



APPENDIX A

# **Adoption Agency**

**Annual Report**

**For the period  
2013 - 2014**

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## SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.0.1 This report describes the activity of Central Bedfordshire Council's Adoption Agency during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, noting their achievements, clarifying the remit and focus of their work and identifying recommendations for the development of the service. It also reflects that during the period of the report, from 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013, the Council's adoption service operated as a shared service with Bedford Borough Council.
- 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.

### 1.1 STAFFING / SERVICE STRUCTURE

- 1.1.1 The joint Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Adoption and Permanence Support Team was made up of the following staff until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013:

- 1 x full time Team Manager
- 1 x full time Deputy Team Manager
- 4 x Senior Practitioners (3 full time equivalent)
- 8 x Social Workers (6.78 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

As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 the Adoption Team of Central Bedfordshire Council [as a single adoption agency] is made up of the following staffing compliment:

- 1x full time Team Manager
- 3x Senior Practitioners (2 full time equivalent)
- 4x Social Workers (3.5 full time equivalent)
- 2x Social Work Assistants (1 full time equivalent)
- 1x Adopter Stage One Project Worker
- 0.5x Administrator for Letter-box contact
- 1x Administrator

- 1.1.2 The service has remained largely fully staffed this year.
- 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. The team carries out the full functions of an adoption agency, with social workers carrying a range of adoption work, including adopters' assessments, family finding and work with adopted adults and their birth relatives.

- 1.1.3.1 The adoption agency is supported by specialist staff who work across the Adoption and Fostering service area. While a shared service, these staff included 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. Since the disaggregation, the Adoption and Fostering Service has retained a Resources Team and a newly formed Marketing Team.

## 1.2 THE ADOPTION PANEL

- 1.2.1 The adoption panel has for the time being remained a shared panel between Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council with separate decision-makers from each authority.
- 1.2.2 The Adoption Panel usually meets every month of the year, with extraordinary panels as and when required. There were 5 extra panels during 2013/2014 and the panel therefore met on 17 occasions.
- 1.2.3 The Adoption Panel considers applications from prospective adopters and makes recommendations as to their approval. Panel also considers the proposed match between all children with adopters, making recommendations on any matters brought before them. On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2012 amended Regulations determined that where a child's case was before the Court in respect of Court Proceedings, the adoption panel would no longer consider whether adoption should be the plan for the child, and this decision would instead be made by the Agency Decision Maker without a recommendation from the Adoption Panel.

## 1.3 ADOPTION PANEL MEMBERSHIP

- 1.3.1 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013 the Adoption Panel central list was as follows:

Panel Chair	Independent
Independent	Adoptive Mother
Independent	Adoptive Father
Independent	Birth Parent of an Adopted Child
Independent	Gypsy and Traveller Educational Consultant
Social Work Member	Fostering Team Manager, Bedford Borough
Social Work Member	Team Manager, Children with Disabilities Team (BBC)
Social Work Member	Social Worker, Adoption Team CBC
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 AND AGENCY DECISION MAKER ACTIVITY**

- 1.4.1 In 2013/2014 the Adoption Panel met 17 times and considered one plan for a relinquished baby.
- 1.4.2 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 the Agency Decision Makers decided that adoption should be the plan for 91 children. Of these 48 were from Central Bedfordshire and 43 were from Bedford Borough. This compares to 41 in 2012/2013 and is an increase for the fourth year in succession.
- 1.4.3 In relation to approvals, the Panel recommended that 29 households were suitable to adopt a child. This compares to 22 households in 2012/2013. All applicants attended the panel.
- 1.4.4 In terms of matching, the panel recommended that 48 children should be placed with particular adopters. Of these 20 were from Central Bedfordshire and 28 from Bedford Borough. This compares to 21 children in 2012/2013 from Central Bedfordshire Council.

#### **1.5 PANEL TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT**

- 1.5.1 The Adoption Agency strives to ensure that there is a good level of training, appraisal and induction offered to Panel Members. This year, due to the number of cases and business on the agenda, it has been a challenge to find time for the 'bite-size' training on panel days. However, a 'bite size session' was held in May 2013 on 'Loving Waters', a technique demonstrated at Preparation Group to adopters as a means of understanding attachment difficulties.
- 1.5.2 All Panel Members had an annual appraisal where their personal training needs are discussed and considered.
- 1.5.3 A full day's training was held in November 2013, which looked at the national reforms to adopter recruitment and planning for children.

#### **1.6 PROVISION OF INFORMATION ON ADOPTION**

- 1.6.1 Central Bedfordshire Council has a single point of contact to the service through a local rate telephone line. Following the Statutory Guidance on Adoption published in July 2013, social workers from the team meet to share information with enquirers within 5 working days.
- 1.6.2 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. Since July 2013 these have been held monthly. 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 2013/2014, there were 48 children from Central Bedfordshire referred to the service for adoption. In the same period there were 43 children from Bedford Borough referred to the service .
- 2.0.2 During 2013/2014 a further 58 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. This is an increase from the 30 referrals in 2012/2013.

### **2.1 OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN WITH PLANS FOR ADOPTION**

- 2.1.0 Of the 91 children with plans for adoption in 2013/2014, 48 were from Central Bedfordshire. Of the 48 children, 13 children had been placed with prospective adopters by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, with a further 5 having been matched but not yet placed. The team were still family finding for 14 children, three of whom were likely to remain with their current foster carers. 6 children, representing two groups of three siblings, returned home to the care of their parents, and 8 children were placed with wider family members under an SGO. 2 children's plans were rescinded in favour of long term fostering.
- 2.1.1 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.
- 2.1.2 In 2013/2014, reforms to the Family Justice system began to take effect with the average timescale for care proceedings to conclude showing a marked reduction enabling us to place children in a timely way.

### **2.2 – PLACEMENTS OF CHILDREN**

- 2.2.1 Members of the Adoption Team were active in facilitating the placements of the 48 children from the two authorities placed for adoption in 2013/2014. This compares to the placement of 21 children in the previous year.
- 2.2.2 There were 9 sibling groups placed for adoption during 2013/2014, of which 3 are from Central Bedfordshire.

### **2.3 – TYPE OF ADOPTION PLACEMENT**

- 2.3.1 Of the 20 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire in 2013/2014, 11 were placed with adopters assessed and approved by Central Bedfordshire. 4 were placed with adopters recruited by Bedford Borough and 3 more were placed with adopters approved by another authority. Two children were placed inter-country with relatives in Ireland
- 2.3.2 No children were placed under the new 'Fostering to Adopt' regulations. The adoption team has guidelines in place to consider this as an option for children, however it is recognised that this will only be an option for a small number of children in any one year.

## **2.4 – ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION**

- 2.4.1 Of the 20 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire in the year 2013/2014, 18 were White British, and two were of White/Asian ethnicity.

## **2.5 – AGES OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION**

- 2.5.1 Of the 20 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire in 2013/2014, 12 were aged 2 years or under, 4 were between 3-5 years and 4 were 5 and above.

## **2.6 – GENDER OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION**

- 2.6.1 Of the 20 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire, 12 were female and 8 were male.

## **2.7 – ADOPTION ORDERS / SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS**

- 2.2.1 Adoption Orders were made in respect of 17 children during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014. Of these 10 were for children from Central Bedfordshire and 7 from Bedford Borough. This is an increase in the numbers of adoption orders granted in 2012/2013, which was 12 (6 from Central Bedfordshire).
- 2.2.2 Special Guardianship Orders were made in respect of 20 children. This is an increase for the third year running, last year's total was 12 children.

# **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 children from Central Bedfordshire, and to meet the needs of children nationally requiring adoptive families, a range of recruitment activity has taken place during the year. Drop-in sessions were held in July 2013 as well as specific drop-in events during National Adoption Week in November 2013. A social media campaign using twitter and email alerts has been used. Advertising in local newspapers and magazines was used to publicise events.

### **3.2 – THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS: 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 the Statutory Guidance for Adoption published in July 2013. We have since July successfully implemented the two stage process for adopters which was introduced as part of the Government's Adoption Reform Agenda
- 3.2.2 98 enquiries from prospective adopters were received in 2013/2014. This represents the joint agency from 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> December and Central Bedfordshire as a single agency from 1<sup>st</sup> January. At 31<sup>st</sup> March Central Bedfordshire had 12 sets of adopters in Stage one of the process and 8 in Stage 2. In total 27 households were approved during the period.

### **3.3 – ETHNICITY OF ADOPTERS**

- 3.3.1 Of the adopters approved 25 households were White British, 2 were Asian, one was White Scottish, 1 was White British/Italian and one was White British/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 team 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 period April 2013 to July 2013 a four day preparation training programme was held. Since the changes to the adoption process in July 2013 a new modular training programme has been introduced. This runs monthly with adopters attending at least three foundation modules during the period of their assessment prior to presentation at adoption panel

3.5.3 The training modules are

The Child  
Adoption For Life  
The Adoption Process.

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. New legislation about to be published at this time requires all adoptive families to be provided with information about adoption services available locally and how to access them. This practice is already well-established in Central Bedfordshire.

4.0.2 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.

4.0.3 As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, the team was working directly with 12 adopted children and their families who were in need of support. This includes 2 families where a social worker from the team trained in Theraplay delivered this intervention to assist the development of attachment in the new families.

4.0.4 A number of adopted children and their families were assessed as being in need of therapeutic support. It is expected that this is provided by community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). In a small number of cases this year CAMHS did not have the resources to meet the identified needs of children or deemed that children did not meet their referral criteria.

4.0.5 The team have a mailing list of adoptive families 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. Since the disaggregation with Bedford Borough we have continued to provide some of these events as a shared services to families living in Bedfordshire.

- 4.0.6 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.
- 4.0.7 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 92 children 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. .

#### **4.1 – SERVICES TO ADOPTED ADULTS AND BIRTH RELATIVES**

- 4.1.1 Social Workers in the Adoption Team provide an advice and counselling service to adopted people seeking information and access to their birth records. For all residents of Central 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 At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 the Adoption Team were providing support to 17 adult adoptees and birth relatives who were seeking access to records and support in tracing.

#### **4.2 – DISRUPTED ADOPTIONS**

- 4.2.1 There no disruptions in 2013/14 of children placed by Central Bedfordshire, meaning that there had only been two disruptions 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.

### **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 2013/2014 PACT received 4 enquiries concerning inter-country adoption from residents of Central Bedfordshire. No enquirers followed up their enquiry with a request for an initial interview. For the third year running this is a decrease in activity in respect of inter-country adoption.

## **5.1 – THE ADOPTION CONSORTIUM**

- 5.1.1 Central Bedfordshire Council Adoption Agency,(until December 2013 alongside Bedford Borough) 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 CouncilAssociate member: St Francis Children's Society

## **5.2 – BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR ADOPTION AND FOSTERING (BAAF)**

- 5.2.1 Central Bedfordshire Council is a full member 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 During the last 12 months the agency has continued its 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 2013/2014 with ongoing contract reviews to ensure there is maximum support for those accessing the service and to ensure optimum take up by birth parents.

### **5.4 – THE ADOPTION SCORECARD**

- 5.4.1 In 2012 the Department for Education published 'An Action Plan For Adoption: Tackling Delay' in which they outlined the intention to publish Adoption Scorecards for each council outlining performance in relation to numbers and timeliness of adoptions.
- 5.4.2 The scorecard details the average length of time between a child becoming looked after and moving in with their adoptive family and the length of time between the council having court authority to place a child and them moving in with their adoptive family.
- 5.4.3 The scorecards published in November 2012 and January 2014 showed that performance in relation to timeliness of placements was in the upper quartile of all councils and better than the targets set by government.

## **SECTION 6 CONCLUSION**

- 6.0.1 2013/14 was the fourth year of the shared service for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Councils. The decision was taken to disaggregate the service and this was achieved in January 2014.
- 6.0.2 There has been a continued increase in activity across all aspects of the service. The increase in looked after children in both councils over the last three years has resulted in a hugely increased number 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 and adoption orders granted. In order to meet continued demand a recruitment target for adopters has been set again for 2014/2015, based on known and likely numbers and needs of children requiring adoption. The target has been set at 24 new approvals in 2014/2015.

#### 6.0.4

The Government's national reform of adoption has continued during 2013/2014. The statutory Guidance for Adoption, published in July 2013, restructured the approval process for adopters, made significant amounts of funding available to Local Authorities and introduced the concept of 'adoption passports' to equalise adoption support services. Central Bedfordshire has used the money provided by the Adoption Reform Grant to embed the new adopter approval process, improve our family finding for children and increase legal and medical advice to Children's Services.

6.0.5 As reported above, in March 2012 following the annual review of the Shared Service Level Agreement it was decided to end the Shared Service Arrangement. This decision was subsequently reviewed in detail in Autumn 2012 with the decision being made for the disaggregation of the service to be effective from 1 January 2014. A project board comprising staff in both councils was established to plan the arrangements for January 2014 and beyond. This planning process has involve consultation with key stakeholders and staff and has resulted in a smooth transition to ensure that our services to children and families remains of a high standard

6.0.6 The Adoption and Fostering Service relocated in March 2014 to Stephenson Court in Bedford. The service now is part of the Corporate Parenting Service under a single Head of Service. It is anticipated that this will further enhance the quality of service delivered by maximising opportunities for joint working with our colleagues in Looked After Children and Leaving and After-care.

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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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