

BRACKNELL FOREST ADOPTION SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

1st April 2013 – 31st March 2014

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report provides details of activity over the year April 2013- March 2014 and the plans for development of the Adoption Service up to 31st March 2015.
- 1.2 This report should be read in conjunction with the Annual Statement of Purpose 2014-2015. The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context in which Bracknell Forest Council acts as an Adoption Agency.
- 1.3 Over the last four years there has been a significant increase in the numbers of Bracknell Forest children with plans for adoption, from three in 2010 to nine at March 2014. In 2011 – 2012 no adoption orders were granted whilst during 2013 – 2014 there were ten.
- 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 with significant success.

2. Adoption Inspection – Ofsted

- 2.1 Bracknell Forest Adoption Agency was last 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 impact on percentage figures of those who did not meet the criteria was significant. 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 were all appropriately addressed and resolved within the year.
- 2.2 Over the past two years, the Family Placement Team have worked hard to address the issues raised around timescales with very pleasing results. The outcomes are recorded later in this report.
- 2.3 Ofsted has introduced a new inspection framework for Children's Social Care which brings significant changes to the way that the adoption service is inspected. The new inspections began in November 2013 and comprise an unannounced inspection which follows the child's journey through the service and includes inspecting the permanency planning process and adoption service. The Adoption Service will have a grading, separate to the overall inspection outcome. It is anticipated that Bracknell Forest will be inspected in the next six-twelve months

3. The Family Placement Team

- 3.1 During this 12 month period, one experienced social worker left the Family Placement Team and another worker with adoption experience was appointed and started work in January 2014.
- 3.2 The Children's Social Care's Family Placement Team provides 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 also maintain the Adoption Panel. The annual report by the BAAS is attached for reference.
- 3.3 The functions of the Adoption Service include:
- Presenting reports to the Agency Decision Maker for children who are looked after and who have adoption as their care plan.
 - Presenting reports to the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker on the prospective match of Bracknell Forest children with adopters or other Local Authority children with Bracknell Forest adopters.
 - Recruiting and assessing a pool of adopters as part of the Berkshire Consortium and presenting them to Adoption Panel for approval.
 - Supporting Bracknell Forest adopters throughout the adoption process until Adoption Orders are made.
 - Providing post adoption support to any adoptive families living in Bracknell Forest 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 based in Reading.
 - Providing counselling for adopted adults.
 - Providing mediation services for both adopted adults and birth family members.

4. Summary of Bracknell Forest Activity

- 4.1 For the year April 2013 to March 2014:
- Nine children currently have plans for adoption.
 - Ten children had adoption orders granted during 2013-14, of these four had been placed in previous years and six were placed and adopted within the financial year.
 - Seven other children currently in the legal process have been identified as potentially needing an adoptive family.
 - 20 adoptive families were approved compared with seven in 2013-2014. One were grandparents who, although formally approved to adopt, were eventually granted a Special Guardianship Order as the plan for the child changed.
 - Of the remaining 19 adopters, six have children placed with them from other local authorities; five have Bracknell Forest children, three of whom were previously foster carers for the children placed with them. Two of the children in these arrangements have already been adopted. Seven adopters have not yet been matched with children and one couple withdrew owing to serious health issues.
 - No child was placed for adoption from overseas.
 - Seven notifications in respect of intention to adopt by step parents were received, of these four have moved on to assessment
 - There were no disruptions for a child who Bracknell Forest placed with prospective adopters. One breakdown in an adoptive placement of children from another Local Authority with Bracknell adopters has resulted in the children becoming looked after.

- 4.2 Until July 2013, six adoption preparation groups and eight information days were available for Bracknell Forest prospective adopters through a joint working arrangement with three other Berkshire local authorities (RBWM, West Berks & Slough). These were arranged through the Berkshire Adoption Consortium. Bracknell Forest was responsible for one Preparation Group and one Information Day between 1st April and 30th September 2013.
- 4.3 From 1st July 2013 changes in the law and regulations in relation to adoption and the assessment and approval of adopters came into force. (Please see section five below). As a result of this and the overall need to increase the number of adopters, the Berkshire Consortium of Adoption Agencies agreed to arrange one Information Meeting and one Preparation Group per month across the county. Bracknell Forest was responsible for a two Information Meetings and two Preparation Groups up to March 2014.
- 4.4 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 adoption score card reports on a range of data for all aspects of the adoption process. Bracknell Forest continues to have small numbers in comparison with larger authorities so not all data is readily comparable. However from the information available it is possible to identify performance and travel of progress against other authorities.
- For example in the score care published in November 2012 Bracknell Forest was listed as
 - - 7th best in England and Wales for the average length of care proceedings.
 - 10th best in England and Wales for the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family.
 - January 2014 Bracknell Forest was listed
 - 7th best in England and Wales for the average length of care proceedings.
 - 9th best in England and Wales for the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family.

5. Developments during April 2013 - March 2014

- 5.1 As a result of the national focus on adoption, significant changes to the regulations and processes within the Adoption Agency came into force in July 2014 (Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013). The aim of these changes has been to reduce potential barriers and reduce delay in approving families as adopters and thereby increasing the placements available for children waiting.
- 5.2 The Children and Families Act 2014, which was given Royal assent on 13th March 2014, further reinforced the changes, some of which are detailed in the report including changes to post adoption services. Although already implemented in early summer 2012, following the Family Justice Review (November 2011) the Act includes the introduction of a maximum 26-week time limit for completing care and supervision proceedings, with the possibility of extending the time limit in a particular case for up to 8 weeks at a time, should that be necessary to resolve the proceedings justly.

- 5.2 Fostering to Adopt – the regulations introduced a new process whereby approved adopters can become foster carers for a specific child on a temporary basis. This arrangement allows children to be placed with their prospective adopters prior to the completion of the formal matching process. The adopters' approval as foster carers ends on the date that the formal process is completed - at which point the child's status changes to a protected placement under the adoption regulations. There is an inherent risk in the fostering arrangement in that should the plan for the child to be placed for adoption change, they could potentially be removed to another placement or returned to their birth family. Therefore Fostering to Adopt would only be considered where the risks of a move were considered very low and where the adopters are willing to accept the risks.
- 5.3 However, in Bracknell Forest, the new regulations did allow an arrangement to be made for a child to be placed directly with the proposed adopter earlier than would otherwise have been the case. The child was subject to a Placement Order where the Local Authority have authorisation to place the child for adoption and the risks of the child being moved were therefore very low. However the short term foster carers had planned a holiday which would have led to a move to a respite foster carer and a delay in progressing the plan. By placing the child with the adopters already identified as a suitable match, an additional move for the child was avoided. The matching process for adoption was then followed and a formal match agreed a few weeks later.
- 5.4 Two Stage Approval Process for Adopters. From the 1st July 2013, the process for approving prospective adopters follows a new two stage process. In Stage One applicants learn about adoption and the adoption agency gathers information including Health, Disclosure and Barring Service check and references. This work needs to be completed within two months. Once this is completed a decision is made as to whether to progress the application to Stage Two. In this part of the assessment information about background is gathered and applicants attend a Preparation Group. Stage Two, including presentation to Adoption Panel, must be completed in four months. This has the impact of reducing the time the agency has to approve prospective adopters from eight months to six months. Since July 2014 four prospective adopters have been approved under the two stage process. As mentioned in 5.2, foster carers who seek to adopt a child they are caring for can be 'fast tracked' through the Two Stage assessment process and begin at Stage Two. This would mean that applications from approved foster carers should be completed within four months. Of the four approvals under the new two stage process, one was of a foster carer applying to adopt and as per the regulations this assessment was "fast tracked"
- 5.5 In order to meet demand within timescales reliable good quality independent workers have been commissioned to produce high quality and timely assessments, resulting in the service approving the most ever adopters both within and outside Bracknell Forest, with the additional bonus of allowing Bracknell children to be placed with Bracknell approved adopters

6. Training and Development

- 6.1 In July and October 2013 the Family Placement Team held training days to consider the changes to the legislation and regulations and to develop local processes, alongside embedding new knowledge within the team.
- 6.2 The Berkshire Adoption Consortium have worked together to address the changes to the assessment process and the need to increase the number of adopters. As a result of this work, an Information Meeting and a Preparation Group are arranged

every month – thereby ensuring that prospective adopters do not have to wait and also increasing capacity. In addition, workers across the county have worked together to develop new formats, forms and leaflets in respect of the new assessment process.

- 6.3 In April 2013 the Department of Education provided all local authorities with an adoption reform grant. This was to support the requirement to reduce the length of time children wait to be placed with adopters. This funding has been used for a variety of adoption related activities, including increasing publicity; commission independent workers to complete assessments of adopters and to review and streamline the internal processes relating to adoption.
- 6.4 **Adoption Activity Day** – Adoption Activity Days are relatively new in the U.K. but have been piloted by British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) over the past two years. In brief children are prepared and supported by their foster carers and social workers to attend a fun based activity day to which prospective adopters are also invited. This method has some proven success in finding adoptive families for older children or those with complex needs. The Berkshire Adoption Consortium (all six unitary authorities) ran an Adoption Activity Day in February 2014 with the support of BAAF. A steering group was set up to work on the practical arrangements including training for foster carers and social workers to ensure that children identified to attend the day were prepared well and supported at this event. 41 children attended on the day as well as 40 adoptive families (20 from the Berkshire Unitary Authorities and 20 approved by other agencies).

On the day 21 adopters (about half of those who attended) expressed an interest in one or more of the children who attended the day. This included children from across the age range of those attending, and children from all six of the host authorities.

Five Bracknell Forest looked after children attended the day. There were two expressions of interest for one child and one expression of interest for another child. There were no expressions of interest in the three other children who attended. On this occasion none of these expressions of interest progressed further on follow up by the Family Finding social workers.

Three Bracknell Forest approved adoptive families attended the Adoption Activity Day. All expressed interest in children looked after by other authorities and of these two have been linked; the third has been linked to a child following attending an Activity day arranged by a different agency.

The impact of the day is to be evaluated and a further event is being considered for the Autumn of 2014.

- 6.5 In March 2014, 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.

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. For a variety of reasons the demand for intercountry adoptions has fallen in recent years with a result that there number of enquires made were fewer than five and none reached the point of application. There are no adopters waiting.

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 with support from an experienced Family Worker.
- 8.2 Post adoption services include the counselling of adopted adults and mediation services for both adopted adults and birth family members and 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 The post-adoption worker continues to take a central role with ‘Berkshire Adoption Advice and Consultation Service’ (BAACS) which is a collaboration, between a clinical psychologist and the post-adoption workers from Bracknell and Wokingham. The costs are shared between the Berkshire authorities. There continues to be a steady number of referrals to this service.
- 8.4 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 work in this area is steady with increased emphasis on the need to support new placements of children and those recently placed for adoption. 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.
- 8.5 During the year, around fourteen adults received a service in relation to access to birth records or mediation. 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. Ten adults received a service as birth relatives most of these were seeking advice and support around tracing or contact with relatives who have been adopted (now adults) or a relative who is currently a child who has been adopted.
- 8.6 The post adoption worker continues to work with schools and the Behaviour Support Team (BST) to address any issues that arise for children who have been adopted. This service is universally provided to any child who is known to be adopted. Prior to an adoption order, the child is Looked After so the school will invariably be aware of the change of status when the adoption order is granted. However families who

move into the area may choose not to identify the child as adopted and will only seek support if or when it is required.

- 8.7 Section 5 of the new Children and Families Act 2014 inserts a new Section 4A into the Adoption and Children Act 2002 so that where a local authority has agreed to provide adoption support services it has to prepare a personal budget on request. This aims to enable adoptive parents and adoptees to access support more directly and quicker by allowing them to secure the appropriate adoption support services and information themselves rather than relying on local authorities.
- 8.8 Any adoption support services secured through direct payments from personal budgets will still be treated as a service commissioned by the local authority. Regulations may make provision about the use of personal budgets (including amount, what it can be used for, from where funds are sourced)
- 8.9 The Department for Education will be piloting personal budgets within the prototype of the adoption support fund in ten local authorities between March 2014 and spring 2015. The date of implementation of the Regulations will be decided following the outcome of pilots. Bracknell Forest will await the outcome of the pilot in the year ahead in order to inform their practice.
- 8.10 Section 6 of the Children and Families Act 2014, inserts a new Section 4B into the Adoption and Children Act 2002 that places a duty on local authorities to provide information to adoptive parents and potential adoptive parents regarding the support services available in the local authority's area. A duty is also placed on local authorities to provide details of all other responsibilities and services offered such as the right to request a needs assessment, under this and other relevant legislation. This is an area of development identified for the forthcoming year.

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 In this reporting period, seven Special Guardianship assessments were completed with six orders being granted in respect of seven children. One assessment did not result in a recommendation for an order and there are two assessments currently on-going. The post adoption worker is supporting seven Special Guardianship arrangements.

10. In-family adoptions

- 10.1 Work with 'in family' adoptions, continues to be steady over the year. This is an area which relates to the preparation of reports for the court in consideration of an application to adopt a specific child who is already living with the family who wish to change their legal status in order to acquire parental responsibility for the child. The child is not "looked after".
- 10.2 In this reporting period the team received a total of nine enquiries for in-family adoptions of which seven notifications of intentions to adopt were received. Of the seven notifications, four reports are being prepared for court; three withdrew following initial visits by a social worker.

11. Complaints

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

12. Plans for Development

- 12.1 The Berkshire Adoption Consortium members (all six unitary authorities) continue to explore ways of working together to increase the number of adopters available and to reduce unnecessary delays for children needing adoptive families. Currently plans for a shared service continue to be explored with the possibility of a Berkshire team (including Bracknell Forest, Wokingham, Windsor and Maidenhead and West Berkshire) focusing on recruitment and assessment of adopters and adoptive families for children with plans for adoption (family finding). There is evidence from other local authority areas that pooling resources in this way can significantly increase capacity. At present discussions are on-going about how to progress this and the possibility of launching the new arrangements in autumn 2014. The Berkshire service would be staffed from each participating unitary authority and therefore if this is progressed there will be significant changes to Bracknell Family Placement Team. As this is at an early planning stage the impact of any changes is not yet known.

Nationally there continues to be a shortage of adopters for the children who are waiting and there is a particular need for adopters who can offer homes for children aged 4 to 8 years. As a part of an overall campaign to seek foster carers and adopters, and for this particular group of children, the Family Placement Team has linked with a local church through the 'Home for Good' initiative devised by the Evangelical Alliance. This has begun with a presentation to leaders of local churches and will continue through 2014 – 2015 with Family Placement Team attendance at individual events publicising the local and national need.

- 12.2 Due to the increase in the numbers of adopters approved, and the numbers of Bracknell Forest children placed for adoption or made subject to Special Guardianship Orders, there has been and will likely continue to be a significant increase in work for the post adoption service. In addition to this the expectations of this aspect of the service as outlined in the Children and Families Act 2014, means that this service needs to be monitored carefully to ensure that the team is able to provide the support required. Currently one social worker is dedicated to providing post adoption support as well as providing a service to adults who have been adopted. A further review and analysis of predicted future demands over the next three years given the increases and the requirements of the Act.

The implementation of the amendments to the Children Act 2002 in respect of post adoption support and personal budgets will have implications for financial and other resources. Further work is required to develop information about local resources and allocation of personal budgets.

13. Summary

- 13.1 The adoption service has continued to see an increase in demand over the period of 1st April 2013 to 31st March 2014. As the number of younger children becoming looked after has risen, there has been a consequential increase in the family finding activity.

Overall, demands on the Family Placement Team have increased significantly over the past year; the number of children becoming looked after has increased alongside the requirements to reduce timescales across the range of services which together

have been particularly challenging. In addition to recruiting, assessing and supporting adopters; and family finding for children with plans for adoption with all other aspects of adoption, the team recruits and assesses short and long term foster carers, undertakes connected persons assessments of potential permanent and foster carers; provides a short break fostering service and private fostering assessments. The team also provides a Duty Service each day to search for any placement required across Children's Social Care, respond to foster carer concerns and cover for team members who are unavailable. Social Workers in the team provide regular training for foster carers both pre approval and post approval. Foster carer's training is often held during evenings and weekends. The new two stage processes for both fostering and adoption applications has resulted in changes in how the team delivers aspects of the service which has required further training and a change in work practice.

- 15.3 During the past year, the team has completed a total of forty seven assessments across the service (fostering, adoption, private fostering, in-family adoption, connected person's assessments) and conducted family finding (adoption) for nineteen children. This is in addition to supporting 49 fostering households caring for seventy one children. In real terms, the work of the team has continued to increase year on year.
- 13.2 The national focus 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 has resulted in increased pressure and workload for the service. Children's Social Care have ensured that in order to meet the increased demands dedicated staff have been employed to work on adoption and family finding. In addition close monitoring and tracking of the service has been on-going and the new processes arising from changes in regulations and legislation are already embedded in team practices. In all of this however, we remain ever mindful that the needs of children are paramount and that the quality of assessments and matching of children to the right family remain the ultimate priority.
- 13.3 The adoption service has continued to see a high level of demand for placements for children and a requirement to increase the numbers of adopters available to care for them. This has in effect doubled the demand on the Family Placement Team over the past year. The team has risen to this challenge and are to be commended for their achievements.

Sheila McKeand

Head of Service, Looked After Children

Date: 5.5.14