

# **HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL ADOPTION AGENCY**

## **REVIEW FROM THE SECOND YEAR OF THE ADOPTION SERVICE FROM 1<sup>ST</sup> APRIL 2002 – 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2003**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This is a report of the second year of Herefordshire as a stand-alone Adoption Agency since its final split with Worcestershire in April 2001.

During this year we used LPSA funding to employ a play therapist, Sheren Brealey, to prepare and support the children through the move to adoption.

Sheren then took up her post in September 2002.

Many of the changes in the service which were evident in the first year have continued, despite the lower number of children being presented to the Adoption Permanency Panel –

- It is still inadvisable to place Herefordshire children in the county for confidentiality reasons (and sometimes for security as well).
- The high use of inter-agency placements (90%) for Herefordshire children has continued.
- The greatest challenge has been the need to find children suitable for our approved adopter, who cannot take children from Herefordshire – ‘children finding’.
- The increase in the workload has continued to rise –
  - The children needing families present more challenges because they are more damaged.
  - The work involved in responding to adverts for children in ‘Be My Parent’.
  - Specific requirements in finding the right family.

### **II. REVIEW OF RESOURCES**

#### **1. Category of Adoptive Applicants**

There are no longer specific categories of adopters. Prospective applicants are considered on the basis of what they can offer realistically and if this meets the needs of the children who require adoptive families. The regional and national need must be considered even if this is different from the local requirements, as we have to offer our resources to other authorities.

Applicants are prioritised on this basis.

There are still, however, criteria for those who wish to be considered for very young children (except or children with complex needs).

- i. Applicants must be childless because they are unable to have their own children.
- ii. Their fertility investigations must be complete and be some indication that they have come to terms with their infertility sufficiently to move towards

- adoption in a positive manner (while acknowledging that the loss will revive in the future).
- iii. Preference for those who are married.
  - iv. Together at least three years.

For other applicants if there are fertility issues then ii still applies (often secondary infertility).

All applicants must be in a stable relationship of at least three years.

The main area of change is that we will consider adoptive applicants from outside the Herefordshire border, providing the distance does not make an assessment impractical. Priority will be given to Herefordshire's need, as these applicants could become resources for our children.

## 2. **Adoptive Applicants approved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2002 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2003.**

Between April 2002 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2003, **10**, Adoptive Applicants have been approved by the Herefordshire Adoption Permanency Panel.

This number continues to be lower than before the split from Worcestershire. It would appear that the significant increase in inter-agency work finding families, the 'children-finding' for adopters and the introduction of the competency element in assessments have been factors in this decrease.

### Factors effecting the decrease

- i. Increase in inter-agency work, which is time-intensive.
- ii. The same effort is invested in finding children for our families – 'children-finding'.
- iii. Competency element in assessments and increase in statutory checks and the time involved in CRB.
- iv. There appears to be an increase in the number of applicants who have to be counselled out of adoption. Despite the training, a significant number do not get the message that the children needing families are more difficult and that there are no 'straight-forward' babies.
- v. This situation is complicated by our adopters need to have 'added extra' if they are to be chosen by other authorities.

Year	No.
1999/2000	<b>11</b>
2000/2001	<b>13</b>
2001/2002	<b>9</b>
2002/2003	<b>10</b>

These resources break down as follows –

1 <sup>st</sup> time adopters	<b>7</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Placement adopters	<b>2</b>
Applicants for specific child	<b>1</b>
Applicants for disabled children	<b>0</b>
Inter-County Applicants	<b>0</b>

Of the first time adopters, approval was for the following –

Number accepted for 2 children	<b>4</b>
Number accepted for 1 child only	<b>3</b>

Number who would accept either sex	<b>6</b>
Preference that one of a pair is a girl	<b>1</b>
Preference for a boy	<b>2</b>

The age-range was again very diverse, which illustrates the attempt at precision when looking at the age of children applicants can consider -

Age	No.	Age	No.
0 – 2 years	<b>3</b>	3.5 – 5.5 years	<b>1</b>
0 – 4 years	<b>0</b>	3 – 7 years	<b>1</b>
0 – 5 years	<b>1</b>	2 – 8 years	<b>1</b>
0 – 6 years	<b>1</b>		
0 – 8 years	<b>1</b>		

One applicant was for a specific child of 7 years, which disrupted during introductions.

Of the 3 adopters who were approved for 1 child 0 – 2 years, 2 were for second placements when the age and needs of the first child restricted what the applicants could consider.

Further information –

- All applicants are of British/white heritage.
- All are heterosexual and all but one comprised a married couple

### 3. **Herefordshire Applicants who have had a child placed in the year.**

In this period **6** adoptive couples had children placed. This is an improvement on the first year but the continued low level of placements reflects the difficulty of placing Herefordshire children and the increasing complexity of finding the right children for our adopters. However, the increase reflects a different and more pro-active approach to 'children-finding'.

- Two couples had single Herefordshire children who were 2<sup>nd</sup> placements. Both couples lived either on the border or just outside.
- Four couples had placements from within the Consortium, involving 6 children.

### 4. **Current Resources – Approved Adopters Waiting for a Placement at 1<sup>st</sup> April 2003.**

On April 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, there were **9** potential adoptive families waiting for children.

1 <sup>st</sup> time applicants	<b>9</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> placement applicants	<b>0</b>
Child over 3 years (1 child)	<b>6</b>
Applicants approved for 2	<b>3</b>
Applicants 'on hold'	<b>0</b>

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Time Approved Adopters for children under 3 years**

**Total = 3 applicant**

- One couple waiting since 1996; there have been several potential matches, the most suitable they turned down.

- Single applicant is disabled and waiting for a child with similar disability.
- One couple have a birth child with Fragile X Syndrome and there has been little interest in them.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Placement Approved Adopters**

**Total = 6**

- **Three couples** are approved for 2 children and have been approached about several potential matches, none of which has yet materialised.
- One of these couples have changes circumstances, (moved to live above their pub), which has slowed down the task.
- **Three couples** are experienced parents but –
- Of those, one cannot consider a child where there is no adoption allowance because of very recent financial problems brought about by the ‘foot and mouth’ epidemic. Several Authorities have been interested in them but have not yet gone beyond the ‘interest’ stage.
- Another couple have a narrow age-range of 2years (3.5 – 5.5).
- The third couple already have 3 sons and want to extend their family by adoption.

Approved Adopters ‘on hold’

Total = 0

Single Parent Adopters

- We have **one** single parent adopter, offering a placement to a child with a specific disability – a child with restricted growth. She is now available, having waited until she was in an adapted house, which could meet the needs of herself as an adoptive parent. To date she has not had any possible placements.

## **5. Approved adopters referred to the Qest midlands Consortium, BAAf Link and the Adoption Register..**

The major change in the new Adoption Service has been the change to working inter-agency, finding placements for our children from other Authorities and also finding children for our adopters.

This has meant that **all** applicants are referred to the West Midlands Consortium as soon as they are approved. They are encouraged to be pro-active themselves by looking through ‘Be My Parent’ and ‘Children Who Wait’.

Interest in our adoptive families was slow to start. Since the first few placements, there appears to be a growing interest in approaching Herefordshire for resources. There are several authorities with whom we have a reciprocal arrangement, which appears to be working to our mutual advantage. It is unusual for an Authority to **not** place within their boundary and the perception is that if you are promoting your adoptive couples they must be the ones who are ‘limited’ or ‘left over’. Outside these reciprocal

arrangements, our adopters need to have something 'extra' before being considered by other Authorities.

**6. The number of Applicants not accepted by the Agency or withdrawn.**

In this year, **6** couples were withdrawn or had their application brought early to Panel.

- One couple were brought early and the panel recommended that their application should not proceed. The applicants had not met any of the competencies and appeared to have learnt nothing from the training course. They made representation after the 28 days had lapsed, but were allowed to represent their views to the Adoption Permanency Panel. Specific arrangements were laid down by the Panel, which might have enabled the application to proceed.
- Of those withdrawn, 2 couples had had a disruption and were ready to acknowledge that adoption was not right for them; one couple had been offered several children and when linked with a child, disrupted at the introduction stage, causing a severe reaction in the child. One couple were withdrawn for reasons of ill-health and the other as they had waited too long for their second placement and it was recognised they were unlikely to be offered a child as their age range was very limited (0 – 10 months).

**7. Background Offers made by approved Adopters witing placement at the beginning of April 2003. (These areas represent those factors most difficult to find in applicants)**

Backgrounds couples would consider	1 <sup>st</sup> time placement	Over 3 years & siblings
Face to face contact with birth parents	2	1
Face to face contact with birth siblings and wider family	4	2
Children with significant physical disabilities	1	0
Children with significant learning disabilities	2	2
Children with uncertain prognosis	5	4
Children with serious mental health backgrounds	1	1
Children sexually abused	1	1

**III. CHILDREN PRESENTED TO THE HEREFORDSHIRE ADOPTION AND PERANENCY PANEL FROM 1<sup>ST</sup> APRIL 2002 – 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2003**

**1. Numbers**

The number of Herefordshire children presented to the Adoption and Permanency Panel during this year was **13 + 9** for **permanent fostering**.

Children accepted for adoption	13
Children where the recommendation could not be given	1
Children accepted for permanent fostering	9

This figure of 13 is less than last year when 17 children were accepted and the year 2000/2001 when the number was 20 (the highest figure ever and representing 30% increase on the previous year and more than 100% increase on the average number of 9 of previous years).

Of the **9** children accepted for permanent fostering, three siblings were accepted earlier in the year for adoption but had their care plan changed (thus reducing the 2000/01 figure to 18 children) when their birth father withdrew his consent. Five other children were presented for the first time and **4** were subsequently linked with Herefordshire foster carers. **One** of these children is still waiting for a permanent family.

2. **Areas of origin**

Hereford City	<b>12</b>
Bromyard	<b>0</b>
Ledbury	<b>0</b>
Leominster	<b>0</b>
Ross-on-Wye (s Hfd)	<b>1</b>

3. **Age Range**

0 – 12 months	<b>4</b>
12 – 24 months	<b>4</b>
2 – 3 years	<b>1</b>
3 – 5 years	<b>3</b>
5 – 7 years	<b>0</b>
7 – 10 years	<b>1</b>

4. **Sex distribution**

The **13** children, comprised **6 boys** and **7 girls**

5. **Single/sibling distribution**

Single boys	<b>5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>4</b> – under 12 months</li> <li>• <b>1</b> – 3 – 5 years</li> </ul>
Single girls	<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>1</b> – 12 – 24 months</li> <li>• <b>1</b> – 3 – 5 years</li> <li>• <b>1</b> – 8 year old</li> </ul>
Sibling pairs	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b> girls aged 2 and 4 years (separated from 2 other siblings)
Three siblings	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b> girls aged 2 & 3 years; <b>1</b> boy age 1 year

Age	No	Sex
Under 3 years	<b>9</b>	3 girls; 6 boys
3 – 5 years	<b>3</b>	All boys
Over 5 years	<b>1</b>	1 girl

#### 6. **Background**

All the children's backgrounds are complex. What is of note this year is that although there are **8** young children out of **13**, only **1** child was placed with consent. This is a significant difference from 2001 – 2002 when 6 out of 19 children were in consent situations (and 2 out of 20 in 2000 – 2001).

### IV. **CHILDREN LINKED WITH ADOPTERS APRIL 2002 – MARCH 2003**

#### 1. **Numbers**

Families were found for **17** children in this period although **11** children were actually placed with adoptive families in 2001 – 2002

Reasons placements did not proceed

Consent withdrawn by birth parent	<b>3 (sibs)</b>
Placement disrupted at introductions	<b>1</b>
Placement stopped at Review stage of introductions by Herefordshire	<b>2 (sibs)</b>

Children placed for adoption who were accepted by the Panel in the same year	<b>2</b>
Children placed for adoption who were accepted by the Panel in the previous year	<b>9</b>
Children placed who were waiting for families at April 2001	<b>0</b>

#### 2. **Disruption of placements**

A distinction needs to be made between a planned link not proceeding and the disruption of a placement. New guidelines have been agreed with the West Midlands Consortium, summer 2003.

An adoption placement can be said to have disrupted if –  
*'the child or children have been placed with a view to adoption and cease to live with the prospective adopters by returning to the Looked After system of the Placing Agency before Order, or entering the Looked After system of the authority in which the children are placed, for a period of three years after the making of an Adoption Order'.*

During 202/3 there were no disruptions of placements.

Placements did not proceed for 3 children linked with adopters. In one case the placement did not continue when the applicant withdrew. The link with adopters for two siblings was stopped at the Review stage of introductions. This decision was taken by Herefordshire and against the wishes of the adopters. There was increasing evidence that the adopters could not meet the needs of the children.

Sadly, one of our children was killed in a tragic car accident on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2002, 10 weeks after he had been placed for adoption. His prospective adoptive mother was seriously injured in the accident, but has since recovered.

3. **Children who Wait at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2003**

Children waiting for placements at 31/3/03	<b>15</b>
Children still in Court Proceedings	<b>10</b>
Children with placements identified (carer being assessed)	<b>1</b>
Children waiting, presented to Panel in 02/03 ( Proceedings complete)	<b>2</b>
Children still waiting from previous Panels	<b>2</b>

4. **Inter-Agency placements**

Of the **11** children placed for adoption in 2002 – 2003, **9** were placed outside Herefordshire. This continues to represent the change of policy, that Herefordshire children are placed outside the Authority for confidentiality and security reasons.

When searching for the right family, we look first at our own resources to check whether it would be safe to place 'in-county'. Sometimes, the adoptive family's location makes this possible.

Our first consideration is to approach the West Midland Consortium (a group of 13 local authorities in the Midlands who share resources), followed by other local authorities and then the voluntary Adoption Agencies.

Over the year Herefordshire has further developed reciprocal arrangements with 5 local authorities within the Consortium, involving an exchange of resources.

Children placed in Herefordshire	<b>2</b>
Children placed via the West Midlands Consortium	<b>3</b>
Children placed in other Local Authorities	<b>6</b>
Children placed via voluntary Adoption Agencies	<b>0</b>



Many Herefordshire children are featured in the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) magazine 'Be My Parent' (BMP), published 10 times a year.

	Children	Household
Featured in 'Be My Parent' during the year	12	8
Paced this year via BMP	6	4
Where BMP has failed to produce a resource to date	0	0

## V. CHILDREN LINKED WITH ADOPTERS APRIL 2002 – MARCH 2003

The separation from Worcestershire has continued to have an impact on the way we run the Herefordshire Adoption Service.

The major change has been the low possibility being able to place our children with approved Herefordshire adopters with sufficient security and confidentiality. This results in the need to find adoptive families outside the county boundary for children where adoption is the child care plan.

### Herefordshire Children

The advantage of this change for our children has been that by widening the search for adopters, the quality of the adoptive families found has been very high. Our search is now nation-wide, ensuring we find the best adoptive families available at the time to meet our children's needs.

The change to a stand-alone service has given impetus to increase the skill and thoroughness with which children are prepared and moved to their new adoptive families. New standards have been introduced and monitored by the team manager to ensure consistency of service to Herefordshire's children. New skills are being developed and used.

The positive impact of the play therapist attached to the team (from LPSA funding) has already been evident. Three of the children we have placed this year in the families had a previous placement stopped – when preparation had been done with them, introductions almost complete and their 'good byes' said. We could not have managed such successful transfers to more suitable families in the time or manner without the skill of the play therapist working alongside the child's social worker.

Therapeutic work undertaken by the play therapist has given us a greater understanding and insight into the inner world of the child – which can only be helpful in deciding whether they can meet the child's long term needs.

Disadvantages have been in the greatly increased volume of work and expenditure. Extending our search nationally has increased the workload by at least 300%. For a significant number of children we have had a response rate upward of 50 families. All enquiries have to be contacted as a matter of good practice and courtesy. For some of the children there is little response, which poses a different problem.

The increase in court requirements has complicated the task. Court directions have led to children being featured in 'Be My Parent' unnecessarily. One child, for whom we could have found a family via the Consortium, was featured in 'Be My Parent' and the 70 responses had to be followed through and by the court's direction a specific question asked of all enquirers. Any difference of view between the Local Authority and the Guardian ad Litem impacts on the homefinding task.

## **Herefordshire adopters**

The most significant difficulty following the final split with Worcestershire has been the impact on Herefordshire approved adopters. As Herefordshire children cannot be placed with them the challenge is to find the right children for our adopters. They are disadvantaged because we cannot place our children with them.

All authorities large enough (as Herefordshire and Worcester were) place children within their own authority. It is cost effective and providing this meets the needs of the children has to be seen as the best practice.

The result is that the Adoption Service is now involved in 'children-finding' for adopters.

This can be just as time-consuming as homefinding for children. It takes time for other authorities to realise that Herefordshire adopters have the qualities they are looking for. It is often assumed that if adopters are made available to other authorities they have less skills.

The reality that adoption is changing and involves increasingly damaged children is difficult for the public to accept at a time when adoption has a high profile and the media message is 'anyone can adopt'. Considerable time is spent counselling out applicants who cannot meet the complex needs of adopted children or who, if they were approved, would never be chosen for a child.

One of the reasons authorities place within their boundaries is the financial implication. An inter-agency fee is charged for adopters (see attached fees). Herefordshire Adoption Service has sought to reduce this cost by arranging 'exchange of placements' with authorities with the same level of practice. At present exchanges have occurred with 5 different local authorities. Our priority, however, is still to find the best family for our children.

The challenge for 2003/2004 is the implementation of the new Adoption and Children Act 2002 and setting up an Adoption Support Service by October 31<sup>st</sup> 2003. The new Act involves far reaching changes for both Children and Families Teams and the Adoption Service.

Hazel Couch  
Adoption Team Manager  
September 2003

## Inter-agency Fees Between Consortium Member Agencies

<u>Number and Age of Children</u>	<u>Consortium LA members</u>	<u>LA generally</u>	<u>Voluntary Organisations including Consortium Voluntary Organisations</u>
Baby 0 – 1yr No Specific Needs	One third in total £3,781	£11,344	£17,823 + 1/6 Post Adoption Support £2,970
Single Children 1 – 5 yrs No Specific Needs	Two thirds in total £7,562	£11,344	£17,823 + 1/6 Post Adoption Support £2,970
Sibling Groups 2 or more Children or Children with Specific Needs	Standard LA Inter-agency Fee	LA Inter-agency Fee	Voluntary Organisations Fee

## Permanent Fostering Placements

**Two thirds of the LA Inter-agency fee for recruiting and preparing the family and the placement of the child.**

1 Child	£7,562
2 Children	£11,344
3 Children	£15,125

**One third of the LA Inter-agency fee charged on an annual basis for support to the placement.**

1 Child	£3,781
2 Children	£5,671
3 Children	£7,562

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