

# West Berkshire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC057256
<b>Inspection date</b>	01/02/2008
<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Chapman / Margaret Lynes
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

---

<b>Setting address</b>	West Berkshire District Council, Social Services, Avonbank House, West Street, NEWBURY, Berkshire, RG14 1BZ
<b>Telephone number</b>	01635 519051
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	West Berkshire Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Diane Grist
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Karen Reeve
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	13/12/2004

---

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: [www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

## 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, a post adoption support worker, 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 (BAAS). 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 good.

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

This inspection was announced and took place over a period of four days. Two inspectors were involved and interviewed the key people who provide the adoption service, a small sample (four) of adoptive parents, read case files and other supporting documentation.

A real strength of the adoption service are the benefits obtained by working in partnership with five other neighbouring local authorities, particularly in relation to the funding of BAAS, which facilitates the provision of a wider range of professionally run resources than could otherwise be provided.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents is robust and provides the basis of a safe adoption service for children. The agency offers a good range of post adoption services to maintain children in their adoptive families. Birth relatives also receive a good service including independent support and assistance with maintaining contact once their children are adopted. Staff are supported by experienced managers, good supervision arrangements and training opportunities.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The actions and recommendations which were made at the previous key inspection have all been addressed and are completed to a satisfactory standard.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

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

The provision is good.

The agency has a well written recruitment strategy which recognises the needs of West Berkshire children. The agency employs a recruitment and publicity officer and a variety of strategies are used to raise the profile of adoption and recruit adopters; these include open evenings, posters, flyers and leaflets, all of which aim to demystify the process and provide realistic information. The recruitment and publicity officer works closely with children's social workers and family finders to develop profiles and DVDs when searching for an adoptive family. A twice yearly adoption exchange event also improves the possibilities for matching children with appropriate adoptive families. Social workers give detailed consideration to the matching of children which includes whether siblings should be placed together or apart.

There is a thorough process for the preparation, assessment and approval of applicants but the application is currently taken after the preparation when the guidance is clear that this must be before the preparation. Applicants can attend the preparation courses of the other consortium members if they wish and this improves the access. Managers of the consortium members meet regularly to ensure the preparation offered by all authorities covers the required information and is of a similar standard. Applicants receive a thorough, written evaluation of their attendance and input during the course which details further work which may be needed during the assessment. This is good practice.

The assessments are thorough and analytical and robust checks are carried out, which include former partners and employers. Second opinion visits are routinely carried out, which again is good practice. Health and safety checks are also thorough but do not include an assessment of ceremonial weapons or hanging cords from blinds. There have been lengthy delays in the process of assessing applicants, including waiting for preparation courses and the allocation of social workers to undertake assessments. This has improved recently and the manager was able to detail how this is being monitored and could be further improved to meet the timescales.

Once approved, prospective adopters are given a useful booklet with information

about the matching process, useful telephone numbers and a reading list. Prospective adopters receive full information about the child they are being matched with and can meet the medical advisor to discuss any medical implications. This meeting is not minuted however, which could lead to challenges about what information has been shared in discussion. The agency has a well-established practice of holding life appreciation days which are very useful in giving adopters first hand information about the child's history. An adopter described this as 'fabulous' and very worthwhile.

The arrangements for the adoption panel are undertaken by the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS) and are extremely well organised and professional. The adoption panel is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures and there is a well-established practice of adopter attendance for approval. The panel is appropriately constituted and includes members with personal experience of adoption. BAAS provide a thorough induction and a good level of training for panel members. The administration of the panel is good, with the paperwork being sent out in good time and with an appropriate level of security. Panel dates can be provided for urgent cases to prevent delay. The minutes are clear, reflect the discussion and give reasons for the recommendation. The panel gives feedback on all cases being presented to them in order to improve practice. They also receive feedback from anyone who attends panel. The adoption panel is robust and gives careful consideration to all cases presented to it.

The agency decision maker receives full information prior to making the decision and has identified another senior member of the management team with whom to discuss any concerns in the event of a disagreement. The letter sent to notify the adopters of the decision is not clear in highlighting who has made the decision however, and in differentiating advice from the decision to approve.

The manager and staff are recruited in accordance with robust recruitment and selection procedures to ensure they are suitable people to work with children. They are qualified and experienced in working with children and adopters. The safety of children is further promoted by sound safeguarding procedures which make reference to children placed for adoption.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for providing support to adopters are varied, robust and a real strength of the adoption service. The agency responds to requests for support in a timely way and undertakes a thorough, comprehensive assessment for support needs, which forms the basis of a support plan which is implemented and reviewed annually. Approved adopters have their membership of Adoption UK, an organisation which provides information and peer support which is invaluable to newly approved adoptive families, funded for 3 years.

As well as social work support, adopters have access to support groups and useful

resources such as books and workshops. In-house arrangements for post adoption support have been developed since the previous inspection and there is a good range of social events which have been planned in consultation with adopters, a newsletter, activity days and a local support group, the interaction with other adoptive families being seen by adopters as invaluable. An adopter commented that the activity day 'was the best day I have ever spent with my children'. The consortium arrangements facilitate a wider variety of support groups than could be provided by West Berkshire alone and these include groups for adoptive fathers, adopted young people and adopters. BAAS runs a range of workshops and training events which cover issues such as 'contact', 'the adopted child in school' and 'telling' and there is an annual adopter conference. These offer adopters further opportunities for support, advice and information.

West Berkshire has a life chances team which is a multi-disciplinary team of professionals who provide targeted and responsive intervention to looked after and adopted children. This team includes a teacher for adopted children who takes a proactive approach, liaises with schools and other professionals and provides support to parents to stabilise school placements, which has a positive effect on the child and helps if other aspects of the child's life are problematic.

There is a clear written policy in relation to disruptions of adoptive placements. There has only been one such disruption in the last year and a meeting was held, chaired by an independent person and the minutes identified clear learning points for future practice which are shared with the adoption panel as well as relevant staff.

The agency has access to a medical advisor and legal advisor, both of whom provide advice to the adoption panel as well as staff, and in the case of medical advice, adoptive families. These roles are governed by written protocols.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for working with birth parents to achieve the best possible outcomes for children is a real strength of the adoption service. They are involved in contributing their wishes and feelings in relation to their child's adoption and this is clearly recorded on the child permanence report (CPR) for the child to see in the future. This is also taken into account when family finding for the child. They are shown the CPR if at all possible and this is recorded. Life story books and later in life letters are provided, and although the timeliness of these could be improved in some cases, the issue is given priority and raised at reviews to ensure it is kept on the agenda.

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service provides the independent support to birth parents. Birth parents are referred to the service at an early stage and the initial contact is made by BAAS. This ensures they can contribute to the planning for the child and give their views. These arrangements have been well thought out to promote access to the service and the resulting take-up rate for this service is high.

Information about all aspects of adoption is available in written and audio tape form. There are separate support groups for both birth mothers and birth fathers.

Birth parents are encouraged to provide clear and appropriate information for their child which is invaluable for the future. One-off meetings take place between adoptive parents and birth parents wherever possible, which again is an important source of information for the child in the future. BAAS run the letterbox scheme to facilitate indirect contact and this is a well-established, robust and secure service. Birth parents and adopters are offered assistance in writing letters if required and written guidance is available. There are also direct contacts which are facilitated by BAAS and these are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they are meeting the needs of the child. Clear guidelines are in place to ensure everyone involved is aware of the remit and boundaries. BAAS run workshops for social workers on all aspects of the service to birth families and working with children in relation to life story books and contact arrangements. This raises the profile of the service and ensures that a good standard of work takes place for the benefit of the children placed for adoption.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

West Berkshire is a well-managed adoption agency, with sound policies and procedures which underpin its Statement of Purpose. The Children's Guide is an accessible document and available in differing formats to suit the differing ages and abilities of children. The information which is sent to people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents is clear and outlines the process, timescales, roles and responsibilities.

There is a good management team who are knowledgeable, skilled, experienced and suitably qualified to manage the adoption agency. The structural arrangements are sound and roles and responsibilities are clearly outlined. There are robust arrangements for monitoring the work of the agency, both by the management team and the executive. The latter receive regular information from the senior managers, including written reports on a twice yearly basis. The lead council member, whose remit includes responsibility for the service, demonstrates an enthusiasm for the needs of looked after children and a commitment to raise the profile amongst the rest of the members.

The management team recognise that the possible conflicting needs of fostering and adoption, in a team which covers both services, needs careful balancing. This is being addressed by enabling team members to specialise in specific aspects of work, such as family finding and adoption assessments and developing monitoring systems

to ensure applications are progressed in a more timely manner. There are good links between the adoption team and the children's teams at all levels to ensure that appropriate advice and guidance is given and children's adoption plans are progressed speedily. There is a good level of mutual respect and understanding, clear links between the managers and regular monitoring and progress meetings. Staff receive regular supervision, training is available, managers are said to be supportive and available and are valued and respected.

The adoption team has experienced staffing difficulties and currently has vacancies which are being covered by suitable agency staff. These vacancies have impacted on the timeliness of adopter assessments but not in the progress of children's cases. Systems are being developed to improve this and there is evidence that these have had a positive effect but it is still too early to assess the impact fully. West Berkshire is a good employer, with flexible working practices and support and these are valued by the staff who were interviewed during the inspection.

The case files on adopters are well ordered, informative and contain all the expected information. They are audited and contain evidence of case supervision. Children's adoption files are similarly well organised and comply with the regulations. There are no case records for the other authority's children/adopters in interagency placements however. Current records are stored with appropriate security and the arrangements for the archives are robust, with secure access arrangements. The staff and panel members' files meet regulatory requirements and a separate record is maintained of all complaints to aid the monitoring processes.

The premises from which the adoption agency operates are accessible, identifiable and have suitable arrangements for security including a disaster recovery plan for the Council and the adoption service.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
25	establish a separate case record for the adoptive parent/child when an interagency placement is being considered (Adoption Agencies Regulations, Regulation 31 [8]).	01/05/2008

## 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)
- include an assessment of ceremonial weapons and hanging cords for blinds on the health and safety check (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure that assessments of applicants are undertaken in a timely manner to conform with the expected timescales (National Minimum Standard 4)
- consider providing minutes of the meeting between prospective adopters and the medical advisor (National Minimum Standard 5)
- clarify the decision making process in the notification letters sent to adopters (National Minimum Standard 13)
- continue to monitor the staffing levels of the adoption agency to ensure there is no adverse impact on the progress of cases (National Minimum Standard 21).