



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL ADOPTION AGENCY
STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

2013/14

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1. Context

Wokingham Borough Council through the power delegated to the General Manager of Children's Services, undertakes to provide a comprehensive adoption service. It seeks to operate within the requirements of all current, relevant legislation, regulations, guidance and national standards.

2. The Aims and Objectives of the Agency

The Adoption Service is part of a range of Local Authority services, which primarily seek to promote the upbringing of children by their families in accordance with the spirit and provision of the Children Act 1989. When it is either not safe or not appropriate for a child to remain in the care of his/her birth parent(s) or wider family members a range of other permanency options will be considered, one of which is adoption. Where the needs of a child are such that placement for adoption is the preferred option for the child the Adoption Agency undertakes to find a permanent alternative family with a view to enabling the child to experience the benefits of a safe, stable and legally secure permanent family placement in which his/her various needs are appropriately prioritised and met.

The priorities of the Adoption Agency are:

- i) To identify the children in the care of Wokingham Borough Council who would benefit from adoption and to achieve the placement of these children with appropriate prospective adoptive families within timescales appropriate to the needs of each child and in line with those identified in statutory guidance.
- ii) To prepare and assess prospective adoptive applicants applying to the Agency who are likely to be able to meet the placement needs of the children waiting for families both locally and nationally.
- iii) To support approved and waiting adopters in achieving the placement of appropriately matched children.
- iv) To provide a high standard of post placement support to the children placed for adoption by the Agency and to their prospective or legal adopters during the pre-adoption period and for the first three years

post-adoption in order to maximise the long-term success of each child's placement.

- v) To provide appropriate support to the prospective adopters recruited by the Agency following the placement of children and to work effectively with placing authorities in order to maximise the long-term success of each child's placement.
- vi) To provide a range of Adoption Support Services that are in line with the requirements of current legislation and regulations and that serve to minimise the risks of disruption.

(The Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 (Regulation 4) prescribe the persons to whom the Local Authority must extend Adoption Support Services. In exceptional circumstances (e.g. where there is a significant risk of disruption) the Authority may provide services to other parties.)

- vii) To fulfil the Authority's duty under The Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999, to provide, or arrange to provide, an Intercountry Adoption Service.

The Agency, by arrangement with Parents and Children Together Adoption Agency (Reading), delegates to that Agency the work of providing counselling and services to applicants wishing to adopt from abroad. However once a child is placed with prospective or legal adoptive parents who reside within the Wokingham Borough the Authority undertakes any required supervision of or support to these placements.

- viii) To maintain effective systems for recording, managing and keeping safe, information about children placed for adoption and adopters and information received from people affected by adoption.

3. The Name and Address of the Registered Provider, the Responsible Individual and the Manager

3.1 The Registered Provider

Wokingham Borough Council Adoption Agency:

Children's Services

Placements Service

Brambles Area Office

Budges Gardens

Wokingham

Berkshire RG40 1PX

3.2 The Adoption Agency Decision-Makers

The Head of Safeguarding and Social Care,

The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Manager

Wokingham Borough Council, Children's Services,
Shute End, Wokingham, Berkshire RG40 1BN.

3.3 The Responsible Individual

The role of the Responsible Individual is vested in the Authority's Head of Safeguarding and Social Care. However the strategic management of the work of the Adoption Agency is undertaken by the Service Manager Resources, in consultation with the Team Manager of the Placements Service, the Service Manager Social Work and the Service Manager Quality Assurance and Safeguarding. The Team Manager has operational responsibility for the daily delivery of the Service.

3.4 The Adoption Support Services Advisor

The role of Adoption Support Services Advisor is vested in the Team Manager of the Placements Service.

3.5 The Manager

The Team Manager of the Placements Service, supervises the work of the staff within the Service who undertake adoption and adoption support work. She also provides specialist advice, information and assistance to other staff in the Authority on good practice in adoption and permanency work in order to ensure timely and effective provision of services to Service Users. The Team Manager of the Placements Service works closely with the Service Manager Resources, and the Team Managers in the Authority's Children's Area Teams to ensure provision of a consistent, coherent and flexible service.

4. Registration

The Agency is registered with Ofsted under Part II of the Act. No conditions are in force in relation to this registration.

5. Staffing

5.1 Qualifications and experience of the manager

Name: Hilary Loades

Date Appointed: September 1992

Qualification: C.Q.S.W. – Awarded July 1984
Certificate in Management Studies – Awarded March 2006

Relevant Experience: Employed in the field of Fostering and Adoption since 1984. Appointed to a Senior Social Worker post in 1987. Team Manager in Wokingham since 1992.

5.2 The number of staff working for the purposes of the Agency

The Adoption Agency work within Wokingham Borough Council is undertaken by specific staff employed within the Placements Service. These staff provide the full range of Adoption services, including:

- Permanency Planning
- Family Finding for all WBC Children in Care who require placement for adoption

- Services to children who are the subject of notified adoptions (in-family, inter-country etc)
- Services to Wokingham Borough Council residents who are seeking to be approved to adopt
- Services to prospective adopters who have been approved by the Local Authority (whether living in the Wokingham Borough Council area or further afield)
- Adoption Support Services to adopted children, adoptive parents and other members of adoptive families living in the Wokingham Borough Council area (subject to an assessment of need for Adoption Support Services)

There is a specific post within the Service that holds responsibility for providing adoption support services; all the other social work staff working within the adoption specialism share the same generic Adoption Social Worker job description, however some workers take a specialist lead for particular areas of the work.

5.3 Total Staffing

Team Manager Permanence Service	37 hours
Assistant Team Manager Permanence Service (Both post holders have management responsibility for the authority's whole Placements Service which includes adoption, mainstream fostering and family and friends care)	37 hours
Total Manager Hours	2.0 f.t.e.
Adoption social workers One Senior Social Work Practitioners (0.8 fte)	30 hours
Two Social Work Practitioners	74 hours

(full-time)	
Total Adoption & Permanence Social Worker hours	2.8 f.t.e.
Adoption Support Worker	22.5 hours
Total Adoption Support Worker hours	0.6 f.t.e.
Team Support Officer - Adoption	30 hours
Total Administrative Support Hours	0.8 f.t.e.
<p>* Some additional finance support is available from the Finance and Data Manager in terms of budget management</p> <p>* Additional admin support is available from the TSO Fostering and TSO Family & Friends at times of heavy demand</p>	

5.4 The relevant qualifications and experience of the staff working for the purposes of the Agency

All social work staff within the Adoption Service who undertake adoption work hold a professional social work qualification i.e., CQSW, CSS or DipSw.

On appointment, all Adoption social work staff are usually required to have a minimum of two years post qualifying experience within a Children & Families setting. The Authority has generally been successful in recruiting staff with considerably more than the minimum experience required.

6. The Organisational Structure of the Agency

Please see organisational chart attached.

7. Links to Other Agencies

7.1 The other Consortium Agencies & Local Voluntary Agencies

The Agency is part of the Berkshire Local Authority Adoption Agencies Consortium and as such works in close co-operation with the other five Unitary Authority Adoption Agencies within Berkshire and with the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service.

The Agency by arrangement with Parents and Children Together Adoption Agency (Reading) delegates to that Agency the work of providing counselling and services to applicants wishing to adopt from abroad.

Where there is a need for any specific piece of work relating to the recruitment of applicants or the placing of a child(ren) to be carried out by staff independent of the Agency, the Agency seeks to make arrangements for this to be undertaken, without undue delay, by one of the other five Berkshire Local Authority Adoption Agencies or by an Independent Adoption Agency - CCS (Reading) or PACT (Reading) - or by a suitably qualified Independent Worker employed on a contractual basis.

Where specific advice or expertise is required in relation to a particular case, this is sought in the first instance from the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service or BAAF (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering). A referral may be made to a specialist Adoption/Adoption Support Agency depending on the circumstances of the case (and the budgetary constraints within which the Authority is operating at the time).

7.2 The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service is a joint arrangement that was set up in 1998 and is funded by Wokingham Borough Council and the five other Berkshire Unitary Authorities (The Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead (the host Authority), Reading Borough Council, West Berkshire Council, Bracknell Forest Borough Council and Slough Borough Council).

The service currently comprises of a Service Manager, an Adoption Consultant, two Project Workers (providing Birth Parent counselling and managing the direct contact service) , a Letterbox Co-ordinator, a Records Officer (1 day per week based at Darwin Close, Reading) and two administrative staff.

The original Contract of Quality Standards set out for the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service was as follows:

- Recruit and train Adoption Panel members
- Manage and service the two Berkshire Panels (including attendance by adoption applicants) – see 7.3 below

- Provide professional and administrative support for the two Adoption Panels
- Manage the Berkshire Information Exchange Service between adoptive families and birth families
- Provide specialist training on adoption issues for staff in the six Unitary Authorities
- Provide specialist advice and assistance on complex adoption matters to staff in the six Unitary Authorities
- Provide specialist counselling for adults seeking access to birth records
- Administer the closed children's records and adoption records
- Provide a social work service to the closed children's records and adoption records

These original areas of responsibility have been maintained and many have been further developed particularly in the light of The Adoption & Children Act 2002.

In addition the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service now:-

- Provides information and advice appertaining to all areas of adoption including legislation, guidance and Best Practice
- Co-ordinates the 'Berkshire Linking Forum' – bi-monthly meetings that bring together representatives from the Adoption Teams within the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies based within Berkshire, in order to facilitate linkings within the Consortium and to avoid undue delay in achieving appropriate placements for children
- Manages the 'Berkshire Adoption Exchange' – an annual event that brings together social workers from across the region in an effort to achieve the matching of child(ren) with approved adopters
- Facilitates 'Life Appreciation' meetings for children being placed by the Berkshire Unitary Authorities

- Chairs Disruption Meetings for children placed by the six unitary authorities whose placements disrupt
- Co-ordinates the Berkshire Post Adoption Forum – a six-weekly meeting that bring together Adoption Support workers employed within the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities in order to co-ordinate development of some pan-Berkshire Adoption Support Services to which all teams have access (e.g. Birth Mothers’ Support Group and Birth Records Workshops) and to promote Best Practice
- Supervises direct contact arrangements that are set up for children placed with adoptive families (Post Order)
- Organises an Annual Adopters’ Conference
- Hosts the Birth Parent Project (which aims - to offer both an integrated independent approach alongside consistent support and information to significant birth family members when adoption has been formally identified as the plan for a child)

The Berkshire Adoption Agencies’ Consortium arrangement was reviewed in Spring 2008 and this included a review of the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service. All six of the Berkshire Unitary Authorities committed to continuing to be part of the Consortium Arrangement as it provides an ‘economy of scale’ and enables the Authorities to each provide a wider range of services at a reduced cost to that that any individual authority would incur if seeking to provide the services on its own – this included the full range of services provided through the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service.

7.3 The Adoption Panel

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS) manages two Adoption Panels, which each consider cases from all six of the Berkshire Unitary Authorities.

The composition of the Panels is in line with Regulations.

Both Panels meet regularly throughout the year with panel meetings taking place usually on the 2nd and 4th Thursday of each month. In addition a

number of additional Panels are calendared during any year in order to meet the demand for Panel space. Additional Panels are arranged if needed.

The Panels between them consider the cases of all prospective adopter(s) and all proposed placements referred to them by the Adoption Agency, in accordance with the Adoption Regulations 2005.

The overall functioning of the Adoption Panel is managed by the Adoption Panel Adviser (Service Manager, Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service).

Panel members and the Adoption Agency's Decision-Maker are supplied with copies of all the reports to be considered by the Panel on each agenda item, two weeks prior to the Panel meeting.

Recent changes in Regulations mean that adoption panels no longer consider children for placement in advance of considering their proposed 'matches'. However arrangements have been set up that enable the BAAS Service Manager to consider all the relevant information on each child and to then give advice to the Agency's Adoption Decision Maker who then makes the decision whether to approve the adoption plan for the child.

7.4 The National Adoption Register

The National Adoption Register is a National Database containing information on children waiting to be placed for adoption and on approved prospective adopters who are awaiting linking. The Register is operated by BAAF (British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering) and generates suggested links between children and prospective adopters.

All approved adopters who are not linked or being actively considered for a potential match within three months of their approval are required to at that stage be referred to the Register so that they can be made available for consideration by other Placing Authorities (subject to the consent of the applicants). Placing Authorities are likewise required to refer children needing placement to the Register if prospective adopters have not been identified for them via other sources within three months of their adoption plan having been approved by the Agency Decision-Maker.

Wokingham Borough Council seeks to be proactive in seeking to achieve appropriate placements for children needing placement for adoption both within the Authority, within the Berkshire Adoption Agencies' Consortium and

nationally. Therefore, while all approved adopters are firstly considered for children originating from within the Consortium where a suitable linking is not identified within the first two months of applicants being approved they are advised to agree to their details being included on the Register. Likewise, while approved and waiting families available from within the Consortium are firstly considered for any Wokingham child needing placement, if a suitable match cannot be identified within a few weeks of adoption becoming the plan for a child an early referral to the Register will be considered alongside other placement options being pursued.

If the approval range of approved prospective adopters or the identified placement needs of a child are such that it is apparent that it is unlikely that a suitable 'match' will be identified within the Consortium, referral to the Register will be considered immediately following Agency approval (of the prospective adopter(s) or of the adoption plan for the child) in order to maximise the chances of an appropriate link being identified without undue delay.

8. Systems in place to monitor and evaluate the provision of services to ensure that the services provided by the Agency are effective and the quality of those services is of an appropriate standard

The Agency is committed to seeking feedback from Service Users in order to inform future Service provision.

At the current time a fairly robust system is in place to seek feedback from prospective and legal adopters at key points in the adoption process.

Systems are also in place to seek feedback from birth parents and from users of the Authority's Schedule II and BRIC Services.

The Authority is committed to seeking feed-back from children being placed for adoption, however in recent years the vast majority of children placed by the Agency have been aged under three years when they joined their adoptive families. They have therefore not been of an age and understanding to express an informed view.

The Authority is committed to continual improvement and in line with this systems are being put in place to seek and monitor feed-back on the Adoption Support Services provided to:

- Adoptive parents
- Adopted children

8.1 Feedback from the Adoption Advisory Service

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service provides annual information about the feedback received from the birth parents/relatives and adopters to whom it provides services on behalf of Wokingham Borough Council's Adoption Agency. Feedback can additionally be sought in relation to a specific case and/or will be provided on specific issues arising if there appears to be reasons for concern about the nature or quality of any service offered or provided.

8.2 Feedback from adoptive parents

Adoptive parents are consulted on their views at six specific stages of the adoption process as well as having the opportunity to attend the Agency's Adoption Panel when their application to be approved to adopt is first considered and to give feed-back on how they experience the panel.

Following attendance at an initial Information Session all prospective adoptive applicants receive a visit from one of the group leaders and in most cases the Team Manager of the Authority's Placements Service. The purpose of this visit is to discuss the prospective applicant(s)' individual circumstances and to explore any issues arising for them from the Information Session.

Following completion of a three day Adoption Preparation Group each applicant is also required to complete a feedback form and to return it to the Agency. This gives the opportunity for them to express their views on the quality and appropriateness of the preparation that they have received/the group experience.

All first time applicants receive a visit from the Team Manager of the Placements Service , at the end of the homestudy process, prior to their application being considered by the Authority's Adoption Panel, while all second or third time applicants receive a visit from a Senior Social Work Practitioner who has the experience to provide a 'second opinion' for the Panel and who has not been involved in the homestudy process. This interview serves a number of purposes, one of which is to invite applicants to

share their views about how the preparation/assessment process has been managed by the Authority and experienced by them.

All applicants who are engaged with the Agency are also asked to complete a questionnaire:

- After their application has been considered by the Adoption Panel
- After they have been formally matched to a child(ren)
- After the Adoption Order(s) has been granted

In addition the Adoption Advisory Service which manages the Adoption Panel on behalf of the Agency requests feed-back from all applicants who attend the panel, via a questionnaire, after their application has been considered at panel. All these feed-back loops indicate that the vast majority of service users are very satisfied with the service that they receive.

Post approval reviews are also undertaken with all approved and waiting adopters in line with regulations. Reviews take place:

- Whenever the agency considers it necessary
- Not more than one year following approval and afterwards at intervals of not more than one year, until a child(ren) is placed with the prospective adopters or the period of time for which approval was originally given expires, or they formally withdraw from the adoption process.

Reviews are usually carried out by the Team Manager of the Placements Service and always involve a meeting with the prospective adopters. The views of the prospective adopters are always elicited and taken into account. If the prospective adopters wish to continue to be approved to adopt, a review report is compiled which is shared with them and they have the opportunity to comment on its contents.

Where applicants decide not to proceed after attending an Information Session or subsequently after attending Adoption Preparation Groups, the reasons for this are ascertained and recorded. Similarly where applicants decide to withdraw during the homestudy process or approved adopters decide to withdraw from the adoption process prior to achieving a placement, the reasons for this are always discussed with them and recorded.

8.3 Feedback from birth parents

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service operates a Birth Relatives Support Project on behalf of the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities. The staff who are involved in this project are independent in relation to any staff who have any level of involvement in placing children for adoption. This separation of roles appears to assist some birth parents of children who the Authority places for adoption in accessing appropriate counselling and support.

When the Birth Relatives Project Worker has concluded her/his involvement, birth relatives are asked to give their views on the service that they have received via a questionnaire. Additionally their views are sought following the first meeting.

Where birth relatives are able to engage with the Authority at the stage that plans are being made to place their child(ren) for adoption, their thoughts and wishes are proactively sought, both in terms of the adoption plan and in terms of the type of family they would wish their child(ren) to be placed with. The Birth Relatives Project Worker follows this up with a discussion about the adoption process, the implications for the parents/relatives and their involvement.

Except where birth parents sever all links with the Agency, contact is maintained with birth parents until the adoption of their child(ren) is legally concluded.

The Birth Relatives Project Worker re-contacts all birth parents with whom she/he has been engaged once the legal adoption of their child(ren) has been concluded in order to advise them of the Adoption Support Services available for birth parents both locally and nationally. This provides a further forum for obtaining feedback on services provided which is then formally recorded/monitored.

8.4 Feedback from users of the Authority's Schedule II and BRIC Services

Feedback about the Authority's delivery of its Schedule II and BRIC Services was sought from all Service Users via a questionnaire in autumn 2010. It is proposed that this exercise will be repeated in 2013 and feed-back used in planning future service delivery.

8.5 Evaluating and responding to feedback

Where a shortfall in services is identified or an expression of dissatisfaction about a service is received by the Authority, this is referred to/checked out by the relevant Team/Service Manager in the first instance (including where necessary liaison with external agencies/organisations) and where it is reasonable for the Authority to do so, action will be taken to address the issue.

Where the expression of dissatisfaction constitutes a 'complaint' the matter will be referred to the Authority's Complaints' Officer (see section 12 below).

Statistical information is maintained on feedback from Service Users.

Information about feedback received from Service Users is detailed in reports to Members. (The Corporate Parenting Board).

9. Procedure for identifying the children being looked after by the authority who would benefit from placement for adoption and for achieving their placement with appropriate adoptive families

Wokingham Borough Council supports the basic principles that:

- Every child is entitled to grow up as part of a loving families, which can meet his/her needs during childhood, and beyond
- It is best for children whenever possible to be brought up by their own birth families
- Children whose birth families cannot provide them with a safe, secure, stable and permanent home are entitled to have adoption considered for them as one of a range of permanency options
- The child's welfare, safety and needs must be at the centre of the adoption process
- Children's views should be listened to, recorded and given due consideration when decisions are made about their placement needs.

9.1 Making the plan for adoption

In line with regulations, all children in the Looked After System have a plan for Permanence considered at their second Child in Care Review (within four

months of their reception into care) or sooner if return to the care of their birth parent(s) is clearly not an appropriate or achievable option.

The objective of planning for permanence is to ensure that all children have a secure, stable and caring family to support them through childhood and beyond. A spectrum of options exists ranging from rehabilitation to adoption and the planning process serves to identify which option is most likely to meet each child's individual needs.

The Authority, while making all reasonable efforts to rehabilitate Children In Care with their families (unless this is clearly inappropriate for the child) is mindful of the need to balance the benefits of rehabilitation against a recognition of the importance of time in a child's life.

Where the care plan for the child is to attempt rehabilitation but the outcome is uncertain, contingency plans will be identified. This can mean that a parallel plan for adoption runs alongside the plan for rehabilitation and/or exploration of the extended family. If this is the case then some preparatory work in relation to adoption will begin, in order to avoid later delay for the child if a return to the birth family is not achieved.

If the assessments of the birth parent(s) and the known extended family members indicate that the child should not be returned to their care then permanence outside of the family will become the care plan. Whether adoption is the preferred placement option will depend on the child's age and an assessment of the child's parenting needs, his/her wishes and feelings and his/her likely ability to attach to future carers/prospective adopters. The level of contact that the child needs or would benefit from maintaining with his/her various birth family members will also influence the decision.

9.2 The process following the decision that adoption is the plan or a parallel plan for the child

Once the care plan for a child becomes adoption or the need for parallel planning for adoption is identified a permanency planning meeting is held. The purpose of this meeting is to agree the work that needs to be done, the timescales and who is responsible for completing different actions.

The work that needs to be done with or for the child will be identified. As far as is reasonably practicable, when the child is of an appropriate age and

understanding, a counselling service will be provided for the child to explain the adoption process and the legal implications of adoption and to explore his/her wishes and feelings.

The work that needs to be done with the birth parent(s) and/or extended family members will also be identified and consideration given to contact arrangements both pre and post placement.

Arrangements will be made for the child to have an Adoption Agency Medical unless he/she is of sufficient age and understanding and refuses to have one.

Timescales for submission to the Adoption Agency Decision Maker will be considered alongside any Court proceedings and appropriately dovetailed. Where Care Proceedings are on-going it is usual for the Agency Decision Maker to consider the child's case during the month prior to the final hearing. However, if all assessments have been completed this can happen at an earlier stage.

9.3 The Child Permanence Report

The Child's Permanence Report is written in line with the requirements of Schedule 1 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 using the exemplar provided by BAAF. (The completion of the report will be undertaken and supervised by appropriately qualified staff, in line with regulations).

Where the child is of an age to express an informed view on the adoption plan this will be recorded.

The birth parent(s)' views are ascertained where possible and they are given the opportunity to see what has been written about them and to receive a copy of the report or the parts of it that are relevant to them.

Children for whom an adoption plan is being considered may wish to make a submission to the Agency Decision Maker and will be supported in doing so. If an older child requests to express his/her views directly to the Agency Decision Maker, consideration will be given to how this might be best managed for him/her.

9.4 The role of the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service Manager and the Agency Decision Maker

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service Manager will consider the papers on all children for placement who are subject to Care Proceedings and will provide written advice to the Agency Decision Maker as to whether placement for adoption is the appropriate Care Plan for the child. In doing this she will consider:

- The Child Permanence Report
- Any 'Expert' reports from Care Proceedings
- The report on the child compiled by the Adoption Agency's Medical Advisor
- The Legal Advice

Where the Adoption Advisory Service Manager makes a recommendation that the child should be placed for adoption she will consider, and may give advice to the Agency about, contact arrangements and whether an application should be made by the authority for a Placement Order. (The Authority can only place a child for adoption if it has either the consent of the birth parent(s) or a Placement Order).

The Agency Decision-Maker will then make the agency decision within 7 working days of receiving written advice from the Adoption Advisory Service Manager.

9.5 Voluntarily relinquished babies

The Agency has specific procedures to deal with situations where birth mothers request that their unborn baby or young infant/child be placed for adoption.

Whilst these cases may appear to be relatively straightforward they often prove to be highly complex and legally fraught and this is taken into account when allocation is considered.

Providing the infant/child's parent(s) with practical and/or emotional support and appropriate information will often enable her/him/them to reconsider the long term implications of adoption for both the child and themselves and lead

to the infant/child remaining with or returning to the care of the parent(s) rather than a premature decision being made at a time of crisis.

If the child is accommodated by the Authority every effort will be made to maintain contact between the birth parent(s) and the child until a final decision is reached.

If the birth parent(s) maintain the view that adoption is the preferred option for the child and it is not possible for the child to be appropriately placed within the extended family, then a plan for permanence outside of the family will be agreed and the child's case considered by the Adoption Panel who will then provide advice to the Agency Decision Maker prior to her making her decision on the plan for the child.

9.6 The matching and linking process

The Agency is always mindful of the negative impact of delay on children and will seek to achieve appropriate placements for each child within six months of the Agency deciding that the child should be placed for adoption (or within three months if the child is aged under six months and the birth parent(s) is requesting that the child be placed) provided that doing so is not likely to be against the best interests of the child.

9.6.1 *The matching criteria*

When adoption becomes the plan for a child his/her individual placement needs will be identified and a written 'matching criteria' drawn up.

Where at all possible and if consistent with their individual assessed needs and welfare, the Authority will always seek to place siblings together. However the individual needs of different children within sibling pairs/groups will be assessed and given due consideration in reaching decisions as to whether they should be placed together or separately for adoption - where siblings are to be placed together it is recognised that each child will still have different needs and the matching criteria will reflect this.

A Family Finder will be allocated from the Placements Service and she/he will assist the child's social worker in focusing on the child's background, earlier life experiences and presenting placement needs and in assessing what the longer-term implications of these are likely to be both for the child and for his/her future carers.

Consideration is given to what adoption support may be needed in order for the prospective adopter(s) to parent the child and this will include consideration of financial support.

9.6.2 *Applications from current foster carer(s) or anyone with an established relationship with the child*

If a child's current carer(s), or anyone else with an established relationship with the child, indicate that they wish to be considered as potential adopter(s) for the child, their application will be considered alongside other approved and waiting adopters available within the Consortium and, depending on the placement needs of the child, approved and waiting adopters available outside the Consortium.

Whilst acknowledging that the established relationship(s) and associated attachments may be significant, the agency must make sure that the family selected is the one that is likely to be best able to meet the child's identified short and long-term needs throughout his/her childhood and into adult life.

9.6.3 *The matching process*

In addressing questions of matching, the Agency will look at each child's needs holistically. No one set of needs will take precedence over another set of needs where this would result in unwarranted delay or no placement at all.

The Agency is proactive in seeking to identify prospective adopters for children who offer a positive match in terms of each child's ethnic origins, culture, language and religion. However no child will be denied the benefits of adoption on the grounds that prospective adopters who share the same racial and cultural background cannot be identified.

Once the matching criteria have been written and the first draft of the Child's Permanence Report is available the Family Finder will consult the list of approved adopters available within the Consortium and access appropriate prospective adopters' reports.

At the same time the child's profile will be circulated within the Consortium – this will not only identify approved and waiting adopters but also those still under assessment who it may be appropriate to consider.

If a child's placement needs are such that it appears unlikely that prospective adopter(s) will be identified from within the Consortium, wider distribution of the profile will be actioned and the possibility of national advertising considered. Consideration will be given to whether the child's name should be placed on the National Adoption Register at an early stage. In such circumstances the viability of matching to available families is considered as an on-going process in order to reduce the risk of losing potential families who may be suitable for a hard to place child.

The Family Finder reads all prospective adopters' reports received alongside the matching criteria and eliminates the obviously unsuitable (i.e. those where the family structure or geographical location are inappropriate). The remaining prospective adopters' reports are shared in full with the child's social worker.

Having both read the prospective adopters' reports on the families available, the family finder and the child's social worker will meet to discuss and draw up an agreed shortlist of families who appear to have the potential to meet the child's placement needs.

At this stage the Child's Permanence Report will be shared with the link workers of any families shortlisted if this has not already happened.

9.6.4 *When potential matches have been identified*

Once a list of potentially suitable families has been identified the family finder for the child will contact the link worker(s) for each of the families under consideration to discuss their views on the appropriateness of any match and to confirm the way forward. Possible outcomes at this stage are:

- Prospective adopter(s)' approving agency does not wish to proceed
- Placing Authority does not wish to proceed
- Placing Authority wishes to visit a number of families prior to a linking meeting
- Placing Authority wishes to visit the family of first choice prior to a linking meeting

- Placing Authority wishes to hold a linking meeting (to which link worker(s) may or may not be invited)

9.6.5 *The linking meeting*

A formal linking meeting is held in relation to every child for placement, chaired by a senior member of staff.

In addition to the Chair, the meeting will be attended by the child's social worker; the family finder and any of their supervisors/managers appropriate. Link workers for the shortlisted adoptive families may be invited, depending on the complexity of the child's needs, the number of families being considered and their geographical locations.

It is the responsibility of the Chair to ensure that the likely capacity of each family to meet the child's current and anticipated longer term needs is carefully and objectively considered. The needs of the child requiring placement must be the absolute priority.

The linking meeting may identify:

- No family being considered is likely to be able to meet the needs of the child
- A family of first choice
- More than one family offer a potentially suitable match

9.6.6 *Process following the linking meeting and prior to presentation at the adoption panel*

Where the linking meeting identifies that no family being considered is likely to meet the needs of the child family finding will continue to be pursued.

Where the linking meeting identifies one or more families as being a potentially suitable match for the child any necessary visits will be arranged.

Following the meeting and any subsequent visit(s) a family of first choice will usually be formally identified. The decision will be made at a second stage linking meeting involving as a minimum the child's social worker, the family finder and the person who chaired the original linking meeting.

Once prospective adopter(s) are identified as the family of first choice, then full written information will be shared with them including the Child's Permanence Report, medical information, any psychological assessment(s) and any other information that the agency considers relevant.

Where information on a child is complex or requires specialist knowledge to evaluate the implications of it, the Agency will seek to ensure that the prospective adopter(s) have access to people (professionals, other adopters, foster carers) who can help them to clarify and explore the implications of the information and thus to make an informed decision for themselves as to whether to proceed. A meeting with the agency's medical adviser will be offered prior to any proposed match being presented to the Adoption Panel.

The Adoption Placement Report will be written by an appropriately qualified and experienced worker (or where this is not possible the worker will be supervised by someone who has the required level of qualification and experience).

The Adoption Placement Report will detail the reasons for proposing the placement and the views of the prospective adopter(s). It will be shared with the prospective adopters at least 10 days prior to the papers being submitted for the Adoption Panel's consideration unless doing so would necessitate a delay in the proposed match being considered (i.e. postponement to a later panel date). In this circumstance the prospective adopter(s) will be asked to waive their right to the 10 day period.

Note – except in exceptional circumstances (e.g. the placement of a child with profound disabilities) it is not usual practice for the prospective adopter(s) to meet the child prior to the adoption panel considering the proposed match and the Agency Decision-Maker subsequently reaching her decision.

The Adoption Support Plan will be written at this stage and presented to the Adoption Panel alongside the Adoption Placement Report. The Adoption Support Plan identifies the child and the prospective adopter(s)' anticipated support needs both in the immediate post-placement period and in the longer-term and how these will be addressed by both the Placing Authority and the Agency that holds responsibility for the prospective adopter(s) – the Local Authority in whose area the prospective adopters live may also have a role in

supporting the placement, if they are not the prospective adopter(s)' approving agency they should be consulted in the drawing-up of the plan.

The plan also details any arrangements to be put in place in order to maintain a level of direct or indirect contact between the prospective adopter(s) on behalf of the child, and any members of the birth family. The child's needs, welfare, wishes and safety will be the most important concern when considering the possibility of maintaining links between the child and his/her birth family members post-placement, whether by indirect or direct contact.

The prospective adopter(s) will be consulted in the writing of the plan and their likely support needs discussed. The plan will include details of the process by which it will be reviewed.

9.6.7 Panel

The social worker for the child and the link worker for the prospective adopter(s) (or a representative from their approving agency) will both attend the Adoption Panel. The family finder may also attend if he/she has direct knowledge of either the child or the prospective adopter(s) or if he/she is in a better position than the child's social worker to respond to questions about the matching process.

All workers must be prepared to respond to any questions/issues/concerns that the Panel Members may wish to raise in relation to the proposed link.

The Panel will make a recommendation following consideration of all the information available. The Panel can recommend that a proposed match is approved, that it is deferred, or that it is not approved.

The Panel may also give advice about the proposals for adoption support services, contact arrangements and whether the parental responsibility of any birth parent(s) or guardian(s) or the prospective adopter(s) should be restricted and if so the extent of any such restriction.

The final decision in respect of any proposed match rests with the Adoption Agency Decision-Maker. If she formally approves a proposed match then the placement planning and introductory process can proceed.

9.6.8 *Process following the approval of a proposed match*

Following the approval of a proposed match the child will be informed in a way appropriate to his/her age and level of understanding.

Before introductions begin, work will be undertaken with the child to fully prepare him/her not only for joining a new family but for joining the particular family with whom he/she has been matched. Each child will be offered support by a named social worker in preparing to move and in managing the impact of the changes that placement will necessitate, which might also include termination of previous direct contact with his/her birth parent(s), sibling(s) and/or other family members as well as the loss of his/her previous carer(s).

It is expected that similar work will also be undertaken with the prospective adopter(s) by their approving agency. Consideration will be given to holding a Life Appreciation Day to assist the prospective adopter(s) in becoming fully aware of the child's history, needs, behaviours and potential areas of difficulty. Even if this results in the prospective adopter(s) deciding to withdraw, it is preferable that they do so at this stage rather than the child subsequently experiencing further rejection.

9.6.9 *Planning the introductions*

A placement planning meeting will take place as soon as the appropriate preparation of the child and the prospective adopter(s) has been completed and a formal inter-agency meeting may also take place if the child is being placed with prospective adopter(s) approved by another agency.

The planning meeting will agree a plan of introductions between the child and the prospective adopter(s) which must include a minimum of one review of the introductions before placement. It will also identify what other meetings should take place during the introductory period and what information is outstanding. Arrangements will usually be made for the prospective adopter(s) to meet significant members of the child's birth family if this is not inappropriate and other meetings will be scheduled with any other significant people e.g. teacher(s), therapist(s) etc.

In agreeing the programme of introductions between the child and the prospective adopter(s) the length and pace of the introductions will be primarily determined by the anticipated needs and responses of the child.

Prior to the placement being effected the prospective adopter(s) will be provided with full written information in respect of the child including the Adoption Placement Plan and a written statement by the Authority detailing how Parental Responsibility for the child is to be shared. The Agency may only place the child with the prospective adopter(s) when the prospective adopter(s) have notified the Agency that they wish to proceed with the placement, therefore a letter detailing the terms of the placement is sent to the prospective adopter(s) in duplicate prior to the proposed date of placement and they are required to sign and return one copy to the Authority before the placement is effected.

Before the Agency places the child formal notifications are sent to the prospective adopter(s)' G.P, their Local Authority, the Primary Care Trust in whose area the prospective adopter(s) reside and where necessary to the prospective adopter(s)' Local Education Authority.

The prospective adopter(s) are also given written details of how and where to access support following the placement of the child including details of who to contact for advice/support outside of normal office hours.

On the day that the child is placed the transfer of care is supervised by a social worker from the Authority.

9.6.10 Support and actions following placement

Following a placement being effected the child's social worker retains responsibility for monitoring the child's welfare while the prospective adopter(s)' link worker is primarily responsible for supporting them.

Placing authorities are legally required to visit and see any child placed under the Adoption Agencies Regulations within one week of placement and at least weekly until the first review. The child's social worker will usually undertake these visits. Where this is not possible arrangements are made for another worker to undertake the visits on his/her behalf.

Visits by the child's social worker are usually dovetailed with those made by the prospective adopter(s)' link worker. In some instances joint visits will be made.

As part of each visit the child's social worker will usually ensure that the child is seen without the prospective adopter(s) being present unless the child is

too young for this to be appropriate or he/she is of sufficient age and understanding and refuses to see the social worker alone.

While supervision of the child's welfare rests with the Placing Authority, it can, by agreement, be delegated to the prospective adopter(s)' Approving Agency, however good practice suggests that the Placing Authority should always retain a significant role in the supervision of the placement. Wokingham Borough Council never routinely asks another Agency to undertake more than 50% of the Welfare Supervision visits to a child placed in a pre-adoption placement.

All Placing Authorities are legally required to review the placements of all children placed for adoption within certain time frames:

1st review not more than 4 weeks after the date of placement

2nd review not more than 3 months after the first review

3rd and subsequent reviews within 6 months of the previous review

The Authority ensures that reviews are held in line with regulations. All reviews are independently chaired and every effort is made to ensure that the prospective adopter(s), the child's social worker and the prospective adopter(s)' link worker are all present – a review will be rearranged if at least one of the prospective adopters is not able to attend. Reviews will always focus on the child's welfare within the placement.

The Authority will not usually agree to an adoption application being progressed until the child has been in placement for a minimum of 12 weeks, however from this stage onwards the Authority will support an adoption application being lodged when it is apparent that adoption by the prospective adopter(s) is in the best interests of the child.

10. Procedures for recruiting, preparing, assessing, approving and supporting prospective adopters

10.1 Recruitment of adopters

The Agency has to date not needed to invest heavily in general recruitment of adoptive parents, although co-operating with county wide initiatives and maintaining a level of public awareness of the wider national need for

adopters. The Authority generally experiences a fairly steady level of enquiries/applications. Recruitment initiatives are concentrated around National Adoption Week in the autumn of each year.

The Agency has a written policy on the recruitment of prospective adopters which has been developed taking into account past trends, anticipated needs, local Consortia plans and information from research and the Adoption Register. This policy is reviewed annually.

All enquiries from prospective adopters are welcomed without prejudice and responded to promptly and impartially. They are given/sent clear written information about adoption in general, children who need adoptive families, the agency's expectations of adopters, the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval process and the subsequent matching and placing process.

The Authority's information pack is reviewed on an annual basis.

While the Agency is committed to providing a service to adults within the Wokingham community who are wishing to adopt, this service has to be managed within the financial and staffing constraints under which the Authority operates and balanced against the needs of other Service Users. Given this the Agency puts a ceiling on the number of applications that it can process each year. The Agency is not always able to accept/process applications from all those who apply to be considered as prospective adopters. Any decision as to whether or not to proceed with an application is based on:

- The minimum legal and Agency criteria
- The Agency's priority areas for recruitment

Applications are prioritised from applicants who appear to have the potential to meet the parenting needs of:

- Single children aged 4 years and over
- Sibling groups of two or more children where the eldest child is aged 4 years or over
- Children from minority ethnic backgrounds

- Children who have identified health or medical problems and who are likely to need a significant level of ongoing health/medical care
- Children who are significantly developmentally delayed and who may always require a higher level of support than other children of similar age (including in some cases a level of special education provision)
- Children who have an identified physical or learning disability
- Children who have significant emotional and/or behavioural difficulties
- Children whose background histories include having a parent(s) diagnosed as having significant mental health difficulties

All applicants are expected to be able to accept the placement of a child(ren) with complex backgrounds and a child(ren) for whom there is not complete background and/or health information.

10.2 The Processing of Applications

Current Adoption Regulations require Adoption Agencies to separate the provision of information about adoption to prospective adoptive applicants from the process of providing preparation and training for the adoption task. Agencies are also required to determine which applications they will accept prior to inviting applicants to attend Preparation Groups. Given this, all enquirers who are considering adopting through the Agency are invited to attend an Initial Information Session which concentrates on providing a basic introduction to adoption and gives prospective applicants the opportunity to meet with some experienced adoptive parents.

Attendance at an Information Session should assist the prospective applicants to consider:

- the requirements of the adoption process
- the parenting needs of the children who the Agency has placed and the likely profiles of children who need adoption
- their expectations of adoption
- the possible consequences for them and their families of caring for and adopting a child(ren) who is likely to have a range of complex needs

and in the light of the above

- their wish to adopt a child(ren)

Attendance at an Information Session does not in any way commit either the individual/couple concerned, or the Local Authority, to progress their interest further after the Information Session.

The Agency seeks to run regular Information Sessions about Adoption throughout the year; however this is dependent on the numbers of prospective applicants wishing to attend.

Following each Information Session a visit is arranged to each prospective applicant. The purpose of this visit is to discuss and explore the prospective applicant(s)' individual circumstances and any issues arising from the Information Session. During this meeting a decision is made as to whether it is appropriate for the prospective applicant(s) to make a formal application to the Agency.

Applicants who it is agreed will submit an application to be approved to adopt then need to complete an application form and return it to the Agency.

The decision as to which applications the authority will accept rests with the Team Manager of the Placements Service. In order to reach a decision on each application she will:

- consider the information provided by the applicant(s) on the application form
- consider any additional information shared during the information session and/or initial visit
- consult with the Group Leader/Visiting Social Worker
- consider whether the applicant(s) meet the Agency's minimum criteria for prospective adopters
- consider the application alongside those from other prospective applicants

All adoptive applicants whose applications are accepted are required to attend a series of Adoption Preparation Groups if they have not previously adopted a child(ren) through the Agency. The purpose of the group is to provide

applicants with the information that they need about adoption in general, the adoption process, the Adoption Agency, the profile and needs of children requiring placement, (both within Berkshire and nationally) and the potential issues that they may face as adoptive parent(s), in order to enable them to make informed decisions as to whether or not they wish to proceed further with the adoption process and to prepare them for the assessment and approval process and the adoption task.

The training material used was extensively updated in 2010 and is reviewed after each series of groups.

The Agency aims to run three series of preparation groups each year, but this is dependent on the number of applications received. The Agency seeks to accommodate all applicants on its own preparation groups, however it also works in co-operation with the other five Berkshire Unitary Authorities, therefore where attending Wokingham hosted preparation groups would entail applicants experiencing an unacceptable delay, places are sought on another more immediate group running within the county. Likewise, while priority is given to applicants applying through Wokingham Borough Council, unfilled places on Wokingham hosted groups are offered out to the other Berkshire Unitary Authorities.

Following completion of a series of Adoption Preparation Groups, each applicant is required to complete a feedback form and to return it to the Agency and the feedback received is reflected in the applicant(s) later assessment report (PAR).

The Agency will prioritise applications that are most likely to meet the needs of the children waiting for adoption both locally and nationally (this may include applications from applicants living outside of the Wokingham Borough Council area).

When the Agency decides not to proceed with an application, applicants will be informed in writing and advised of the options open to them.

10.3 Assessment of Applicants

Enhanced DBS¹ and Local Authority checks are taken up prior to applicants being invited to attend Preparation groups.

¹ Disclosure and Barring Service

The Agency seeks to offer an assessment and approval process that is comprehensive, thorough and fair. Consideration will be given to all the areas of the applicants' lives, detailed within the BAAF Prospective Adopters' Report (PAR).

The 'homestudy' assessment is usually undertaken by a specific worker, but where staffing allows, applications may be jointly worked between two social workers with one taking the lead. A 'Second Opinion' visit will be completed in every case, by a suitably qualified worker (usually the Team Manager of the Placement Service). Social workers undertaking the assessment of prospective adopters will usually have experience of adoption and permanence work and be trained and experienced in assessment, where this is not the case they will be supervised and supported by a worker with the appropriate level of knowledge, experience and training.

Applicants are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way that meets their health and developmental needs – physical, emotional, intellectual and social.

While the Agency does not subscribe to the pure model of competency based assessments, prospective adopters are assisted, through both the preparation groups and the homestudy process, to consider/identify the competencies and strengths that they have and those that they will need to develop if they are to be able to provide for both a child's short and longer term needs.

A range of status, health and statutory checks as well as personal references are taken up on all adoptive applicants in line with the requirements of the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

In working with adoptive applicants the Agency seeks to balance the need to give applicants time to consider and adjust to new information and ideas and in some cases to demonstrate a capacity to change, whilst avoiding unnecessary delays. Applicants are kept informed of the progress of their application throughout.

Wherever possible the Agency seeks to present applicants to the Agency's Adoption Panel for consideration, within six months of accepting their application.²

² The agency is mindful of current moves by the Department of Education aimed at shortening the 2013/14 Statement of Purpose

Enquiries from foster carers about adopting a child in their care are welcomed in the same way as any other enquiry. Foster carers who make application to adopt children in their care will be entitled to the same preparation and information as other prospective adopters.

All adoptive applicants receive a copy of their homestudy report at least 10 days prior to the report being submitted to the Adoption Panel and they are invited to send their views on the report in writing to the agency, any comments are then considered by the Adoption Panel at the time that their application is considered. Applicants are also provided with a copy of the Second Opinion Report in respect of their application in advance of it being submitted to the Adoption Panel and have the opportunity to comment on it.

At the current time the Agency delegates the preparation and assessment of Intercountry Adoption applicants to a local Voluntary Adoption Agency. (Please see Section 7.1 above). The Agency regularly reviews the Contract in place with this Agency to ensure that the work undertaken with enquirers and applicants is in line with the requirements of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 and the Intercountry Adoption Agency (Hague Convention) Regulation 2003 and accompanying guidance

10.4 Approval processes

All applicants seeking approval as prospective adopters have their application presented to the Agency's Adoption Panel for consideration.

The link worker for the applicants, or in her/his absence, her/his Manager will be present when an application is considered, to answer the Panel's questions and assist them in reaching a decision.

Applicants are also given the opportunity to attend the Panel.

The recommendation of the Panel is conveyed to the applicant(s) on the day of the Panel and to the Adoption Agency Decision-Maker by the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service within 24 working hours (draft Minutes will be forwarded within four working days).

preparation and assessment process for prospective adopters and work is ongoing within the Authority aimed at ensuring that the adoption service is in a position to meet any future timescales introduced in revised regulations.

The Adoption Agency Decision-Maker reaches the final decision in relation to any application within seven working days of the Panel meeting.

The Decision-Maker will convey her decision in writing (e-mail, fax or memo) to the applicants' link worker and to the Team Manager of the Permanence Service.

The Team Manager of the Permanence Service ensures that letters confirming the Agency's decisions are sent to all applicants.

In the event of an application being deferred or turned down, the applicants are informed of their right to make representation or complaint.

Approval to adopt relates only to the placement of children from within the UK and does not cover the placement of children from abroad.

All approved adopters are firstly considered for the placement of a child(ren) via the Berkshire Local Authorities' Adoption Consortium. However, if a suitable placement is not identified within the first two months of their approval, prospective adopters will, subject to their agreement, be made available for consideration by other placing Agencies via the National Adoption Register (see section 7.4 above).

10.5 Support to prospective adopters approved by the agency

Approved adopters are given an information pack which gives clear written information about the matching, introduction and placement process.

All approved and waiting adopters have a named social worker (link worker) who provides them with regular support throughout the post approval period and assists them in considering the specific placement needs and issues relevant to children awaiting placement and to objectively evaluate whether it is appropriate for them to pursue possible linkings.

Where prospective adopters are considering a child(ren) the agency will seek to ensure that they are provided with as much written information as is available to help them to understand the needs and background of the child(ren), and will provide the opportunity for them to discuss the details and the implications for them and their family. Where information about a child(ren) is shared either verbally or in writing the prospective adopters will be informed of the need to keep all information confidential and not to share

details with anyone outside of their immediate family, unless they are ultimately matched to the child(ren). Where prospective adopters are identified as being the placement of choice for a child(ren) the Adoption Placement Report and the Adoption Support Plan will be discussed with them and their views obtained (their views should be taken into account prior to the reports being finalised for presentation to the placing authority's adoption panel). The Agency will seek to ensure that they are provided with the Adoption Placement Report at least 10 days prior to the papers being submitted to the relevant Adoption Panel for consideration of the proposed link and that they are invited to give their views on it in writing.

Where information on a child(ren) is complex or requires specialist knowledge to evaluate the implications of it, the Agency will seek to ensure that the prospective adopters have access to people who can help them to clarify and explore the implications of the information and thus to make an informed decision for themselves as to whether to proceed. Where there are medical issues, a meeting with the Placing Authority's Medical Adviser will be sought.

The Agency will assess the risks that there may be to the prospective adoptive family in pursuing any identified match and will alert the prospective adopters to any perceived risks and give advice on these.

The Agency will advise and support the prospective adoptive parents in preparing any children within their household or wider network for the impending placement and the future adoption of the child(ren).

Where prospective adopters do not directly reflect the ethnicity or heritage of a child to be placed, the Agency will provide advice, training and support aimed at enabling the prospective adopters to foster the child's racial and ethnic identity in a way that is likely to lead to a positive self-image, knowledge about and connection to his/her origins. The Agency will seek to help the prospective adopters, to understand the need for, and to develop, strategies to help the child address racism or other forms of discrimination.

The Agency will ensure that prospective adoptive parents are informed prior to a placement about support services that are available within the area, should they or the child(ren) require specialist support after placement or after any future Adoption Order(s) has been made and how they might access these

services – the Agency will seek to contribute to the Placement Support Plan(s) drawn up by the Placing Authority.

The Agency will ensure that the prospective adopters are aware of what (if any) adoption allowances may be payable in respect of the child(ren) and the process by which the payment of any allowance(s) will be reviewed. The Agency will also ensure that the prospective adopters are aware of any DSS benefits to which they or the child(ren) might be entitled and how they might claim them.

Following the placement of a child(ren), all prospective adopters approved by the Agency will continue to receive link-work support from an identified social worker within the Placement Service, until such time as the legal adoption(s) is/are concluded.

It is the expectation of the Agency that all children placed with Wokingham Borough Council approved adopters will have a named social worker who will be responsible for supervising the child's welfare and supporting him/her within the placement.

The Agency will encourage adopters to formally sign up to any plan for direct or indirect contact with birth family members that is agreed at the time of placement and will support them in facilitating these arrangements.

Support will be made available to the adoptive parents to help them to establish an open acknowledgement of the child(ren)'s adoptive situation within the family.

The Agency will provide advice and support to the prospective adopters on progressing an application to adopt to the appropriate Court at the appropriate time. (The Agency will expect the Court Application Fee to be met by the Placing Authority unless it has been made clear at the point of linking that this will not be the case).

The Agency recognises that timely and effective support can help to avoid placement breakdowns. However, the complexity of children's needs, the impact of previous neglect or maltreatment, the child(ren)'s attachment issues and the adoptive parents' patterns and ways of managing these difficulties, may threaten placement, whatever services have been made available.

Should a placement experience difficulties at any stage, whatever the level of severity, the Agency will seek to ensure that:

- Separate support is available to the prospective adopters and the child(ren)
- The child(ren)'s welfare remains the first consideration
- Any review process in respect of the placement acknowledges the difficulties within the placement and identifies/agrees interventions and supports focused on achieving a positive outcome for the child(ren)
- The possibility of placement breakdown is acknowledged and planned appropriately
- If a disruption occurs a disruption meeting is held in order to assist the responsible authority in gathering as much information as possible to assist with planning for the child(ren)'s future

11. Adoption Support Services

The Agency recognises that the Adoption & Children Act 2002 places a duty on every Local Authority to establish and maintain a service designed to meet the needs in relation to adoption of:

- Children who have been or may be adopted
- The birth relatives of such children (i.e. relatives within the meaning of Section 14.4 (1) of the Act)
- Any person with whom the adopted child has a relationship which appears to the Local Authority to be beneficial to the welfare of the child
- Persons who have adopted or may adopt a child
- Any children of such persons (whether by birth or adoption)

In addition, the Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (England) Regulations 2005, require Local Authorities to make arrangements for the provision of a range of Adoption Support Services and places duties on Local Authorities to carry out assessments of need for Adoption Support Services and having carried out an assessment to decide whether to provide any

services. Moreover, Local Authorities must act reasonably in deciding whether to provide Adoption Support Services following an assessment, although there is a presumption that an assessment of need for a service will not automatically result in the provision of that service

While the Agency recognises the lifelong implications of adoption for adopters, adopted children, birth relatives and adult adoptees, in reaching any decision as to what services to provide the Authority will take into account both the circumstances of each individual case and the resources that are available locally.

Wokingham Borough Council is committed to providing the full range of Adoption Support Services that Local Authorities are required by Regulations to provide. These services are:

- Financial support (ASR 3.1.a)
- Services to enable groups of adoptive children, adoptive parents and natural parents or former guardians or an adoptive child to discuss matters relating to adoption (ASR 3.1.b)
- Assistance, including mediation services, in relation to contact between an adoptive child and a natural parent, natural sibling, former guardian or a related person of the adoptive child (ASR 3.1.c)
- Therapeutic services for adoptive children (ASR 3.1.d)
- Assistance for the purpose of ensuring the continuance of the relationship between an adoptive child and his/her adoptive parent, including training for adoptive parents to meet any special needs of the child; and respite care (ASR 3.1.e)
- Assistance where disruption of an adoptive placement or adoption arrangement following the making of an adoption order has occurred, or is in danger of occurring, making arrangements for the provision of mediation services and organising and running meetings to discuss disruptions (ASR 3.1.f)
- Counselling, advice and information

While the Council seeks to ensure provision of the full range of services, the Authority may make arrangements for the services to be provided by others; either other Local Authorities within the Berkshire Consortium, the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service, Voluntary Adoption Agencies or independent providers of adoption services.

The Authority's full range of Adoption Support Services are not available to those involved in adoptions by:

- A birth parent
- A step-parent

In these cases services provided are limited to counselling, advice and information.

The Authority is committed to providing Adoption Support Services as part of an overall integrated service for all child(ren) and families who are engaged with the Children's Services and in the context of the local Preventive Strategy, recognising that while there are some services that are specific to adoption, it is essential that adopted children and their families also have access to mainstream services available to children and families with particular needs.

The Agency is also committed to providing counselling and support service to:

- Any person directly affected by adoption who requires counselling or support
- Adopted persons requiring access to birth records
- Persons requiring information as to the use of the Adoption Contact Register, in particular adopted persons, birth parents and other relatives
- Adults seeking to establish contact with birth family members separated via adoption and requesting an Intermediary Service

11.1 Adult adoptees

The Local Authority is responsible for providing a birth records counselling service to adult adoptees living in the area, providing on request, advice and counselling about their adoptions, together with any information that is available from adoption records. In the case of persons adopted before 12th

November 1975, the Agency provides counselling in line with relevant legal requirements before sharing any information that is available.

Counselling is also provided for adult adoptees adopted after that date if this is requested and the Agency encourages adoptees to make use of this service.

Where an adult adoptee who does not live in the Wokingham Borough Council area is seeking information from his/her adoption records and Wokingham Borough Council is the Appropriate Adoption Agency, advice and counselling about the process is provided and the Authority co-operates in providing information from its records to any Adoption Support Agency involved or to the Local Authority in whose area the adoptee lives, in order to facilitate him/her accessing his/her adoption records.

When the Agency is approached by another Adoption Agency seeking information from the adoption case records for an adoptee who remains under the age of 18 the Agency will only release information if there are clear reasons to suggest that this would be in-keeping with the best interests of the young person and with the consent of the adoptive parent(s).

If an adoptee is seeking to trace a birth relative(s) he/she is informed that the Agency is not able to provide a 'tracing' service, however if he/she is able to provide the name and address of the person who he/she wishes to contact the agency will, where staffing permits, provide an intermediary service. Alternatively the Agency will provide details of other agencies and organisations that provide tracing and/or intermediary services or that might be able to offer additional support appropriate to the individual's needs.

All adoptees are provided with details of the Adoption Contact Register and advised as to how they might access it.

11.2 Intermediary services for birth relatives

Where a birth parent or sibling or grandparent of an adopted person lives within the Wokingham Borough Council Area and wishes to establish contact with his/her birth child/sibling/grand-child he/she is offered a counselling interview.

The Agency is not generally in a position to undertake tracing on behalf of birth relatives and is not able to provide any identifying information in relation

to an adopted person to birth family members, even if the person seeking contact was a sibling and was also adopted him/herself.

Birth relatives are provided with a list of Registered Adoption Support Agencies and encouraged to make use of the Adoption Contact Register operated by the Registrar General.

The Agency only routinely provides intermediary services where the following criteria are met:

- The birth relative lives within the Wokingham Borough Council Area
- The birth relative is able to provide the name and address of the person who they wish to make contact with
- The birth relative is able to provide evidence of their relationship to the adoptee
- The adopted person is over the age of 18 and was originally placed for adoption by Wokingham Borough Council

Where the Agency acts as an intermediary, if contact with the adopted person is established and he/she wishes to have contact with his/her birth relative(s) all parties are offered support prior to and following any reunion. While the Agency is acting as an intermediary, support will be made available to any involved party if their circumstances suggest that this would be helpful.

12. The Complaints Procedure

All prospective adopters engaging with the Agency and all birth parents of children for whom the Agency is planning adoption are provided with written information about Complaints Procedures, including contact details for the Complaints Officer.

All young people, for whom there is an adoption plan and who are of an appropriate age and understanding are likewise informed of the Complaints Procedures and they are also informed of the role of Wokingham's Children's Rights Officer and how they would be able to contact her should they wish to do so.

Other Service Users are also provided with details of the complaints process on engagement.

The Team Manager of the Placements Service monitors all complaints received in respect of any aspect of the work undertaken by the Adoption Service.

13. Details of the Registration Authority

OFSTED
Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester M2 7LA
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Hilary Loades

Team Manager Placements Service

Wokingham Borough Council Children's Services

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