

adoption west



April 2022 to March 2023

Annual Report

Prepared by Alison Lewis, Service Director



Bath & North East
Somerset Council

North
Somerset
Council

Wiltshire Council

South Gloucestershire
Council

Gloucestershire
COUNTY COUNCIL

Contents

Page 3	Introduction
Page 3	Working with the local authorities
Page 4	Ofsted
Page 4	The Children
Page 8	Early Permanence
Page 8	Marketing and Recruitment
Page 9	Adopters
Page 12	Adopter Preparation Training
Page 13	Adoption Panels
Page 14	Adoption Disruptions
Page 15	Non-Agency Partner Adoption
Page 16	Adoption Support
Page 21	Birth Links/Adopted Adult/Birth Parent Support
Page 23	National and Regional Developments
Page 25	People
Page 26	Finance
Page 26	Complaints & Data Breaches
Page 27	Moving Forward
Page 29	Appendix– Governance and Scrutiny

Introduction

This is Adoption West's fourth Annual report and provides the agency's performance data across family finding, adopter recruitment, adoption panels and adoption support services. An important aspect of the report is the focus on the practice of the agency and experience of people who have been involved with Adoption West in the year.

Adoption West is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) commissioned by Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Wiltshire Council. The agency is a local authority company wholly owned by the aforementioned local authorities. As a separate legal entity from the local authorities Adoption West is registered with Ofsted as a Voluntary Adoption Agency.

This report is produced in accordance with National Minimum Standard 25.6, which details that the Voluntary Adoption Agency Board Members should:

- Receive a written report on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency, every six months.
- Monitor the management and outcomes of the services provided, in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users.
- Satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

It is also a requirement of the Social Care Common Inspection Framework (SCCIF): voluntary adoption agencies, that the six-monthly reports are shared with Ofsted on an annual basis.

Appendix A provides details the governance, commissioning, and local government scrutiny arrangements.

Working with our Local Authority Partners

Adoption West works closely with our local authority partners. We have monthly tracking meetings with each, on order to support our local authority colleagues to progress plans for children who are unable to live with their birth parents and adoption is being considers as a permanence option for them. Lead managers for adoption in each area meets with senior managers in Adoption West every two months to develop policy and practice across the region for the six local authorities. Each quarter there is a liaison meeting with each individual local authority to review performance, practice development and working together arrangements. These meetings ensure that we are working together across the region to achieve positive outcomes for children who have a plan for adoption or are living with their adopted family.

Ofsted

Two of our partners have had an Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services this year. Adoption West supported the authorities in this process including staff, panel chairs and adopters all speaking with the inspectors. These are the comments in relation to the work with Adoption West and adoption services:

Bristol City Council 16 to 27 January 2023

"Prospective and approved adopters receive good support. They are positive about their experience of the adoption process."

North Somerset Council 13 to 24 March 2023 –

"The local authority approach to securing permanence for children who can benefit from adoption is strong. Adoption is secured for a relatively high number of children early on through foster to adopt carers. Effective working with the regional adoption agency (Adoption West RAA) helps to promptly secure the best outcomes for children. The RAA comments positively on joint working with North Somerset, as do adopters about the quality of the support they receive. Life-story work is consistently completed and appropriate."

The Children

This year, **125** children have had **plans for adoption**, noticeably higher than the year-end figure of 107 children in the previous year. The number of children with a 'best interest decision' had dropped in Q4 21/22 due to some children's plans being paused due to medical compliance issues, and the increase in the current year suggests that those children who were previously delayed are now progressing. However, the number of ADMs has remained largely consistent across all four quarters, which suggests that the increase may not be due entirely to medical compliance issues reducing the number of 'best interest decisions' made in the previous year and increasing it in this year. If this trend continues it could suggest that Adoption West may not be reflecting the national picture, which indicates a reduction in the number of 'best interest' decisions being made.

Placement orders were granted for **100** children and 78 children have been placed for adoption. **84** children were **adopted** in this period, which is 6 less than last. Some families have experienced delays in gaining adoption orders due to medical compliance issues with regards to seeking birth parent consent to access medical records being addressed when the court has considered the application for an adoption order. This does now seem to be improving with quarter 4 having a significantly higher number of orders made and the number of children placed for adoption haven fallen to **84** from 110 after quarter 2,

This year has seen a significant increase in **early permanence** activity with an increase in referrals from the local authorities and **36** children placed with adopters temporarily approved as foster carers. This is an increase of 64% from 2021-2022.



Adoption West Adopters 64



External Adopters 14

The number of **children placed with Adoption West adopters** has increased for the third year to **82%**. This means that more children are being placed with in the region and therefore their provision of adoption support services will remain with Adoption West.

Family Finding

Children with a Placement Order currently waiting for adoption at 31/03/23.

	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-12 Months	12 -18 Months	18+ Months	Total by LA	Q4 21/22 By LA
Number of Children	31	18	13	2	3	66↓	69
Q4 21/22 Number of Children	25	21	12	3	8	69	

There were **66 children with Placement Orders** without a match at 31/03/23. This is slightly lower than the 69 children at the same period last year. This figure does not include children with a placement order who had a 'change of plan away from adoption' which is being progressed by the local authority, with regards to a rescission of the plan and revocation of the placement order.

Of these **66 children with placement orders, 29 were linked with adoptive placements** and progressing to adoption panel for a match and another **9 had plans in place for adoption by their foster carers**. Of the 28 children with Placement Orders who were not linked at the end of the year, there are only 12 children with a Placement Order who do not yet have a potential link being pursued.

There are currently **18 children waiting longer than six months**. The five children waiting more than 12 months all have foster carers who are making direct applications to the court for an adoption order. On 31st March there were 3 children waiting longer than six months who did not have a link or match being progressed.

It is positive to report that there have only been **8 children for whom family finding has stopped as their plans have changed a way from adoption**. This is a decrease of 56% from the 18 children who had their plans changed last year.

The national CORAM I data 2022-23, shows that the average time in the Adoption West region between the six local authorities for the child's journey (A 10) continues to be quicker than the England average 412 days compared to 480. The time between placement order and match (period of family finding activity) is continuing to improve at **173** days, **24** days quicker than the England average of 197.

These improvements in numbers of children placed and timeliness can only be achieved by the commitment, tenacity and proactive approach of the family finding team in their joint work with children's social workers.

The team supported by the Recruitment and Marketing Officer have continued to hold virtual family finding events throughout the year. Each session profiles 5-6 children with their social workers in attendance to answer adopter's questions. Generally, 10 sets of adopters attend each session. We have also started to have the return of in person events, with the first South West Adoption Consortium Adoption Exchange held for over three years.

In addition, national children's activity days hosted by Coram are also utilised if the distance and logistics are appropriate for a child.



Adoption West held their first Activity Day since January 2020, on March 4th, 2023, this event was designed to allow prospective adopters, and children awaiting adoption to come together in a calm, relaxed way, with the support of social workers available. The main objective of this event was to find adopters for harder to place children; sibling groups and older children, by allowing them to meet in a controlled and safe environment.

The day was a great success with children and adults being entertained with lots of activities, including bubbles, play doh, cake decorating and soft play.

Eleven children attended this family finding event and at this time, 6 children in 3 sibling pairs are progressing links or interviews with adopters and there is a potential match for another child.

Feedback from prospective adopters

"We wanted to let you know what a magical day we had at the activity day today



We are so thankful that we were able to speak to both foster carers about the boys at length and spend time with them. We felt a strong connection with the boys. We had the space to play and chat over Lego and balloon making - so much fun! We think the boys are incredible. . . We wanted to pass on a huge thank you to foster carers for offering us time to discuss the boys. We are in awe of the amazing care they are giving them.

Finally, thanks to the family finder who facilitated an invaluable conversation with foster dad, allowing us to get a better picture of the boys' needs."

"It was a really helpful time. Great to have the chance to interact and see their personalities."

"Also helpful to chat with social workers and foster carers in a casual atmosphere."

"We have been to two previous activity days, and yours was a much more inclusive, positive experience".

The Family Finding Team have successfully placed a number of older, complex children. Transitions in those circumstances are often challenging and require thoughtful and collaborative practice, the team feel proud of the work achieved and the outcomes for those children.

"Whilst being pleased that we have been able to place so many children and many in EP placements the Children who have really stood out to us this year are:

Brothers 6yrs & 3yrs of age who had had multiple foster placements, therefore significant concerns about the impact of this instability.

Brothers 5yrs & 7yrs one of these children has a genetic condition, learning difficulty and global delay.

Brother and sister 5yrs & 4yrs with global developmental delay and concerns about emotional regulation and sibling relationship.

A 7yrs old boy who having lived with his carer for two years needed very carefully supported transitions.” - The Family Finding Team

Early Permanence

It is positive that there is an increased number of children being referred for EP placements which has resulted in **36** children being placed. This is the highest number achieved across the Adoption West region. With **78** children placed for adoption this year this means that nearly half of the children are being placed with their adoptive family at the earliest possible stage and we are ensuring the first placement is the only placement. Currently, over 50% of approved adopters are offering an EP placement. EP carers are currently being matched quite quickly after approval so having approved 45 adopters providing 36 placements this year, when the complexities of matching and location are considered, it is essential that Adoption West provides a constant flow of potential EP carers to have choice of placements for children.

The level of placement activity reflects the work and commitment of social workers in both the Family Finding and recruitment and assessment teams working together to match children and families and provide the support to the placement.

To increase the number of children placed in Early Permanence placements (NMS 13)

Recruitment and Marketing

This is detailed in the Adoption West Recruitment Strategy 2022-23

Recruitment activity during this period focussed on social media and updating the website content, centred around these objectives.

- To recruit enough adopters willing to consider children who wait the longest for adoptive parent/s (specifically siblings and those children with complex needs)
- To make potential adopters' aware early in their journey of the need for adopters for siblings and what this might look like
- To provide and promote support to enable people to adopt siblings and children with complex needs.

Adoption West Online Coffee Mornings



We run an online chat for anyone interested in adoption these are advertised on the Adoption West website and via social media. Each event is hosted by Becky Myers Recruitment and Marketing Officer and another member of staff.

National recruitment Campaigns

You Can Adopt launched a new campaign for National Adoption Week 2022, which focused on the theme of identity. You Can Adopt explored adopted people's memories and relationships from before, during, and after they were adopted, and how these make them who they are today. A toolkit of promotional material was shared with all Regional Adoption Agencies telling lived experiences of adoption. In Adoption West this material was shared on our social media pages and website



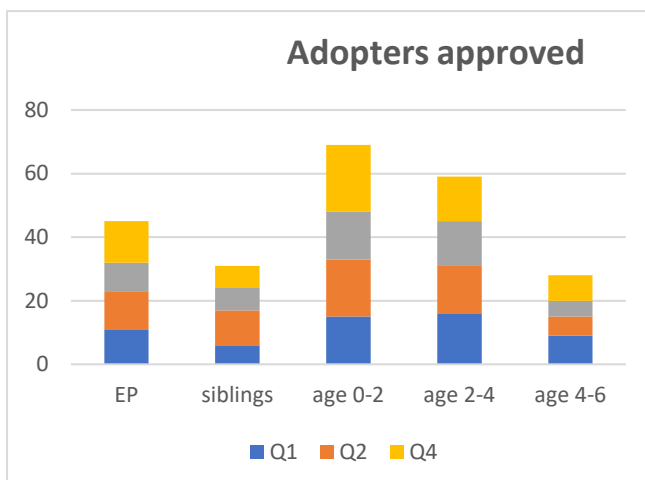
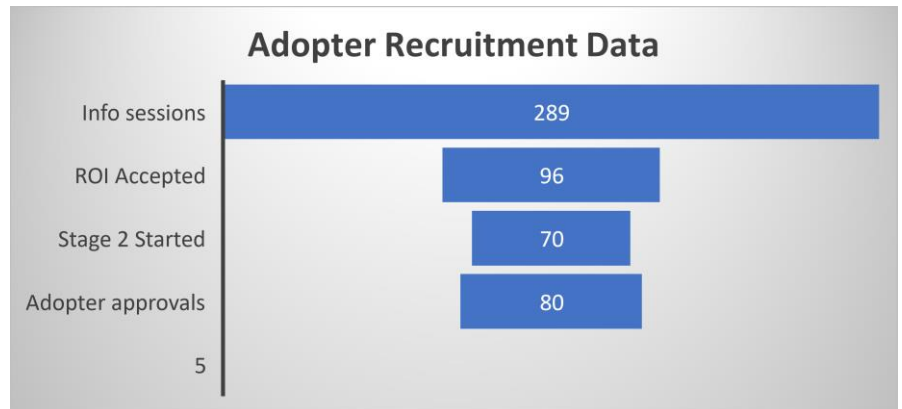
Adopters

Adopter recruitment has been slightly lower this year with the number of people attending Information Sessions being 12% down on last year. The conversion rate from info session to ROI accepted is the same as for last year at 33%. Due to the lower number of people enquiring about adoption the number of prospective adopters starting stage 1 is 30% down compared to last year.

User feedback of their experience of the Information Sessions has had a response rate of 11% with respondents giving an overall satisfaction of 8.45/10. The information from this first year of user evaluation will help us to review the processes as Adoption West restructures and operates with a regional Recruitment and Assessment Team from 1st April 2023.

The national data (Q4 2022-23) indicates a falling number of applicants in the adoption system across England.

80 adopter households have been approved in 2022-23, which is also slightly lower than the 87 approvals in 2021-22. The chart below shows that we continue to recruit adopters to meet the needs of children waiting for families and that Adoption West has sustained the improvements in the recruitment of adopters for siblings made last year, with 39% of applicants being open to providing adoption for siblings.



56% of adopters will consider early permanence with an increase in children placed for early permanence during this period.

There are currently **91** approved adopters, with 53 (**58%**) waiting more than six months to be matched. However, **25** of these households are currently providing an EP placement and we are finding that many children are placed more than 26 weeks prior to a placement order and then the placement

progressing to an adoption placement. We have seen a decrease in approved adopters on-hand so the number of adopters available at 31st March 2023 was **59**

Analysis of adopter sufficiency which considers the demographic information and numbers of children with a plan for adoption in 2022-23 highlights the following recruitment priorities.

- Maintain the number of adopters who will offer an early permanence placement at 50 – 60 %.
- 40% of adopters for siblings
- Increase the number of adopters from the Black community.
- Overall to recruit 80-90 adopters a year.

This will be a challenge for all adoption agencies in the current socio – economic climate. Whilst Adoption West has currently positive sufficiency levels, we are actively developing our recruitment strategy for the longer term and to address the priorities highlighted.

67 Adopters have been matched and **76** children have been placed with Adoption West adopters. The percentage of adopters providing homes for children within the Adoption West region is **87%**.

Adoption West aims to establish a process that captures feedback from Adopters at each stage of the process in a way that is straight forward and accessible for adopter. In addition to establishing feedback following an information session we have introduced an evaluation for prospective adopters to complete via a link provided to them in their Stage 1 Review Report.

This year we have had a response rate of 25%, respondents gave their experience of the stage 1 process an overall rating of **8.79/10**

Here are some comments that we are using to inform the service we provide:

"We enjoyed the new format of the workbooks and the variety of tasks and documents to complete e.g. the eco map of support and the useful family tree website".

"Everyone we have had contact with has been pleasant, helpful and supportive and has made us feel at ease with what could be a stressful process. Many thanks to all!"

"Only comment is the documents sent to complete and return don't seem to work well on a mobile device. The workbook in particular proved difficult for us as my laptop is a work device so cannot email confidential details such as addresses."

"Unfortunately, due to recruitment issues we had to wait a long time from registration of interest to allocation of a social worker, approx 8 weeks. Though this was through no fault of anyone, it was disheartening to initially have had a long wait. Since then the process has been efficient and really smooth."

"Really impressed with the knowledge, support and guidance that we have received from our Social Worker and the training staff."

"To make the admin/documents collection for stage 1 easier and more efficient, providing a written checklist of documents, including options of suitable documents, to the applicants would likely speed up the process."

The following compliments have been given to staff:

I am writing to highlight to you how well (social worker) supported us through the adoption. She put us at ease and explained everything very clearly. She was friendly, open and approachable. She was great with the children, they enjoyed talking with her. I felt i could talk openly with her without judgement. Her support was excellent and made the process so much easier to cope with. "Thank you so much, your eternal optimism and ability to find the humour in difficult situations has been a lifeline to us all".

We just wanted to say thank you again, we are ready for the next stage and will continue to do every bit of research we can.

Just wanted to say thank you so much for getting us this far. The support you have provided has been excellent and the quality of your par made yesterday so

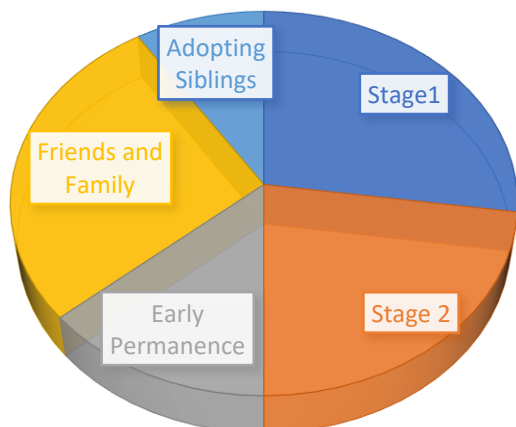
We just feel it is really important for us to share how absolutely fantastic (social worker) has been along the way. From the moment we met her we felt at complete ease with her, she has such a friendly, kind and caring manner which meant it was so easy to talk to her. She made every effort to really get to know us and allowed us to get to know her too whilst maintaining complete professionalism along the way. Thank you to the entire adoption west team who have been fantastic.

*The assessment process is clearly explained to prospective adopters (ibid) (NMS 10.3)
Agencies respond to requests for detailed information (following initial enquiries either to the National Gateway for Adoption or directly to an adoption agency) within ten working days, through an information session, a visit, pre-planned telephone call or similar arrangement with the prospective adopter. (NMS 10.4)*

To implement an effective recruitment strategy, meeting the needs of children with a plan for adoption in the AW region (NMS 10.1)

Adopter Preparation Training

All prospective adopters are offered and expected to attend the following training:



Stage 1	1 day
Stage 2	3 days
EP	1 day
Friends and Family	2 hours
Adopting Siblings	½ day

For those adopters who want to provide an Early Permanence placement, they are asked to attend an additional 1-day training course during Stage 2 of their assessment. Those adopters

wanting to be matched with siblings should complete the Adopting Siblings Workshop, prior to matching panel.

"We like very much that training was made by people who have been adopt children and have experience "

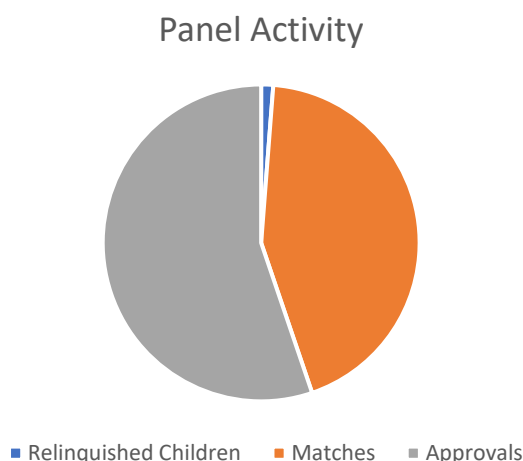
Applicants are given the opportunity to talk to approved adopters, adoptees and birth parents whose children were adopted. (NMS10.7)

Preparation courses are held and made available to all prospective adopters, including foster carers who wish to adopt the child (NMS10.8)

Prospective adopters are prepared to become adoptive parents in a sensitive way, which addresses and gives them skills knowledge and practical techniques to manage the issues they are likely to encounter (NMS10.9)

Adoption Panels

The Adoption West Panel Chairs Report has been completed for this period, meeting National Minimum Adoption Standards 17.2 and 25. This report includes full details of the panel's process, membership, appraisals, quality assurance, training and activity, with recommendations to the agency.



Panel business this year has included:

2 relinquished children,
71 matches
90 approvals considered.

Feedback is requested from all those attending panel. Returns are low and further consideration is required by the agency as to the most effective way to improve the level of feedback provided. It is important that the panels understand how they are experienced by those attending so that changes and improvements to practice can be made where required.

Adoption West panels have continued to meet virtually and it is interesting to note that a number of comments refer to this with mixed views but on balance most adopters and professionals preferring this way of running panels.

"It was a really positive experience for us. We attended approval panel in person and found the virtual panel a much better experience than the in-person panel. We felt

that facing the panel in person was much more intimidating than joining a Teams meeting. We were nervous before panel and the waiting is tough so the only suggestion, we would have is to reduce the waiting time for adopters where possible.”

“The pre-panel preparation with [our social worker and the panel administrator] was helpful and reassuring and the panel itself went very smoothly and we both found it to be a very positive experience. We were really impressed with [the chair]; his tone and manner were warmly professional and we both felt at ease and reassured immediately.”

“We feel that now Covid isn’t such a risk any more it would be good to do Panel in person. We understand it’s more convenient to do it online but you get a much better sense of who the Panel are, and what they are asking when you are in person”.

“All panel members showing a real interest in the child we were discussing and plans moving forwards”.

“Some technical issues for the Chair, but Vice Chair seamlessly stepped in and progressed the meeting without any disruption. Ideally panel would run on time but I understand why it doesn’t and why it’s difficult to predict how long panel will take. However, communication with panel advisors and admin is good so it helps to keep informed of delays.

Adoption Disruptions

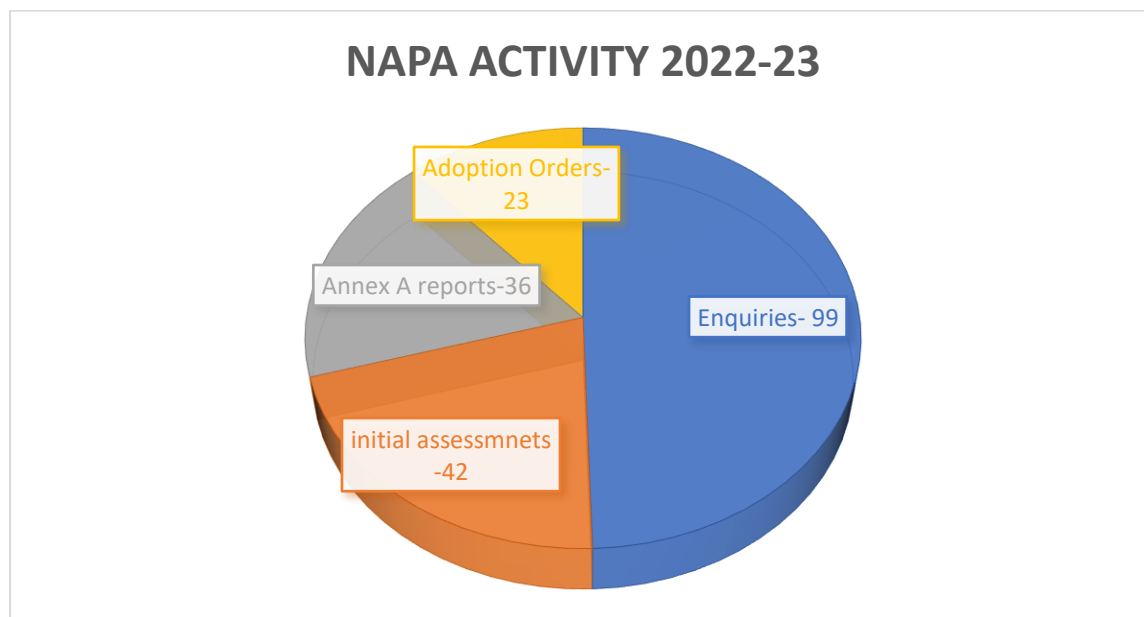
When a child is placed for adoption and returns to into local authority care before an adoption order this is considered a disruption and a Disruption meeting must be held do that any practice learning can be shared with the agencies and adoption panel. There have been two children whose placements disrupted during 2022-23. One disruption meeting has been held and the second is being planned as this occurred at the end of March 2023.

The adoption Lead managers have a learning review planned for July 2023.

Non-Agency Partner Adoption (referred to as Step-Parent Adoption)

Adoption West manages enquiries regarding partner adoptions via a triage process. Applicants are required to submit their notice of intention to adopt to the local authority and Adoption West then completes the checks, references and court report.

This work is completed by social workers in the Recruitment & Assessment Teams in each hub, enabling the flow of this work to be managed at a regular pace and appropriately balanced with the priorities of agency adoptions.

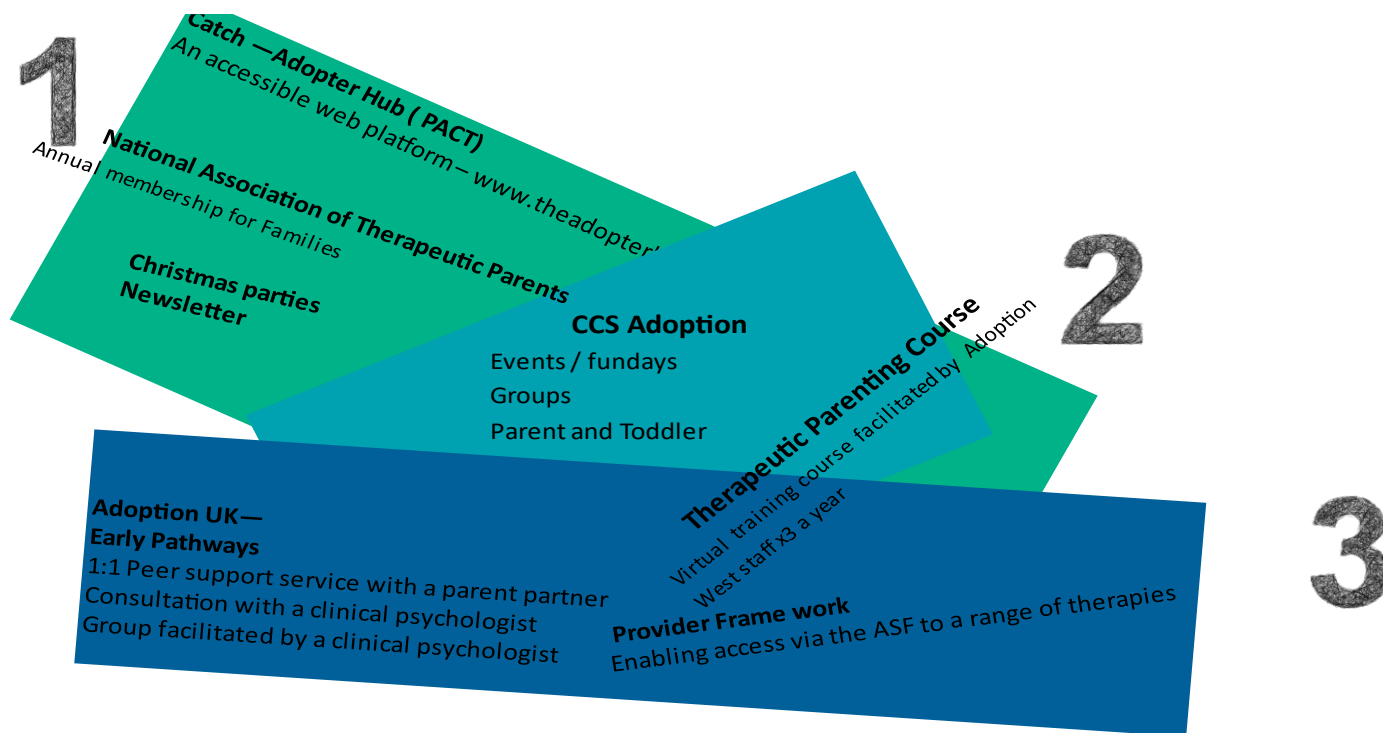


"Thanks for your help and support today, which made the hearing much less of a worry than it might have been. As we told the judge, we are extremely grateful to you and all your colleagues for the help, support and guidance we have received from you all from day one to this very happy conclusion. It's very clear that you are not just doing your jobs. You have gone far beyond that, and it has changed our family's lives beyond measure."

"We never tire of telling people how amazing you and your colleagues have been."

Adoption Support

We provide service to children and families to meet different levels of need, these are some of the services that have been available this year to either prospective adopters or adopted families.



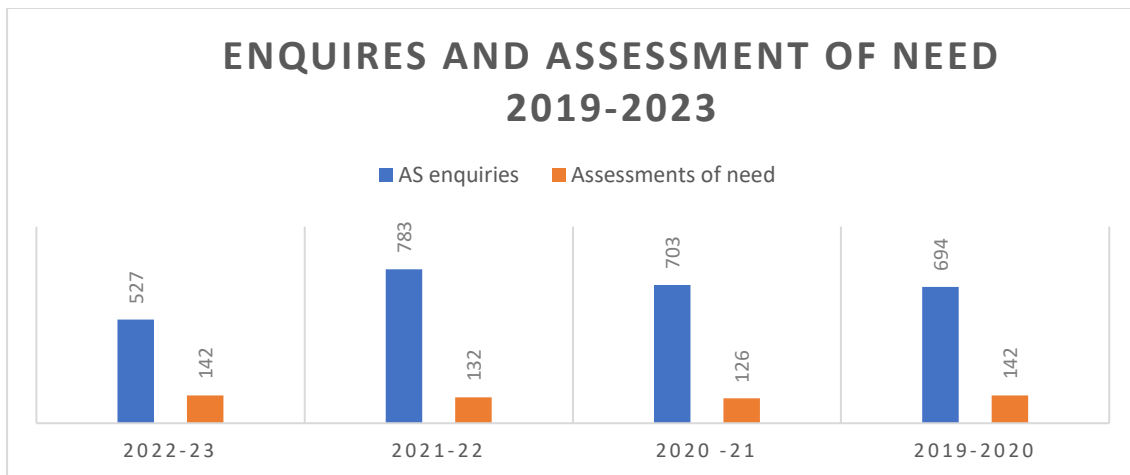
We have a commissioning arrangement with CCS Adoption that enables the provision of a range of groups and events for adopters from both agencies. We have also worked closely with Adoption UK as they have transitioned the TESSA service to the new Early Pathways offer, which can now be accessed via the Adoption Support Fund.

Adoption West have worked with Wiltshire Adopters Network for Development and Support (WANDS) to put a proposal to the Adoption West Board for to develop peer to peer support across all six local authorities and this was agreed in April 2023 and we have begun to progress these plans for the coming year. To find out more about WANDS and the support available from adopters to adopters please visit <https://wearewands.org.uk>

The core activities of the service include, daily duty service, assessments of need, management of applications to the Adoption Support Fund for individual children and/or families, direct support to families and children and Letterbox and Direct Contact arrangements. We also aim to run 3 therapeutic parenting courses each year facilitated by experienced adoption support social workers along with events for adopters and children where possible.

The level of need and demand for adoption support continues to grow. Even though enquiries have been lower in 2022/23 than over the last four years , the number of families that have required an assessment of need has increased and was 27% of all enquires compared with 17% in 21/22.

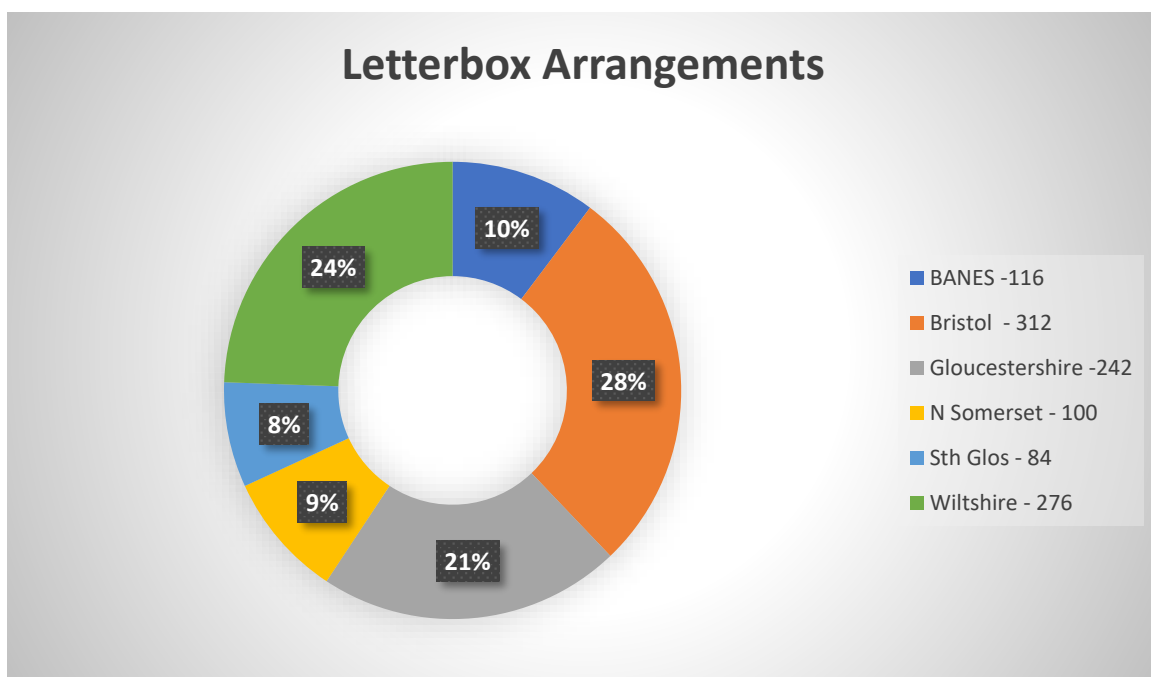
Consequently, in the latter part of the year it hasn't been possible to achieve the average timescale of 6 weeks from enquiry to assessment appointment. While families are waiting we provide 'keeping in touch' calls from duty or the adoption support team.



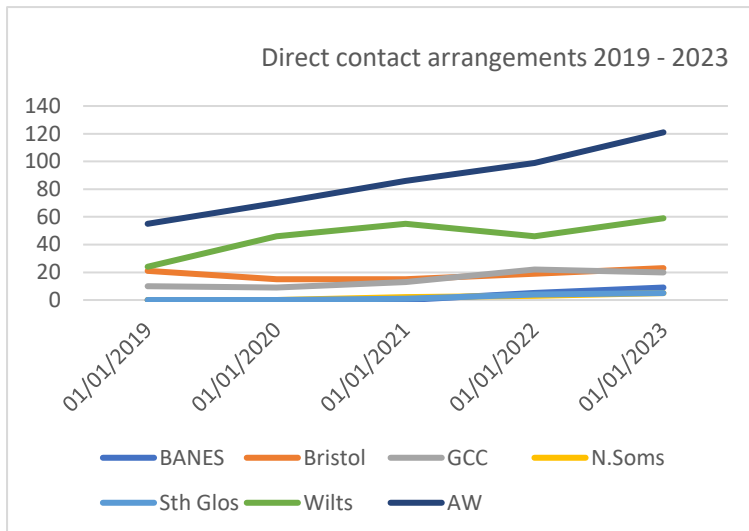
Currently, **798** families across the region have an allocated social worker providing regular support and or enabling them to access therapy via the ASF.

Maintaining Relationships

A significant amount of the support provided by the teams is in helping adopted children and young people maintain connections with birth family either via letter box arrangements or face to face contact. Adoption West manages 1,130 letterbox arrangements.



Across Adoption West we are seeing an increase in children and adopted families having some direct contact with birth family members.



It is likely that we will see more adoptions with face to face contact in the future.

The adoption support teams are working hard to embed Beth's Neal *Contact in Adoption Risk Assessment Tool* and have created a working Risk Assessment document for this purpose. The principles that underpin this work are:

- Every direct contact is unique and organised with the child's emotional wellbeing and best interests at the heart of it. It can be run independently, facilitated or arranged and supported by Adoption West depending on who the contact is between, especially if it is between siblings.
- Preparation and planning is key to a successful meet up. Factors to consider include are the time of year; weather; venue; photos; gifts; age appropriate activity for the child(ren); travel arrangements.
- Everyone is prepared prior to contact to ensure that expectations are managed and so that the meeting is as successful and enjoyable as possible.
- Review: After a contact feedback form is sent to all parties.

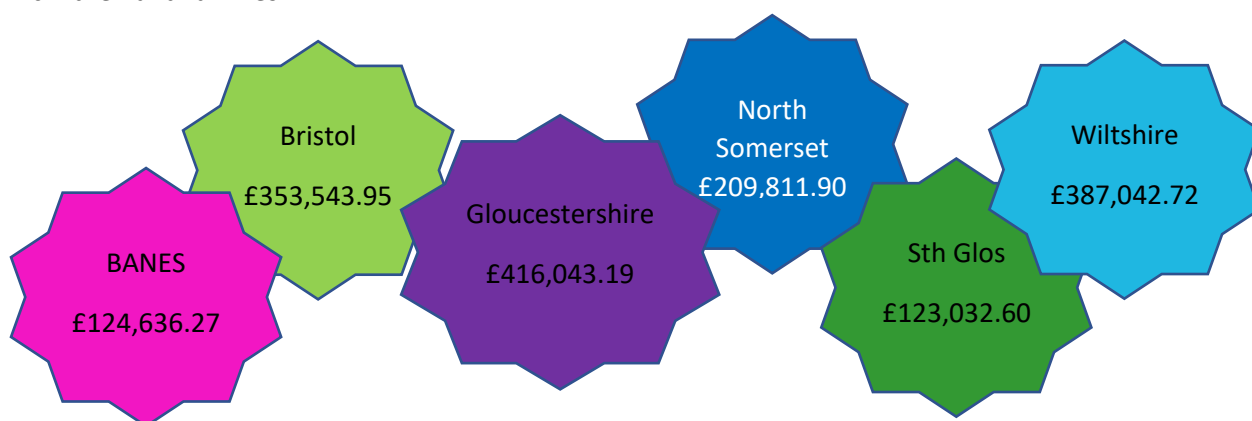
It is testament to the work of the adoption support teams in Adoption West that three members of staff and an adopter were asked to contribute to this national webinar. Well done and thank you to all those involved.

The Importance of Maintaining Relationships for Children and Families event

On **Tuesday 21st March**, the National Adoption Strategy Team are hosting a webinar on *The importance of Maintaining Relationships for Children and Families*. The conference will include members of the NAST, Julie Young from the UEA and speakers with lived experience from the adoption triad. This event is to continue to promote the importance of this area within the wider

Adoption Support Fund

The Adoption Support Fund provides funds to pay for therapeutic services for adopted children and young people. The Adoption support teams must complete an assessment of need with the child and family to identify the appropriate support and provider. **1059** applications were approved for families in the Adoption West Region with **1210** recipients accessing therapeutic support. This is a further year on year increase in the number of families accessing the fund. We accessed **£3,774,916.74** to provide therapeutic support to children and families.



Feedback and Compliments

Direct contact

You were both wonderful, i cant thank you enough. The day was perfect you both were so caring and good with us and the kids , im just so pleased it went that well

Letterbox

Thank you for your letter enclosing a letter from my daughter's birth father. I am so pleased that we have heard from him. It is going to be so important for my daughter to have these....I am so pleased to be hearing from the birth families. We are so lucky that they are at least starting to engage with the letterbox process. Anything extra would be a bonus. Thank you for all the thought and effort that has gone into helping us with communication.

Family Support

We're in an OK place at the moment- mostly thanks to your team!..Many thanks as ever for all the help and support. I honestly don't know how we would have survived the last few years without your team!

has always listened graciously and only ever offered support and for that we are so very grateful. I truly mean that.

*You are a *marvel*. I'm so pleased that you're our social worker. You make such a demonstrable difference to our lives and I can't thank you enough.*

Assessment of Need

Thank you so much for this. We are very grateful and impressed at how thorough and accurate your report is

Events

I just wanted to send a big thank you for the Christmas party. It was so well organised and my kids had an absolutely brilliant time.

Therapeutic Parenting Course

The course is run by social workers in Adoption West three times a year this is some of the feedback:

- I often wonder if I'm parenting in the right way. The course has confirmed I am, and I've picked up tips and hints
- Being part of an adopter community and knowing you're not on your own
- Hearing other's experiences and knowing you're not on your own and there is light at the end of the tunnel; can sometimes feel like you're on an island
- For the first time strategies that actually work. I've read books but none of it works

Was there anything we could have spent more time on/anything we didn't cover?

- More on sibling rivalry and sibling relationships
- More on compassion fatigue, how to recognise it and deal with it
- More on parent mental health, post adoption depression. Can make therapeutic parenting much harder

Online experience

- Our whole adopter experience started in Covid and we have never met anyone in person, everything has been online. I do miss the connection of being in a room with others and having a conversation.
- It would have been impossible for me to travel and commit for 10 weeks if it had been in person. Perhaps there could be one optional 'real' meeting at the end of the course, to meet everyone in person?

Adoption National Minimum Standard 15

Adoption support

Children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs.

Children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs. Service users confirm that the adoption support service provided met or are meeting their assessed needs. (NMS 15)

Contact with birth parents, siblings, other members of the birth family and significant others is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child. (NMS 8)



Adopted Adult Service

Provides counselling and access to records for adopted adults this also includes advise about how to access intermediary services if people wish to trace birth family members.

User feedback rated the experience as **9.4/10**

	Adopted Adult (Schedule 2)	Adopted Adult/Support (Access to Records)	Intermediary Advice	Adopted Adult/Support Post Commencement
AW Total	39	75	35	1

Birth Family Support

Support provided to birth families has increased by 25% this year with 125 people accessing the service, we are currently providing 1-1 support and Group work. In addition, we have been collaborating across Adoption West and with Pause to raise the profile of birth parent voices

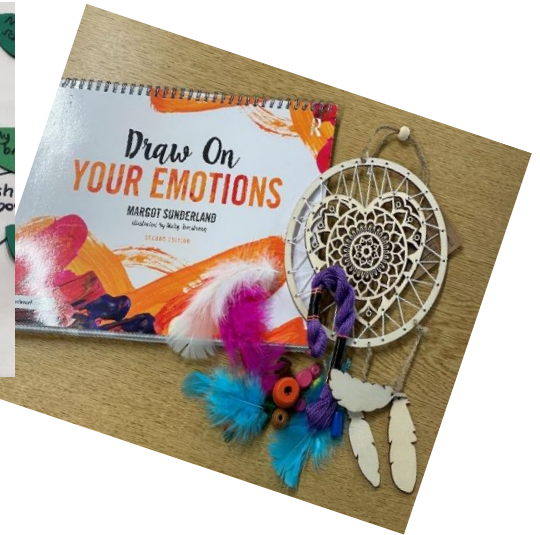
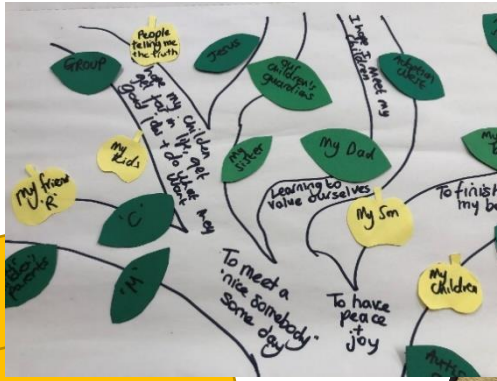
1-1 Support

Talking and listening

- Liaising with children’s social workers the regions
- Liaising with letterbox support workers regarding contact plans
- Supporting birth parents to write a later life letter for their child
- Creating Memory boxes for the birth parent
- Supporting birth parents to meet with adopters of their child

Groupwork

We have been running a regular monthly group in Bristol since September 2021 with five birth mum’s who attend. It has been enormous step for the women to join the group and their commitment to it demonstrates the import place it is for them. Development is in place to start another ‘pop-up’ group in Gloucester in April 2023 and Wiltshire Pause are interested in co-running in the future.



Do you remember
when the hammocks were swaying
the fish were swimming
in the light blue sea.

I heard the birds
and I knew.

The reggae music took us
from dawn to dusk
drinks flowing, bodies grooving,
until our feet were aching.

Barefoot and cackling,
cool water on our toes,
as the moon sparkled on the sea.

Sitting, feeling the sand sift
through our fingertips
skin still tingling from the sun.

Peace. Warmth. Love.

The Bristol Birth parents group took the opportunity to work with a creative writer to create this poem. It speaks for itself.

The women were asked if they would like to share any comments about the group for the annual report. Here is what they said:

"I reckon its brilliant. It should have come from the start when we first lost our kids. Should've come ages ago."

"It helps cause you're not on your own, other people in the group are in a similar situation. We can support each other."

"It's a space we can just open up and talk about what we've been through – the suffering and pain. We understand each other because our children have been adopted. People who haven't been through it wouldn't understand."

"I've made good friends."

"This should have been done ages ago. I wish I could have met someone who had my experience years ago."

Twilight' sessions where prospective adopters can meet with birth parents in person was run for the first time this year with plans in place to run a further 3 in 2023-24

In the summer of 2023 Adoption West will be sharing "Brandon's story – Stuck in a Cycle" an animated story of a birth father who has worked with the service to produce it.

Adoption National Minimum Standards 12.3 Birth parents are given access to, and are actively encouraged to use, a support worker from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child. The support worker is independent of the child's social worker. (NMS12.3)

Adoption National Minimum Standards 12.6 Birth parents are helped to work through their concerns through the counselling they receive and understand what is proposed for their child and how the child will benefit if they take an active part in their child's adoption. (NMS12.6)

Adoption National Minimum Standards 16 Intermediary services - Adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to the adoption, where appropriate, and contact is facilitated between an adopted adult and their birth relative if that is what both parties want

Adoption National Minimum Standards 23.9 Birth records counselling and disclosure of adoption information

National and Regional Developments

The National Adoption Team is led by the Strategic Adoption Lead Sarah Johal, allows for RAA leaders to work collaboratively on developing and improving practice and delivering improved outcomes for children and families as part of the government's national adoption strategy-achieving excellence everywhere. The 3 year programme has 3 key priorities, recruitment of adopters, the child's journey and adoption support.

Working with RAA's across the South West, Adoption West has taken a lead role in submitting successful bids for national adoption strategy monies for developing practice in early permanence and matching.

South West Early Permanence Project

One of the 2021-22 aims of the Department for Education 2021 Adoption strategy: Achieving excellence everywhere is to increase the number of children put forward for Early Permanence placements. The specific aims of the project cover four of the six overall funding objectives, namely:

1. To increase the number of EP placements
2. To improve the quality of EP placement practice
3. To ensure that EP carers and placements receive the most appropriate support before, during and after placement.
4. To identify areas for potential innovation in EPP

The project lead has been reviewing practice across the region including the preparation and support of adopters/carers, what the data tells us about the children who are placed for EP, what are the challenges in maintaining the practice knowledge in the system a to ensure an EP placement is considered and available for children when needed. The project aims to identify EP Champions across the south west who will continue to work together to further develop and embed practice in the region across RAA's, VAA's and local authorities.

Early Permanence Conference

The South West conference took place in Taunton on 19 April 2023, with 60 delegates attending, including representatives from Cafcass, Local Authority Legal teams, IROs and EP practitioners from RAAs and all but one Local Authority. The event commenced with a keynote speech from Julie Selwyn, followed by a recording of an EP carer, taken at the national conference in Leeds and then Alexandra Conroy Harris presenting on legal issues in EP. Both speakers generated a lot of questions and discussions.

The afternoon workshops on the following subjects were very well received:

- Experiences of family time in Early Permanence placements
- Supporting Early Permanence Carers
- Planning for the best outcomes for children
- Early Permanence for older children
- Maintaining a fostering focus in early permanence placements



South West Matching project for children with disabilities –

The project is a partnership between the RAA's in the south west and Julie Selwyn from Oxford University Rees Centre. The challenges we will address:

- Are we aspirational enough for children with complex health needs, in terms of their plans for permanence or are we impacted by bias and belief that we won't place children.
- Working across 13 Local Authorities to understand the relationship between children's disabilities teams and front line teams in permanence practice for children
- Does mainstream recruitment identify adopters for children with complex health needs.
- What has worked in Bespoke family finding.
- Timely development and commitment to a robust support plan by the LA's
- Combining the support plan with the EHCP from the outset – is there a potential pilot?

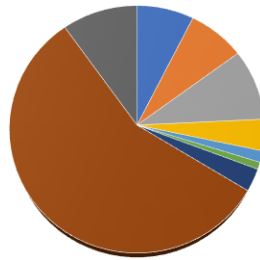
The project has recruited the staff who will come into post in June 2023. The Rees centre has completed a review of literature and practice model which will further inform the scope of the project.

People

The Senior Management Team, as detailed below, remains stable.

- Alison Lewis, Service Director- Agency Decision Maker (Adopter Approvals)
- Stuart Babbage, Business Manager
- Sue White, Service Manager – Recruitment, Assessment & Adoption Support
- Alison Hall, Service Manager (30 hours) – Family Finding and Panels

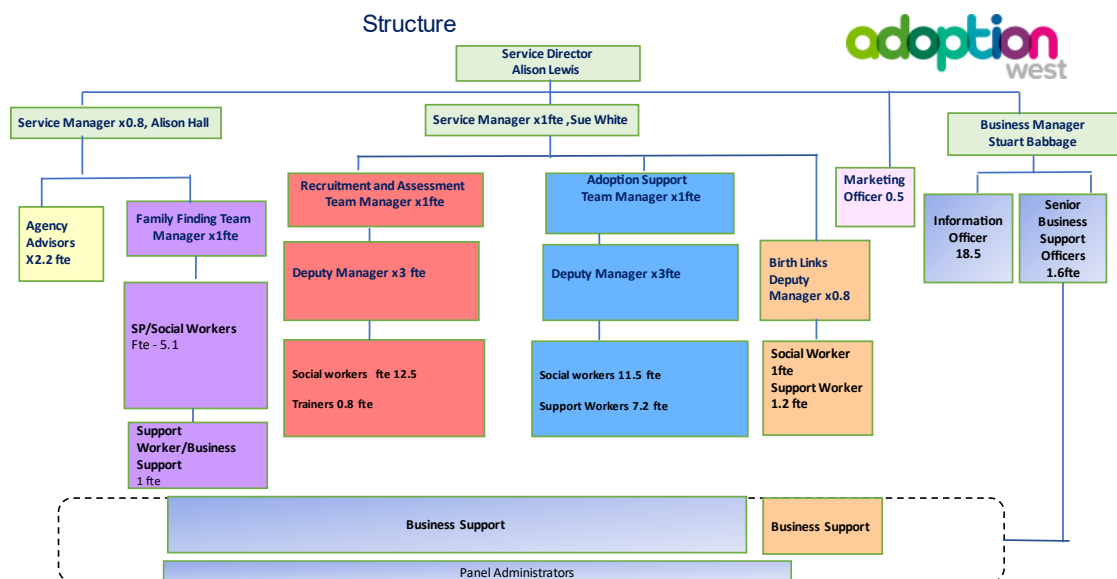
Roles in Adoption West



- Senior Managers
- Team Managers
- DTM
- Agency Advisors
- Trainers
- Marketing Officer
- Senior Business Support
- Social workers
- Support Workers
- Business Support

Our establishment is 83 staff, 61 FTE.

Adoption West moved to a temporary structure in June 2022, which created a single Recruitment and Assessment Team for four local authority areas, the aim was to provide more consistent management of these teams and review the impact it may have on performance. We will be reviewing the progress and impact in coming months. In December 2022 the Adoption West Board agreed to a new structure for the service:



Finance

Adoption West will receive commissioned contract income of £3.629m in 2022/23 from its 6 local authority partners to deliver adoption services. The breakdown of budget allocation is shown below:

Category	2022/23
Staff Salary, NI & Pensions	3,014
Other staff costs (Incl. Agency)	89
Travel, Accom, Training Subsistence	67
Commissioned Services, Subscriptions & other adopter recruitment activity	153
Post Adoption Support	62
ICT & Office	164
Support services	79
Total	3,629

Adoption West has also received £3.780 m Adoption Support Fund grant income and manages the related expenditure on behalf of the 6 local authority partners. As a Voluntary Adoption Agency, Adoption West operates on a not-for-profit basis and any surpluses are returned to the local authority partners that control the organisation.

Adoption West has managed its finances effectively to deliver services within budget under the added pressures of inflationary increases and various other organisational challenges. The financial processes and systems in place have proved effective and are being continuously improved to meet requirements, increase efficiency and enable Adoption West to realise new opportunities.

Financial viability and changes affecting business continuity. The Voluntary Adoption Agency/Adoption Support Agency is financially sound. (NMS20)

Complaints & Data Breaches

In addition to the six complaints detailed in the six month report for April to September 2022, there has been a further 2 complaints between October 2022 and March 2023. One complaint related to the delay in progressing a Non Agency Partner Adoption which was upheld and an apology given. The other to complaint related to approved adopters who had had a long wait to be matched with a child and their concern about the transparency of the matching process. All eight complaints have been dealt with within stage 1 of the complaints process.

There has been a total of three data breaches this year this is a significant reduction from the previous year of 10. All incidents were reported to the Data Protection Officer, and none were reportable to the ICO.

Moving Forward

With the new structure and investment from the local authorities, next year brings opportunities to focus on our adoption support service. Whilst the service makes very good use of the Adoption Support Fund, this cannot be relied on indefinitely and Adoption West needs to develop its own in house services. We have done this with the Therapeutic Parenting course and we have also invested in staff training and development with most social workers and support workers having completed Dyadic Development Psychotherapy (DDP) level 1 and or Theraplay level 1. We also have a small number of staff who are DDP level2 qualified and we would like to grow this number this year. This will enable our own practitioners to provide direct work to children and families.

Adoption West wants to be more visible to adopters across this large region and working with WANDS to develop peer to peer support we will be able to reach out to the communities of adopters. As part of this work, we plan to develop our own Adopter Reference group so that we can regularly communicate with adopters about how this service is developed. This will also create more opportunities for participation with children and young adults.

The growth in the number of children placed in Early Permanence placements means we are having a direct impact on the lives of children with their first placement being their only placement. The excellent work of the Family Finding, Recruitment assessment teams and the EP Project, should be part of Adoption West working to achieve the Coram Baaf kite mark for Early permanence this year.

The Birth Links team have been instrumental in growing the offer of support to birth families and next year we look forward to providing more groups across the region. Connecting birth parents and adopters via the twilight sessions will create an opportunity to grow understanding and break down barriers, which we hope will impact on connections being maintained when possible. This year we aim to work with our partner authorities to develop a more consistent understanding and practice when planning contact for children after the adoption order.

It is challenging times for recruiting both adopters and foster carers. We are actively working with the National Adopter Recruitment Campaigns and locally plan to promote adoption across the region. Our recruitment strategy highlights the needs to maintain the level of recruitment of Early Permanence carers and the progress in recruiting and supporting adopters to provide a family for siblings. Each year we have seen more children who are adopted, staying and growing up in the Adoption West region. This year we need to work with our local authorities to encourage more Black Asian Minority Ethnic people to consider adoption to meet the needs of children in the region.

As highlighted in the Ofsted ILCAS inspections Adoption West continues to work well with the local authorities and together are continually seeking to improve the experience for children and families.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who works for Adoption West for their commitment and dedication often going above and beyond, to develop the practice of this agency, which strives to ensure positive experiences and outcomes for all those whose lives are impacted by adoption.



Alison Lewis
Service Director

Contributors:

Sue White: Service Manager
Alison Hall: Service Manager
Stuart Babbage: Business Manager
Anjali Gupta: Team Manager Bristol
Jane Priborsky: Team Manager Trowbridge
Jen Brennan: Interim Team Manager Family Finding
Kate Worthington: Team Manager Family Finding
Rebecca Myers: Marketing and Communications
Anita Huggins: DTM Adoption Support Bristol
Denise O'Connor, DTM Adoption Support Trowbridge
Rebecca Kay: DTM Adoption Support Gloucester
Claire Jarvis: DTM Birth Links
Hannah Walker: Support Worker Birth Links
Sallie Turnbull: Support Worker Birth Links

Appendix 1

Governance Arrangements:

As a local authority company, Adoption West is owned by the six partner local authorities through the Joint Committee of Directors of Children's Services. The management of Adoption West is delegated to the Adoption West Board of Directors and to the Service Director.

Adoption West Board of Directors:

Voting members:

- Andy Dempsey – Director of Partnerships and Strategy, Gloucestershire County Council (Chair until November 2022)
- Sheila Smith – Director of Children's Services, North Somerset Council (Chair from November 2022)
- Martin Davis – Director Children and Families, Wiltshire Council until August 2022 / Jen Salter - Interim Director Families and Children's Services, Wiltshire Council from September 2022
- Fiona Tudge – Director of Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council
- Jo Cross – Head of Integrated Children Services, South Gloucestershire Council
- Becky Hopkins – Assistant Director, North Somerset Council
- Mary Kearney-Knowles – Director Children and Young Peoples Service, Bath and North East Somerset Council

Non-Voting members:

- Mustafa Salih – Head of Financial Management and Business Support, South Gloucestershire Council
- Emma Simpson – CEO, CCS Adoption from September 2022

Commissioning Arrangements:

Adoption West is commissioned by the six local authorities to provide adoption services. The Lead Managers group is responsible for oversight of the commissioning arrangement and developing shared practice between Adoption West and the Local authority children's social care teams.

Local Authority Adoption Lead Managers Group:

- Rachael Ward – Head of Service: Care Outcomes, Bath & North East Somerset Council

- Tara Parsons – Service Manager, Placements Team, Permanency and Specialist Services, Bristol City Council
- Tammy Wheatley – Head of Service, Permanence, Gloucestershire County Council
- Shelley Caldwell – Service Leader Service Leader Resource Service, North Somerset Council
- Aimee Williams – Service Manager, South Gloucestershire Council
- Pier Pritchard – Service Manager, Children in Care and Placement Service, Wiltshire Council

Scrutiny Arrangements:

As an adoption agency that is funded by public finances to provide statutory adoption services it is crucial that there is effective scrutiny of Adoption West. The Joint Scrutiny Panel has been established to provide this function. The panel meets quarterly, and each meeting includes a briefing about adoption issues. In this period adopters have met with councillors and shared their experience of support via the ASF and being an Early Permanence carer.

Joint Scrutiny Panel: 2022-23

Elected Voting Members:

- Cllr Michelle O’Doherty Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Cllr Christine Townsend Bristol City Council
- Cllr Dr Andrew Miller Gloucestershire County Council
- Cllr Wendy Griggs North Somerset Council
- Cllr Nic Labuschagne South Gloucestershire Council
- Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman) Wiltshire Council
- Cllr Carole King Wiltshire Council

Adopter Participation:

Adoption West has commissioned Adoption UK to provide Adopter Voice services across the region. An Adopter Advisory Board has been created which consists of a Chair and Adopter Champions across the region. The Chair also attends the Adoption West Board to ensure the voice of adopters is included in the governance and scrutiny of the work of Adoption West.

The current Chair of the Advisory Board Vicky Reynolds until November 2022