

ANNUAL REPORT 2012 – 2013

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report should be read in conjunction with the Annual Statement of Purpose. The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context in which Bracknell Forest Council acts as an Adoption Agency.
- 1.2 This report provides details of activity over the year April 2012- March 2013 and sets out the plans for development up to 31st March 2014.
- 1.3 Over the last three years there has been a significant increase in the numbers of Bracknell Forest children with plans for adoption, from three in 2010 to seventeen at March 2013. In 2011 – 2012 no adoption orders were granted whilst during 2012 – 2013 there were eight.
- 1.4 During the year the Adoption Agency has continued to build on work to improve timescales for children needing adoptive placement and for the assessment and approval of adopters. This has been achieved through the appointment of social workers and an assistant team manager with knowledge and experience of adoption and through further development of monitoring and tracking systems.

2. Adoption Inspection – Ofsted

Bracknell Forest Adoption Agency was inspected by Ofsted in March 2012. The inspection identified areas of strength in the adoption service and concluded that many areas of the service are good or outstanding. However the timescales required to place children identified as in need of adoption and the length of time that some assessments of prospective foster carers took to become approved adopters did not meet the requirements set out in the regulations. The numbers of children and prospective adopters involved were very small (both under five) so the percentage of those who did not meet the criteria was significant. Although action had already been taken to address the timeliness of decisions, the numbers that fell within the specified timeframe of measurement (the previous twelve months) did not meet requirements so limited the overall judgement to satisfactory. The Ofsted definition of a satisfactory service is that the provision is sound. A copy of the inspection report is available on the Bracknell Forest Council website as well as the OFSTED website. Four recommendations were made which have all been appropriately addressed and resolved.

3. The Family Placement Team

- 3.1 Children's Social Care's Family Placement Team provide most of the required functions of the Adoption Agency. Other functions are provided through the arrangement with the other five Berkshire Unitary Authorities acting as a Consortium and also through the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS), hosted by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead who maintain the Adoption Panel.
- 3.2 The functions of the Adoption Agency include:

- Preparing and presenting reports to be considered by the Adoption Advisor at Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service and the Agency Decision Maker for children who are looked after and adoption is their care plan.
- Presenting reports to the Panel and the Agency Decision Maker on the prospective match of Bracknell children with adopters or other Local Authority children with Bracknell adopters.
- Recruiting and assessing a pool of adopters as part of the Berkshire Consortium and presenting them to Adoption Panel for approval.
- Supporting Bracknell adopters throughout the adoption process until Adoption Orders are made.
- Providing post adoption support to any adoptive family living in Bracknell and for three years following the making of an adoption order for those children who have been placed by Bracknell Forest.
- Sign posting prospective adopters of children from overseas to the service provided by Parents and Children Together – Reading.
- Provide counselling for adopted adults.
- Provide mediation services for both adopted adults and birth family members.

4. Summary of Bracknell Forest Activity

4.1 For the year 01/04/2012 and 31/03/2013:

- As at 31st March 2013, seventeen children in total have plans for adoption agreed as in their best interests. Ten of these were agreed during 2012-13. Five children have definite links or plans for permanent placements.
- Six children were matched with adopters.
- One placement of a Bracknell child matched to adopters did not proceed to placement. (This child was subsequently placed with adopters four months later and is settled and thriving).
- Seven applications by adopters were approved. An eighth family were ready for approval in March 2013 but were moved to Adoption Panel in April 2013 due to the high demand on panel space.
- Five adoption orders were granted. Three of these were within 12 months of the plan for adoption being recommended by adoption panel.
- Two children were adopted before their first birthday (nationally only 77 children were adopted before their 1st birthday in 2011/12 so this is exceptional performance).
- One child was adopted from overseas.
- Two in family (step parent) adoptions were made.
- Two children from another local authority were placed with Bracknell Forest approved adopters.
- One adoption order was granted on a child placed from another local authority with Bracknell adopters.
- There were no disruptions to a child's placement with prospective adopters.

4.2 Six adoption preparation groups and eight Information Days have been available for prospective adopters across Berkshire over the year. These are arranged through the Berkshire Adoption Consortium. Bracknell Forest was responsible for one preparation group and two Information Days between 1st April and 31st March 2013. These were well attended by prospective adopters from both Bracknell Forest and the other unitary authorities. The increase from four to six Preparation Groups annually is

in response to the demand to increase the number of approved adopters to meet the needs of children waiting for placement.

- 4.3 Currently ten households are in the process of being assessed as prospective adopters. These comprise of:
One application delayed until the April Panel due to the priority given of Panel time to matches between children and adopters.
Two families are ready for presentation to Adoption Panel in April 2013.
One family is currently 'on hold' at their own request with a plan to complete the process in the summer 2013.
One family are the current foster carers for the child they are seeking to adopt.
Three assessments are in process.
Two further applications are anticipated during April 2013.

5. Developments during April- September 2012

- 5.1 Since 1st April 2012 there have been changes to the regulations and processes within the Adoption Agency as a result of the national focus on adoption. The aim has been to reduce the barriers that may lead to delay in placing children for adoption; this includes radical changes in processes and a drive to increase the number of approved adopters. Some of these changes have been formally implemented and others put forward as part of consultations though with a clear expectation that Local Authorities should adapt practice and potentially organisation of adoption services where appropriate without delay.

Changes include:

- § From 1st September 2012 the requirement for Adoption Panel to consider plans that adoption would be in the child's 'Best Interests' was removed, giving the Agency Decision Maker the opportunity to make the decision at a time that may be more congruent with the Court timetable. In order to maintain a quality assurance process it has been agreed with the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS) that they will quality assure the reports prior to the Agency Decision Maker making the decision. BAAS' oversight of the process and information provided i.e. legal advice and medical reports will contribute a similar level of scrutiny and comment as the Adoption Panel but will provide greater flexibility as cases will not be delayed. This new process is in place and working effectively.
- § The Family Justice Review (November 2011) identified the need to address delays in the court processes which in turn delay progressing plans for children to be placed for adoption. Local Courts are formally adopting proposals made in the review to set a strict time limit of 26 weeks for the completion of care proceedings. This started to be implemented during the early summer (2012) and the first cases heard under the new system were completed in early winter. The change has implications for resources as all options, including the possibility of placing children within their family network, have to be explored alongside plans for permanency through adoption.
- § This has presented challenges in terms of ensuring that Permanency Planning and Family Finding is progressed with allocated workers at an early stage. New systems are in place to ensure that the timescales can be met.

The first Adoption 'score card' was published in May 2012. This has been developed by Government to highlight the performance of individual authorities, particularly in terms of timescales for the child's journey through the care system into permanency. The first published score card was based on data from 2007 – 2010. In Bracknell Forest during this time the number of children requiring adoption was very small, between none to three a year, and consequently there were a similar low number of adopters approved and percentage scoring unhelpful. Over the past eighteen months there has been a significant increase in both children with plans for adoption and in the number of adopters being approved.

§ The Adoption 'score card' published in November 2012 showed that Bracknell had made significant improvements. Although the numbers continue to be small and are therefore not publically available comparisons with other Local Authorities show that:

- Bracknell Forest is listed as 7th best in England and Wales for the average length of care proceedings.
- Bracknell Forest is listed as 10th best in England and Wales for the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family.

§ National Government has set out a number of other changes to address delays in children being placed for adoption. There have been significant changes to the process and time allowed to complete adoption assessments and a reduction in the time allowed by courts to complete care proceedings. The proposed changes to the recruitment and assessment process are to be implemented at the beginning of September 2013 and take the form of a two stage application process with a reduction in timescales for completion of assessments/ approval of adopters from 8 to 6 months. Currently the Adoption Agency is working on developing new processes around this including the introduction of a new style of Prospective Adopters Report.

§ In order to meet the increase in demand, the establishment of the Family Placement Team has been increased by one social worker. This, together with other developments in process and training, has enabled the team to grow in confidence and competence. This is evidenced in the quality of assessment reports; number of children placed quickly after the Court order and feedback from adopters.

6. Training and Development

6.1 In July 2012 a training morning was held on 'Concurrent Planning', attended by Children's Social Care and colleagues from other Berkshire adoption teams. The Coram Foundation have a well established Concurrent Planning project and a parent who has adopted three children through this route gave a well received presentation of her experience. Research shows that the sooner a child can make an attachment with their primary carer the better the outcome for them in later life. Children with secure attachments grow into more confident and secure adults. One way of addressing this is through Concurrent Planning where a child can be placed with prospective adopters who are also approved as foster carers. This may be considered in situations where at the point of an infant or young child becoming

Looked After there is a strong possibility that the ultimate plan will be for permanency through adoption.

- 6.2 The annual Children's Social Care 'away day' was held in October 2012 and featured several presentations from BAAS on 'Attachment'.
- 6.3 In February 2013 a conference, led by Louise Bomber, Attachment support teacher/therapist was well attended by professionals across the Children's workforce, including schools, foster carers and social workers. The focus was on support for children with disrupted or poor attachment experience, including adoption and the conference has been a catalyst for further developments.
- 6.4 The Adopters Charter is a national government initiative which sets out what adopters and prospective adopters can expect from adoption agencies. Bracknell Forest's Adoption Charter was launched with the support of adopters at a well attend cheese and wine event on 6th December 2012.
- 6.5 In order to address the increasing need to place children as soon as possible with adopters, the Department of Education provided Bracknell Forest with an Adoption Improvement grant in November 2012. This funding has been used to increase publicity; commission independent workers to complete assessments of adopters and to review and streamline the internal processes relating to adoption.
- 6.6 A one year 2013-14 Adoption Reform Grant has been offered by the Department of Education to support the requirements for improvement in adoption. Some of the funding will be used to pay the increased flat rate fee to be charged by all Agencies who place children with another Agency's approved adopter.
- 6.7 Discussions with the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities has already taken place to consider the optimum use of our resources. In the short term, plans are also being finalised by the six Berkshire Authorities to arrange an 'Activity Day' where prospective adopters can have sight of children with plans for adoption in a relaxed setting. Discussions about wider reconfiguration of services are also in place.

7. Inter-country Adoption Arrangements

- 7.1 Bracknell Forest has a Service Level Agreement with a local voluntary agency PACT (Parents and Children Together) for that agency to provide an adoption service for those seeking to adopt from overseas. This service is currently renewed on an annual basis. PACT provides prospective inter country adopters with information about the overseas adoption process, including an enquiry service so that prospective adopters can make an informed decision as to whether inter country adoption is appropriate for them PACT assess prospective adopters, who will be presented to the PACT adoption panel for consideration of their application. Post Adoption support is, however, provided by the local authority in the area in which the adopter resides.
- 7.2 During 2012-13 there was very little activity undertaken for Bracknell Forest by PACT, apart from one placement from the Indian sub-continent. Although historically PACT have offered advice to very low numbers of Bracknell Forest residents, this lack of enquiry may be indicative of a national trend away from inter-country adoption.

8. Post-adoption Support Services

- 8.1 The post-adoption service is provided by an experienced social worker assisted by other members of the Family Placement Team.
- 8.2 Post adoption services include the counselling of adopted adults and mediation services for both adopted adults and birth family members. Requests for these services have continued to increase significantly following the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The service continues to provide information and support to a wide and varied population. Post Adoption services range from low level provision such as regular newsletters and support groups to more specialised or individual services, such as financial support; support over contact; direct work; therapeutic provision and liaison with schools. Where further specialist services are required the post adoption support worker can “signpost” adopters to the most suitable resource, such as CAMHS, the Post Adoption Centre and other provision.
- 8.3 Approximately 30 children and families will, at any time, be receiving a post adoption support service involving social work support from Bracknell Forest. Some families are given a high level of support to prevent adoption breakdown. The authority works with adoptive families to support placements and whilst this may on occasions require individual work the general approach is to work with the family as a whole. The details of adoptive families, who are not directly receiving a service, are held on the post adoption database and these receive regular invites to training, groups and events. Adoption allowances are being paid in respect of 24 children due to their specific needs.
- 8.4 Around nineteen adults received a service in relation to access to birth records or mediation, with ten families active at any one time. Several of these cases are quite complex and the agency continues to support people who have only recently found out that they are adopted, often with quite devastating feelings of loss for the adoptees.
- 8.5 Electronic forms tailored to post adoption needs have been developed. However, further development is being progressed to ensure that the Post Adoption service is in keeping with the introduction of the ‘single assessment framework’ across Children’s Social Care. All children already receiving a service have written plans. All assessments are shared with families and formally reviewed. The electronic system allows for closer monitoring of demand and resources required to meet need, which is anticipated to increase as adoption services develop within Bracknell Forest.
- 8.6 Following a period of development and planning, the post-adoption worker has launched a service for adopters and their children. This service is called the ‘Berkshire Adoption Advice and Consultation Service’ (BAACS) and is a collaboration between the two post-adoption workers from Bracknell and Wokingham and a clinical psychologist. This Berkshire wide service first offered appointments in April 2012 and offers families a place to discuss issues and receive advice. There have been a total of 26 enquiries between 1st April 2012 and 31st March 2013. This resulted in 17 referrals being received of which 17 families have either been seen or have appointments confirmed. A review of the service was completed during the first quarter of 2013. Initially PACT was funding the clinical psychologist however after 31st March 2013 the cost will be shared by the six authorities within the Berkshire Adoption Consortium funded out of existing budgets.

9. Special Guardianship

- 9.1 The Family Placement Team is involved in the preparation of reports for court in Special Guardianship applications along with the child's social worker (where the child is looked after), and in the provision of special guardian support services once the order has been granted.
- 9.2 During the year 1.04.12 to 31.03.2013, fourteen Special Guardianship assessment processes have been completed and a further application regarding one child is in the process of assessment. Five applications have resulted in the making of Special Guardianship Orders with a further three awaiting the outcome of court proceedings. Six applications were assessed as not being suitable. The post adoption worker is supporting eleven Special Guardianship arrangements, all at a low level following a period of quite high involvement.

10. In-family adoptions

- 10.1 In family' adoption work relates to the preparation of reports for the court in consideration of an application to adopt a specific child, already living with the family, who wish to change the legal status in order to acquire parental responsibility for the child. The child is not "looked after".
- 10.2 Two adoption orders have been granted in respect of two in family adopters this year.

11. Complaints

- 11.1 No complaints have been received in respect of adoption and post adoption support over the last year.

12. Summary

- 12.1 The adoption service has continued to see an increase in demand over the period of 1st April 2012 to 31st March 2013. As the number of younger children becoming looked after has risen, there has been a consequential increase in the family finding activity.
- 12.2 Adoption is now a key national priority; the increased number of children needing adoptive families has led to a shortfall in the number of prospective adoptive families able to meet their needs. The greatest impact of this shortfall is for children who are over three years old, and for those children with complex needs. National initiatives are being taken to promote adoption and the Family Placement Team have a proactive recruitment plan, alongside initiatives being developed with the Berkshire Adoption Consortium.
- 12.3 The national focus is also on the timescales for children to be placed with adoptive families and greater scrutiny of all aspects of the 'child's journey' from the point of becoming looked after until placed with an adoptive family. Children's Social Care have already implemented changes in order to reduce undue delay and continue to monitor progress in order to further develop service. However, we are ever mindful that the needs of children remain paramount and that the quality of assessments and matching of children to the right family remain the ultimate priority.

- 12.4 Overall the work of the Family Placement Team has increased significantly and brought with it the challenge of meeting individual demands of the various timescales in different parts of the service. In addition to recruiting and supporting adopters and family finding for children with plans for adoption, the team works with fostering, step parent adoption, post adoption support, connected persons assessments of potential permanent and foster carers, family finding for long term fostering, a short break fostering service and private fostering assessments. The team also provides a Duty Service each day to identify any placement required across Children's Social Care and cover for those on leave etc. Social Workers in the team also provide regular training for foster carers both pre approval and post approval. To meet the needs of the foster carers this training is often held at weekends and evenings. During the past year the team has completed a total of 35 assessment across the service (fostering, adoption, private fostering, in family adoption, connected persons assessments) in addition to supporting fifty one fostering households. In real terms the work of the team has more than doubled since 2009 and the increase in the establishment of the family placement team has enabled this to happen. There is in addition to increased joint work with the social work teams.
- 12.5 Despite these pressures there have been highlights this year in exceptional practice and outcomes for some of the children needing permanence through adoption: including two children placed and adopted within their first year and one child with developmental needs placed at birth with foster carers who subsequently adopted her. 2013- 2014 will be another challenging year but the ability of the service to meet the needs of children has grown and is in a good position to meet the challenge.

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