



adoption west

April 2024 to March 2025

Annual Report Prepared by Alison Lewis, Service Director

Combination of images used, some from Adoption West events, some stock images.

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Introduction

The Annual Report provides the agency's performance data across family finding, adopter recruitment, adoption panels and adoption support services for the Adoption West region. 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 of the governance, commissioning, and local government scrutiny arrangements.

Working with our Local Authority Partners - (Please see appendix Governance and Scrutiny Arrangements)



Adoption West Board meets quarterly and is responsible for the operation and strategic management of the agency. This year we welcome a new chair Hannah Woodhouse, Director of Children's Services (DCS) in Bristol City Council. I would like to thank Mary Kearney Knowles (BANES, DCS) for her commitment and support of Adoption West; Mary had been part of the Board since July 2018 and most recently the Chair. Sara Taylor Trustee of It Takes a Village has also joined the Board and brings the adopter perspective to the meetings.

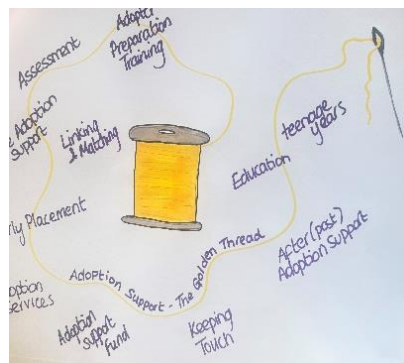
The Local Authority Lead Adoption Managers and Adoption West senior managers meet quarterly, this year we have established working groups to focus on the development

of practice in maintaining relationships and lifestory work. In addition, we have quarterly liaison meetings with each individual local authority.

Each month the Adoption West Family Finding manager has tracking meetings with each local authority regarding children who have a plan for adoption.

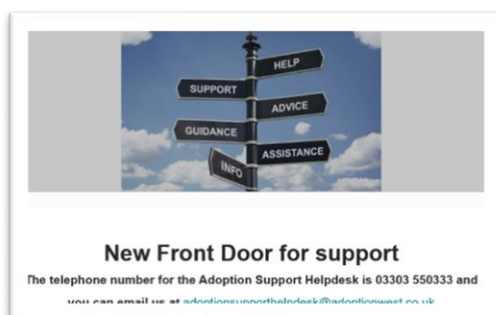
The Adoption West Scrutiny Panel includes an elected member from each of the six councils. Since its inception in 2020 the panel has been chaired by Cllr Jon Hubbard Wiltshire Council who has now stepped down from this role. As chair Cllr Hubbard ensured the panel provide a “critical friend” to the agency.

This year we have decided to present the report in a slightly different way. Adoption Support is often covered towards the end of our reports and we thought it was important to recognise how significant adoption support is in the lives of adopted children, young people, their adoptive parents and birth family. It is part of our service that is growing year on year and it should be the golden thread of any adoption agency recognising support from the first contact through to adulthood. We have more work to do to achieve this, but it is our aspiration



Adoption Support

The core activities of the service include, Helpdesk service, assessments of need, management of applications to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) for individual children and/or families, direct support to families and children, Letterbox and Direct Contact arrangements, and events / groups. The following provides information about the people accessing the services and what we have provided in 2024/25



Adoption Support Helpdesk opened 2nd September 2024

This has been developed to be the first point of contact and triage for families, providing advice, signposting, initial assessment and support. It is a move away from a duty system staffed by all members of the team, to having a small number of staff provide consistency for families accessing the service.

Since the introduction of the Adoption Support Helpdesk there has been a 26% increase in enquiries to the service recorded this year. This probably reflects a number of factors: improved recording, improved accessibility and publicising the service. This means that more families are accessing services, at the same time early initial assessment and improved triage means more families are signposted to services or advice given that address the presenting need sooner. Therefore, fewer families are requiring a full assessment of need and consequently the length of time waiting for an assessment of need has fallen from 12.5 weeks at the end of 23/24 to 3 weeks at the end of 24/25. The numbers of families waiting for an assessment to start at the end of the year was 5 compared with 41 at the end of 2023/24.

	Enquiries / Contact	Initial Assessments completed by the Helpdesk	Assessments of Need completed by support	Total Assessments completed	Waiting for assessment of need to start at 31/03/2025
Year End 24/25	1,034	69 Since Sept 24	112 46 Since Sept 24	181 115 Since Sept24	5
Year End 23-24	819↑	157↑		167↑	

An example of the type of support provided through the Helpdesk from a parent’s perspective:

“A huge thank you for all the support you have provided! The EHCP meeting went reasonably well and there is a plan for the next 6 months.

The neurodivergence course has started off really well. However, for the next few months I think this should be an easier period compared to the rest of the year.

Things still feel in flux at the moment with our child having a day at home from school - once a week. Engagement with school has improved. The autumn term can also be bumpy with all the transition to new things.

Happy for you to end involvement and we can call the helpdesk in the autumn if we need to. Many thanks!”

Children receiving social work support and or accessing the ASGSF

On 31/03/25	Allocated Children	ASGSF Review only
Year end 24/25	498	555
Year End 23/24	939 Both allocated and ASGSF	

- 66% of the children and young people are aged 10-19yrs, which highlights the focus of support is with pre-adolescence and teenagers and therefore why improving the adoption support offer to include youth work is vital
- 5% of the young people are aged 20-24 years. Both locally and nationally there is a growing awareness of the needs of adopted people as they transition to adulthood, the challenges in accessing services and continued high levels of support required from families. This is an area that the service needs to improve the definition the support that can be offered.
- 82% of the children and young people are white British, it is important to note that up to 18% are dual heritage, highlighting the complexity of identity issues for this group including adoption and cultural issues.

In May 2025 the adoption support team had training with Dr Tam Cain on the AFDiT framework and how this can be used to inform assessment and support to children and families.

Some feedback about the support from the team

"Last full day today. Unbelievably proud of my daughter for turning it around and completing school. It's definitely been a team effort. I wanted to thank you for all of your amazing support. Undoubtedly without you the outcome would have been very different. Despite your heavy workload you've always been there when we've needed you and for that I will be eternally grateful. Our child sings your praises to anyone who asks if she has a social worker, and those that don't! The reply is always "yes G, she's amazing" with a huge smile on her face.

We just need to get through the exams and then our child has prom to look forward to!

A heart full of thanks..."

"I thought I should let you know that X gave the highest praise about F and her involvement with the family, and what a difference it has made to her. X said F is the "most supportive Adoption social worker she has ever had, it feels good to know someone is helping and, on our side"."

Groups & Training provided 2024/25	
Course	Comments from attendees
<p><i>Theraplay for children and parents in early placement to support attachments.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provided by AW staff - 8 sessions - May/June 2024 - 5 attended 	<p><i>"The sessions were fun, engaging and well structured. We have used many of the games and ideas at home since completing the course. The sessions felt age appropriate and were flexible to ensure everyone could access and enjoy the activities. Both E and J made it fun for all."</i></p> <p><i>"It was fun, friendly, age appropriate and allowed me some special 1:1 with my daughter. It was nice to have time at the end of the sessions to engage with and get to know the other parents and children too - it all felt supportive"</i></p>
<p><i>The Great Behaviour Breakdown - A parenting model by Bryan Post</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ASGSF funded - 5 sessions - September 2024 - 5 attended 	<p><i>"We found the course really helpful in so many ways. It was first time we had it explained what our child suffers from coming from a trauma background and techniques to cope. These techniques are great for us but also helps us explain to the school what our child has gone through and how to help him regulate. Also, the course gave us chance to interact with other couples who are going through the same issues as us and understood our background story, something our friends who haven't adopted will never understand. Finally, we use some of these learnings with mum in explaining to our child how his brain works and why. So, we highly recommend the course and are very thankful that you organised this for us."</i></p>
<p><i>Life story work (online and in person) - workshop up to 8 years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 sessions - January and March 2025 - 28 attended. 	<p><i>"Practical examples. The content generally was great. Talking to other adopters. "</i></p>
<p><i>FASD</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ASGSF funded - 8 sessions - January 2025 - 13 attended 	<p><i>"I cannot thank you enough. It has changed everything we do, literally everything. Low demand, thinking outside the box, stepping back not stepping in and giving yourself permission to be kind to yourself. All are now on my fridge door, looking forward to next week!"</i></p>

Therapeutic Parenting Course

- Provided by AW staff
- 10 sessions
- September 2024
- 15 attended

“Their knowledge, experience and delivery was absolutely brilliant, they literally had an answer for everything, they were patient, empathetic and

made me and i am sure everyone else feel safe to express our fears and mistakes without judgement. Thankyou ladies so much, i feel like i am more equipped to enter into the next chapter of our lives with way less self-doubt and uncertainty”

Amazing Wallabies - Stay and Play Gloucestershire



Background and Purpose

Launched in November 2024, this group was established in response to a recognised need for more activities tailored to adopters and children under the age of four in the Gloucestershire area.

Structure and Delivery

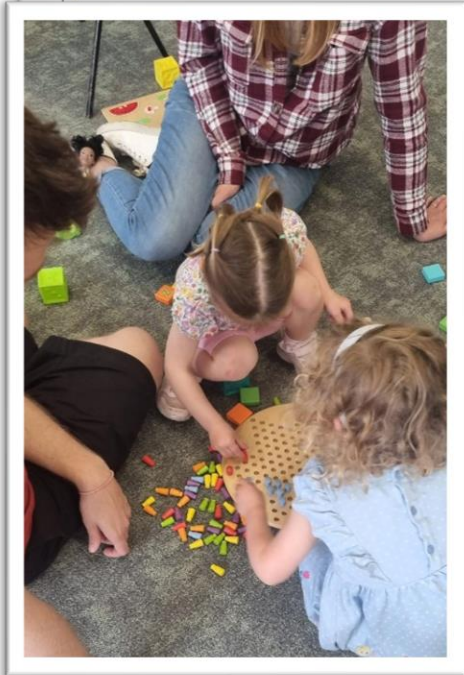
The group meets monthly for 90 minutes in Stonehouse, hosted at the Family Action Children’s Centre. Adoption West staff facilitate the sessions, offering light refreshments, age-appropriate activities, and a welcoming space for adopters to connect, share experiences, and support one another. The group also provides children with a safe and inclusive environment to play and interact with other adopted children.

Impact and Feedback

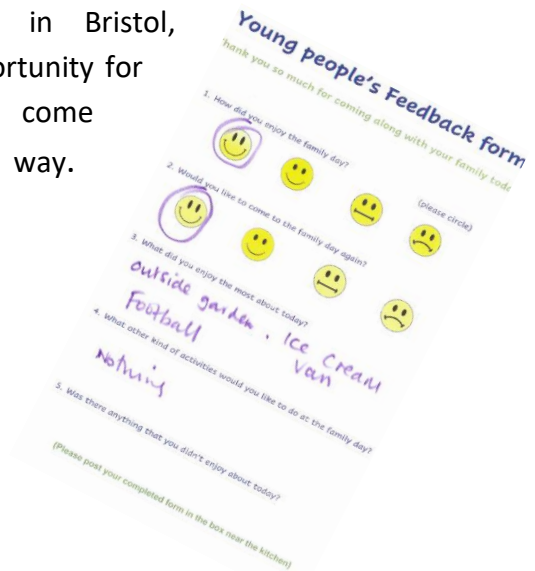
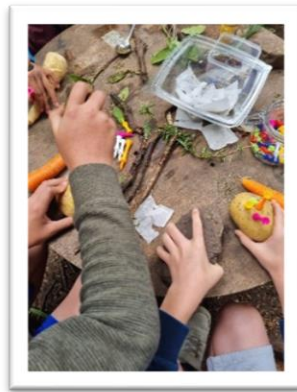
Attendance has remained steady, with six to ten families regularly taking part. Sessions have been praised for their calm, friendly atmosphere and supportive environment.

Next Steps

A review is scheduled for October 2025 to explore potential expansion into the Wiltshire area.



Summer and Christmas parties were held in Bristol, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, to provide an opportunity for adoptive families to come together in a relaxed way.



Adoption West Grant funded support.

It Takes a Village, £20,000 grant to assist the development of Peer support groups across the region.

Groups are now happening in 5 of the 6 local authority areas, with each being set up by local adopters responding to the need they have in their localities. Each month groups such as Mindfulness Walks, Coffee and Chat, Pub Social, Parents of Adult Adoptees, and Family Get Togethers are happening across the different areas.

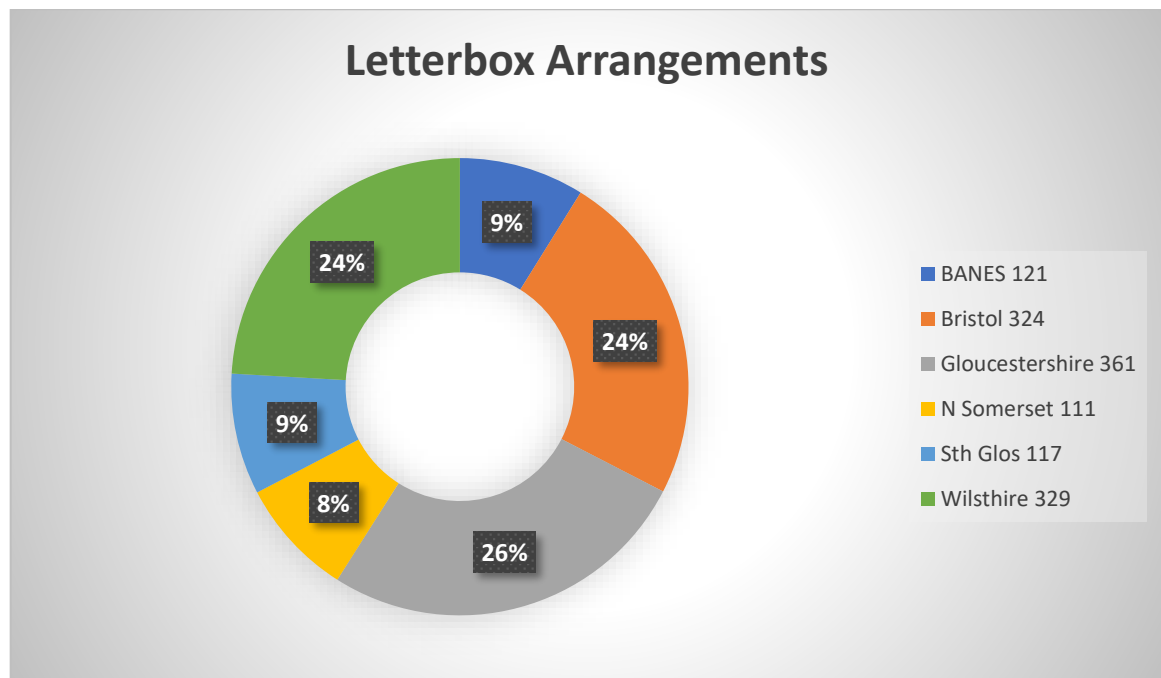


Adoption West has continued to pay a grant of £33,205 to **CCS Adoption** to enable adopters and children to access the groups they provide across the Bristol/ North Somerset and South Glos areas. These include:

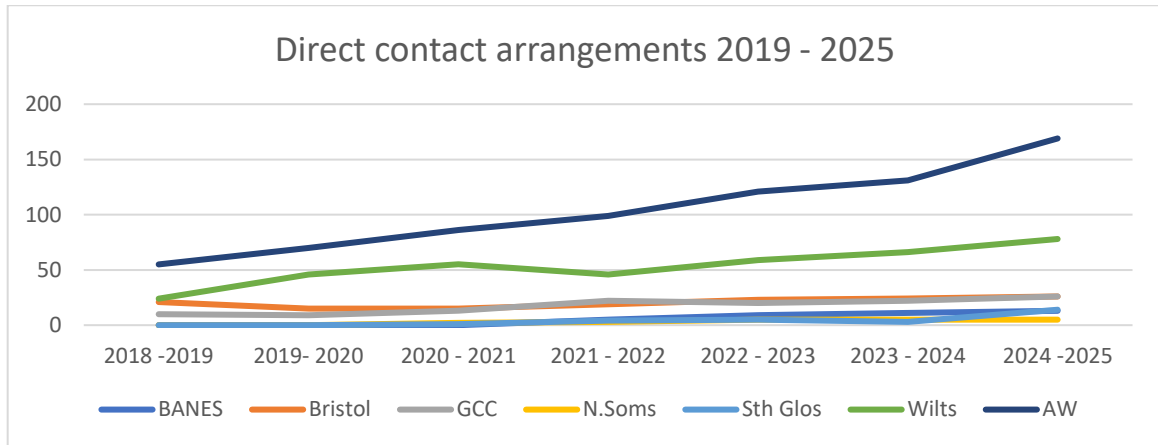
Groups and activities:
Tots
Parents Support Group
Single Adopters family Fun Day
LGBT Coffee Mornings
Activities for Children and Young people
- Empire Fighting Chance
- Horse World
- All Aboard Water Sports
Family Fundays
Holiday Hub Activity Sessions

Maintaining Relationships

The maintaining connections service has been working hard to manage and support letterbox contact and meeting up times between birth family members, adopted children and their adopters. The number of meeting up times is continuing to increase and the support workers are managing these well.



“Thank you so much, it means a lot to speak to a team that have such empathy with the birth family and actually return our calls.” – a birth parent.



Adoption West held a regional conference on the 5th February 2025 which focused on maintaining relationships post adoption. We had two keynote speakers Ruth Copson from the University of East Anglia and Professor Julie Selwyn from Oxford University Rees Centre. Both provided their perspective on research, current practice and thinking on this issue. Adoption West created 4 films providing the voice of young people, adoptive parents and birth parents, these films were very well received by the audience and will be used in Adoption West training going forward. Nearly 200 people attended the conference with adopters and professionals from across the six local authorities, this provided a wide perspective on the issues that we were able to capture through the breakout groups in the afternoon. This feedback from the conference will directly contribute to the activity of the regional working group.

**Professor Julie Selwyn
delivering her keynote
speech**



The conference also provided an opportunity for networking and ITAV and the Belay Foundation sharing information about their local support services and groups.



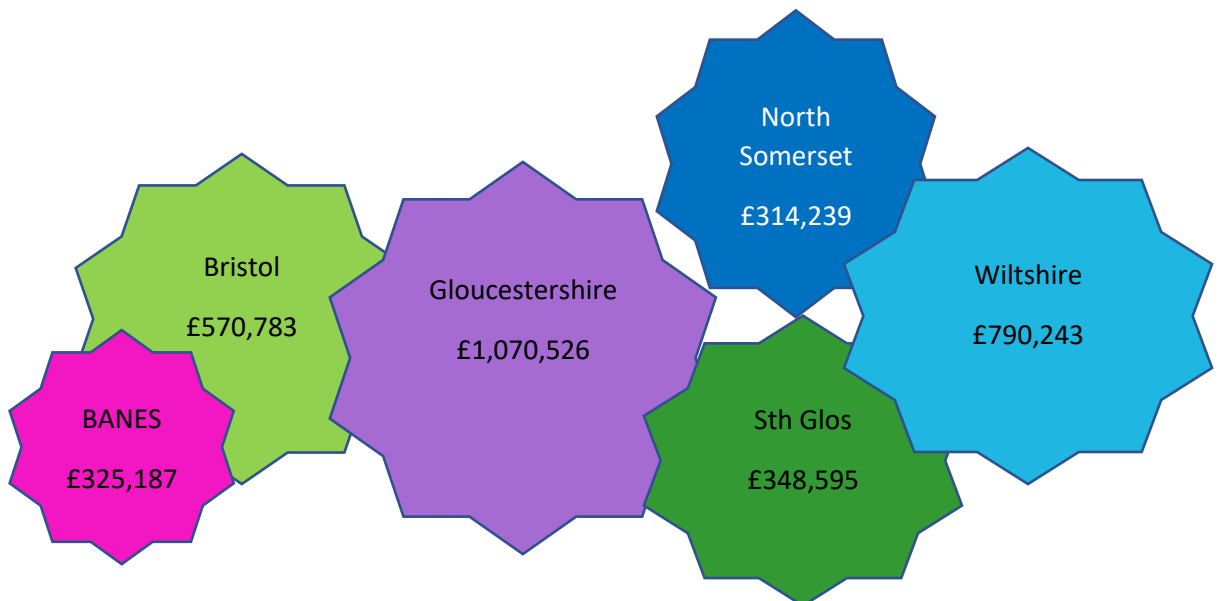
"Really good variety and all knowledgeable and passionate about the topic"

"Very informative. I enjoyed the insight into recent legal cases and studies, and insight from different organisations. Would have liked the discussions to be more interactive with more time for questions/discussions. "

"The films were powerful. Hearing people's stories and shared experiences are very valuable resources to offer people. The young children telling their experiences was very moving, as well as the adopters and their adopted children too. Massive thank you to everyone involved with these, putting yourself forward to share your personal journeys is a very courageous thing to do, and it's very much appreciated. "

Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

The Adoption & Special Guardianship 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. **916** applications were approved for families in the Adoption West Region with **1086** recipients accessing therapeutic support. This is a further year on year increase in the number of families accessing the fund. We accessed £3,561,351 to provide therapeutic support to children and families.



Parent feedback

"We have received great amount of help pre and post adoption. The sws have been very proactive and we have made use of the adoption fund in two consecutive years"

"It still remains paper work heavy in applying for services and also the need to keep applying is time consuming"

"Thank you so much for your presence and approach during the ASF reviews for two of my children. I was impressed particularly around how you managed the one when they were was present in the room with us. It was an incredible achievement that they were able to remain present in the background throughout the session and that is a testimony, in part, with how you showed acceptance, empathy and a light attuned curiosity throughout. "

The reported delays in the announcement of the ASGSF for 2025/26 meant that applications for therapy starting in April 2025 could not be made in Q4 and consequently a slightly lower number of applications in the year. Following the announcement in April 2025 regarding reduction to the Fair Access Limit there has been substantial re work completed of the applications that had been prepared. This work is dependent on social workers and business support working together. I am pleased to report that by the mid-June 95% of pending applications had been processed.

"The response to the changes from Adoption West was really good – very quick and A was amazing just coming back with suggestions on reducing sessions, she got the applications in really quickly and we have the funding. Response from some of the other RAAs were very slow and there has been lots of delay" - Therapist feedback

"It is really easy to forget people who helped. THANK YOU for your time, support and help. You helped secure the MDA for us". - To a member of the business support team

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

Our Birth Links service provides counselling and access to records for adopted adults this also includes advice about how to access intermediary services if people wish to trace birth family members.

Year	Adopted Adult (Sch 2)	Adopted adult (Access to records)	Intermediary advice	Birth family	Adopted adult (post commencement)	Total
2024/2025	47	73	24	98	5	247
2023/2024	45	76	29	104	5	259
2022/2023	39	75	35	103	1	253

In addition to the core services the Birth Links Team offer:

Keeping Connected (formerly Twilight) sessions – Birth relatives talk with prospective adopters. 3 sessions in Bristol, Gloucester & Trowbridge now established and have proved to be very popular and have received very positive feedback from adopters. Birth Links workers prepare and support birth relatives to attend. Now changed to afternoon slot rather than evening.

Bristol birth parent group – Bristol group continues to run and is a valuable resource for AW – helping to improved wording of letterbox leaflet; giving feedback about value of direct contact & the benefit of maintaining relationships, feedback re: content of adopters’ letters.

Gloucester birth parent group – Has been running for several months now; still in forming stage and only has low numbers of attendees but we hope to build this up.

Wiltshire birth parent group – Extra hours agreed for Birth Links worker and Letterbox worker was agreed to set up group. First session to take place in May, with alternate venues between Trowbridge and Salisbury to cover the large county.

Trees - The “Birth Links’ Seed of Hope Tree” and accompanying plaque is now in place in Bristol and in Salisbury. We hope to have a tree in Gloucester this year.

Promoting Birth Links – Support workers have attended team meetings of various child care teams across the region to promote Birth Links’s work and have also attended the Family Finding team meeting.



“I found it ok. I think it’s a really good thing because we just get left once court is over and there isn’t much support for birth mums, and we feel pretty much on our own but with this group we will meet people that have gone through similar and we are able to support each other through”

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

The Children

This year there has been a further increase in all aspects of adoption activity relating to children. **147** children have had **plans for adoption**, an increase of 7 or 14%, which contrasts with the national data which shows a 9% reduction in the number of children who had a Should Be Placed decision (Coram-i 24/25 data) from the previous year.

Placement orders were granted for **127** children a slight increase of 4 from the previous year and **91** children have been placed for adoption, which is a decrease from 2023-24. **122** children were **adopted** in this period, which is an increase of 33% from the previous year and reflects the high number of children placed for adoption in 2022/23.

Referrals for **Early Permanence** have remained strong with **104** being made, as plans revolved not all these children did require an EP placement. However, we were unable to find placements for 30 children and there has been a 30% reduction in the number of EP placements with **21** made. This decrease is greater than the national of 18% and should be considered in the context of Adoption West having previously higher than average EP activity and reflects the shortage of adopters and therefore EP carers nationally. (Coram-i 24/25 data).

The percentage of children placed for adoption in England who were formerly in an EP placement is 13.8%. In Adoption West the percentage for the same 12-month period is 31.5% - this reflects the higher EP activity in 2023-2024. (Coram-i Q3 data)

It is positive that the work of the EP project in 2022-23 to increase the number of referrals for EP placements is sustaining at a time there are fewer placement available. It is important that we continue to encourage local authorities to consider the option of an EP placement for children. The number of available cares has been impacted by both the fall in recruitment numbers and also w lower percentage of those approved considering early permanence. To address the latter, we have reviewed our preparation training and since January 2025 all prospective adopters now complete EP training as part of their preparation, so are fully informed before they make a choice.



Children with Adoption West Adopters = 74



Children with external Adopters =17

The number of **children placed with Adoption West adopters** increased to 81%. Whilst the number of children placed internally has remained roughly the same, the percentage change reflects the lower number of available external adopters.

Family Finding

Children with a Placement Order currently waiting for adoption at 31/03/25.

	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-12 Months	12 -18 Months	18+ Months	Total by LA
Q4 24/25 Number of Children	40	15	32	12	10	109
Q4 23/24 Number of Children	36	25	14	8	1	84

There were **109** children **with Placement Orders** without a match at 31/03/25, which is higher than the 84 children at the same period last year. This reflects the increased numbers of children with plans for adoption at a time of national fall in the number of people coming forward to adopt. 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 recission of the plan and revocation of the placement order.

Of the **109** children with placement orders yet to be placed at the end of Q4, **33** were already linked or matched with adoptive families. Of the remaining 76 children, five were linked in early Q4. Five other children were 'on hold'. Family finding is continuing for the remaining 66 children. Of those children, 15 have some interest which is being explored. Currently there are 51 children (47%) where family finding is continuing with no potential link yet identified

The challenges in national adopter recruitment are starting to impact directly on children with more waiting longer for an adoptive family to be found, with 22 children waiting longer than a year since placement order and 32 between 6 and 12 months.

There have been **9** children for whom family finding has stopped as their **plans have changed a way from adoption**. This is the same as last year but with an increase in

children who are waiting, we anticipate that there will be an increased number of children having their plans changed in the coming year.

Timeliness for matching and placing children (A10 and A2 figures) remain better in Adoption West than the national average. *(Coram-i provisional data 24/25)*

	A1 (Target=426)		A10 (Target=426)		A2 (Target=121)		A20	
	23/24	24/25	23/24	24/25	23/24	24/25	23/24	24/25
Adoption West	498	521	453	421	194	217	341	270
England	556	561	512	491	195	218	347	320

The Team have continued to use virtual family finding events to profile children to adopters, with 7 events run during the year. Family finders also attended external virtual and in person exchange events both locally and further afield. Positive feedback has been received from the SWAC project lead who has commented on positive observations of the family finder’s presentation of children at virtual family finding events. In the latter part of the year two external exchange events were cancelled due to low adopter numbers and those events that did go ahead were notably less well attended. We have experienced increasing challenges in securing places for children at external activities day with places being in high demand, this reflects the significant disparity nationally between the number of children with a plan of adoption versus the number of available adopters. We had hoped to host an activity day in October 2024 however we did not have enough adopter take up to make the event viable. We are currently exploring the potential of running smaller, more targeted activity events and are also liaising with another RAA in the southwest consortium to consider co-hosting an event.

It is currently a very challenging environment for family finding due to the high number of children being made subject to Placement Orders, lower numbers of adopters locally and nationally, increased number of external searches for families which can be complex and children remaining with the team for longer.

The teams highlights for the year are:

In the last year we matched three sets of sibling groups of three. One group were aged between 7 and 9 years old in a transracial foster placement who had sadly experienced a previous disrupted transition. There were multiple contributing factors that led to previous breakdown in transitions but amongst those were complex issues around ethnicity, heritage and identity that needed careful consideration in subsequent family finding. The family finding social worker and LA childcare team worked incredibly closely throughout family finding, matching and transitions with a clear focus on the children's voice and experience being evident throughout. The children are now placed for adoption.

The two other groups of three children were successfully matched and placed with Adoption West adopters – a sibling group including twins aged 1-2 years old and a

sibling group aged 3-5 years old. Placing older children and larger sibling groups requires a high level of professional investment and collaboration, the strong working relationship between the LA and Adoption West was key to the positive outcomes seen in both cases.

The team were involved in the CoramBAAF pilot of the new Adoption Support Plan which was concluded in December 2024, and we have now rolled out the use across the six local authorities. The plan is a standalone document from the Adopter Placement report which provides a more thorough analysis of the child's long er support needs and provision to support and review this.

The team have also been learning about the Anti-racist Framework for Decision - making in Transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic families (AFDiT). This has included a day's training with Dr Tam Cain who is the author of the framework.

Recruitment and Marketing

The Adoption West recruitment and Marketing Strategy 2025-27 was agreed by the Adoption West Board in March 2025, please refer to this document for full details of the recruitment activity and strategy. These are some highlights

Core themes for social media content

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

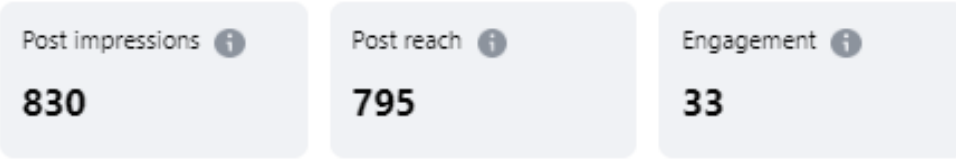
- To recruit enough adopters willing to consider children who wait the longest for adoptive parent/s (specifically siblings, Black children, and those children with complex needs)
- To make potential adopters' aware early in their journey of the need for adopters for siblings and Early Permanence and what this might look like
- To promote our support offer (to enhance the above recruitment needs), but also to allow us to be seen as a friendly, approachable, and supportive agency.

On average we post four or five times a week on both Instagram and Facebook (similar content on both) covering a range of adoption issues and highlighting the importance of adoption in changing the lives of children waiting – we aim to continue this pattern for the coming year.



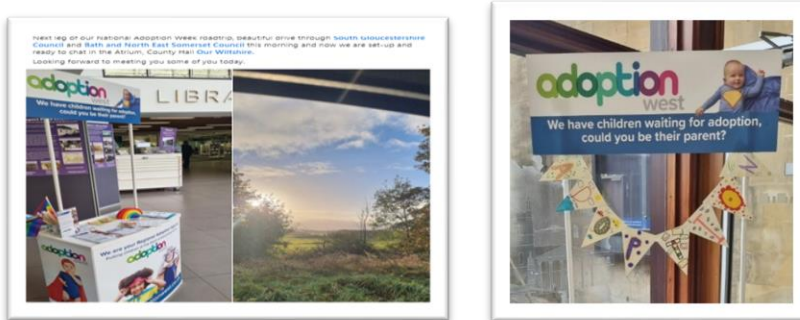
We currently need adopters for all types of children; babies, toddlers, preschoolers, children aged four and...

Published by Hootsuite · 17 May at 07:00 ·



In-person recruitment events

In 2024 we visited three PRIDE Events: Chippenham, Bristol, and Gloucester, with lots of interest from the public at all three events. We also trialled having three stands during National Adoption Week, with John Lewis in Cheltenham showing the most interest.



Stand for National Adoption Week 2024 – which visited Shire Hall Gloucester, County Hall Trowbridge and John Lewis Cheltenham

Recruitment Objectives 2024/27

The objectives of the Adoption West recruitment strategy is informed by the Adoption England strategy and the local regional perspective and focus on 3 key areas:

1. Finding the right adopters for children waiting
2. Improving the engagement and preparation of adopters
3. Marketing and Influencing

Media Plan 2024-27 – Quality alongside Quantity

The Messages

We are here; if you are interested in adopting, we should be your first point of contact

This is who we are; we represent the children that need adopting in your region

Secondary message: **To provide support** to enable people to adopt the children that need it (siblings and children with complex needs)

This is what we do; we find families for children that need them (who the children are)

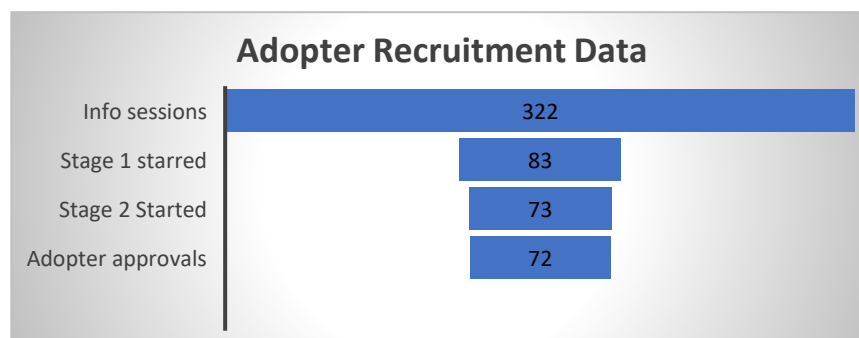
This is what it could mean for you, but ultimately what it means to the children awaiting adoption.

	<p>This is what adoption really looks like in 2024/5 - (through lived experience) and who the children are (Modern Adoption)</p>
The Means	<p>Long term campaign, to make it appear we are always present, active, and reactive and to fit with the information we already know about our audience (it takes a long time to decide to adopt).</p> <p>Similar format to the previous year, but with an increased level of in-person and online presence.</p> <p>Google Ads (similar format to previous year) Social media (similar format to the plan detailed for the previous year) In-person events, exploration to be given to extending our reach with in-person events, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRIDE Events (three across the regions) • Department/Homeware stores (John Lewis and Ikea) • Train Stations (Temple Meads, Bath and Westbury, as starting points) • Schedule to be set out for static stands to remain in local libraries <p>In-person events are to be targeted by location. Liaising with colleagues in the six fostering teams and the SW fostering hub, to ensure they have information about adoption at events they are attending, this helps to extend our reach across the region.</p>
Campaign Objectives	<p>Continue to build awareness of, and engagement with, Adoption West in through 2024 to 2027</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To recruit enough adopters for the children needing permanent homes within our region, by educating and engaging with our audiences 2. To increase the number of adopters able and willing to consider siblings, Black children, and those children with complex needs (incl. children aged 4+ years). By educating our audience, we hope to receive informed enquiries <p>Audience Insight,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are we engaging with? • Where are our key demographics 'hanging out'? • What content do they engage with most? • What are the challenges our audience are currently facing? • What happens after first point of contact? • What can we do to re-capture audience that has previously engaged? <p>(Inform future campaigns, and this campaign over time)</p>

Adopters

- **Of 110 responses the Information sessions are considered 8.75/10**
- **Of 47 responses the experience of stage 1 was considered to be 8.94/10**
- **Of 14 responses the Stage 2 Assessment and Approval panel experience was considered 9/10**

The number of adopters approved this year has increased to **72**, a 20% increase compared to a 0.8% increase across England (*Coram-i provisional data 24/25*). The number attending information sessions and starting stage 1 are slightly lower than the 332 and 91 figures in 2023-24.



The recruitment of adopters remains uncertain with continued fluctuations in the number of ROI's received quarter to quarter. At year end, there was the lowest numbers of adopters in assessment with only 43, following low numbers starting in Q3 and Q4. However, Q1 25/26 there have been 26 adopters starting the process nearer the numbers required to maintain the same level of approval as this year.

We are able to forecast the number of approvals to the end of Q2 with some certainty and this should be between 35-38, which 22 already approved. The numbers coming in to the process in the next 4 months will determine the overall numbers for the year and as stated the variations from quarter to quarter makes it difficult to be certain.

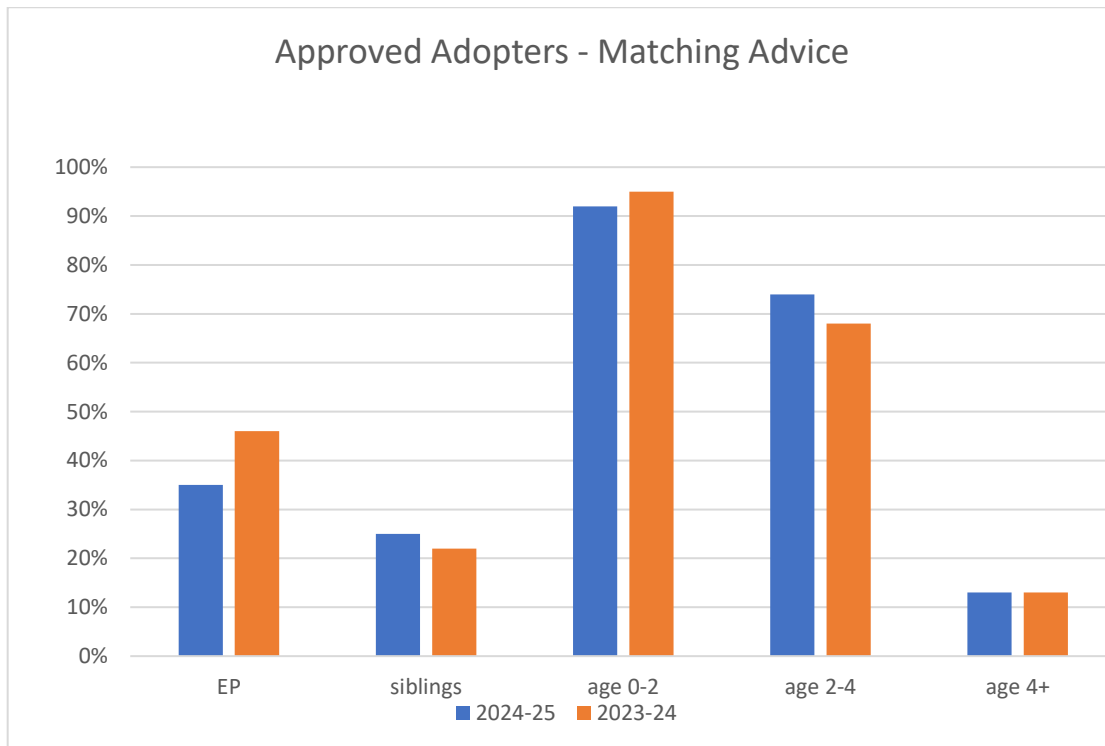
Attendance at information sessions were slightly down this year at 322 compared with 342 the previous year but remain at reasonable levels. The conversion rates remain lower. Initial analysis of this indicates that due to the ease of access to Information sessions in recent years more people are attending at an earlier stage in their consideration of adoption than we would have seen pre-Covid.

A Front Door team has now been established which is allowing focus on recruitment and follow up to Information Sessions, as well as social workers completing stage 1 of the process with applicants ensuring assessments focus on improving timeliness.

All Registrations of Interest have been allocated within 5 days of receipt. Currently the timescale from Enquiry to ROI is 90 days compared with the England average of 106 days (*Coram-i provisional data 24/25*)

Along with a more settled workforce in the Recruitment and Assessment Teams, there are improved systems in place to manage, track and monitor assessments. We have seen the stage 2 timescales improve, now being 151 days, just 4 days longer than the England average of 147. Stage 1 continues to be better than the England average at 114 days compared with 128 days. (*Coram-i provisional data 24/25*)

The quality of adopter assessments is scrutinised by Adoption Panel and through regular Ofsted inspections, all of which continually comment on the good quality of assessment reports.



There has been a decline in the prospective adopters open to providing an early permanence placement, from 46.5 to 35% this year, which is reflected in the reduced number of placements made this year. We have been working to address this and since January 2025 have provided a 4-day course in stage 2, so all adopters do the EP training. It is too soon to report the impact this may have. There has been a small increase to 25% in the number of adopters considering being matched with siblings.

On 31st March 2025 the number of adopters approved and not yet matched for adoption (excluding those on hold and with EP placements) and are actively family finding is **28** continues to fall each quarter as adopters get matched more quickly due higher numbers of children to adopters in the process.

The percentage of adopters providing homes for children within the Adoption West region is **89%**, which is an increase on the previous two years.

Adopter Assessment and Placement Support

Following a successful trial of the new Adopter Assessment Report (AAR) which has been developed by Barnardos funded by the DfE through Practice Improvement Funds, the team are now using the document for all the assessments. The quality of adopter assessment reports are continually considered good or outstanding by the Adoption Panel. This year we are also seeing an improvement in timeliness of assessment with stage 1 consistently better than the England average and stage 2 is now within 4 days of this average, the aim remains that both aspects of the process will be within the England average.

The team are part of the Adoption England feasibility study called “Becoming a Family” which provides a framework for social workers and a resource tool for adopters called the Purple Book to improve the experience of early placement support. Becoming a

Family involves 5 other Regional Adoption Agencies and 3 Voluntary Adoption Agencies across England and is being evaluated by the Institute for Public Care at Oxford Brookes University.

The framework aims to ensure that by the time the family have the adoption order they will be an established family with support from family, community and key agencies in place and feel equipped to support the child's identity and have the confidence to seek any support they may need after the adoption order. The family will have built resilience and knowledge that will support and guide them along the journey of adoption.

- be **preventative** and support the building blocks of parenting in adoption, enable you to start to feel confident **therapeutic parents**,
- build **resilience** through effective social network and peer support.
- be **responsive** to individual needs with access to a wide range of multi-agency support.
- offer **consistency** of support across England for families adopting a child from another region.

"We can't thank you enough for your support and kindness throughout this process. Your guidance has meant the world to us, and we feel incredibly lucky to have had you by our side. None of this would feel remotely manageable without you, and we hope you know just how wonderful you are."

"I just wanted to take a moment to express our deepest gratitude for all your support and guidance throughout the adoption process of We are truly overwhelmed by how much of a difference we've already seen in him since the order went through. He has settled so well into school, and it's clear that, for the first time, he feels a real sense of identity. We are beyond grateful to you for helping us through this journey. We are overjoyed that our family is now complete. With heartfelt thanks"

"What a ride it has been since we first met at the start of 2022! We are confident that you know more about us than some of our friends now! It's impossible to put into words that do justice to the incredible support you have provided, the laughter (and the tears!) that have got us through and ultimately helping us to find our two gorgeous boys (and navigating the slightly less gorgeous moments of summer 2023!). There will always be a space for you at our kitchen bench- with dog hair as a bonus."

*"a big part of panel going well was down to you and the detailed and accurate report you produced in understanding me and my experiences and aspirations
 ❤️ I felt really heard and understand at panel yesterday and it was very rewarding."*

"Thank you so much for supporting us in our journey so far, and for writing such an excellent report, making the panel a smooth and enjoyable experience."

"Thank you for all your hard work doing the paperwork and giving us advice. We're very grateful to you."

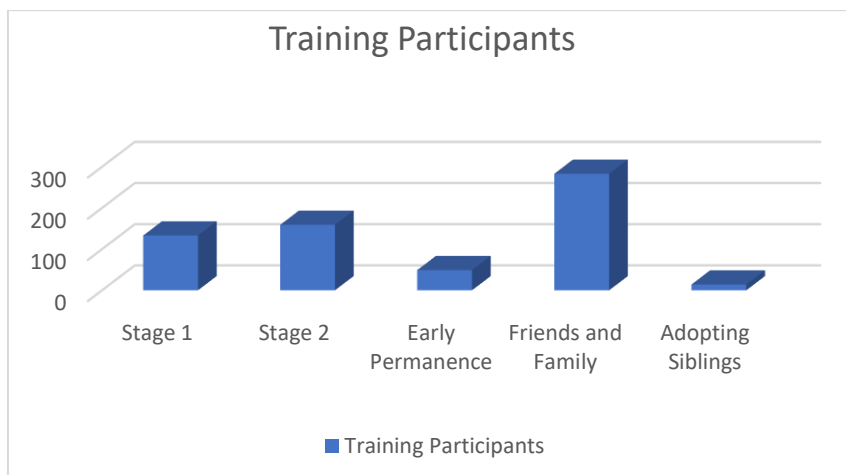
*The assessment process is clearly explained to prospective adopters (ibid) (NMS 10.3)
 Agencies respond to requests for detailed information (following initial enquiries either to the National Gateway for Adoption or directly to an adoption agency) within ten working days, through an information session, 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

Stage 1	1 day	10 courses
Stage 2	3/4 days	10 courses
EP	1 day	4 courses
Friends and Family	2 hours	11 courses
Adopting Siblings	3 hours	2

Since January 2025 stage 2 Training is now 4 days which includes both adopting a sibling and Early Permanence, this ensures that prospective adopters are fully informed about EP before deciding about offering this.



Feedback from prospective adopters of 71 respondents :

- 85% rate their course as excellent and 11% as good
- All considered the trainers knowledge to be excellent
- 70% felt the course exceeded their expectations and 30% felt it met their expectations

“Both trainers were excellent and it was very helpful that they had been through the process themselves. Having a speaker to who had been where we were was also invaluable. The practical and visual examples also really helped drive home the points they were teaching.”

“I thought the day was well delivered, with the right amount of information, not too overwhelming. There were plenty of opportunities to ask questions, with a friendly, open environment. I feel well prepared to continue with the process. I particularly appreciated hearing from someone who'd recently been through the process.”

“Great day that answered lots of questions and solidified my desire to adopt even further.”

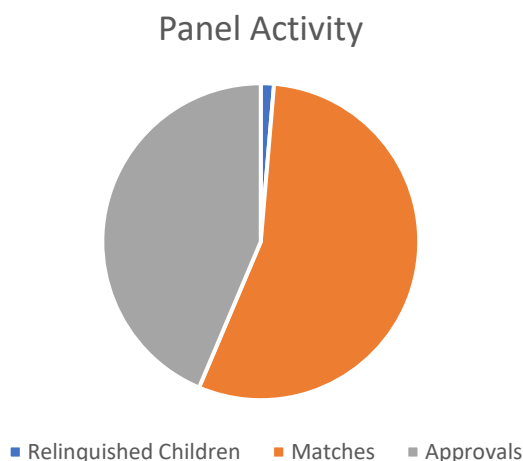
Applicants are given the opportunity to talk to approved adopters, adoptees and birth parents whose children were adopted. (NMS10.7)

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:

3 relinquished children,
85 matches for 96 children
70 approvals considered.

Adoption West continues to run on average 4 panels a month with 33 active panel members as follows:

- 3 panel chairs
- 7 social worker representatives (including 2 vice chairs),
- 13 independent panel members (including 3 vice chairs)
- 10 medical advisers

It has changed from last year as we have recruited 2 more males and 4 women of a black heritage.

Adoption West has been working to expand the diversity of panel members

- 24% are male, 76% are female
- 72% are white and 18 % are from a non-white ethnic background (2 Chinese and 4 black or mixed ethnicity)

We continue to provide two training days a year for panel members one of which includes staff from across Adoption West. The training days covered the following items:

- Gender Diversity – delivered by New Families Social
- Update on Adoption West staffing, structure and practice
- Thinking about the adoption support plan
- Learning from adoption disruptions

- Positive adoption stories
- A summary of feedback from attendees at panel

Feedback is requested from all those attending panel. 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. Social workers and adopters are asked a range of questions including

Adopters were asked what they had expected or hoped for by coming to panel. Key responses (aside from wanting to be approved or matched!) were:

- For a fair conversation around making a decision for the next step.
- I'm in a WhatsApp group with other couples who attended the training, and we were the third couple to go to panel. All the other couples mentioned that their panel members were very kind, and we experienced the same. While the panel, of course, had to ask serious questions and request clarification on certain points, everyone on our panel were very kind and helped put both of us at ease.
- I just hoped everyone was down to earth and would see the real me which they did and I was successfully matched. I had a problem with the teams link and couldn't join the call initially. The panel were very patient and understanding and reassured me that it wasn't my fault.
- To be understood and heard and this expectation was definitely met.

Social workers were asked if they had any suggestions or comments regarding prospective adopters attending panels that may enable the Panel to improve the service offered:

- It's nerve wracking for the applicants waiting for panel to start if it's running late, I wonder if just sending a quick message to the SW's/applicants to say the panel is running behind would be reassuring particularly if there is a longer delay.
- Due to the complexity of matters that needed to be discussed within panel relating to one of my adopters. I feel that it may have been helpful to have had a prior discussion with the panel members, prior to the adopters joining. This may have helped to support understanding over what had happened, prior to questions being asked. I do however agree with the questions needing to be asked, although it may have been helpful to panel to have an opportunity to gain increased understanding prior to this.

Adoption Disruptions

Unfortunately, there were 4 adoption placement disruptions for 5 children, the last one being in October 2024. All have had disruption meetings with plans to review the learning by the Regional Lead Adoption Managers Group and the Adoption Panel.

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.

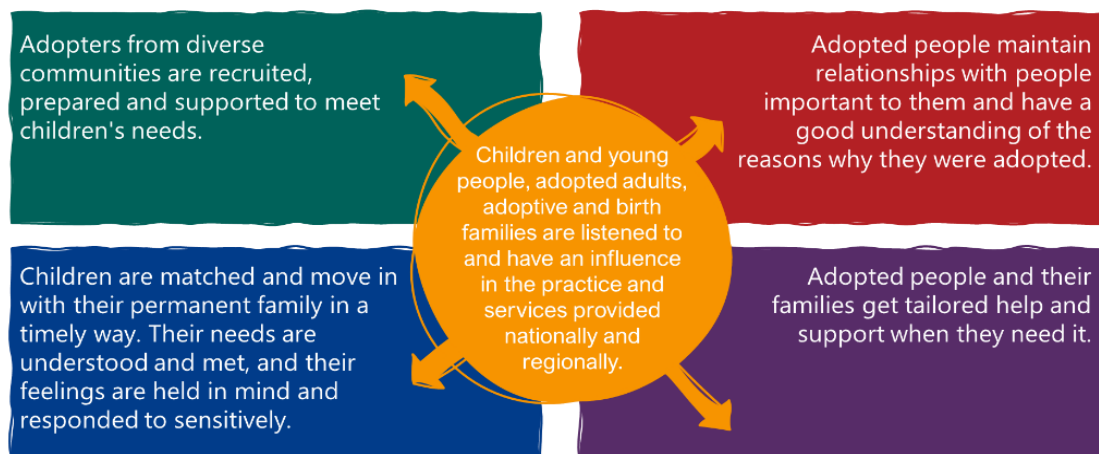
This work is completed by social workers in the Recruitment & Assessment Teams in each hub, enabling the flow of this work to be managed at a regular pace and appropriately balanced with the priorities of agency adoptions.

2024/25 YTD	No. enquiries	No of initial assessment	Pre 3 mth letter of intent	Annex A completed	No. Adoption Orders
AW Total	49	30	23	21	35
2023/24 YTD	60	42	26	23	10

Whilst there is a general downward trend in enquiries this year, there has been a higher number of annex A reports requested and completed by the team and subsequent adoption orders made. This reflects the higher level of enquiries last year.

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 National Adoption Strategy 2024-27 has the following outcomes:



The circles on the diagram below show significant amount of development work happening in Adoption West as we are working towards these outcomes locally.

What's happening in Adoption West



South West Permanence Project

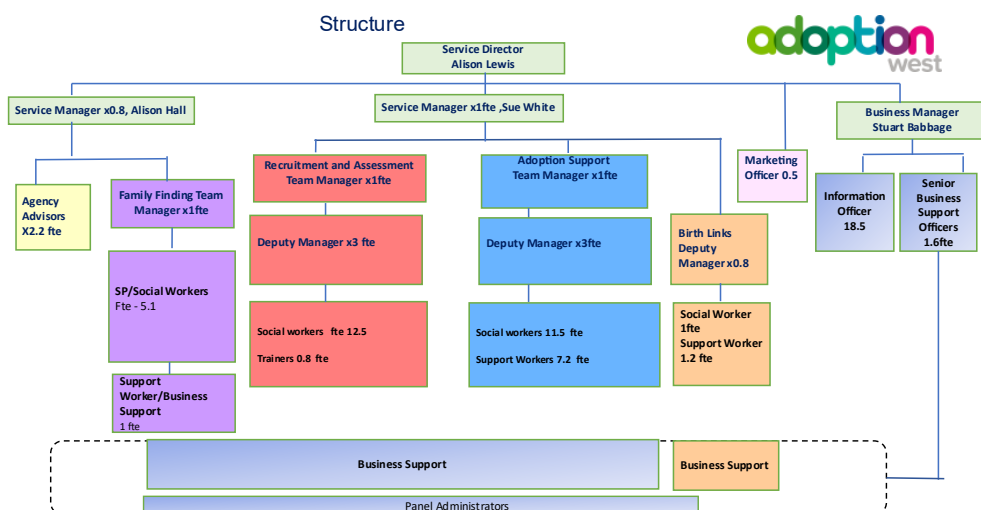


The project is now established with 20 children having been referred and the enhanced family finding underway.

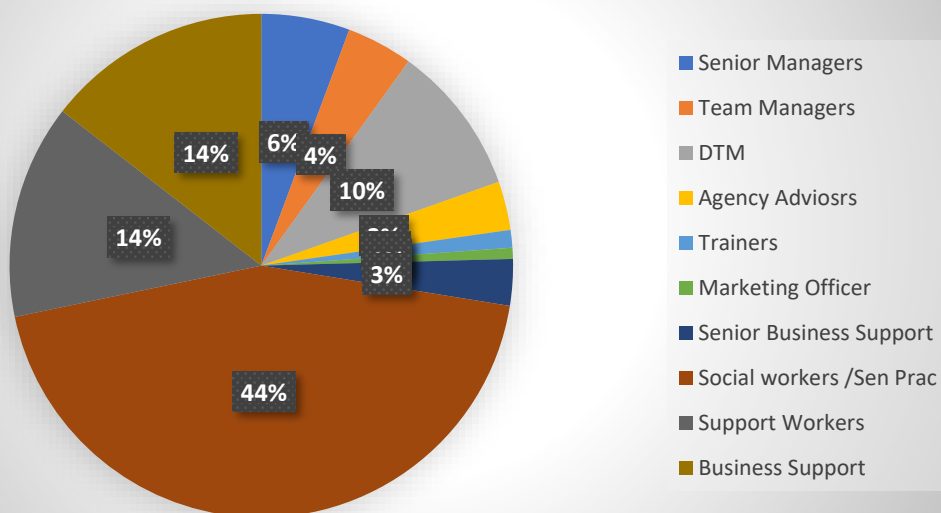
Adoption England have now extended the project with funding until September 2026

People

The average number of staff employed by Adoption West is 93 with 67 fte.



Roles in Adoption West



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, Agency Decision Maker (Adopter Approvals)

Finance

Adoption West received a commissioned contract income of £4.218 million in 2024/25 from its 6 local authority partners to deliver adoption services. The breakdown of budget allocation is shown below:

Category	Budget (£'000)
Employee Salary, NI & Pensions	3,569
Other employee related spend	132
Commissioned Services, subs & adopter recruitment activity	163
Post Adoption Support activity	100
ICT & Office Costs	162
Other Support Services	92
Total	4,218

Adoption West has also received 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

Adoption West has received nine complaints this year, all of which were resolved at local resolution level apart from one that progressed to stage 2. The stage 1 and 2 complaints were partially upheld with apologies provided learning about practice and relevant processes taken forward.

There have been two data breaches this year. All incidents were reported to the Data Protection Officer, and none were reportable to the ICO. This demonstrates that the culture and process supporting the identification of low-level breaches is robust and sufficiently guard against significant data protection issues.

Concluding Remarks

As we reflect on the past year, we are proud of the progress we've made together in supporting children, families, and professionals through every stage of the adoption journey.

This year, we supported the successful placement of 91 children into permanent homes with 122 being adopted. We have supported over a thousand children and families. Our Conference and other training sessions have reached over 200 professionals and adopters, strengthening best practices across the sector.

This year has brought both meaningful progress and important challenges. As more children are being identified with plans for adoption, we continue to face difficulties in recruiting adopters a trend that shows no clear sign of improvement. We know this will remain a pressing issue in the year ahead. Yet, our commitment to finding the right adopted family for children remains unwavering as we work at both a local and national level to promote the needs for more people to come forward and consider adoption.

We are proud to be strengthening our support throughout the entire adoption journey. Our *"Becoming a Family"* pilot is a key step forward, designed to improve early placement support and help families build strong, lasting bonds from the very beginning. Through this work and that of the South West Permanence Project we aim to contribute to improving practice across the whole adoption sector.

Our adoption support offer continues to grow year on year. A standout achievement this year has been the launch of our Helpdesk, which has significantly improved accessibility and enabled quicker, more responsive support for those who need it. We also face uncertainty around the future of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)—a vital resource for many of the families we support. This uncertainty is a real concern, but it also reinforces the importance of building strong,

sustainable support systems within our own service. Collaboration will be more important than ever. We will deepen our partnerships with local authorities, health and education professionals, and the wider community to ensure every child and family receives the support they deserve.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this year's report is the inclusion of voices from those at the heart of adoption—adopters and birth parents. Their stories, reflections, and honesty remind us of the complexity and beauty of adoption, and why our work matters so much. We know we need to do more to provide children and young people with a voice to influence services. Our plans to launch a pilot youth group next year will be a significant part of this work

To our service users—thank you for your trust and openness. To our professional partners—thank you for your collaboration and commitment. And to the dedicated team at Adoption West —your compassion and perseverance continue to drive real change.



Alison Lewis
Service Director

Contributors:

Sue White: Service Manager

Alison Hall: Service Manager

Sue White: Service manager

Stuart Babbage: Business Manager

Anjali Gupta: Team Manager Adoption Support

Jane Priborsky/Bill Boon: Team Manager recruitment and Assessments

Jen Brennan: Team Manager Family Finding

Rebecca Myers: Marketing and Communications

Claire Jarvis: DTM 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:

- Mary Kearney-Knowles – Director Children and Young Peoples Service, Bath and North East Somerset Council (Chair and Responsible Individual from June 2023 until December 2024)
- Hannah Woodhouse – Director of Children's Services Bristol City Council (Chair and Responsible Individual from December 2024)
- Paul Shallcross – Service Director Children and Families, Gloucestershire County Council
- Jane Anstis – Assistant Director of Children's Services, North Somerset Council
- Rhian Evans – Head of Service, Localities, Corporate Parenting and Fostering, South Gloucestershire Council
- Jen Salter - Director Families and Children's Services, Wiltshire Council (Until November 2024)
- Alison Elliot – Director Commissioning, Wiltshire Council from November 2024

Non-Voting members:

- Mustafa Salih – Head of Financial Management and Business Support, South Gloucestershire Council
- Fiona Tudge – Director of Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council
- Emma Simpson – CEO, CCS Adoption
- Sara Taylor, Adopter and Director of It Takes a Village

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:

- Elliot Davies/Jo Parker – Interim Head of Service: Care Outcomes, Bath & North East Somerset Council
- Sarah Bridgman – Assistant 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
- Petros Cerswell – 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: 2024-25

Elected Voting Members:

- Cllr Michelle O’Doherty Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Cllr Christine Townsend Bristol City Council/ Vacant since June 2024
- Cllr Becky Hoyland Gloucestershire County Council
- Cllr Joe Tristram North Somerset Council
- Cllr Sandra Emms South Gloucestershire Council
- Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chair) Wiltshire Council
- Cllr Carole King Wiltshire Council