



# Buckinghamshire County Council Adoption Service Report

**Author:** Nathan Whitley (Head of Service)  
& Carole Atkins (Adoption team manager)

April 2018 –  
March 2019

*Together... Keeping  
Children Safe*



## Introduction/summary

The adoption service has had a productive year assessing, finding and supporting families.

Our purple ribbon recruitment campaign for National Adoption Week in October has borne fruit with a year-end increase in the number of people (24) registering their interest in Adopting with Buckinghamshire. This means we will be able to match and place more of our children with adopters we know well and who are already linked into our training and support programmes. Last year 12 families were approved as adopters and 15 children were placed (with 13 families). The Non-Agency adoption work (adoption by step parents) carried out by the team has resulted in 7 adoption orders this year.

Local families also means less distance for our 'Family Finders' to travel when working on finding potential adopters for children who have a plan for adoption. However, over the past few months they have been as far north as Scotland, south to the Channel Islands and all points east and west. In total 17 children have had their adoption order during the year.

Crucial to supporting children in their new families is their Life Story Book and we welcomed two Life Story Workers to the team in January. They are tasked with sensitively writing an age appropriate account of the child's life for their new family to share with them to make sense of their past as they grow up.

Our Post Order Support advice line has been extended due to demand and took 103 referrals from Adopters and Special Guardians when they felt they needed some additional support. Of the 60 requests received this year for an Assessment of Need, 49 assessments were completed, 15 of which were for Special Guardianship families. Therapeutic support can be provided through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) if the children are eligible. (153 applications were made to the ASF this year totalling £482,563.55). Part of our offer to families has been the Nurturing Attachments group which was run twice; each for 16-18 weeks. We have also provided Great Behaviour Breakdown, a specialist parenting programme provided via ASF funding for a number of families.

We are supporting families with a wide range of services such as workshops on different topics, our young people's groups and monthly support groups for special Guardians. There were 2 Saturday social events for families and a regular newsletter.

Our Post Order team are often picking up the life story work (LSW) several years on when children and young people may be struggling with understanding their past. We have run 4 Life Story Consultation days this year for families and also provided 23 pieces of direct LSW for adopted and Special Guardianship children. They may have made contact with their birth family via social media or have questions about their letter box exchange with their birth family.

A lot of our work is with adults and we have continued to support birth families with our groups, 12 Birth Mother Support Groups and 11 Birth Relative drop-in sessions were held. One of our successes continues to be the independent support offered to Birth Parents and relatives during and beyond care proceedings when the plan is adoption. This collaboration with St Francis Children's Society is now in its 13<sup>th</sup> year.

Our letter box exchange now has 335 children with a letter box set up. There continues to be a steady stream of adult adoptees (28) requesting access to their adoption records.

We have been involved in some creative partnership working with our colleagues in CAMHS and The Post Order Worker in the Virtual School has been vital in educating schools on the needs of adopted children and helping families navigate the intricacies of EHCPs and Pupil Premium. We are jointly running education workshops for our families.

The forthcoming year will be just as busy and we look forward to working with our colleagues across Children’s Social Care and supporting children into their permanent placements.

### Staffing

The Adoption Service is divided into 3 sub teams each led by an Assistant Team Manager. The Team Manager has overall responsibility.

Team Manager	Teams	Assistant Team Manager	Social Workers FTE	Child & Family Workers FTE	Life Story Workers FTE
1.0	Recruitment & Assessment	1.0	5.50	-	
	Family Finding	1.0	4.29	0.67	2.0 (funded from court Team)
	Post order Support	1.0	4.0	2.50	0.40
	Total	3.0	13.79	3.17	2.40

### Compliments and Complaints

- Compliments received: 11
- Complaints received: 1 Statutory and 1 Corporate.

## Children

*This section of the report provides headline figures relating to children and young people at various stages of the adoption process within Buckinghamshire.*

<p><b>How much did we do?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>17</b> of our Looked After Children were adopted.</li><li>• <b>7</b> adoption orders were made in respect of children subject to non-agency adoption applications</li><li>• <b>30</b> children had an Agency Decision made that they Should be Placed for Adoption (ShoPA) (Including 3 sibling pairs)</li><li>• <b>27</b> Placement Orders were made by the court in respect of our Looked After Children</li><li>• <b>33</b> children were matched to an adoptive family at the Buckinghamshire Adoption Panel. 14 of those were with Buckinghamshire families.</li><li>• <b>29</b> Children in the care of Buckinghamshire were placed with an adoptive family. 8 with Buckinghamshire families and 21 inter-agency.</li><li>• <b>5</b> children in the care of Buckinghamshire were placed in Early Permanent Placements (Fostering to Adopt).</li><li>• <b>3</b> children had plans changed away from adoption.</li><li>• <b>2</b> children's placements disrupted prior to the adoption order</li><li>• <b>16</b> children with an Agency Decision Maker decision are not yet matched. Of these 2 have a potential match and are booked into Panel; 2 have a family identified; 2 have a potential link being explored; 9 have active family finding underway; and 1 is on hold pending a change of plan.</li></ul>	<p><b>How well did we do it?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>43.7%</b> of Buckinghamshire children were matched with Buckinghamshire adopters during this year.</li><li>• <b>25%</b> of the children placed were aged 4 or over, including one 7 year old.</li><li>• <b>6</b> sibling groups were matched in the year, a group of 3 and 5 sibling pairs. Of these 4 were placed before year end.</li><li>• <b>18</b> girls and <b>15</b> boys were matched for adoption.</li><li>• <b>4</b> children had a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background.</li><li>• <b>2</b> children were aged 6 or over</li><li>• Families identified for a further <b>4</b> children with ADM decisions</li></ul>
<p><b>What would we like to do better?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We would like to improve the timescales from Placement Order to matching at Panel. This could be improved on by streamlining family finding and matching processes and recruiting more prospective adoptive families.</li><li>• Link Maker (our online matching tool) has <b>1049</b> children listed on their website.</li><li>• We would like to be more successful in placing our older children for adoption. Nationally <b>406</b> of the children currently on Link Maker are aged 5 or over.</li><li>• We would like to place more siblings with Buckinghamshire approved families. Of the children currently on Link Maker there are <b>228</b> profiles of sibling groups.</li><li>• We would like to place children from a BAME background or with significant additional needs with Buckinghamshire approved families. Of the children currently on Link Maker, <b>267</b> profiles are non-white British.</li><li>• We would like more adopters to consider early permanent placements to enable more children to be placed more quickly on this basis and to widen choice.</li></ul>	<p><b>What difference did we make?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A higher percentage of children from Buckinghamshire were placed with Buckinghamshire families than previously.</li><li>• This increase in identifying internal matches reflects the considerable progress in developing early permanence.</li></ul>

## Adopters

*This section of the report provides headline figures relating to prospective and approved adopters at various stages of the adoption process.*

<p><b>How much did we do?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>125</b> enquiries from people considering adopting were received. (97 within Buckinghamshire; 28 out of Buckinghamshire or no address given).</li><li>• <b>24</b> Registrations of Interest were received. Conversion rate of <b>19.2%</b>.</li><li>• <b>91</b> prospective adoptive families attended 12 information sessions.</li><li>• <b>3</b> adopter preparation courses were run this year. 4 planned for next year given numbers of recruitment increasing.</li><li>• <b>13</b> assessments of adoptive families were presented to the adoption panel.</li><li>• <b>12</b> adoptive households approved, 1 deferred.</li><li>• <b>16</b> adopter assessments currently in progress (<b>12</b> at stage 1 and <b>4</b> at Stage 2)</li><li>• <b>13</b> Adopters were matched, with <b>15</b> children</li><li>• <b>5</b> Buckinghamshire families were matched with <b>6</b> children through inter-agency placements with children from other local authorities.</li><li>• Stage 1 completed on average in <b>81</b> days (last year in 125 days average and stage 2 completed on average <b>153</b> days (last year 107 days), this has increased due to a couple of cases that took longer e.g. 1 deferred that took 398 days.</li><li>• There have been <b>6</b> non-agency (step parent) adoptions.</li><li>• <b>3</b> non-agency adoption assessments have been started.</li><li>• At the end of March 2019, there were <b>9</b> approved adoptive families waiting to be matched</li><li>• <b>16</b> prospective adoptive families were still being assessed, of whom <b>12</b> families were in stage one, 4 families were in stage two and <b>0</b> in stage 2 pending.</li><li>• <b>2</b> Families withdrew from the process in stage 1, <b>1</b> withdrew in stage 2 pending and <b>3</b> completed stage 1 and then we did not move them into stage 2. If these had completed we would have had another 6 approvals to add to our 12 for the year.</li></ul>	<p><b>How well did we do it?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We had a target to increase recruitment activity in order to increase ROIs. <b>12</b> new adopter households were approved with <b>11</b> new ROIs in last quarter of 2018/19. This was achieved through a recruitment programme being developed across social media, with content on social and website being expanded.</li><li>• There are a total of <b>16</b> assessments in progress, <b>12</b> of which are at Stage 1 and <b>4</b> at Stage 2 which should lead to <b>3</b> number of approvals in the first quarter of 2019-20.</li><li>• In terms of the diversity of prospective adopters, of the <b>12</b> approved adopter households, <b>11</b> were in male/female relationships, <b>1</b> female couple, <b>0</b> were in single sex female relationships and <b>0</b> in a single sex male relationship. <b>0</b> was from a BAME background.</li><li>• Of the <b>12</b> adopter households approved <b>4</b> were willing to consider Early Permanence (FFA)</li><li>• Adopter preparation training has a lead Social Worker to ensure consistency with contributions from family finders, adopters and post order support.</li><li>• There is a mismatch between the children available and the children adopters are willing to consider.</li><li>• We are matching most of our adopters quickly once approved and have increased the number of in house matches through the use of family finder visits in stage 2 to prospective adopters to consider children pre approval.</li><li>• Adopters can now access 'Family and Friends' and 'Meet the adopter' training which we have restarted. This assists in their education of their network and themselves.</li></ul>
<p><b>What would we like to do better?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We need to recruit more adopters to meet the current demand for adoptive placements.</li><li>• We need to achieve a higher number of enquiries from the 'right' kind of adopters that is adopters who are looking to adopt the children who are waiting.</li><li>• We need to increase the use of Early Permanence so that the majority of our prospective adopters will at least consider it, dependent on an individual child's</li></ul>	<p><b>What difference did we make?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This year <b>15</b> children were placed with Buckinghamshire adopters and <b>8</b> of these are now adopted. (<b>5</b> of these children were from OLA). There were also <b>10</b> other children adopted (adoption order granted 2018/19) by adopters approved in previous years.</li><li>• <b>2</b> Buckinghamshire adopter households have been matched</li></ul>

<p>circumstances. This is the message now being given from first enquiry, through information sessions, to assessment and approval. We would like it to be seen as part of the overall offer rather than a preference.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To continue the progress made in recruitment activity via website and social media. A digital improvement project will start May 2019 to assist with recruitment activity</li><li>• We need to ensure that the majority of non-agency assessments are completed by sessional staff to free up Adoption Social Workers to undertake home studies.</li></ul>	<p>with <b>3</b> children from OLA since 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019, with more matches currently being explored. This is essential income to balance budgets and fund any interagency placements required for Buckinghamshire children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The quality of all assessments is being improved, with policies in place and appropriate training available for new and existing staff to improve and standardise practice across the team.</li><li>• We continue to develop our public information sessions and the prospective adopter's preparation group training. This enhances adopters knowledge and understanding of at the realities of adoption and develops their skills and abilities to manage difficulties along the road</li></ul>
---	---

## Post Order Support

*This section of the report provides headline figures relating to provision of Post order Support services in Buckinghamshire.*

<p><b>How much did we do?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>103</b> family referrals taken on our advice line</li><li>• <b>60</b> requests for an 'Assessment of Need' (45 from Adopters and 15 from Special Guardians)</li><li>• <b>49</b> Assessments of Need's were completed during the year</li><li>• <b>153</b> applications to the Adoption Support Fund were made totalling £482,563.55 for therapeutic interventions</li><li>• <b>23</b> Pieces of Life Story Work undertaken by members of the team</li><li>• <b>2</b> Weekend Social Events for Families were held</li><li>• <b>4</b> Young People's Groups (weekends)</li><li>• <b>11</b> Special Guardian support groups</li><li>• <b>2</b> Nurturing Attachment Groups (one for 18 sessions and the 2<sup>nd</sup> for 16 sessions and Co Facilitated by a therapist funded from the ASF.</li><li>• Sensory Processing Training event for parents, guardians and professionals</li><li>• <b>4</b> Life Story Consultation days</li><li>• <b>1</b> Education workshops run jointly with Virtual School Post Order Worker (this is provided quarterly, started in 2019).</li><li>• Great Behaviour Breakdown, specialist parenting programme provided via ASF funding and extended specialist training to include Sensory Integration, Occupational Therapist contributing to Play Workshop</li><li>• Adults – 28 referrals for Access to Records</li><li>• 12 Birth Mother Support Groups and 11 Birth relative drop-In session –</li><li>• Letter box – 335 children with letterbox set up.</li><li>• CAMHS consultations can be accessed by staff and parents/carers on a weekly basis and reflective sessions for staff on a monthly basis</li></ul>	<p><b>How well did we do it?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We have increased the time available for the advice line due to demand.</li><li>• Provided Sensory Training and Theraplay to ensure all of the team have the same level of knowledge and skills</li></ul>
<p><b>What would we like to do better?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reduce the waiting time for allocation of Assessments of Need's from 8 to 4 weeks</li><li>• Increase the number of groups, by introducing 'Foundations to Attachment'</li><li>• Increase internal interventions provided by the team</li><li>• Offering a group for 7-11 year olds</li></ul>	<p><b>What difference did we make?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continued to improve on the support, which was recognised in the 2018 OFSTED inspection report, by expanding our offer and developing our staff</li><li>• Increased number of Special Guardianship Order support requests</li><li>• Closer working with CAMHS</li></ul>

## Developments and Challenges

The next 12 months will see developments in each of the teams to meet the demand for services.

We will be working closely with our colleagues in the court team involved in pre-birth assessments so that we can identify babies that would benefit from an early permanence placement therefore reducing the need for placement moves where the plan is likely to be adoption. Alongside this we will be supporting the birth parents with counselling to assist them with making positive decisions in their lives going forward.

With the number of registrations of interest increasing from people who wish to adopt, we are faced with the challenge of timely allocation of assessments and completion of work within statutory timescales. Alongside the assessment work we continue to develop the support and training for adopters in the early stages of placement.

Post Order Support services encompass Special Guardianship families as well as Adopters. The complexity of contact arrangements for both these groups will be the focus of some of our work this year. Children in Special Guardian families are mostly within their birth family and contact mediation between the SG and the birth parents is the most common area of support required. For adoption, recent research suggests direct contact is beneficial even for very young children and this is an area which will need much consideration in assessments and matching going forward. This will be a significant shift in thinking for many coming into adopt, but quite pertinent in the digital age of social media where birth parents or adopted adolescents are making direct unsupported contact with each other.

The availability of the Adoption Support Fund has benefited many of our families with therapeutic interventions. Whilst there has been an extension of the fund into 2020, at this moment in time we do not know how long it will be available.

To enhance our universal offer to families we have embarked on a programme of training for staff in the team so that we can deliver additional group work and offer more services. However, social workers are not therapists and there is therefore a need for children's services to consider this in their financial planning for the next year.

Vital to support education for children and families have been the appointment of a specialist Post Order Worker in the Virtual school. Her role has been a mixture of direct work with families and delivering training for schools to enhance their understanding of the needs of adopted and Special Guardian children. This post is government funded and time limited; therefore the adoption service and Virtual school will be reviewing the impact of this role and how this might be funded going forward.

We acknowledge that we are working in a financial environment of diminishing resources. However, in the same way that we aim to support families so that children do not come into care in the first place, we must develop and strengthen our services to support the families – adopters and special guardians -who have taken our children in to their lives.

Moving into a permanent family and no longer being looked after does not mean the trauma that brought them into care has gone away. It is incumbent on us as corporate parents to ensure we can offer the right support at the right time to prevent them returning to our care.