



Central Bedfordshire Council
and Bedford Borough Council
working together

Adoption Agency

Annual Report

For the period
2011/2012

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SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.0.1 This report describes the activity of Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Councils' Adoption Agencies during the period 1st April, 2011 to 31st March, 2012, noting their achievements, clarifying the remit and focus of their work and identifying recommendations for the development of the service.
- 1.0.2 This report is provided as part of the monitoring of the adoption agency required under the Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 and National Minimum Standards 2011. This report will be presented to the Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and a six-monthly update report will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel. A copy of this report is provided to Bedford Borough Council for presentation to Elected Members.

1.1 STAFFING / SERVICE STRUCTURE

- 1.1.1 The Adoption and Permanence Support Team is made up of the following staff as of 31st March 2012:
- 1 x full time Team Manager
 - 1 x full time Deputy Team Manager
 - 4 x Senior Practitioners (three full time equivalent)
 - 8 x Social Workers (6.5 full time equivalent)
 - 4 x Social Work Assistants (2 full time equivalent)
 - 0.5 x Administrator for Letter-box contact
 - 1 x Lifestory Senior Practitioner
 - 2 x Administrators
- 1.1.2 The service has remained fully staffed this year, with staff seconded from within the service to cover a secondment and maternity leave cover.
- 1.1.3 Most staff have a number of years post-qualifying experience, and a programme of additional support is in place for those newly-qualified or in the early years of their social work career.
- 1.1.4 The adoption agency is supported by specialist staff who work across the Adoption and Fostering service area. These staff include a Business Support Officer with responsibility for adoption and special guardianship allowance payments, a Recruitment and Marketing Officer, a Training Officer and Training coordinator, and the Panel Advisor and Secretaries who support the adoption panel.

1.2 THE ADOPTION PANEL

- 1.2.1 The Adoption Panel usually meets every month of the year, with extraordinary panels as and when required. There were three extra panels during 2011/2012 and the panel therefore met on 15 occasions.
- 1.2.2 The Adoption Panel considers applications from prospective adopters and makes recommendations as to their approval. The panel also considers whether adoption should be pursued as the plan for a child, and considers the proposed match between children with adopters, making recommendations on both these matters.

1.3 ADOPTION PANEL MEMBERSHIP

- 1.3.1 From 1 April 2011 amended Regulations introduced greater flexibility in relation to the membership of adoption panels, allowing for the use of a 'central list' of panel members from which attendees for any particular panel could be chosen in accordance with quoracy requirements. The Regulations also allowed for the appointment of more than one vice chair to afford greater flexibility to agencies when convening panels.
- 1.3.2 As at 31st March 2012 the Adoption Panel central list was as follows:

Panel Chair	Independent
Independent	Adoptive Mother
Independent	Adoptive Father
Independent	Birth Parent of an Adopted Child
Social Work Member	Fostering Team Manager
Social Work Member	Team Manager, Children with Disabilities Team (BBC)
Educational Psychologist (Vice Chair)	Educational Psychologist (BBC)
Medical Adviser	Consultant Community Paediatrician
Elected Member	Central Bedfordshire Council
Independent (Vice Chair)	Adopted Person
Elected Member	Bedford Borough Council

- 1.3.2 In attendance but non voting members are:

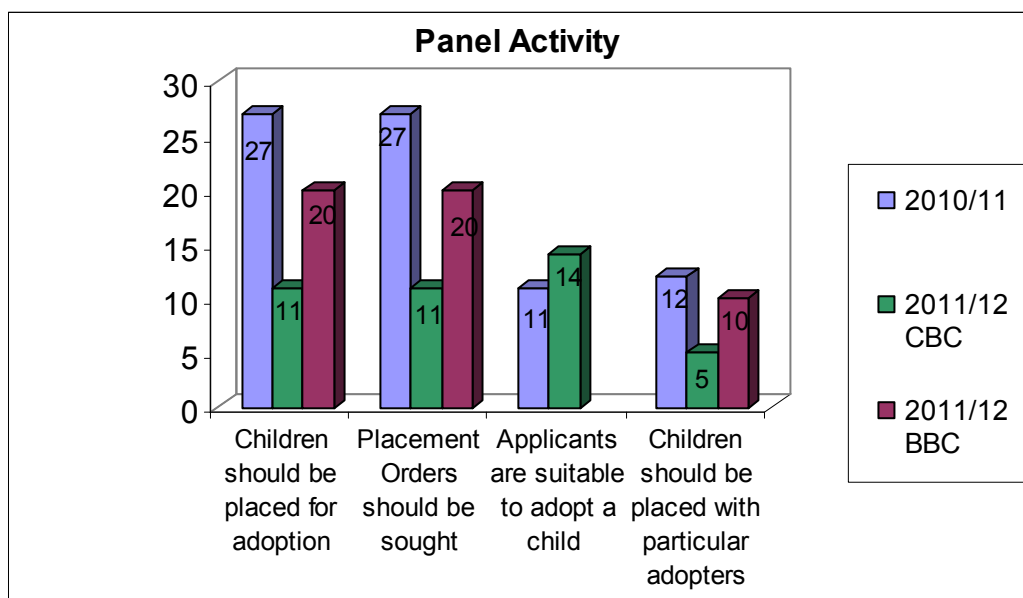
Professional Adviser	
Panel Secretary	

- 1.3.3 The Legal Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing in advance of Panel meetings.

1.4 PANEL ACTIVITY

- 1.4.1 In 2011/2012 the Adoption Panel met 15 times and recommended that 31 children should be placed for adoption. Of these 11 were from Central Bedfordshire and 20 from Bedford Borough. This compares to 27 children in 2010/11 and represents an increase for the second year in succession. The Panel also recommended that Placement Orders should be sought in relation to all 31 children.

- 1.4.2 In relation to approvals, the Panel recommended that 14 households were suitable to adopt a child. This compares to 11 households in 2010/11. All applicants attended the panel.
- 1.4.3 In terms of matching, the panel recommended that 15 children should be placed with particular adopters. Of these 5 were from Central Bedfordshire and 10 from Bedford Borough. This compares to 12 children in 2010/11.



1.5 PANEL TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

- 1.5.1 Over the past 12 months, the following training has been provided to the Panel Members:

April 2011	A Guide to Care Proceedings (Bitesize) The Role of the Guardian (Bitesize) Education – From Risk to Resilience (Bitesize)
May 2011	Adoption Support Service (Bitesize)
June 2011	Loving Waters and String Exercise (Bitesize) Safeguarding and Allegations (Full day)
August 2011	Teenage Adoption Panel (Bitesize)

- 1.5.2 A full day's training is planned in July 2012 which will include consideration of the implications of the Government Action Plan for Adoption.

1.6 PROVISION OF INFORMATION ON ADOPTION

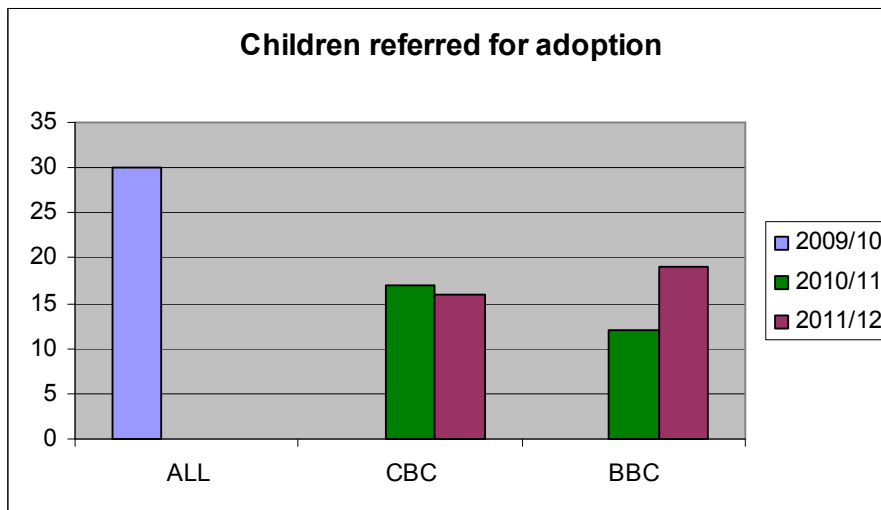
- 1.6.1 Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Councils have a single point of contact to the service through a local rate telephone line. A regularly updated information pack outlining the services available and procedures for prospective adopters is sent within 24 hours to those expressing an interest in adoption.

- 1.6.2 Bi-monthly Information Evenings are held by the Adoption and Permanence Support Team where current information on the needs of children requiring adoption and the process of assessment is given to those people who are interested in becoming prospective adopters. It is a legal requirement for the agency to ensure that prospective adopters are offered the opportunity to attend an Information Evening within 8 weeks of their enquiry to the team.
- 1.6.3 Preliminary counselling discussions in the form of an initial interview with prospective adopters are offered by Adoption Social Workers to enable enquirers to decide whether to pursue their enquiry. This counselling session also enables the Adoption Agency to decide whether to accept an application and whether this is an assessment which should be prioritised as a likely resource for children awaiting adoption.
- 1.6.4 Statistics in relation to enquiries received are included later in this report.

SECTION 2 – CHILDREN AND ADOPTION

2.0 – CHILDREN REFERRED FOR ADOPTION

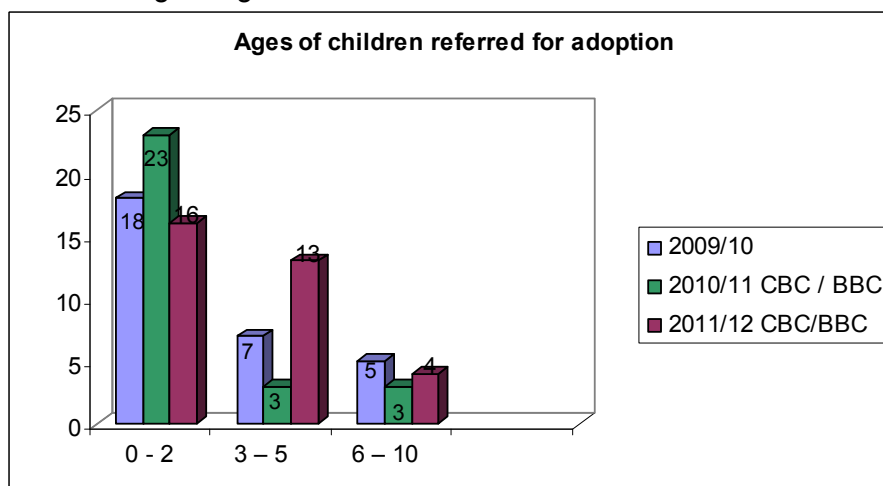
2.0.1 In 2011/12, there were 35 children referred to the service for adoption. Of these, 16 were from Central Bedfordshire and 19 from Bedford Borough. This compares to 29 children in 2010/2011 (17 of whom were from Central Bedfordshire and 12 from Bedford Borough).

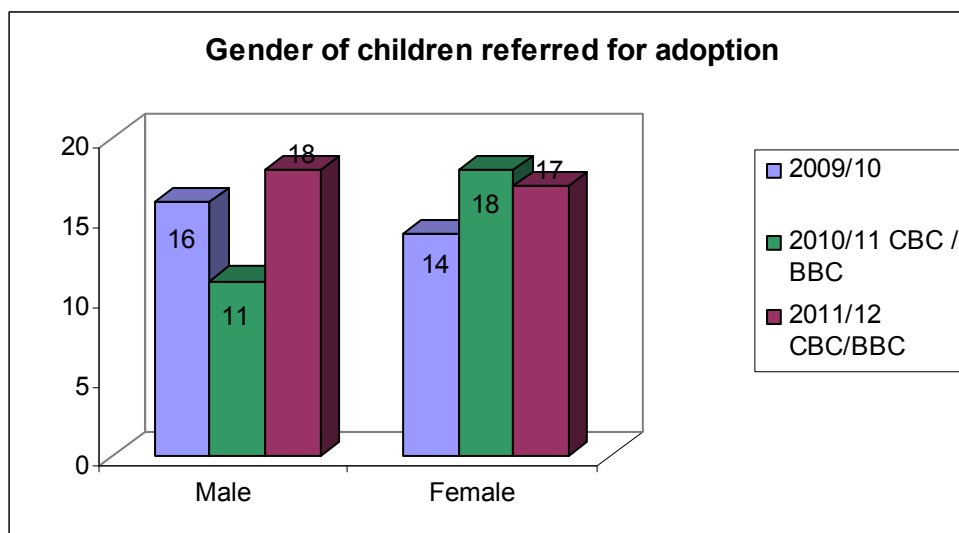


2.0.2 During 2011/12 a further 75 looked after children were referred for permanence planning, where the primary plan was long-term fostering or permanency by way of a Special Guardianship Order or Residence Order. 29 children were from Central Bedfordshire and 36 children were from Bedford Borough.

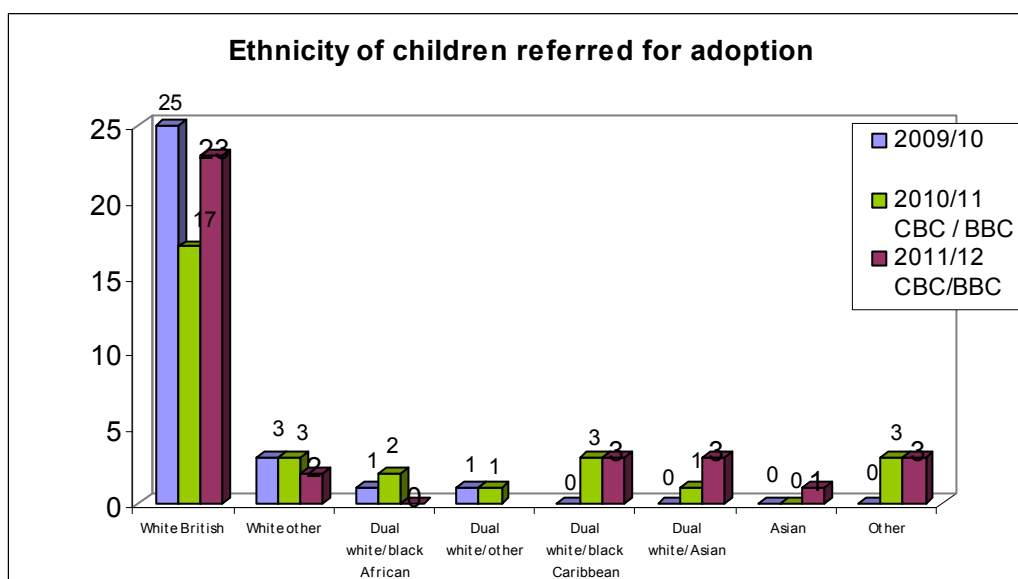
2.1 – AGE, GENDER AND ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN REFERRED FOR ADOPTION

2.1.1 As can be seen from the figures below, the majority of children referred for adoption were under the age of 5 years. This has also been the case in previous years. Even numbers of boys and girls were referred. There was a significant increase in the number of referrals for children in the 3-5 age range.





Of the 35 children referred for adoption 23 were from White British ethnicity, 2 were White other backgrounds, 3 were dual heritage White / Caribbean, 3 were dual heritage White / Asian, 1 was Asian and 3 were from other ethnicities.



2.2 SIBLING GROUPS OF CHILDREN REFERRED FOR ADOPTION

2.2.1 The service received referrals for 8 sibling groups during the year 2011/2012. This compares to 8 sibling groups in 2010/2011. Placing large sibling groups together for adoption can be challenging, especially when the group contains older children.

2.3 – CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES REFERRED FOR ADOPTION

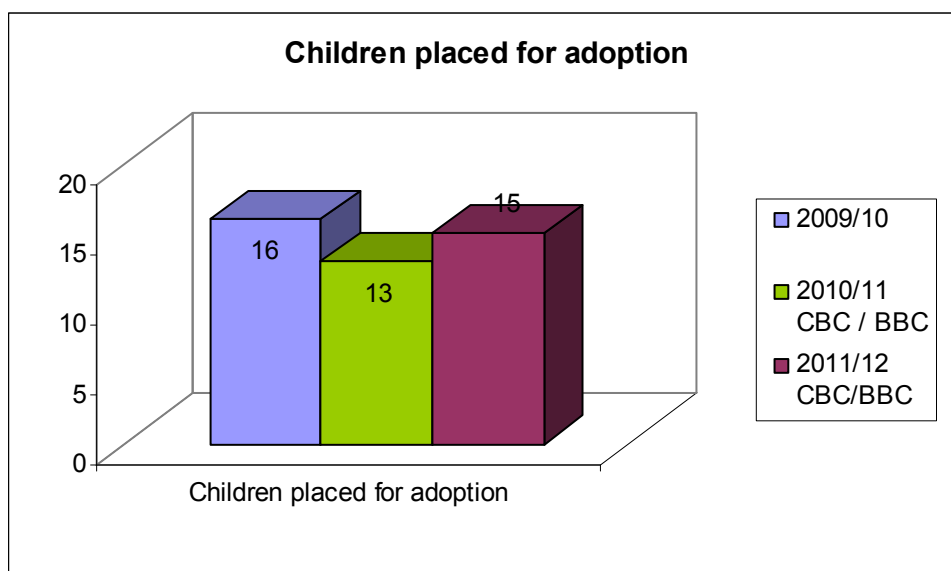
2.3.1 The service received 2 referrals for siblings with a disability during 2011/2012. This was a slight increase on the previous year when there was one referral for a child with a disability.

2.4 OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN REFERRED FOR ADOPTION

- 2.4.1 Of the 35 children referred for possible adoption in 2011/2012, 2 had been matched with adopters by March 2012. In the case of 10 children the Adoption Panel had considered their case and a decision made that adoption should be the plan. For 2 children possible adopters had been considered and were being assessed in respect of those children. The remaining children were still subject to care proceedings as at 31st March 2012. Permanence planning was in place with potential adopters beginning to be identified in order to expedite placements once Placement Orders were granted.
- 2.4.2 In order to avoid case drift for children, social workers are asked to refer children for family finding when adoption is a possible outcome for that child. This does not mean that all children referred will subsequently be adopted, but ensures that robust planning is considered as part of a child's care plan. In many cases, children safely return to their families or are placed with extended family members under other Orders, such as Special Guardianship.
- 2.4.3 In the year 2011/2012 we have continued to see a large number of children where Care Proceedings have taken much longer than expected, often due to viability assessments of family members taking place consecutively.

2.5 – PLACEMENTS OF CHILDREN

- 2.5.1 Members of the Adoption Team were active in facilitating the placements of the 15 children placed for adoption in 2011/2012. This compares to the placement of 13 children in the previous year.
- 2.5.2 There were 2 sibling groups placed for adoption during 2011/2012. Additionally 1 child was able to join a sibling who had already been adopted.



2.6 – TYPE OF ADOPTION PLACEMENT

2.6.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption in 2011/2012, 11 were placed with adopters assessed and approved by Bedfordshire. 1 sibling group and 2 single children were placed with adopters recruited by other adoption agencies – a Voluntary Adoption Agency for the sibling group, and other local authorities for the single children.

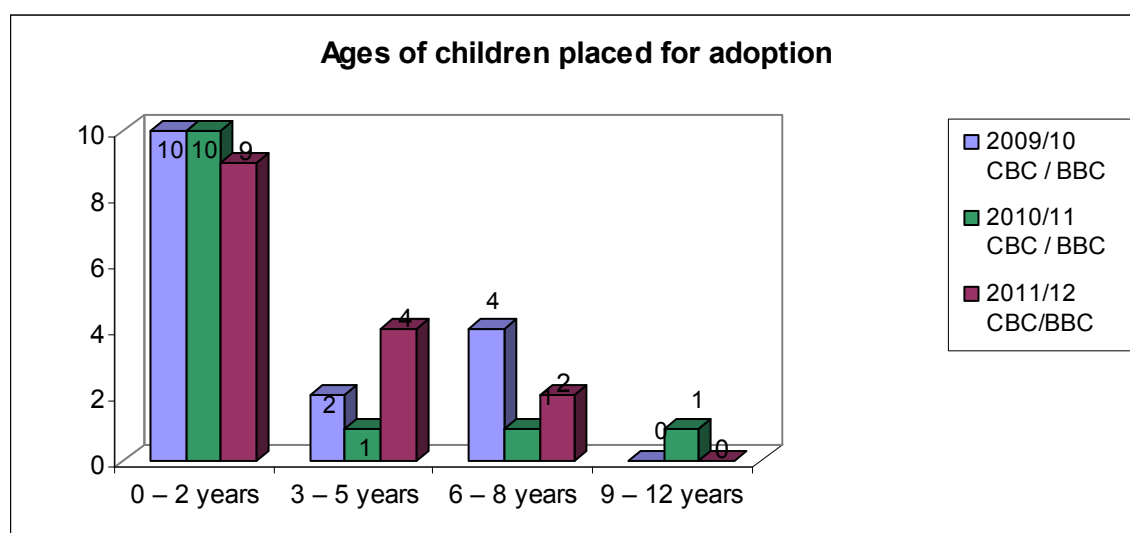
2.7 – ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION

2.7.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption in the year 2011/2012, 7 were White British, 2 were of White British/Irish Traveller heritage, 1 child was of White European heritage and 5 children were of dual heritage, including White/Black Caribbean, White/Turkish and White/Iraqi heritages.

2.8 – AGES OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION

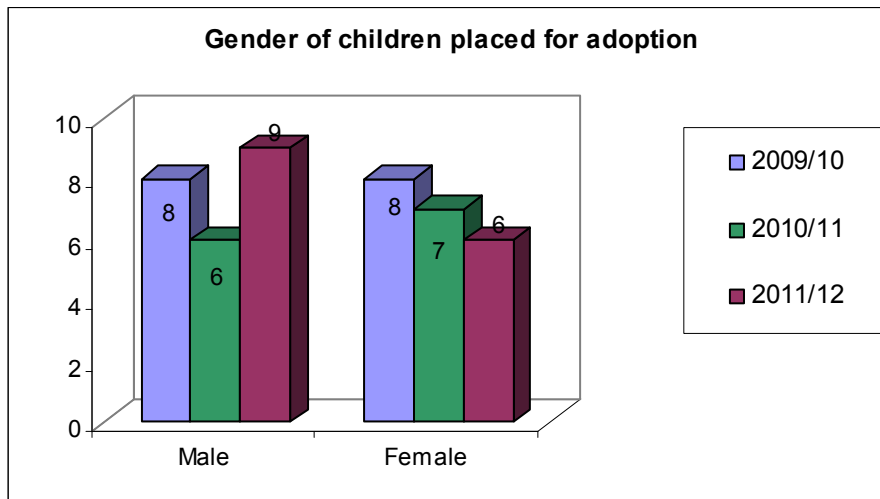
2.8.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption in 2011/2012, 6 were aged three and above. 9 out of the 15 were aged 2 years or under. The age of a child at placement is the single most important variable in predicting a successful outcome, the younger the child at placement, the higher the likelihood of success.

0 – 2 years	9
3 – 5 years	4
6 – 8 years	2
9 – 12 years	0



2.9 – GENDER OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION

2.9.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption, 9 were female and 6 were male. Of these in Central Bedfordshire there were 2 females and 3 males placed for adoption and in Bedford Borough, there were 7 females and 3 males.



2.10 – ADOPTION ORDERS / SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS

2.10.1 Adoption Orders were made in respect of 12 children during the period 1st April 2011 – 31st March 2012. Of these 4 were for children from Central Bedfordshire and 8 from Bedford Borough. This is a decrease on the 16 orders made in 2010/11.

2.10.2 Special Guardianship Orders were made in respect of 12 children. Of these 11 were from Central Bedfordshire and 1 was from Bedford Borough.

SECTION 3 - ADOPTERS

3.0 – THE WORK OF THE ADOPTION AND PERMANENCE SUPPORT TEAM

- 3.0.1 Every child looked after who may need a new permanent family has a social worker from the Adoption and Permanence Support Team allocated to take lead responsibility for finding a suitable family. Family Finding Social Workers attend regular permanence planning meetings with other professionals involved with the child. For those children for whom a return to the care of his / her parents or a member of the extended family is not possible, adoption or long term fostering will be the plan. Family Finding Social Workers are active in identifying not just adoptive families, but also foster families, as appropriate to the needs of the child. This helps ensure that permanence is achieved for all children in a timely manner.

3.1 – RECRUITMENT OF ADOPTERS

- 3.1.1 In order to ensure a range of adopters are recruited for both Bedfordshire children and to meet the needs of children nationally requiring adoptive families a range of recruitment activity has taken place this year. Drop-in sessions were held in June 2011 and February 2012, as well as four specific drop-in events during National Adoption Week in October 2011. A radio advertising campaign was also broadcast in October 2011 to tie-in with National Adoption Week. In addition the Adoption and Fostering service had stalls at Bedford Market, Leighton Buzzard Market, Linslade Canal Festival and Bedfordshire Young Farmers Event during 2011.

3.2 – THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS: ENQUIRIES, ASSESSMENTS AND APPROVALS

- 3.2.1 All assessments are carried out in accordance with the 2011 National Minimum Standards for Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and their Statutory and Practice Guidance. All prospective adopters are required to undertake a training programme as part of the preparation and assessment process and have a review of their assessment conducted by a Manager or Senior Practitioner of the Adoption and Permanence Support Team.
- 3.2.2 104 enquiries from prospective adopters were received in 2011/12 which was an identical number to the 104 in 2010/2011. All enquirers were invited to attend information evenings and sent information packs. 73 households attended with 37 households being interviewed. Applications were accepted from 25 households. 14 adoptive households were approved in 2011/12

3.3 – ETHNICITY OF ADOPTERS

- 3.3.1 Of the 104 enquiries, 85 were white British. 12 households were of a dual heritage background, with 8 being white and white European heritage. 5 households were from an Asian background, 1 of a black African and 1 from a black Caribbean heritage.
- 3.3.2 Of the adopters approved 11 households were White / British. In other cases the household comprised one partner of white of non-British heritage and another household were Asian.

3.4 – POST APPROVAL SUPPORT

- 3.4.1 All approved adopters are supported by a Social Worker from the Adoption and Permanence Support Team from approval, through the process of placement of children, to the making of an Adoption Order.
- 3.4.2 Once an Adoption Order has been made, adopters can continue to access support or request an assessment of their additional support needs through the Adoption and Permanence Support Team.

3.5 – TRAINING FOR ADOPTERS

- 3.5.1 Social Workers from the Adoption and Fostering Service provide the preparation training for adopters. Adopters also have access to the full training programme offered to the Agency's foster carers and adopters. This ongoing training is available to both approved adopters as well as to adoptive parents at any point after an Adoption Order has been granted.
- 3.5.2 During the year April 2011 to March 2012 a four day preparation training programme was held on four occasions and was attended by 19 households, compared to 14 households during 2010/2011. In addition, specific preparation training was held for second-time adopters in November 2011 attended by 3 households.
- 3.5.3 The training covered a variety of topics and experiential exercises including:
- The Adoption Process
 - Agency Policy / Legislation
 - Valuing Diversity
 - Disability Awareness
 - Child Development
 - Attachment and Resilience
 - Health and Education
 - Abuse
 - Memories, Loss and Separation
 - Lifestory work
 - Adoption Support including contact
 - Matching
- 3.5.4 Training is evaluated at the end of each programme, and again when prospective adopters attend Adoption Panel. The feedback to Panel during the past 12 months has been universally positive.

SECTION 4 – ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES

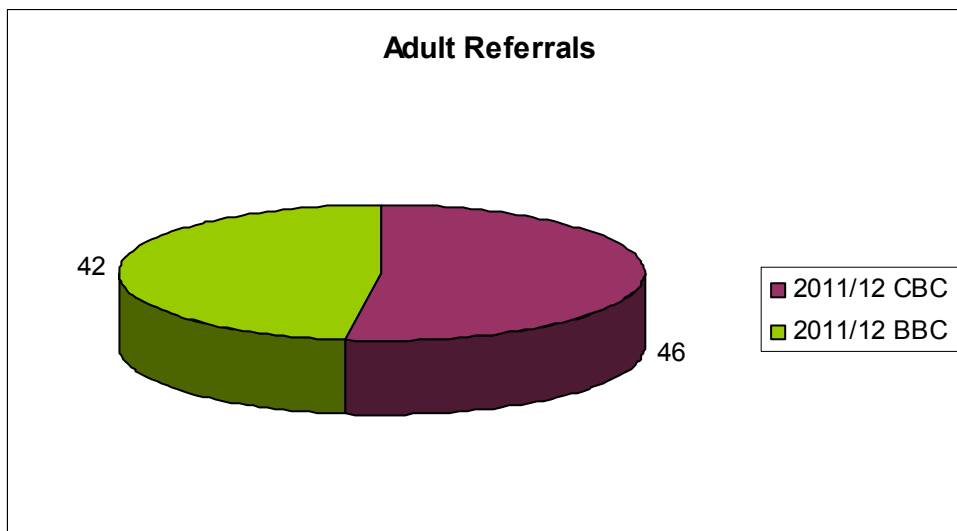
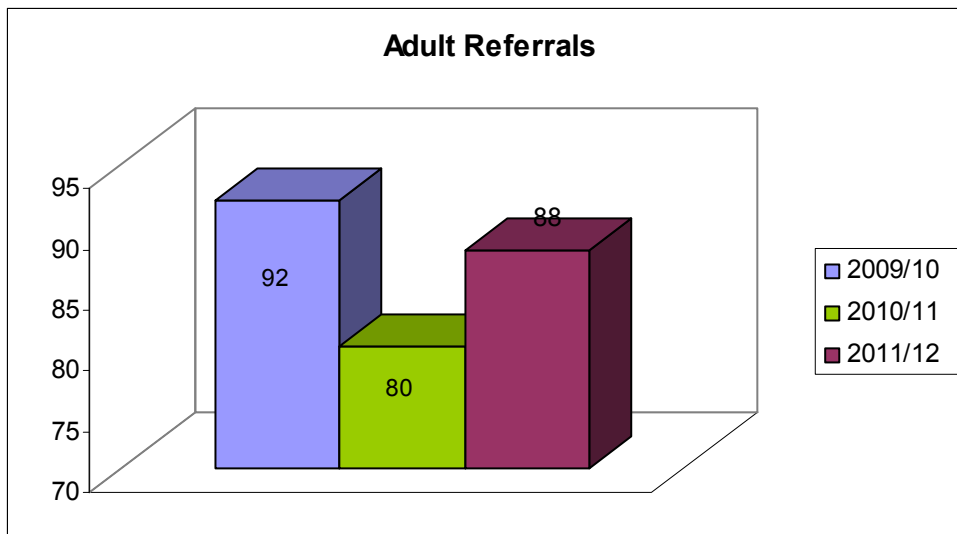
4.0 – POST ADOPTION SUPPORT TO FAMILIES

- 4.0.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 established the right of adopted families to request an assessment of their adoption support needs. These families either self-refer or come to the attention of the department via another agency. In such instances the team either provides direct social work support or where a specific need is identified, a specialist service may be commissioned.
- 4.0.2 As of the 31st March 2012, the team were working directly with 25 adopted children and their families who were in need of support. Of these 12 were from Central Bedfordshire and 13 from Bedford Borough. This compares to 41 children and their families in March 2011. The reduction in open cases is largely as a result of a lower number of referrals than in the preceding 12 months, coupled with the service supporting children and families to make use of some of the lower level group support offered. Between 1st April 2011 and 31st March 2012 the team received a total of 17 new referrals for adoption support, 8 from Central Bedfordshire and 9 from Bedford Borough.
- 4.0.3 The team have a mailing list of 130 adoptive families from Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough who are sent newsletters, invitations to support groups for adoptive parents and family days, some of which are provided by the service and some by Adoption UK. They are also sent information about training events provided by the Adoption and Fostering Service.
- 4.0.4 All new adoption support referrals are offered an Adoption UK Buddy and access to the above services. The Adoption & Permanence team also provide groups for adopted children and their families, including Talking About Adoption workshops. All adoption support referrals have an assessment of need and adoption support plan upon request.
- 4.0.5 Each child placed for adoption is required to have a contact plan in relation to their birth family. The service currently manages contact plans on behalf of 190 children (compared to 204 children in 2010/2011), many of which have required direct intervention to support all the parties involved in the contact arrangements, i.e. adopted children and young people, their adoptive parents and their birth families. In addition the service currently manages contact plans in Special Guardianship cases on behalf of 18 children.

4.1 – SERVICES TO ADOPTED ADULTS AND BIRTH RELATIVES

- 4.1.1 Social Workers in the Adoption Support Team provide an advice and counselling service to adopted people seeking information and access to their birth records. For all residents of Bedfordshire, a counselling service is offered and information is provided to other councils who are supporting people in their areas who were adopted through Bedfordshire. Specific leaflets outlining this service are available to enquirers through the Adoption Duty Desk.
- 4.1.2 Not only is an initial counselling interview offered to those seeking birth records, but work is undertaken to locate records held by other Adoption Agencies. Counselling and practical advice during tracing, an intermediary service and pre and post reunion support are also available to adopted adults and their birth relatives.

- 4.1.3 Birth relatives seeking to make contact with adopted adults are offered information and advice and an intermediary service. In the case of birth relatives, they are not given any identifying information about the adopted person.
- 4.1.4 In the period 2011/2012 there were 88 referrals from adult adoptees and their birth relatives who were seeking Post Adoption counselling support. This was an increase on the 80 referrals received in 2010/11
- 4.1.5 Of the 88 adult referrals received during 2011/2012, 46 came from Central Bedfordshire and 42 were from Bedford Borough. .



4.2 – DISRUPTED ADOPTIONS

- 4.2.1 Nationally the disruption rate pre Adoption Order is considered to be in the region of 20%. There were no disruptions in 2011/12 of children placed by the two councils, meaning that there had only been one disruption in the last 4 years. This low figure reflects the care given to the matching process between children and adoptive families, the resilience and commitment of adoptive parents and the support given to them and the children in the critical early months of placements.
- 4.2.2 During 2011/12 the service provided advice in the cases of three children placed by other councils, but living in this area, whose adoptions had disrupted post Adoption order.

SECTION 5 – OTHER ACTIVITIES

5.0 – INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTION

- 5.0.1 Inter-Country adoption has become increasingly more complex in terms of the legal requirements of those countries that permit children to be placed for adoption outside of their country of origin. In recognition of this and given the specialist knowledge and expertise which this work demands, the Adoption Agency has a Service Level Agreement with a voluntary adoption agency based in Reading, Parents and Children Together (PACT), which is recognised as being a leading agency in this area of work, to provide this service on its behalf.
- 5.0.2 Families who are normally resident in Bedfordshire wishing to adopt children from overseas are referred to PACT who will provide information and preparation training and will assess and approve families wishing to adopt children from overseas.
- 5.0.3 Families are required to pay for their assessment in accordance with Regulations but Bedfordshire funds all of the initial counselling interviews.
- 5.0.4 During 2011/2012 PACT received 6 enquiries concerning inter-country adoption from residents of Central Bedfordshire or Bedford Borough. 2 of these enquiries were followed by an initial interview. During the period PACT approved one adoptive household and made one inter-country placement. This is a reduction in enquiries and interviews from the previous 12 months.

5.1 – THE ADOPTION CONSORTIUM

- 5.1.1 Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council Adoption Agency is a member of the local adoption consortium whose aim is to work in partnership to share information about children and approved adopters to make local matches and to share good practice. The other full members are:
- Buckinghamshire County Council
 - Hertfordshire County Council
 - Luton Borough Council
 - Milton Keynes Council
- Associate member: St Francis Children's Society

- 5.1.2 We are pleased to be able to assist other consortium members and in the year 2011/2012 2 children from Bedford Borough were placed with adopters from the consortium. Three children from within the consortium were placed with adopters trained, assessed and approved by Bedfordshire.

5.2 – BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR ADOPTION AND FOSTERING (BAAF)

- 5.2.1 Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council Adoption Agencies are full members of BAAF which is a leading national voluntary organisation working to promote best practice for children separated from their birth families. It is the leading organisation representing local authority and voluntary adoption agencies and provides training courses, practice guidance, research material, and a consultation and advice service to all its members.
- 5.2.2 Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council Adoption Agency is also a member of the BAAF Eastern Region, a group which meets quarterly to discuss and exchange best practice in the East Anglia region. Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough are represented by the Agency Adviser, Adoption and Fostering.
- 5.2.3 During the last 12 months the agency has taken up membership of New Family Social, a national charity supporting adopters and foster carers from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-gender community. The organisation provides social events, a website and membership events for carers, and support and advice to adoption agencies.

5.3 – INDEPENDENT BIRTH FAMILY COUNSELLING

- 5.3.1 The agency provides an Independent Birth Family Counselling and support service. This service is provided by Adoption Plus Limited on behalf of Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council Adoption Agency. Adoption Plus is an independent adoption support agency.
- 5.3.2 The aim of the service is to provide birth relatives of children who might be adopted an opportunity to talk about their feelings. Although the agency are involved in commissioning this service, Adoption Plus will undertake all counselling work with the birth family members and the counselling will be confidential unless concerns arise about the safety or welfare of a child.
- 5.3.3 The contract with Adoption Plus was renewed in 2011/2012 and at that time the arrangements for how the service is provided were changed to provide more flexibility for those accessing the service and to encourage a greater take up by birth parents.

SECTION 6 CONCLUSION

- 6.0.1 2011/12 has been the third year of the shared service for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Councils. This has been a successful year for the service and one in which we have continued to develop our practice and meet challenges of offering creative and quality services that are cost effective.
- 6.0.2 Compared to last year there has been an increase in activity across all aspects of the service. The increase in looked after children in both councils during 2011/12 resulted in increased numbers of referrals for permanence planning, both for adoption and for long-term fostering or for other legal alternative permanent options, such as Special Guardianship or Residence Orders.
- 6.0.3 In response, the service has increased the number of assessments of prospective adopters, resulting in increased numbers of approvals. The full success of this will be seen in 2012/13 as children are placed with those adopters and adoption orders granted. In order to meet continued demand a recruitment target for adopters has been set again for 2012/13, based on known and likely numbers and needs of children requiring adoption. The target has been set at 24 new approvals in 2012/13.
- 6.0.4 In August 2011 the Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted and judged to be Good with outstanding features. The Teenage Adoption Panel was singled out for particular praise as an example of innovative practice.
- 6.0.5 Overall in 2011/2012 there has been another significant increase in the number of children who have been referred for permanence planning, including those where adoption is being considered. Additional adoption panels have been required to meet the need.
- 6.0.6 During 2011 there has been considerable Government attention paid to the performance of councils in respect to the numbers and timeliness of adoptions of children. In March 2012 the Department for Education published 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' which outlines measures planned to monitor and improve performance. Measures include addressing delay in Court Proceedings, the publishing of an adoption 'scorecard' for each council, and the setting of challenging targets to reduce delay. The Adoption Service is in a strong position to meet the requirements of the action plan, having robust performance monitoring and good practices in place in regard to planning for adoption.
- 6.0.7 In March 2012 following the annual review of the Shared Service Level Agreement it was decided to end the Shared Service Arrangement as of 31st January 2013. Key staff in both councils will therefore be meeting regularly during 2012 to plan the arrangements for February 2013 and beyond. This planning process will involve consultation with key stakeholders and staff to ensure that an effective adoption service that meets the needs of children can be maintained and developed

Report written by:

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This information can be made available in
Large print and in other languages if required

Për Informacion

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