



Reading
Borough Council

Working better with you

**READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
ADOPTION AGENCY**

ANNUAL REPORT 2013 - 2014

1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report outlines the work undertaken by the Adoption Service from 1 April 2013 - 31 March 2014. The main objective of the service was to ensure that all children in Reading who require permanent placements through adoption are provided with an adoptive family who can meet all of their identified needs. The key priority is to ensure that children are placed with families who will offer security and stability within a loving environment. The team also seeks to ensure that there are sufficient adopters available to meet the diverse needs of these children and aims to offer a high standard of post - placement and post adoption support to ensure the ongoing stability and duration of the placement. This also includes assessing potential adopters for other areas children who may need them.
- 1.2 The report updates the actions in relation to the National Minimum Standards for Adoption (Performance Indicators: CF/C23 *percentage of looked after children placed for adoption or with Special Guardianship Orders* and NI 061 - *Percentage of children adopted placed within 12 months of decision that 'child should be placed for adoption'*) as well as having continual regard for meeting children and young people's health, safety and educational needs as previously laid out by the Every Child Matters agenda.
- 1.3 The report also addresses two national targets established within Adoption Scorecards (from the 2012 Action Plan for Adoption) namely:
- *The average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (for children who have been adopted). As of January 2014 the threshold was 20 months.*
 - *The average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family. As of January 2014 the threshold was 6 months.*

2. POLICY CONTEXT

- Adoption Service Regulations 2005
- Statutory guidance on Adoption 2013
- The Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011 and 2013

- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Care Standards Act 2000
- Action Plan for Adoption 2012
- Family Justice Review 2011

3. CHANGES WITHIN THE SERVICE

3.1 There have been a number of significant changes to the service during the period of this report. The following is an outline of the staffing changes in the Adoption team:

- April 2013: 1 part-time RBC permanence fostering social worker (18.5 hours) commenced a period of maternity leave.
- April 2013: 1 part time agency social worker joined the team for 3 months to cover a vacancy until this post was filled in May by a full time RBC social worker.
- May 2013: 1 part time agency social worker (21 hours) had covered a full time vacancy until this post was filled in May by a second full time RBC social worker starting.
- June 2013: 1 full time RBC Assistant Team Manager joined the team replacing the temporary locum Assistant Team Manager who had been covering the vacancy.
- July 2013: 1 part time (25 hours) RBC post adoption social worker joined the team.
- Feb 2014: 1 full time agency social worker left the team. This vacancy will be covered by the full time RBC social worker starting in May 2014.

3.2 There has therefore been a fair degree of staff turnover during the year which produced the challenge of ensuring that work was progressed in a timely fashion. Overall however the staffing situation eased in that for the past year it was generally possible to recruit new substantive workers, albeit that this took some time to achieve and a number of adverts on some occasions.

3.3 Since June 2013 the service became solely an Adoption Team. The permanency fostering family finders transferred to the Recruitment and Assessment section of the Fostering team

4. LEGISLATION

4.1 The Adoption Agencies (miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 came into effect on the 1st July 2013. The 2 stage adopter assessment process has

been established within the service as a result. All adopter assessments now need to be completed within six months.

5. OFSTED INSPECTION

5.1 Ofsted carried out their last adoption inspection of Reading's adoption service in 2010. This was graded as 'good' in all outcomes with an overall rating of 'good'. All actions as recommended were undertaken and work continues to address these issues including;

- The adoption panel continues to offer advice in relation to contact for all children presented with plans of adoption. This advice is clearly recorded in the panel minute extract and recorded on the child's file;
- All recruitment documentation (including that for agency or independent workers) includes details of references and DBS checks having been taken up. Business Support for Family Placements now coordinate this aspect of recruitment activity relating to agency and independent workers to ensure consistency across the service;

5.3 The inspection of local authority adoption services is now integrated into a new Single Inspection Framework and covers all aspects of local authority Safeguarding and Looked After Children's services. These inspections are unannounced and it is unclear when next readings adoption service will be seen.

6. ADOPTION PANEL

6.1 A separate report on the Adoption Panel is compiled by the Adoption Panel Adviser as part of her role within the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service and Consortium. This report provides an overview of adoption activity across the whole of Berkshire.

6.2 Panel activity for Reading this year included the following:

Children: 22 individual children were presented for recommendations of '*should be placed for adoption*'.

Adopters: 16 sets of adopters were approved during the year.

Matches: 24 children were matched with adoptive families.

Type of Placements: children were matched with adopters approved by Reading, other local authorities, other Berkshire local authorities (within the Berkshire Consortium) and with Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

Further analysis of these figures is represented below.

7. STATISTICS - CHILDREN

Adoption Activity

- 7.1 The Adoption Service's performance was judged against two national performance indicators.
- 7.2 **The Percentage of looked after children placed for adoption or with a Special Guardianship Order** - this is a cumulative figure, and the year-end figure now stands at 16.85% with 26 children adopted and Special Guardianship Orders for 11 children). This is well above the target for the year of 12%. This represents a continued year on year increase in the total numbers of children adopted e.g. 26 adoptions in 2013-14 compared to 18 in 2012-13.
- 7.3 **The Percentage of adopted children placed within 12 months of the decision that 'child should be placed for adoption'** - 56% of the 26 children adopted in 2013-14 had been placed within this timescale. This is a slight improvement in performance from 50% for 2012-13. The target had been set at 80%. Performance against this target has been adversely affected by the success in placing children who are older, part of a sibling group, have disabilities, behavioural issues or parents with mental health issues. Of the 10 children for whom it took longer than 12 months to place, 9 had at least one such factor in their profiles which makes find placements more difficult to find. For example 6 of the children were aged 5 to 9 years of age. Hence we are clear that not meeting this target should not be seen as a negative for these children.
- 7.4 The Government has set two increasingly challenging year on year targets. As of January 2014 these were to achieve:
- an average timeframe of six months (183 days) between receiving court authority to place a child and matching children with adoptive parents. The England 2010-13 average was 210 days. RBC's average was 218 days.
 - an average of 20 months (610 days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. The England 2010-13 average was 647 days. RBC's average was 625 days.

Placement of older children, sibling groups or those with complex needs has also impacted on the performance for these targets. Due to the relative low figures for children who are adopted, each child makes a significant difference to the performance. This situation reflects the current situation nationally in terms of the difficulty recruiting sufficient prospective adopters who will consider children in these categories. Having said this however detailed tracking systems are in place to monitor family finding activity and promote timely decision making for individual children.

7.5 The Adoption Team was also supporting the placements for 15 children placed with adoptive parents awaiting adoption orders at 31st March 2014. Their age range was as follows:

- 0 - 12 months: 0 Children
- 12 months - 3 years: 8 children
- 3 years - 5 years: 4 children
- 5 plus years: 3 children

Their profile in terms of ethnicity was as follows:

- White UK: 8 children
- White Other: 2 children
- White UK -Caribbean(Mixed Black & White) : 3 children
- White / African:1 child
- White UK/ Asian: 1 child

7.6 By the 31st March 2014, 22 Reading children had received an Agency Decision Maker decision of 'should be placed for adoption'.

7.7 As of March 2014 the full range of family finding activity is required for 30 children. This represents a 50% decrease from the year before. The Children's Social Work teams have indicated that since the middle of 2013 there has been a reduction in the number of active care proceedings and Court Orders. The Family Justice Review had effectively front-loaded work with families prior to the issuing of proceedings. An increase in the numbers of children placed with extended family members and connected persons with Residence and Special Guardianship Orders has also been indicated.

7.8 In addition to these children early work is under way for five children who are likely to have adoption as their care plan.

7.9 In February 2014 an Adoption Activity Day event was held whereby prospective adopters met children requiring families whilst participating in child friendly activities. From this event two children were linked with families. At the time of writing this report one of the children had started introductions with their adoptive family. Two more Adoption Activity Days are planned for 2014.

Monitoring

7.10 A tracking system was used to monitor the children with plans for adoption from an early stage through to placement and final Adoption Order. The Adoption Liaison Meeting met monthly to monitor the plans, to ensure that these did not drift, and to identify any children and placements that needed

extra support. This group comprised of the Children's Social Work Team Managers, the Adoption Team Manager, an Independent Reviewing Officer and the Service Manager (Family Placements).

Predictions for the year ahead

- 7.11 Compared to some other Local Authorities there continues to be a high number of referrals for children with plans of adoption despite the number of referrals reducing here too since the proceeding year. The relatively high numbers of children combined with the national picture of a mismatch between potential adopters preferring placements of babies without an identified risk of health or behavioural issues and the children whom local authorities are needing to place, means that it is unlikely that the number of children placed within timescales will be 100%. In the past it has not been uncommon for 60-100 plus matches to be explored in order to obtain an adoptive placements for some of the children who are harder to place. It is still too early to see whether the recent decline in numbers of Reading children awaiting adoptive placements means that it becomes more possible to recruit adopters or find inter-agency placements that will meet their needs. There are a significant number of children with a high level of special educational and health needs who will require additional levels of multi-agency, ongoing support. Alongside the cross-agency costs involved here, there is likely to be a continued financial and staffing implication within the Adoption Service for post adoption support as our year on year success in placing more children for adoption has a cumulative effect on the level of demand for post adoption support.

Consortia Membership

- 7.12 In March 2014 a joint feasibility study was undertaken with a consultant researcher regarding the viability of merging 2 existing consortia and the inclusion of Reading in the creation of an enlarged adoption consortium for the South of England (with a total of eight Local Authorities). The study was largely positive and there is a proposal for a new consortium to be launched at the end of 2014. The mutual benefits will be as follows: to improve the pool of available adopters for children, reduce the cost of monitoring and supporting long distance adoptive placements and finally the ability to joint fund specific initiatives such as recruitment campaigns for adopters and training events for workers.
- 7.13 In addition to membership of this new consortium Reading will continue to contribute to the pan-Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service and the associated consortium arrangements.

8. STATISTICS - ADOPTERS

Adoption Activity

- 8.1 The Adoption Service applied a rigorous and thorough assessment of adopters in order to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. There was consistent effort to ensure that the service continued to recruit adopters to meet the needs of the children we are currently family finding for.
- 8.2 Current recruitment guidelines reflect practise in progressing enquiries from prospective adopters who meet basic eligibility criteria
- 8.3 There were 83 initial enquiries between April 2013 - March 2014 from people interested in adopting.
- 8.4 Sixteen prospective adopters have been approved this year (an increase of 2 compared to last year).
- 8.5 63% of Reading children were placed with adopters assessed by Reading Borough Council. This was achieved in part by assessing a cohort of adopters from the Basingstoke area. As more adopters living in Reading are now being assessed this pattern may change next year creating more inter-dependency with consortia partners.
- 8.6 The service received on average 3 - 6 new enquiries per month. All of these are invited to attend Information Days.
- 8.7 At the time of writing this report there were 3 outstanding adopter assessments that were started under the old regulations. One of these assessments will go to the May 2014 Adoption Panel. One assessment has just been re-started after being on hold due to serious family illness. For the remaining assessment additional information has been required which has led to significant delay. In March 2014 there were 6 assessments under the 2013 regulations. Four were in Stage 1 (adopter led self learning) and two were in Stage 2 (Social worker led adopter assessment). In common with all the other Local Authorities in the South England BAAF regional group, difficulties have been experienced in completing Stage 1 within 2 months as outlined in the 2013 Regulations. Changes have been made in practice to ensure that inter-agency checks and also reference checks are started right at the very beginning of the process (as of the carers formal application). However this remains a challenging area. So far the two assessments that are in Stage 2 are on track to be completed within the four month specified timescale.

Ethnicity of adopters

- 8.8 15 of these adopters were White/UK couples and one was a White UK and Asian couple. This is a similar pattern to last year. There is clearly more

development required in increasing the number of adopters from different ethnic backgrounds. The Recruitment and Assessment workers have recently undertaken some targeted work with local faith groups. Unfortunately, to date this had not resulted in an increase in the number of Black and Minority Ethnic adoption applicants. Supplementary activity is being considered in partnership with Reading Churches e.g. as part of the nationwide 'Home for Good' initiative which encourages adoption from all faith groups. Alternative options for distributing adoption information to a wide audience both within and outside the Reading area will be evaluated.

Location

- 8.9 The majority of the adopters approved were non- Reading residents. This meant that more of Reading children requiring adoptive placements were placed with Reading approved prospective adopters.

9. RECRUITMENT

- 9.1 There was a joint recruitment campaign for Black History month in October and Adoption Week in November with Slough Borough Council. The Adoption and Fostering Teams also attended the Royal Berkshire show. In addition there was some advertising in specialist magazines for children with special needs. Although there has been some initial interest from these campaigns the numbers have been small. The biggest impact on adoption enquiries has been when programmes about adoption have been televised. In those circumstances the adoption enquiries increased to double figures in a month compared to the usual 3 to 6. All initial enquires are asked where they heard about adoption. The ongoing challenge is to ascertain what is the most effective recruitment method for future campaigns.

10. DISRUPTIONS

- 10.1 There has been no known disruption of Reading children in adoptive placements this year. There was one disruption during introductions. After 2 days the Agency supplying the adopters made the decision not to proceed with the placement. The child concerned was subsequently adopted by her foster carers.

11. POST ADOPTION SUPPORT

- 11.1 The post-adoption work undertaken in the team continues to expand with the numbers of referrals, particularly in relation to birth relative counselling. The work is covered by 1.5 Post Adoption Workers and there are five distinct legislative areas of work to address:

- Contact arrangements

- Counselling of adopted adults
 - Work with birth parents
 - Supporting adoptive placements
 - Mediation Service (BRIC)
- 11.2 Reading, along with the other Berkshire Unitary Authorities, continues to work in partnership with the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service to administer the Adoption Panel and carry out much of the post adoption work such as Letter Box and Direct Contact, and work with birth parents. Other activities and groups are run jointly with the local authorities within the Berkshire Consortium. The Berkshire Adoption Advisory service provides a separate annual report on their activities.
- 11.3 The team received an average of 17 new referrals for counselling for adopted adults (*Schedule 2 - Adoption and Children Act, 2002*) per month; the Post Adoption Worker has facilitated 4 reunions this year.
- 11.4 Support for children placed with adopters outside of the borough has levelled over the year. In line with the requirement for the placing agency to provide post-placement support for 3 years following Adoption Order (Adoption Support Services Regulations, 2005) the Post Adoption service is currently supporting 21 children/young people.
- 11.5 The Post Adoption Social Workers continue to support adoptive families and those affected by adoption by facilitating a number of groups. A bi-monthly support group for adopters was reinstated in August 2013. Demand for support for people affected by adoption is increasing and reinstating the support groups has been beneficial to those affected by adoption. Approximately 20 adopters have attended the support group. The group has provided the opportunity for peer support and also opportunity to focus on topics identified by adopters such as trauma/nurture time lines and attachment styles of children. The feedback from adopters has been very positive so far. Informal networks of support are also being developed by adopters.
- 11.6 Reading continues to take the lead for the Berkshire Consortium on the 'Tracing Workshop' for adult adoptees in the process of searching for relatives and after a break will be reinstated by July 2013 and will be run twice a year.
- 11.7 Education: The Post-Adoption Workers maintains the link with CAMHS and schools along with a representative from Education. The Post Adoption Worker continues to work with schools with children affected by adoption. The work with schools is to support teachers and staff to appreciate the importance of Attachment and Adoption and its impact on adopted children.
- 11.8 There were 6 requests from adoptive families for formal adoption support

assessments. They all resulted in the provision of continued post adoption support.

12. PARTICIPATION AND INFORMATION

12.1 The Adoption Service routinely obtains feedback from service users at various stages of the adoption process, and incorporates this within service development. Since February 2014 a new set of questionnaires have been devised to obtain the feedback. As part of the Children's Social Care Quality Framework monthly calls are made to all Adopters/ Prospective Adopters as they reach one of three stages in the adoption process. The three stages are initial contact, approval at the Adoption Panel and one month after the Adoption Order. On the whole the feedback received from service users has been positive. The biggest frustration was largely around the length of time it has taken for the DBS checks to be returned and the delay caused by the number of staff changes for their assessments. The adoption team have amended practice to try to address the issue of delayed statutory checks. The staffing situation was discussed earlier in section 3 of this report.

12.2 Questionnaires were also used for obtaining feedback from the adopters of children in relation to the Family Finding aspect of the work. It is envisaged that this will become part of an ongoing process and information will be shared with the children's teams within the Directorate in order to update and improve practice.

12.3 An Adoption Diagnostic exercise was undertaken by BAAF external consultants in July 2013 and was very positive about the Reading adoption service. The following areas of work were undertaken to improve the service following their recommendations.

- Improving the initial contact experience with the agency for prospective adopters by:
 - Providing additional, temporary worker capacity to quality assure the responses and information given to those making initial enquiries regarding adoption. To work alongside the adoption team to implement changes to the first point of contact offered to prospective adopters.
 - Working with the Marketing section to update recruitment, advertising and information pack materials.
- Improving post-adoption support by:
 - Shifting a post within the service to provide additional capacity
 - Continuing to use grant funding to offer flexible support packages

- Training staff to deliver specific input to adopters in order to support placement stability

Performance Monitoring also identified the need to focus on the following :

- Improving assessment timescales with adopters by providing additional training to the adoption team and changing work practises as required
 - Achieving adoptive placements for older children, sibling groups etc.
 - Using a consultant researcher to explore complementarity/membership with a second consortium
- 12.4 Reading Borough Council's Participation Strategy aims to assist individuals, services, and organisations to be involved in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of services. Participation is monitored according to the Strategy and consideration to improving this is high on the Adoption Team's agenda.
- 12.5 Reading Adoption Agency provides full information for members of the public and users of the service, including leaflets and a Statement of Purpose, all of which can be accessed on Reading Borough Council's website or in hard copy.

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