

# West Berkshire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

West Berkshire District Council provides a comprehensive adoption service through its family placement team, based in Newbury. The team, whose remit includes both fostering and adoption, consists of a manager, two assistant team managers, post adoption support workers, social workers, support workers, support staff and a publicity and recruitment worker. It undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; and support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. It operates as part of a local consortium with five other neighbouring unitary local authorities, who each contribute funding to provide the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service. This joint arrangement provides a range of resources for all the six members including the operation and administration of the adoption panel; the letterbox system; the management of closed records; specialist advice and training; and independent support to birth families. The council have a contract with PACT (a registered voluntary adoption agency) to provide a service for the preparation and assessment of people who wish to adopt from overseas.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This was an announced key inspection which looked at the national minimum standards for adoption agencies and associated regulations. Children are placed for adoption with people who are most likely to be able to meet their needs, keep them safe and provide them with security and stability throughout their childhood and into adulthood.

Prospective adopters go through robust preparation, assessment and approval processes which ensure they are suitable people to parent children, who have a range of complex needs, effectively. The stage that prospective adopters are considered to have made a formal application is too late in the process.

The family finding and matching processes are impressive and these ensure that the right adopters are found for each child. The arrangements for the recommendation for approval of children to be placed for adoption, adopters suitability to adopt, and matches between children and adopters are excellent. This ensures that children are placed with adopters best able to meet their needs and parent them into adulthood.

The impressive support services available to families ensure that the right support is provided at the right time and thus ensures that adoptive placements remain as stable as possible. The agency also provides a very good quality support service to adults affected by adoption which includes birth records counselling and intermediary services.

The agency recognises the importance of providing good quality independent support to birth parents and birth family members and accordingly, with their agreement, refers them to the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS) for advice, support and counselling. The agency also recognises the importance of ensuring that children are able to know and understand their backgrounds and accordingly carries out life story work and develops books and later in life letters to aid this. However, not all of this work is carried out in a timely way in every case. Contact arrangements are fully assessed and if appropriate these are well supported via the arrangement with BAAS.

Leadership and management in this agency are very strong and this means that the agency is managed very effectively. The work of the agency is child focused at all times. The staff are of a high calibre and are very well supported in carrying out their respective roles.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

As a result of the last inspection there were seven shortfalls identified; these have all been addressed with the exception of the stage at which the formal application to be considered as an adoptive parent is accepted; this has been restated. The agency is now establishing a separate case record for the adoptive parent/child when an interagency placement is being considered and this means that all information is readily available. The health and safety checklist has been updated and this ensures that risks to children are further minimised. Assessments of applicants are undertaken in a timely manner and this has been achieved by the close monitoring of the staffing levels of the adoption agency; this means that prospective adopters are dealt with in a timely way. Clarification of the decision-making process in the notification letters sent to adopters clearly sets out the important role of the decision maker. Minutes of the meeting between prospective adopters and the medical advisor, where appropriate, are now made to ensure that adopters have this information to refer to in the future.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

The recruitment of adopters focuses on the needs of children waiting for a placement, both locally and within the wider consortium. There is a written strategy which is developed with the needs of children waiting for a placement in mind. The agency is inclusive and provides interested parties with verbal and written information about the process of adoption; this helps people to reach an informed decision about whether they want to progress to making an application to adopt. People who are assessed as most likely to meet the often complex needs of children requiring an adoptive placement are invited to attend the preparation groups; this ensures that the focus remains on the children waiting for an adoptive placement and not on the needs of the adults wishing to adopt.

Prospective adopters attending the preparation courses learn about the often complex needs of the children waiting for a placement and the processes involved in adoption. During these sessions observations are made about the adopters. These allow the agency to make decisions about the attendees' potential to meet the needs of children, and to identify any areas of development. The preparation sessions are of a high quality and provide applicants with a sound basis on which to further develop their understanding and ability to parent children from the care system.

The agency accepts a formal application from prospective adopters following the preparation course; this is not in line with the legislation that requires prospective adopters to make their application prior to the preparation. This has no direct impact on children but for prospective adopters it means they are unable to formally challenge the agency, through the independent reviewing mechanism, should their application not be accepted.

The assessment of adopters is robustly undertaken. Statutory checks are carried out, a thorough assessment of prospective adopters' strengths and areas for development is undertaken and the information is analysed. From this a sound understanding about the prospective adopters' ability to parent a child waiting for adoption is reached. These assessments are scrutinised by the panel which recommends to the agency decision maker if the applicants are suitable to adopt. The assessments also inform the family finding and matching processes and ensure that any areas for development have been highlighted; these are subsequently addressed. Social workers carrying out assessments are suitably qualified, skilled and experienced or are closely supervised by an experienced worker. Adopters commented about the professionalism of the social workers, and on their fairness, reliability, and sensitivity they show in undertaking their respective assessments. Assessments are robustly quality assured through second opinion visits which are carried out by the managers routinely; these explore any issues arising or areas for development identified and are very good practice.

The information provided to prospective adopters is of an excellent quality. Information is given via a range of verbal and written means including a booklet

produced by the BAAS. This booklet provides prospective adopters with very detailed information about the matching, introduction and placement processes as well as a raft of other very useful information. One adopter confirmed that 'West Berkshire did a really great job of providing us with as much information as possible' and went on to say 'I was very impressed with our approval process...not once did I feel out of the loop and was fully informed at every stage of the process where we were at.'

The arrangements for permanency planning are robust and ensure that children who need a permanent placement are closely tracked. Family finding is commenced in a timely way, and the family-finding process is also very good. Clear matching criteria are developed for each child and this information informs the family-finding processes. There is a social worker whose role is to family find for children and this ensures that there is a clear focus, for every child, on finding the right family. There are excellent working relationships between the children's teams and the adoption team; this supports the coordinated approach that is taken to identify suitable adopters for specific children. Internal resources, including the adoption exchange event facilitated by BAAS, provide good opportunities for families to be found for children waiting. When it is clear that adopters cannot be found through these internal resources, national searches are commenced in a timely way. There is also excellent practice in relation to ensuring the views of children about a placement are listened to and acted upon. The family-finding processes are timely and very effective in finding prospective adopters for children who are best able to meet their individual needs.

When matched with adopters clear arrangements are made for the introduction and placement of children; these are made in line with the child's needs. Introductions are sensitively planned and foster carers are fully involved in helping the child move. This supports children, where they are able, to begin to transfer attachments to their prospective adopters. There is a formal review during introductions to ensure that the child and prospective adopters are coping well at this very stressful time. West Berkshire adopters who have children from the authority placed commented that the arrangements are well planned and organised. Typical comments included: 'We felt the process from time of agreed match was handled excellently by all staff involved with very good support from the foster carer who worked with us to make the transition for the child go smoothly. I cannot praise the social worker and link worker enough. We and (the child) could not be happier.' When other local authority children are placed with a West Berkshire assessed couple things are not always as well planned, as the arrangements are, to a great extent, dependant on the other local authority; however, West Berkshire staff work hard to ensure that things go as smoothly as possible. One adopter stated: 'The placing authority have not been very helpful...luckily for us West Berkshire understood and were able to provide support... They have excelled.'

BAAS undertakes the arrangements for the management of the adoption panel. The panel is governed by clear policies and procedures that are followed in practice. Prospective adopters' attendance at panel is welcomed. Young people are also welcomed to attend if they are of an age and level of understanding for it to be meaningful for them; attendance of adopters and young people is very sensitively

managed.

The constitution of the panel is as required and panel members take their respective roles very seriously. Members read and digest the contents of the assessments and devise appropriate questions. The panel is very well chaired by an experienced chair who is suitably qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about adoption and children and families; one adopter stated that the chair is 'personable and approachable.' Panel members are appropriately recruited, and this means that they are suitable people to hear cases. They are also well supported and trained in adoption matters and this enables them to carry out their respective roles effectively.

Panels are held in a timely way and additional panels are convened as necessary; this ensures that delays for children are kept to the minimum. Panel minutes are clear, set out the panel's discussion and clearly record the reasons for the recommendation and set out any advice given; the minutes enable proper consideration to be given to the matching and placement processes and help to inform the development of support plans.

The agency decision maker undertakes the decision-making role with due rigour. She considers all of the papers and makes her decision in a timely way.

The managers and the staff of the agency have the appropriate knowledge, skills, qualifications and experience to carry out their respective roles. They undergo a robust recruitment process which ensures they are people suitable to work with children.

The arrangements for safeguarding children and young people who are involved with the agency are robust. Staff are trained in the safeguarding procedures and know how to make appropriate referrals.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency's approach to supporting children and their adoptive families is impressive and a real strength of the agency. There is a clear written strategy for support and this is jointly provided by BAAS, through the consortium arrangements and by the agency directly.

There are comprehensive support plans developed that ensure that children's identified needs can be met; these are reviewed as needs change or as a minimum annually. Support is provided in a timely and flexible way by people skilled and experienced in their respective disciplines. Experts in a range of disciplines are available to advise and support adopters and social workers and ultimately support placements. For example, there is access to health professionals qualified to support the development of children's physical and emotional health. In addition, children's educational needs are supported to a high level via a team of experts in education matters. This team ensures all children have access to educational facilities and

support in line with their needs. It also provides training for a range of professionals, including those within schools. This training is impressive, as it raises professionals' understanding about how the disadvantage children from the care system experience impacts on their emotional well-being, their behaviour and their social skills. It also enables individual plans to be developed and delivered within the school setting as well as in the home and community, thus providing the child with a consistent approach.

In addition there is an impressive range of activities, training events, workshops and support groups, which all adopters can access. For example, training is provided to prospective adopters' extended families and their friends. This helps to ensure the networks of adoptive families are informed about the complexities of adoption and means they are best equipped to provide support to the family. Newsletters are produced and these are informative and detail up-to-date issues in adoption. Membership of Adoption UK, a registered adoption support agency, is paid for three years and this provides adopters with peer support as the majority of workers are adopters or have been affected in some way by adoption. Two workers from the adoption support team have been trained in a specific therapeutic technique and this ensures therapeutic work can be carried out with children and families in a timely way.

Low disruption rates of West Berkshire children, none for over 3 years, show that the support provided is extremely effective. The support services are a real strength of the agency and ensure the stability of adoptive placements is achieved and help children to grow and develop in line with their potential.

Work with adult adoptees is carried out in a sensitive way by experienced and skilled workers. This work helps adoptees to understand their situation and to find out about their heritage. Comments about this work made by users of the service include, 'a brilliant service was given' and 'I cannot praise them enough.'

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency shows a strong commitment to ensuring that children have information about their backgrounds and birth families. The agency also recognises the importance of involving birth families in the planning for their child and in supporting them to provide information about themselves and their lives. This information helps the child to best understand his or her situation. For some parents, who do not want to lose their child to adoption, it is extremely difficult for them to engage in this work. However, the services provided, through the arrangements with BAAS, are geared to achieving the best outcome possible for both the child and his or her birth family. Take up, by parents agreeing to be referred for this service, is impressive.

The child permanence reports are of a good quality, sensitively written and include parents' views, or record if parents have felt unable to provide their views. For parents who are not involved in care proceedings, and therefore are usually

supporting a plan for adoption, very good support is provided by the adoption team. This support means that these parents' views and histories are obtained and this information is clearly recorded for the child to see in the future.

The arrangements in relation to ensuring that life story books and later in life letters are provided to children and their adopters in a timely way are not as efficient as they should be. This means that not all adopters are able to support their child in a timely way, with the aid of these important documents, to understand their situation.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Equality and diversity are threaded through the agency's policies, procedures and practice, individuality and diversity are valued, and equality is promoted. For example, no one is disadvantaged on the basis of difference as each service area is subject to an equality impact assessment; no prospective adopter is disadvantaged as the recruitment of adopters is inclusive; children's complex needs dictate the family-finding processes to ensure that they are enabled to thrive, whatever their needs; and translation services are available, and have been used, to ensure services are accessible to all.

The Statement of Purpose and policies and procedures underpin the work of the agency. A children's guide is used, along with direct work with the child, to help children understand what adoption means for them. Adopters are informed about adoption through very good verbal and written information and this helps them to understand about the processes, issues they may face and the life-long implications adoption has for all concerned.

The agency is especially well managed by very experienced, knowledgeable and competent managers who provide staff with exceptionally good support to carry out their roles. The management team is forward thinking and is not complacent when it comes to further developing services for children and families. The monitoring of work and quality assurance systems are very effective and ensure that the quality of the work is of a consistently high standard. Elected members closely scrutinise the work of the agency and make sure the service is well resourced and operating to a high standard.

All staff of the agency are of a high calibre, they are very knowledgeable and experienced and show a high level of enthusiasm for their work. They are extremely well supported through regular and good quality supervision, peer support and excellent training opportunities that ensure that they are knowledgeable and kept up

to date with developments in adoption. The agency has sufficient staff to meet existing levels of demand and staff say that West Berkshire is a good place to work; the reasons cited for this are the strong and supportive management team, the stability of personnel, peer support and the training opportunities. The training opportunities are particularly impressive; managers recognise the benefits of having a highly trained workforce and training is resourced very well. The adoption team is supported by administration support workers who are of a high calibre and committed to their work; this means that administration systems are managed effectively and users of the service are dealt with promptly and courteously.

The case records for children and prospective adopters are comprehensively maintained, well ordered and securely stored. For current files the arrangements within the building ensure the records are safe and secure, and for archived files there are appropriate arrangements in respect to safety and security. This ensures that children have a safe and secure record of their early life and the process of their adoption. Only those people with a right to see case files can access them as there are robust arrangements to ensure confidentiality is upheld.

The premises from which the agency operates are centrally located, accessible to all and open during normal office hours. In the event of an emergency, suitable plans have been developed to ensure that back-up arrangements can be quickly put into place so that disruption to the work is minimised.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- take the formal application to be considered as an adoptive parent prior to the preparation training (National Minimum Standard 4 and Guidance on the Adoption and Children Act 2002)
- ensure that information about a child's birth and early life is obtained and provided to children and adopters in a timely way. This is with particular reference to the development of life story work and later in life letters. (NMS 8.2)