



APPENDIX A

Adoption Agency

Six Month Update

**For the period
April- September 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 April to 30 September 2014, 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's Corporate Parenting Panel.

1.1 STAFFING / SERVICE STRUCTURE

- 1.1.1 As of 30 September 2014 the Adoption Team of Central Bedfordshire Council is made up of the following staffing compliment:

1x Full time Practice Manager
3x Senior Practitioners (2 full time equivalent)
4x Social Workers (3.5 full time equivalent)
1x Full time Social Work Assistants
1x Adopter Stage One Project Worker
1x Administrator

We have lost the role of letterbox administrator: this has been included in the tasks of the Social Work Assistant

- 1.1.2 The service has remained largely fully staffed during this period.
- 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, including access to the Council's Assisted and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme. 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 Corporate Parenting service area. This includes a Recruitment and Marketing team.

1.2 THE ADOPTION PANEL

- 1.2.1 The Adoption Panel has remained a shared panel between Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council with separate decision-makers from each authority. It has been agreed that the panel will remain shared for the immediate future.
- 1.2.2 The Adoption Panel has been meeting twice a month and has been scheduled as such for the next year. During the first six months of this year, panel met on 11 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 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 30th September 2014 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	Adoption Social Worker, Bedford Borough
Social Work Member	Team Manager, Children with Disabilities Team (CBC)
Social Work Member	Social Worker, Adoption Team CBC
Medical Adviser	Consultant Community Paediatrician
Elected Member	Central Bedfordshire Council
Independent (Vice Chair)	Adopted Person
Independent	IRO (Bedford Borough)
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 the first 6 months of this year the Adoption Panel met 11 times. The statistics relate only to Central Bedfordshire cases presented at panel.

1.4.2 In this period the Agency Decision Maker decided that adoption should be the plan for 14 children

1.4.3 In relation to approvals, the panel recommended that 11 households were suitable to adopt a child. All applicants attended the panel. The target for the year is to approve 24 households, which is still achievable.

1.4.4 In terms of matching, the panel recommended that 15 children should be placed with particular adopters. This compares to 20 children in 2013/2014 from Central Bedfordshire Council, and shows that we are on target to place 26 children

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.

1.5.2 All Panel Members had an annual appraisal where their personal training needs were discussed and considered.

1.5.3 A full day's training will be held in October 2014, which will consider updates on the Adoption Reform Agenda and a presentation by members of the Teenage Adoption Panel .

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 the first 6 months of this year, there were 14 children from Central Bedfordshire referred to the service for adoption. This represents a significant drop in numbers compared to the same period last year which was 35 children; however 13 of these plans were subsequently rescinded, therefore it is possible that there is more detailed scrutiny of plans before being presented.

2.1 OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN WITH PLANS FOR ADOPTION

- 2.1.1 Of the 48 children who had plans for adoption made in 2013/2014, there are only three children where we are still looking for adopters. Of these we are pursuing positive links for two children and have some interest in the third child. Of the 14 children referred this year, 3 children's plans have changed in favour of an SGO, one child has been placed, 8 children have links and 2 are still subject to court proceedings.
- 2.1.2 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.
- 2.1.3 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 15 children in this period.
- 2.2.2 There were 4 sibling groups placed for adoption during the 6 month period.
- 2.2.3 2 of the adoption placements made during this period disrupted within the first two months of the placement. They involved a sibling group of 2 boys aged 3 and 5, and a 5 year old boy. Meetings with all professionals involved in each case (disruption meetings) will be held to review and look at any lessons which could be learned.

2.3 – TYPE OF ADOPTION PLACEMENT

- 2.3.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire from April to September, 5 were placed with adopters assessed and approved by Central Bedfordshire and 10 were placed with adopters approved by another authority.
- 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 1 year.

2.4 – ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION

- 2.4.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire in the 6 month period, 11 were White British, 3 were of White/Asian ethnicity and 1 child was from a south-east Asian background

2.5 – AGES OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION

- 2.5.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire in the 6 month period, 6 were aged 2 years or under, 2 were between 3-5 years and 7 were 4 years and above.

2.6 – GENDER OF CHILDREN PLACED FOR ADOPTION

- 2.6.1 Of the 15 children placed for adoption by Central Bedfordshire, 6 were female and 9 were male.

2.7 – ADOPTION ORDERS / SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS

- 2.7.1 Adoption Orders were made in respect of 11 children during the period 1 April to 30 September 2014 The previous year saw 10 adoption orders being granted.

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. It has been recognised that due to the increased number of children being considered for adoption, it has been hard for the team to also prioritise those children with plans for long term fostering. It has therefore been decided to recruit to the role of Family Finder for Permanency to ensure that these young people's plans are given equal consideration.

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 takes place during the year. Drop-in sessions have been arranged to coincide with National Adoption Week in November.

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 2013 successfully implemented the two stage process for adopters which was introduced as part of the Government's Adoption Reform Agenda
- 3.2.2 55 enquiries from prospective adopters were received in the 6 month period under review. The figure for the whole of 2013/14 was 98. At 30 September 2014 Central Bedfordshire had 15 sets of adopters in Stage one of the process and 10 in Stage 2. In total 11 households were approved during the period.

3.3 – DETAILS OF ADOPTERS

- 3.3.1 Of the adopters approved 9 households were White British, 1 couple were from a South American background, and 1 adopter was African Caribbean. 2 were single adopters. 1 household was a previous foster carer. 7 households had been matched with a child by 30 September 2014.

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 Modular training is offered to prospective adopters in Stage 2. 1 module runs every month on a rolling program.
- 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 published in April 2014 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 30 September 2014, the team was working directly with 11 adopted children and their families who were in need of support.
- 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 as they did not have a mental health diagnosis. This is an area of concern nationally which the Government is considering as part of its review of adoption support services. In respect of the children concerned we have challenged our local CAMH team and meanwhile continue to offer direct work with the children and their families.
- 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, all of which are very well attended. Since the disaggregation with Bedford Borough we have continued to provide some of these events as a shared service 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 30 September 2014 the Adoption Team were providing support to 9 adult adoptees and birth relatives who were seeking access to records and support in tracing.

4.2 – DISRUPTED ADOPTIONS

- 4.2.1 We are carefully reviewing the process in order to ensure that we can learn from this experience. This must be set against the very low number of adoptions in preceding years and the fact that the children involved were all in the older age group and therefore seen as having a higher risk factor in relation to placement success. Disruption meetings have been held to consider the lessons which can be learned from these two cases and an independent consultant has been asked to report on this. The findings will be disseminated to teams in December and January and a report brought to the next Corporate Parenting Panel.

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 the 6 month period received no 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-county 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 Council
- Associate 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. The average time between a child entering care and being placed for adoption in Central Bedfordshire was 600 days, while the average figure for our statistical neighbours was 630 days

SECTION 6 CONCLUSION

- 6.0.1 The first 6 months of this financial year has continued to see an increase in children placed for adoption and adoption orders granted. The team is likely to exceed the projected number of placements for the year which was 26. We continue to be successful in matching the majority of our children in a timely way, which is reflected in a decrease in the time taken from Placement Order to placement.

- 6.0.2 Adopter enquiries have increased this year, with the team on target to receive over 100 enquiries. To date 11 households have been approved, but there are a further 10 which will be presented at panel in the next 4 months, making the target of 24 households achievable. The practice of pre-matching children with in-house adopters has led to almost all adopters having a child in placement within 6 months of being approved.
- 6.0.3 This practice also allows us to quickly identify those children where we will be unable to place them with CBC adopters in an appropriate timescale and begin searching nationally for families for children where there is a plan of adoption.

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

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