



Central
Bedfordshire

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Annual report

Adoption Agency, Central Bedfordshire Council

For the period:

1st April 2017 – 31st March 2018

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Contents

Section 1 - introduction	3
1.0 Introduction	3
1.1 The Adoption Team	3
1.2 The Adoption Panel	4
1.3 Adoption Panel Membership	4
1.4 Panel and Agency Decision Maker Activity	5
1.5 Panel Training And Development	5
1.6 Provision Of Information On Adoption	6
Section 2 – Children and Adoption	6
2.0 Children Referred For Adoption	6
2.1 Outcomes For Children with Plans for Adoption in this period	7
2.2 Placements Of Children	7
2.3 Type of Adoption Placement	8
2.4 Ethnicity Of Children Placed For Adoption	8
2.5 Ages Of Children Placed For Adoption	8
2.6 Gender Of Children Placed For Adoption	8
2.7 Adoption Orders	8
Section 3 – Adopters	8
3.0 The Work Of The Adoption And Permanence Support Team	8
3.1 Recruitment Of Adopters	9
3.2 The Assessment Process: Enquiries, Assessments And Approvals	10
3.3 Ethnicity Of Adopters	10
3.4 Post Approval Support	10
3.5 Training For Adopters	11
Section 4 – Adoption Support Services	11
4.0 Post Adoption Support To Families	11
4.1 Services To Adopted Adults / Birth Relatives	12
4.2 Disrupted Adoptions	13
Section 5 – Other Activities	13
5.0 Inter-Country and Non Agency Adoption	13
5.1 Regional Adoption Agency	13
5.2 Membership	14
5.3 Commissioned Services: Independent Birth Family Counselling	14
5.4 The Adoption Scorecard	14
Section 6	17
6.0 Conclusion and Performance Objectives	17

Section 1:

Introduction

- 1.0.1 This report describes the activity of Central Bedfordshire Council's Adoption Agency during the period 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018, 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 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 The Adoption Team

- 1.1.1 The Adoption Agency is co-located within the Corporate Parenting Service of Children's Services. This supports the close working relationship with the court teams to achieve early permanence planning for children.
- 1.1.2 The Adoption Agency has remained conveniently located to support the provision for providing the range of adoption services as specified within the current legislation. The Statutory Guidance underpinning adoption legislation prescribes all the services and process to be followed by an Adoption Agency and the qualifications required by Social Workers.
- 1.1.3 The agency has experienced has retained a consistent staff group.
- 1.1.4 During this reporting period the Adoption Team Staffing has been:
- 1 x full time Practice Manager
 - 1 x Senior Practitioner (part time)
 - 5.5 x Social Workers
 - 1 x Social Work Assistant
 - 1 x Business Support Administrators
- 1.1.5 All employed staff are permanent and have a number of years post-qualifying experience.
- 1.1.6 All social workers are qualified and registered with the Health and Care Professions Council and have at least three years' post qualifying experience required by the 'Restriction of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005'.
- 1.1.7 The team carries out the full functions of an adoption agency, with social workers carrying a range of adoption work, including recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters, adoption support and family finding.

1.1.8. The adoption agency is supported by specialist staff who work across the Adoption and Fostering Service. These include a Recruitment and Marketing Officer, a Training Coordinator, a Professional Panel Adviser and Panel Secretaries who support and manage the Adoption Panel.

1.2 The Adoption Panel

1.2.1 The Adoption Panel is hosted by CBC and continues to be a shared panel between Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council. A panel usually sits twice per month, with extraordinary panels as and when required to meet timescales.

1.2.2 Adoption panel considers the following:

- Whether a prospective adopter is suitable to adopt
- Whether a child should be placed for adoption with a particular prospective adopter
- Should be placed for adoption decisions relating to relinquished children
- The termination of approval of prospective adopters

1.2.3 Each panel considers a maximum of six cases per panel.

1.2.4 The Agency Decision Maker makes the decision in regard to whether a child should be placed for adoption without a recommendation from the Adoption Panel. The only exception is for a plan for adoption for a child relinquished for adoption by their birth parent.

1.2.5 The panel management team meet 6 monthly and an annual report is provided by the panel chairperson on the quality of panel business.

1.3 Adoption Panel membership

1.3.1 As at 31st March 2017 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
Independent	Adopted Person,
Social Work Member	Social Worker
Social Work Member	Social Worker
Social Work Member	Independent Social Worker
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	Central Bedfordshire Council
Panel Secretary	Central Bedfordshire Council

1.3.3 The Legal Adviser and Medical Advisor provide advice, in writing, in advance of Panel meetings.

1.4 Panel and Agency Decision Maker activity

1.4.1 In this period the Adoption Panel met on 19 occasions.

1.4.2. The Agency Decision Maker decided that adoption should be the plan for 26 children. This compares to 18 in 2016/2017 which shows an increase in activity.

1.4.3 5 plans for adoption where rescinded within this period due to a change in the Care Plan. This related to two sibling groups that had a plan for adoption agreed in previous years.

1.4.4 18 households were recommended for approval by Adoption Panel and all were later ratified by the Agency Decision Maker as suitable to adopt. All applicants attended the panel.

1.4.5 The target was 20 approvals and so 18 approvals represent 2 households less than the set target. 1 application was ended as it did not meet Adoption regulations and standards and 1 application withdrew due a change in their personal circumstances.

1.4.6 The panel considered and recommended a match with prospective adopters for 14 children and all were later ratified by the ADM.

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 An annual training day was held on 16th October 2017 covering the following subject matters:

- Review the legal framework re: permanence planning for looked after children
- Early Permanence planning including foster for adoption.
- Significance of Life Story information for adoptee's
- Performance Update

1.5.3 All Panel Members had an annual appraisal completed by the Agency Panel Advisor and Panel Chairperson where their personal training needs are discussed and considered.

1.5.4 In addition, the Panel Chair attends the national CoramBaaf panel chairs meeting to support learning, good practice development and updates to legislation. The Panel Chair and Vice Chair also attended a meeting with the Agency Decision Maker for each authority.

1.5.5 Panel members can also access the annual training programme to attend any training needs identified from their annual appraisal.

1.5.6 The Panel Chair is invited to attend adoption disruption meetings to learn from practice. There have been no adoption disruptions within the reporting period.

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. Enquiries can also be made via the council website, where information on adoption is readily available, directly to an adoption email address and via the social media page. Enquirers are provided with information about the needs of children placed for adoption and the assessment process. They are invited to attend an information evening and in addition, are offered an initial interview with a Social Worker to consider their personal circumstances to assist a decision regarding an application to be assessed as prospective adopters.
- 1.6.2 Information Evenings are held monthly where information on the assessment process and the needs of children requiring adoption is provided by social workers from the service. Dates and details of information events are easily accessible on the council website and promoted via social media.
- 1.6.3 Some feedback from attendees includes:

“the information given was very valuable and easy to understand”
“far more in depth than I was expecting but this is good”
“lots of opportunities to ask questions was provided”
“very informative and presented in a professional but friendly manner”

Statistics in relation to the number of enquiries received are included later in this report.

Section 2:

Children and Adoption

2.0 Children Referred for Adoption

- 2.0.1 In this reporting period 33 children were referred to the service for parallel planning where adoption would be the alternative plan if no other options were available. This was a slight decrease from the previous year of 38.
- 2.0.2 In order to avoid case drift or delay for children, children are referred for family finding when adoption is a possible alternative outcome for that child. This does not mean that all children referred will subsequently have a plan for adoption but ensures that robust early permanence planning is considered as part of a child’s care plan, including the duty to consider foster for adoption. In many cases, children safely return to their families or are placed with extended family members under other orders, such as Special Guardianship.
- 2.0.3 Early Permanence has remained a focus including the provision of Foster for Adoption placements for children. Such placements will only be progressed for children who meet the criteria.
- 2.0.4 CoramBaaf guidance reflects that foster for adoption may apply in one of the following circumstances:

- *Where parents have had one or more children previously placed for adoption or other forms of permanent placement and the evidence strongly suggests that their circumstances have not changed and pose the same risks.*
- *The local authority does not have a proactive plan to rehabilitate the child as the circumstances of the parents are such to pose a serious on-going risk.*
- *Where this is the first child, the circumstances of the parents and the risks to the child are such that there is no proactive plan to return the child to the birth parents or to other family members.*
- *Where parents have indicated that they may want their child adopted but have not formally consented. (S52(3) Adoption and Children Act 2002)*
- *There are other circumstances where placement with a dually approved carer may be in the best interests of the child. Concurrent planning is the clearest example.*

2.0.5 A service for birth parents who wish to voluntarily relinquish their child for adoption is provided by the team. This requires intensive support to the parent to enable them to make an informed decision. The service received 2 referrals in the period, only 1 arrangement proceeded to placement with prospective adopters.

2.1. Outcomes for children with plans for adoption in this period

2.1.0 Of the 26 children with plans for adoption in this period (1.4.2) as of 31st March 2018:

7 had been matched and placed with prospective adopters,
 3 with Placement Orders were subject to ongoing family finding
 3 were linked with prospective adopters pending the match being presented to a panel
 6 were subject to a change in Care Plan.
 7 plans for adoption remain pending the conclusion of care proceedings

2.0.5 In this reporting period a total of 14 children have been matched with prospective adopters.

2.0.6 6 children, subject to Placement Order, where adoption continues to be the appropriate plan, were waiting to be matched at the end of the period. Of which 3 had a link identified pending the match being presented to Adoption Panel.

2.2 Placements of children

2.2.2 There were 2 sibling groups placed for adoption during this period.

2.2.3 1 child placed had significant needs.

2.2.4 3 children were placed in Foster for Adoption/early permanence placements.

2.3. Type of Adoption Placement

- 2.3.1 Of the 14 children matched in this period, 12 were matched with prospective adopters approved by CBC. 2 were matched with prospective adopters approved by other agencies.
- 2.3.2 3 children were placed in Fostering for Adoption/early permanence placements approved by CBC.

2.4 Ethnicity of children placed for adoption

- 2.4.1 All 14 children matched for adoption were recorded as White British.

2.5. Ages of children placed for adoption

- 2.5.1 Of the 14 children matched for adoption by Central Bedfordshire, 6 were aged under 1 year, 1 was 1yr, 5 were between 2-4 years and 2 children were 6yrs +.

All 3 children placed in Foster for adoption placements were under 6 months old upon placement.

2.6 Gender of children placed for adoption

- 2.6.1 Of the 14 children matched for adoption by Central Bedfordshire, 11 were male and 3 were female.

2.7 Adoption Orders

- 2.7.1 12 Adoption Orders were granted during the period.
- 2.7.2 The Adoption Orders granted included 3 siblings groups and 6 single children.
- 2.7.3 4 were male and 8 were female.
- 2.7.4 1 child was adopted by her foster carers.
- 2.7.5 At the end of the reporting period 12 children were placed for adoption, pending the adoption order. It is anticipated that these will be granted in 2018/19 increasing the comparative number of adoption orders expected to be granted from this reporting period.

Section 3:

Adopters

3.0 The work of the Adoption and Permanence Support Team

- 3.0.1 A core objective is to recruit and assess a diverse range of adoptive families who are able to meet the needs of children with an adoption decision. This includes the recruitment of adopters able to offer foster for adoption placements, placements for siblings and children with significant needs.

- 3.0.2. The Adoption service strive to ensure that all children are placed with adoptive families who can meet all their identified needs including, ethnicity, culture and religion where possible. A match with adopters who are able to meet most of the child's identified needs will be considered to avoid delay.
- 3.0.3 CBC offer timely information, advice and counselling to members of the public enquiring about adoption and access to records via a duty service
- 3.0.4 Children and families are provided with information explaining adoption support and information is readily available on the council website.

3.1 Recruitment of Adopters

- 3.1.1 In order to ensure a range of adopters are recruited a range of recruitment activity has taken place during the year.
- 3.1.2 In order to ensure a range of adopters are recruited a blended marketing approach of traditional and digital marketing was utilised to attract a diverse range of people and families to consider adoption for Central Bedfordshire Council.

This has included:

- Regular information evenings
 - Local news webpage takeovers
 - Radio advertising
 - Facebook advertising
 - Regular advertising in electronic newsletters across community groups, staff groups and through our local doctors and dentist surgeries
 - Newspaper advertising.
- 3.1.3 The Service previously worked with First4Adoption to recruit adopters for a specific child which was successful, and he is now placed with his prospective adopters. As part of National Adoption Week, the service worked with First4Adoption to provide an update on his progress to launch National Adoption Week and raise the awareness of adoption.

The strategy continued with a targeted approach to provide a clear picture of the needs of Central Bedfordshire with adverts specifically targeting those who would consider:

- Foster for adoption
 - Sibling groups
 - Children with additional or more complex needs.
- 3.1.4 A clear message from the Department of Education has been the need for adoption agencies to recruit from a wider and more diverse pool of prospective adoptive parents. The Adoption Service has focused on recruiting the right adopters to provide loving families for the children who are waiting, and this has enabled more children from Central Bedfordshire to be placed in their own adoptive placements whilst providing placements for children from other Local Authorities. Where this is not possible the service uses a range of other placements from Voluntary Adoption Agencies and other Local Authorities to ensure choice and avoid delay for children. Due to this approach only 2 children were placed in external placements (interagency).

3.1.5. The target for approval of adopters during this period was 20 approved households. This anticipated the demand from children subject to placement orders and the pool of adopters already available for matching.

3.2 The Assessment Process: enquiries; assessments; and, approvals

3.2.1 Prospective adopter 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. The two-stage process for adopters, which was introduced as part of the Government's Adoption Reform Agenda, remains to be implemented.

3.2.1 136 enquiries were received in this period of which 13 were in regard to step parent adoption.

3.2.2 18 recommendations for approval were presented to panel and approved by the Agency Decision Maker.

3.2.3 1 application was ended as the required checks and references did not meet Adoption regulations and standards. 1 application withdrew due a change in their personal circumstances.

3.2.4 10 CBC approved adoptive families have provided placements for 17 children from other Local Authorities within this reporting period.

3.2.5 No approvals were terminated

3.2.6 As of 31st March 2018, Central Bedfordshire had 9 approved prospective adoptive families waiting, of which 5 were linked with a child pending the match being presented to panel.

3.2.7 11 prospective adopter applications were in progress – 4 in Stage 1 and 7 in Stage 2.

3.3 Ethnicity of adopters

3.3.1 14 approved households were White British, 4 were of mixed ethnicity couples including White British/Indian and White British/European

3.4 Post approval support

3.4.1 All approved adopters are supported by a Social Worker from the Adoption Team from approval, through the process of matching and placement of a child, to the application and granting of an Adoption Order.

3.4.2 Post Adoption Order, adoptive families can continue to access support and/or request an assessment of their additional support needs via the Adoption Team.

3.4.3 Approved prospective adopters must be reviewed annually if not matched or linked with a child. There is no requirement for the review to be presented to the Adoption Panel unless the agency consider that approval is no longer appropriate.

3.4.4 3 Annual Reviews were completed within this period with approval continuing to be appropriate.

3.5 Training for adopters

3.5.1 Social Workers from the Adoption service provide the preparation training for prospective adopters.

3.5.2 Training is accessed in Stage one of the assessment process and is provided in three modules:

- **The Process** – information about the assessment process and matching.
- **The Child** – Explores the experiences and trauma of children placed for adoption
- **Adoption for Life** – Explores a child's life story and Adoption Support

3.5.3 A Foster for Adoption module is available for applicants wanting to consider providing this type of placement.

3.5.4 Adopters also have access to the full annual training programme offered by CBC. This annual programme is available to both prospective adopters and adoptive parents for adoption support.

Section 4:

Adoption support services

A local authority must provide a range of adoption support services under Section 3(1) of the Children and Families Act 2014. The Adoption Support Regulations 2005 (ASR) set out the detail of such provisions. In summary these include

- Counselling, advice and information;
- Therapeutic services;
- Financial support;
- Services to ensure discussion of matters relating to adoption;
- Services to ensure the continuation of adoptive relationship;
- Assistance in relation to arrangements for contact.

The Statutory Guidance on Adoption (2013) provides greater clarity for the provision of Adoption Support and the specific role of the Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) when carrying out duties.

The Adoption Support (Amendment) Regulations 2014 make it the duty of a local authority to provide information about adoption support and make further provision to provide the following information about adoption support services;

- The Adoption Passport
- Availability of assessments for adoption support,
- Information on priority school admission for looked after children and those placed for adoption,

- Details of where to find information on statutory adoption pay and adoption leave,
- Information about the prospective adopter's right to receive the child's permanence report including medical adviser's report on the health of the child and the complaints procedures.

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. To inform people about support available we have a booklet called 'Adoption Support Services in Central Bedfordshire'. Also available is a 'Children's Guide to Adoption Support', both can be downloaded from the Council website.
- 4.0.2 In this period the service had 25 new enquiries for adoption support and completed 18 adoption support assessments, each either requiring advice and support only, signposting to universal services or a prescribed service such as therapy or counselling
- 4.0.3 The families either self-refer or are referred via other agencies such as school or health services. In such instances the team either provides direct social work support or where a specific need is identified, a specialist service may be commissioned.
- 4.0.4 The Adoption Support Fund has remained available throughout this year to provide therapeutic support and intervention for adopted children and their family. From 1st April 2016 the Department for Education extended the criteria for applications to include Intercountry Adoptions (once the placement has been made and the child is in England) and for Special Guardians who care for children who were previously looked after. This has continued in the annual reporting period.
- 4.0.5 National demand for the fund continued to grow and in recognition of this additional funding was made available. Whilst the funding increased the Minister of State for Children and Families confirmed, in November 2017, that the existing fair access limits remain in place – up to £2,500.00 for specialist assessments and up to £5,000.00 for therapy
- 4.0.6 A small number of children may require an exemption to the Fair Access Limit and funding will be available for such children in exceptional circumstances. In such cases funding would be available but only where the Local Authority agree to 'match' funding.
- 4.0.7 The scope for access to the fund has remained unchanged.
- 4.0.8 13 applications for funding were approved providing a fund total of £46,570.00 to provide a therapeutic intervention to children and families.
- 4.0.9 The agency maintains a mailing list of adoptive families to send newsletters, invitations to support groups, family activity days and the annual training programme.
- 4.0.10 Each child placed for adoption has a contact plan in relation to post adoption contact with their birth family. Birth family includes birth parents, siblings, grandparents and any other significant family member. The service currently manages 123 individual arrangements of post adoption contact.
- 4.0.11 Financial support for adopters continues to be available to meet the needs of the child and the circumstances of adopters.

4.1 Services to Adopted Adults and Birth Relatives

- 4.1.1 Social Workers provide an advice and counselling service to adopted adults seeking access to their birth records. For all residents of CBC an access to records counselling service is offered. Information is also provided to other councils who are supporting adopted adults living in their area who were adopted through Bedfordshire.
- 4.1.2 An initial counselling interview is offered to those seeking birth records and work is undertaken to locate records held by other Adoption Agencies. Counselling and 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 10 requests for access to adoption information were received in this reporting period.
- 4.1.4 Birth relatives or those with a prescribed relationship, seeking to make contact with adopted adults are offered information and advice. An intermediary service can be offered where appropriate and if there is capacity in the service.

4.2 Disrupted adoptions

- 4.2.1 Disruption in prospective adoption placements refers to placements that have ended prior to an adoption order being granted.
- 4.2.2 No placements have experienced a disruption in this reporting period, which continues a low disruption rate for a second year running.

Section 5:

Other activities

5.0 Inter-Country and non-agency adoption

- 5.0.1 1 enquiry was received relating to Intercountry adoption.
- 5.0.2 Non-Agency Adoption
- 13 enquiries regarding step parent adoption were received and 1 progressed to a notification of intention to adopt.
 - 1 section 44 application was received, and assessment progressed.

5.1 Regional Adoption Agency

- 5.1.1 CBC are members of the Central East Partnership with other Local Authorities. In addition, the partnership includes two local Voluntary Adoption Agencies:
- AdoptionPlus
 - St. Francis Children's Society

5.1.2. The Regional Adoption Agency has remained in the design and development phase during this reporting period. Practitioner groups and a matching project have met on a regular basis to share learning, good practice and support matching for children within the region.

5.2 Membership

5.2.1 The agency has continued its membership with 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.

5.2.2 Membership with Adoption UK has continued.

5.3 Commissioned services: 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. 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/are adopted an opportunity for independent counselling support. Although the agency are involved in commissioning this service, Adoption Plus will undertake all counselling work with the birth family members which will be confidential unless concerns arise about the safety or welfare of a child.

5.3.3 Ongoing contract reviews are held each quarter to ensure there is maximum support available for those accessing the service and to ensure optimum take up by birth parents.

5.3.4 21 referrals were made to the service.

5.3.5 27 birth relatives used the service

5.4 The Adoption Scorecard

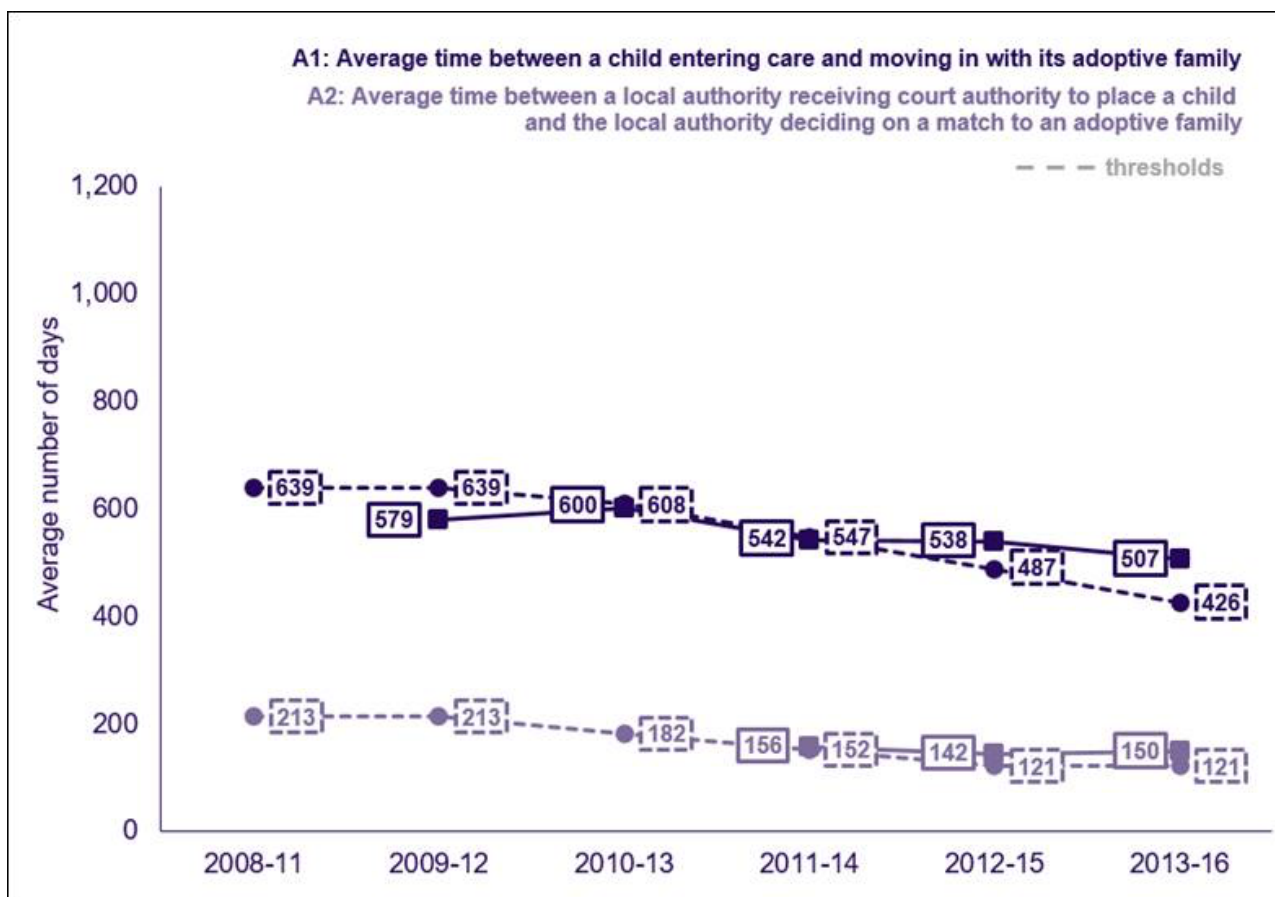
5.4.1 In 2012 the Department for Education published 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' in which they outlined the intention to publish Adoption Scorecards for each council outlining performance in relation to numbers and timeliness of adoptions. This introduced a number of key indicators to measure local authority performance in relation to achieving permanence for children. The scorecard details a 3-year average for:

- A1. Average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family
- A2. Average time between the council receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A3. Children who wait less than 16 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)

5.4.2. Performance:

A1. 3-year average (2013-2016) for time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days) was 507 days, showing a reduction of 31 days from the previous performance.

This is lower than the England/National average for the same period which was 558 days. (Nationally, the lowest rate was 325 days and the highest was 872 days)

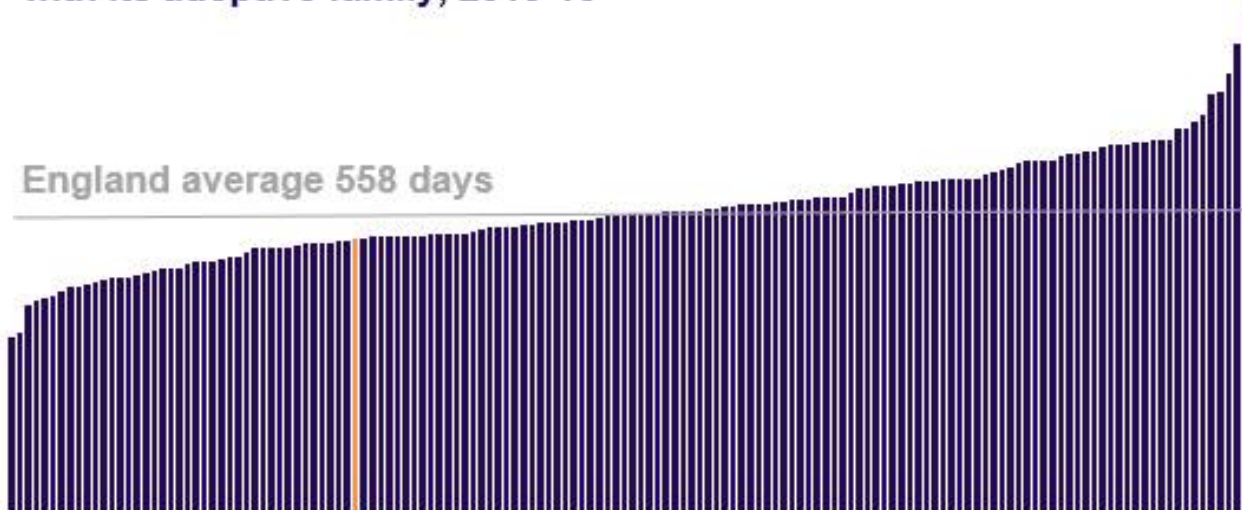


A2. 3 year average time between a local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family was 150 days, showing an increase of 8 days from the previous performance.

This is lower than the reported England/National figure of 226 days for the same period. (Nationally, the lowest rate was 62 days and the highest was 413 days)

A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, 2013-16

England average 558 days



A3. 60% of Central Bedfordshire Children with a placement order wait less than 16 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. The England/National average of 55% shows that Central Bedfordshire is performing slightly better than the England average.

A2: Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family, 2013-16

England average 226 days



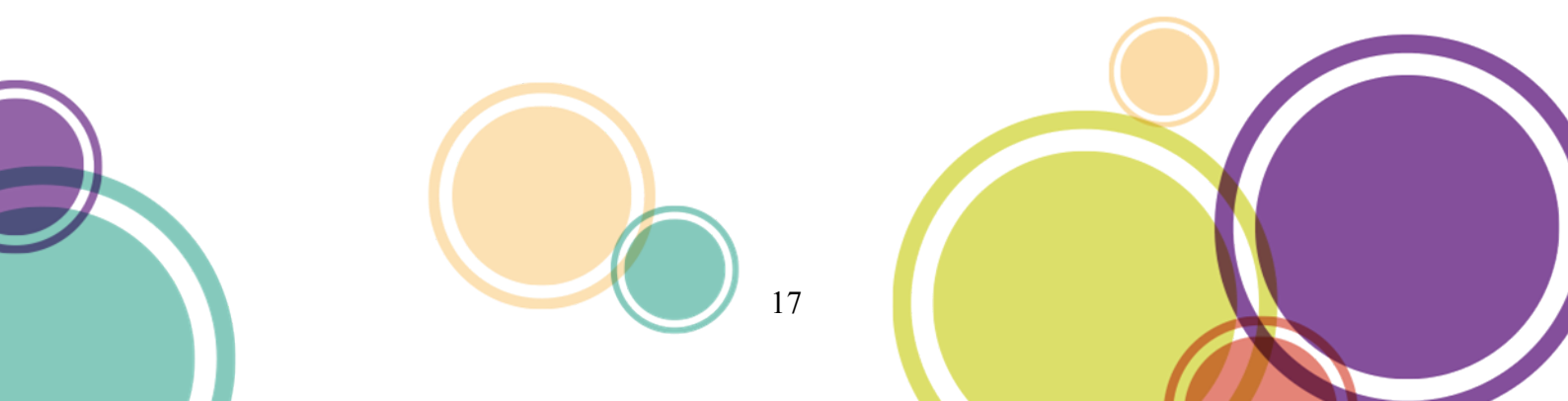
Section 6:

Service Developments in 2018/19

- 6.0.1 Recruit 20 adopters and increase the pool of adopters to meet the needs of all children with a plan for adoption. Continue to work in partnership with regional partners to widen the placement choice for children.
- 6.0.2 To expand the use of Early Permanence placements for children by maintaining a robust parallel planning process. The option of early permanence placements will continue to be routinely considered within the parallel planning process and the Adoption service will continue to work closely with childcare colleagues to achieve this.
- 6.0.3 Continue to work in partnership with regional partners to develop the Regional Adoption Agency.

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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Per Informazione

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