



adoption west

April 2025 to March 2026

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, 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. The Board membership has experienced some change with three new members, with Hannah Woodhouse, Director of Children's Services (DCS) in Bristol City Council providing continuity as chair for a two-year period.

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. This year the panel has been chaired by Cllr Dine Romero BANES Council and continues to be supported by Julie Bielby, Senior Scrutiny Officer Wiltshire Council. The Panel provides an annual report detailing its activity to the Adoption West Board and each council.



Adoption Support

Anjali Gupta Team manager Adoption Support writes:

“The Adoption Support Helpdesk has been the first step for many families and have ensured that we respond quickly to families’ questions and needs with empathy and understanding of the lifelong complexities of adoption. The Adoption Support Helpdesk have been able to provide early intervention alongside responding to increasing levels of need and crisis for our families. This has included undertaking assessments, effective information giving and signposting, referral onto parenting programmes and our universal offer of support, access to funding for therapeutic support funded by the ASGSF. We see many families struggling with complex systems around their children and so the Adoption Support helpdesk have supported them to navigate and understand thresholds and referral processes, give our professional support and at times advocacy in multidisciplinary settings, and increase knowledge about the needs of adopted children and young people with our colleagues in partner services.

2025/26 has been a busy year in Adoption Support. Demand from families for social work support and therapeutic input remain high and the social workers and support workers have worked very hard to meet this demand. Caseloads for social workers have been carefully managed to try and ensure consistency across Adoption West and so that families can access support when needed and families are /stepped down when the situation allows to ensure there is space at the time of need.

Alongside their key Staying in Touch work managing letterbox and Meeting-up times our support workers have also worked with families; including some direct work with our children and young people, for example \life Story work

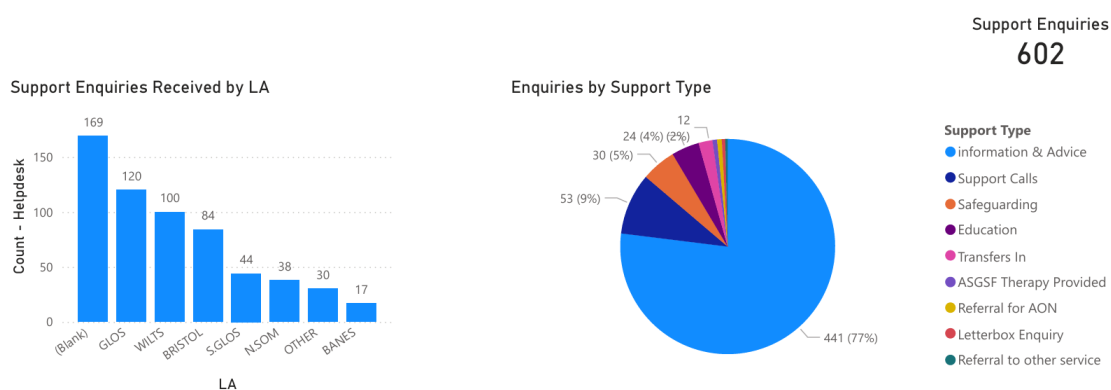
The team continue to;

- Support birth parent groups,
- Run Amazing Wallabies, our parent and toddler group
- To Develop a parent toddler group in Wiltshire,
- Continue the Theraplay groups,
- Hold Christmas parties and, summer picnics
- Organise and lead activities for children and young people at WOLT in Wiltshire and Forest School in Gloucestershire

and finally, over the last year the team have established a youth group. It has been lovely to have more direct contact with our children and young people and hear what they have to say about adoption, schools, friendships and social media!"

Adoption Support Helpdesk Enquires = 602

The helpdesk has been operating for 18 months and is staffed by 1 fte support worker and 1.7fte senior practitioners. They manage all calls into the adoption support service, complete initial assessments and triage assessment of need and any adoptive families transferring to the service to the teams. Of the 602 enquiries 181 (30%) required an initial assessment or assessment of need, this reflects the complexity of the presenting issues.



The Helpdesk can complete an initial assessment or refer the family to the adoption support team for a more in-depth assessment if this is required. The helpdesk completed **120** initial assessments and a further **59** assessments of need were completed.

Children receiving social work support and or accessing the Adoption Support and Special Guardianship Fund (ASGSF)

31/03/26	Allocated Children	ASGSF Review only
Year end 25/26	426	574
Year End 24/25	498	555

- Similar to last year 46% of the children and young people are aged 12-15 yrs and 19% are 9-11 yrs. This highlights the focus of support is with pre-adolescence and teenagers. This fits with reported research (e.g. Family Roots Selwyn et al) which shows a rise in support needs for families and the challenges for young people managing in secondary school and emerging identity issues.
- Significantly the service is continuing to work with young people into early adulthood (13%). Both locally and nationally there is a growing awareness of the needs of adopted people as they transition into adulthood and the challenges in accessing services where high levels of support continue to be required by families. This is an area that the service needs to define what the support that can be offered, and when
- 82% of the children and young people are white British, 11% are of the Global Majority. *Need to explain why this figure is included?*

Parental feedback about the support from the team

"The good news is that I went to the college and was told that Y will be receiving the LEVEL 2 Diploma for this year as she did well when she was able to attend and did get a few Merits for her writing assignments and practical exams as well. I can't tell you how happy we were and what a relief, as this year has been so challenging for Y Your help with this has been much appreciated. I really feel you coming onboard recently has helped a lot, I am so proud of her."

"Over the past 4 months I have been fighting the biggest battle of my life with the LA to find our son a suitable school placement. Tina has been there for me every step of the way, any time I've randomly called freaking out or struggling she has been there, and today she crafted an email which was exactly what I was trying to say but was too emotional to do so.... I wanted to highlight an incredible support that was available when I needed it the most for our family."

"It is clear that Ami always has the best interests of the child and parents at the core of her work and she has worked tirelessly to advocate on our behalf with in a number of challenging situations. Ami has also supported us as parents by placing us on a therapeutic parenting course where we learned a lot about ourselves and how we can do things differently to help our daughter. As well as attending many meetings with us, she has regularly checked in to offer support and give good practical advice."

Adoption Support Offer

We have continued to develop the adoption support offer across the region focussing on accessible training and events across the region. The support offer is provided in multiple ways and via several partnerships which include CCS Adoption Bristol, It takes a Village Peer Support, Virtual Schools and Face Youth Services.

At the core of this is the Adoption West support team who manage and directly deliver many of the activities and courses. 229 adults and children have attended one of the six Summer Picnics/ Christmas Parties. Activity session for 10 -15-year-olds in school

holidays have been held in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire to supplement the CCS holiday hub which is provided across Bristol. There have been seven training groups covering five different topics for adoptive parents with 70 attendees.



I liked it because I met people I haven't met before

I loved it todaygot to be with friends and do woodwork

I liked it because I met new people and became the mud monster....and made a necklaceand a spider's web



Education Webinars provide in partnership with the six Virtual Schools

Term	Topic	Date and time
5	Early Years Foundation Stage	Tuesday 25 th April 2025 18.00-19.00
6	SEND	Tuesday 10 th June 2025 18.00-19.00
1	Secondary education- choosing a school and what to expect	Tuesday 23 rd September 2025 10.00-11.30
2	Primary education- choosing a school and what to expect	Monday 24 th November 2025 10.00-11.30
3	Early Years education	Tuesday 3 rd February 2026 10.00-11.30

"I attended the intro to education one few weeks ago. I found it so helpful. I think it was a great presentation with key information but not overwhelming. Although I knew a lot of the information, I went with a child in mind and could ask specific questions which now mean I feel more informed in school meetings and know where I could be asking more questions."

Amazing Wallabies - Stay and Play Gloucestershire



Attendance has remained steady, with six to ten families regularly taking part. Over the last six months, there has been an increase in the number of families attending with children being cared for under EP arrangements.

Feedback from attendees has been overwhelmingly positive, with families consistently praising the calm, friendly atmosphere and supportive environment created during sessions. Adopters have highlighted the value of meeting others with shared experiences and have expressed appreciation for having a dedicated space designed specifically for younger adopted children.

The group has received numerous compliments from participating families, who frequently comment on the quality of the activities, the welcoming nature of the sessions, and the positive impact the group has had on both children and parents. The connections formed through the group have extended beyond the monthly sessions, with several members joining the ITAV network, and vice versa, with members joining the group via connections they have made through ITAV. Members have planned to meet independently, helping to build lasting peer support networks and friendships.

Many attendees have expressed a strong desire for additional opportunities to meet, reflecting the clear demand for this type of provision and the important role the group plays in reducing isolation, strengthening community connections, and promoting family wellbeing

"G told me how much he enjoys Amazing Wallabies. His favourite baby group because he is with similar people, doesn't need to explain anything and he finds the set up really relaxed"



"It has been so refreshing joining a baby/child group with other adopters as just feels that everyone gets it and gets on so well"

Partners in Support

It Takes a Village – £20,000 grant to assist the development of Peer support groups across the region. Groups are now happening in all the six 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.

“Working with ITAV and watching the development of peer support across the Adoption West region has been lovely. We hear back from parents about events and groups they have joined, and how beneficial it is to be with other adopters who understand their experiences.

This includes the recent transracial and global majority group which has been formed with support from Adoption England funding.” – Anjali Gupta Team Manager Adoption Support

CCS Adoption Bristol Groups and activities grant funded by Adoption West 2025/26 £20,515
Tots
Parents Support Group
Single Adopters family Fun Day
LGBTQ+ Coffee Mornings
Activities for Children and Young people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empire Fighting Chance - Horseworld • All Aboard Water Sports
Holiday Hub Activity Sessions

The Youth Club

The youth group launched in November 2025 and has now been running for just over seven months. It is delivered in partnership with **FACE** (Filton Active Community Engagement), using their youth club facilities in South Gloucestershire, which include a kitchen, sports area and activity space.



The group is staffed by four team members: Katie (Leader in Charge), Kay (also an Adoption West support worker), Anjali and Tadg (youth workers). In addition, volunteer Kim leads on cooking activities.

There are currently 16 young people attending regularly, aged 11–15 years. Some participants joined with existing friendships, while others were new. New relationships have formed, with youth workers supporting young people to navigate both positive interactions, and challenges.



Sessions typically include cooking, sports and craft activities, alongside informal socialising and games. Ball games are particularly popular. Evenings conclude with a group game of *Villagers and Werewolves*, which helps bring everyone together. Encouraging consistent participation in tidying-up remains an area for development.

Young people have contributed to shaping the group by agreeing ground rules, choosing a group name, and selecting activities. Some have taken leadership roles, such as leading baking sessions (e.g. chocolate cookies), supporting tuck shop duties, managing music choices, and helping with cash handling. A few younger members have developed a strong interest in cooking and take pride in serving food to others.

Staff review each session to reflect on progress and record observed skills and development. Current term themes focus on **healthy and safe relationships** and **health and wellbeing**.

Future aims include expanding capacity to offer more places to young people currently on the waiting list and strengthening young people’s voice and influence. One young person has expressed interest in joining the national Voice and Influence forum.

Overall, the group continues to develop positively, fostering engagement, skills development and peer relationships.

Voice and Influence

The APPG Adoption and Permanence -Adoptee Voices Enquiry report (January 2026) recommendations highlight the importance of embedding the adoptee voice in the design, scrutiny and evaluation of services, including staying in touch, access to records, peer support and awareness campaigns.

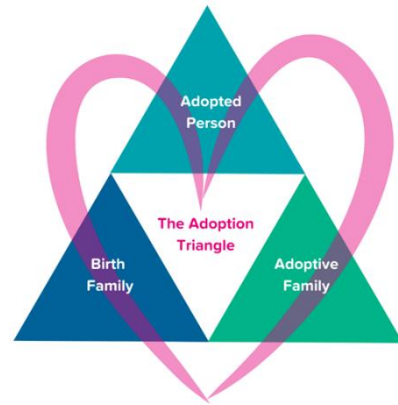


Through the connections we have with young people via the youth group and activity sessions at both WOLT (Wiltshire Outdoor Learning Team) and the Forest school in Gloucestershire, we are aiming to build a foundation for involving young people’s voice and influence within the Adoption West region and nationally.

Staying in Touch

This year, progress has been made in strengthening opportunities for adopted children to maintain meaningful connections that support their identity and understanding of their adoption journey.

A regional working group, comprising senior managers, practitioners, and Independent Reviewing Officers, has been established and has met regularly to drive this work forward. The group is focused on enhancing the *Staying in Touch* (SiT) offer for children placed for adoption, as well as for their parents, birth family members, and other significant individuals in their lives. The key objectives of the group include:



- **Reviewing current practice** against the *Adoption England Staying in Touch Practice Standards* to ensure alignment with national expectations.
- **Developing clear processes and policies** to support a consistent, high-quality approach to Staying in Touch and maintaining connections across the region.
- **Establishing a shared language and framework** that reflects contemporary practice and promotes clarity for practitioners, families, and children.
- **Designing robust systems** for the assessment, planning, and review of all Staying in Touch arrangements, including both letter exchange and direct contact (Meeting Up Time).
- **Identifying training and development needs** to support continuous improvement in practice. Plans are underway for a regional learning event in October 2026 to further embed good practice and support workforce development.

This coordinated regional approach aims to ensure that Staying in Touch arrangements are purposeful, child-centred, and responsive, ultimately improving outcomes for adopted children and their families.

Staying in touch is the ‘umbrella’ name for the services provided to adopted children so that they can keep connected to the people important to them when they are adopted.

Within this term, the following is included:

Letter exchange (replaces Letterbox, Indirect Contact) is where letters are exchanged between adopted children’s birth relatives and adoptive parents. Letters are exchanged instead of/ or as well as other forms of staying in touch, such as digital exchanges or meeting up times.

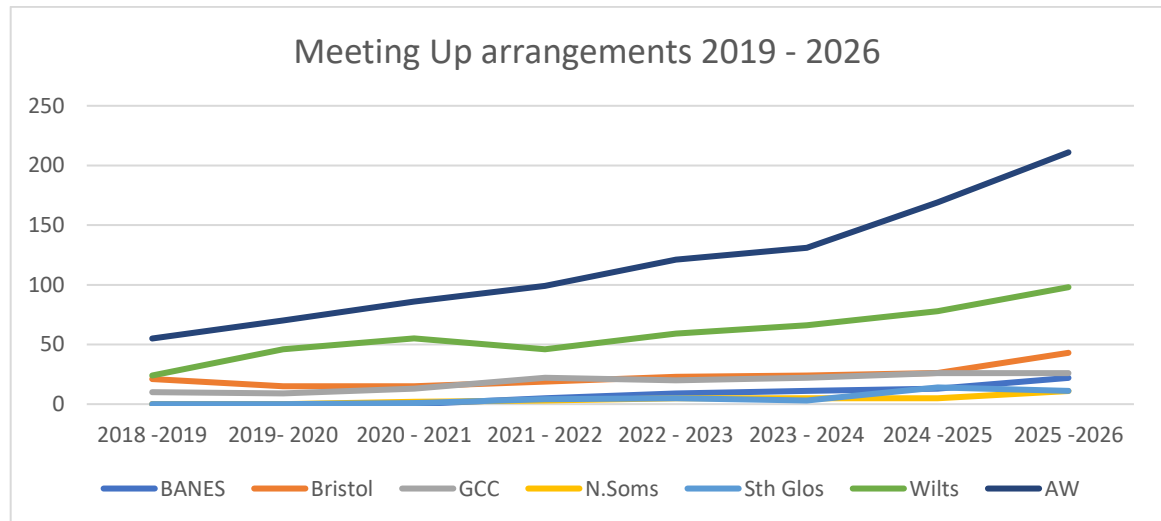
Meeting up time (replaces Direct contact) involves face-to-face visits or phone calls between the adopted child, their adopted parents and birth family relatives, as well as previous foster carers.

Wish you well, meet-up (replaces Final Contact). This is usually the last family time between the child and birth family prior to moving on to adoption. This is regardless of the ongoing post-adoption staying connected plan.

Adoption West has continued to strengthen its approach to data collection and analysis in relation to both elements of the *Staying in Touch* service: letter exchange and *Meeting Up Time* arrangements. Improvements in data quality are already enabling better insight into current practice and are helping to identify areas where processes can be refined. This is supporting the development of more effective, sustainable arrangements that enable children to maintain meaningful connections throughout their childhood.

At present, Adoption West manages **211 Meeting Up Time agreements** for **128 children**, involving **290 birth relatives**. This reflects the scale and complexity of work undertaken to support ongoing relationships between adopted children and their birth families. The rate of growth remains variable and, in general, continues to align with historic levels observed prior to the establishment of Adoption West.

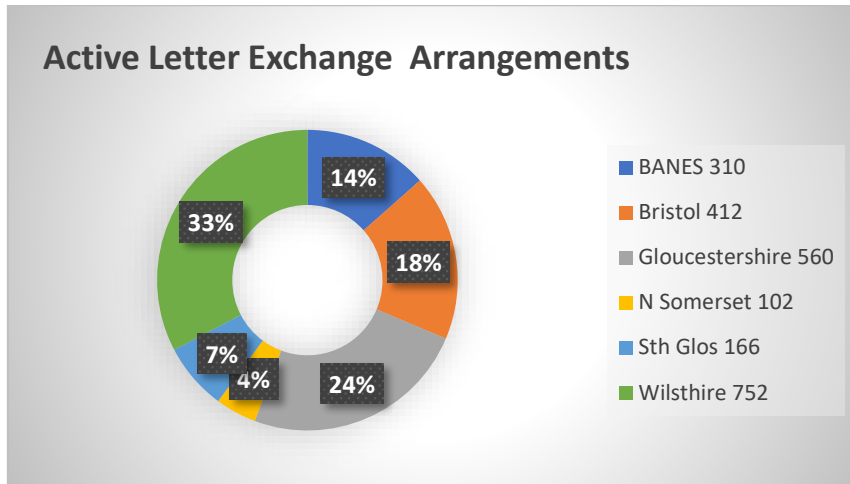
Ongoing analysis of this data will be key to informing service development, ensuring that arrangements are both child-centred and responsive to changing needs, and that they are capable of being sustained over time.



Letter Exchange arrangements

There are a total of 3,848 letter exchange agreements with 40% being inactive in the last 3 years. Some children can have a mix of active and inactive agreements; we therefore need to explore further the impact on individual children.

Of the children with active exchange agreements in place there is an average of 2.4 exchanges per child, per year.



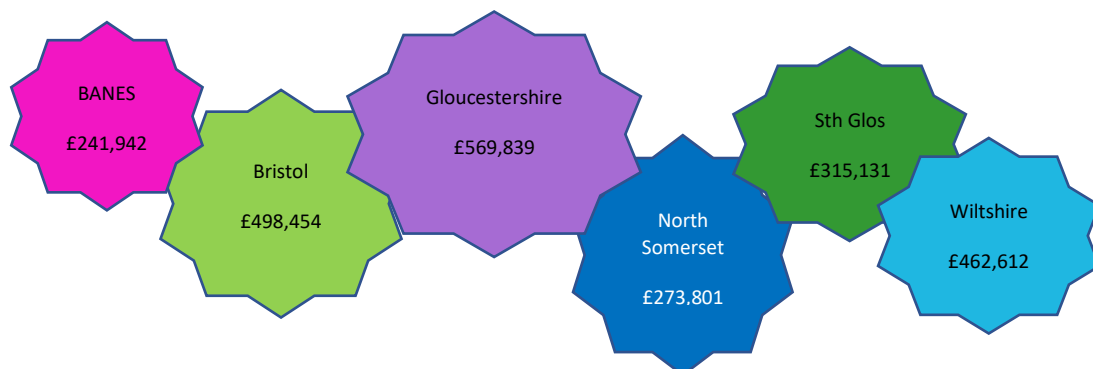
"Thank you so much, it means a lot to speak to a team that have such empathy with the birth family and actually return our calls".

"Kirsty was persistent in trying to get the adoptive parents to send their letter - "Omg I could cry, thank you ever so much Kirsty you've made our Christmas!"
Birth relatives about letter exchange

Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

The changes and delay in announcements about the funding we will receive from the ASGSF has provided the team with challenges in managing a busy adoption support review period and reassuring our families about the therapeutic support they will receive. This included managing therapy breaks and the decreasing amount of funding from April 2025, which led to some difficult choices for parents and young people.

Despite the additional workload that this meant for the team, they were efficient and determined in their efforts to manage this delay and minimise the impact on the majority of our families. There has been a 34% decrease in the total cost of applications made and a 16% decrease in the number of applications made to the ASGSF. This will relate to the decrease in the Fair Access Limit from £5000 to £3000. **792** applications were approved for families in the Adoption West Region with 909 recipients accessing therapeutic support. We accessed **£2,361,780** to provide therapeutic support to children and families.



Parent feedback

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

"The response to the changes from Adoption West was really good – very quick and Amanda was amazing just coming back with suggestions on reducing sessions, she got the applications in really quickly and we have the funding." - from a provider in relation to the ASGSF changes

"This is amazing news! Thank you so much to everyone for pushing this forward so quickly! It's really appreciated !.... So happy you were able to achieve this outcome after asking for this for so long from other institutes, and you've done it within 3 months of us migrating to Adoption West! Thanks Muchly!"

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)



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.

2025/2026	Adopted Adult (Sch 2)	Adopted adult (Access to records)	Adopted adult (post commencement)	Intermediary advice	Birth family	SEC 61	Total
2025/2026	44	57	14	23	98	1	237
2024/2025	47	73	5	24	98	N/A	247
2023/2024	45	76	5	29	104	N/A	259

Claire Jarvis Deputy Team Manager writes:

This year we have had some staffing challenges; in a small team any vacancy or absences can have a significant impact. We were one support worker down for six months as it took three attempts to fill the post. The Access to records service is provided by the one full-time

equivalent social worker. Following a supported request for flexible retirement this post was shared with another worker who had a period of absence and chose to leave to role after six months. Consequently, we have not had full capacity in this part of the service much of the last year. However, we have managed to keep waiting list at around 30 or less for both adopted adults and birth parents. With the staffing challenges being resolved in Q1 we would envisage the list reducing in the next period.

Post-commencement Regulations – We have started to get requests for access to records from young people adopted after or on the 30th of December 2005 and Sec 61 applications from adopted people and birth relatives in same cohort. We have provided a presentation on legislation and regulations to all staff at Whole Service Day and developed initial procedure for responding to Sec. 61 applications.

How a small team will meet the new requirements is being discussed with the local authorities.

Birth parent groups –

Wiltshire – Very successful and well attended groups started in May 2025. Alternate monthly between Trowbridge & Salisbury to cater for such large, rural county.

Bristol – Continues to run monthly, is well attended and valued by group members.

Gloucestershire – It has not got off the ground in the last 12 months as it has been poorly attended. The geography of the region is a challenge, as has been shortage of staffing in Birth Links.

Feedback;

“With Amy she understood where I was coming from and I really wanted to work with her. Amy listened to me which helped me open up more” - birth father

“Sallie made sure I wasn’t treated like a nobody. Sallie was amazing.” – birth mother

“Honestly, I can’t think of any improvements. The service felt very well organised, supportive, and personal. Everything was explained clearly and at a pace that felt right for me” – Adult Adoptee access to records

“I would just like to give a massive thanks to everyone involved, I found out the information which has always been at the back of my mind regarding my birth parents background etc all my questions were answered in a kind and considerate manner, thank you once again”. – Adult Adoptee access to records

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

Jen Brennan, Family Finding Team Manager writes:

In the year 2025/2026 we saw an increase in the number of children we were needing to search externally for, whilst external matches and placements can bring increased complexities there was one which has been recognised as a brilliant example of good practice, joined up working and creative thinking. This relates to a match between a 7yr old little girl & Barnardo's adopters; multiple challenges emerged during introductions with professionals needing to balance the child's voice whilst navigating the breakdown of adult relationships. The successful outcome achieved was a testament to the resources, time and commitment shown by both Barnardo's and the LA social work team and the collaboration between the professional team.

Another highlight and success for us as a team are the Stay & Play events, we have now successfully re-introduced over the last year. We have recently held our fourth Stay & Play event for children 3yrs and under and have a further two planned later in the year. We have seen positive outcomes from these events with the most recent event resulting in five expressions of interest being received.

In terms of challenges, we have had a few disruptions which have been difficult for the team as is the ongoing adopter sufficiency issues we are experiencing. The declining number of available adopters has created a difficult landscape for the team to navigate, and we are seeing even very young children wait longer.



This year there has been a small decrease in all aspects of adoption activity relating to children. **140** children have had **plans for adoption**, a 6% decrease after a 14% increase in the previous year. This is less than the national data which shows a 9.9% reduction in the number of children who had a Should Be Placed decision (*Coram-i provisional Q4 25/26 data*).

Placement orders were granted for **122** children a slight decrease of 4% decrease from last year's figure of 127 POs, like the national picture which shows a 6.5% decrease in the number of Placement Orders made. **93** children were **adopted** in this period, significantly lower than the 122 made in 2024-2025 after a period of high placement activity, but slightly higher than each of the three preceding years.

Referrals for **Early Permanence** have remained steady with **100** of these we were unable to find EP carers for 30 children, due to insufficient adopters being available to provide EP. **19 children were placed in an** Early Permanence two less than last year. Whilst there are challenges in the general sufficiency of adopters which impacts on the number of available Early Permanence carer, it is positive that referrals remain at the current level indicating that local authority social workers are considering this option in their permanence planning.



The number of **children placed with Adoption West adopters** increased to 85% with 15% placed with external adopters. The overall number of children placed for adoption fell by 10 to 81. This change is also indicative of the national challenges in recruiting adopters.

Children with a Placement Order currently waiting for adoption at 31/03/26

	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-12 Months	12 -18 Months	18+ Months	Total by LA
Q4 25/26 Number of Children	22	31	42	12	6	113
Q4 24/25 Number of Children	40	15	32	12	10	109

At the end of the year there were **113** children with Placement Orders who had not been placed with adopters – a slight increase from the 109 children at the end of 2024/25. The steady rise in Placement Orders over the last three years, combined with the reduction in the number of approved adopters, has meant that children are waiting longer for a suitable family or result in no suitable family being found for them.

Of the 113 children, 35 (31%) were linked or matched with adopters, seven children, including were 'on hold'. Family finding is continuing for the remaining 71 children. Of those children, 18 have some interest which is being explored, and six links have been made in early Q1 2026-2027.

A higher number of children this year have had changes of plan away from adoption, which has also contributed to the lower number of children with a PO over a year awaiting placement. There have been **38** children for whom family finding has stopped as their **plans have changed a way from adoption**. Whilst this had been predicted in the last annual report due to the widening sufficiency gap both regionally and nationally. It is a significant rise of 280% and we are working actively will the local authorities discussing children where the possibility of adoption is now very small and they would benefit from a change of plan to avoid unnecessary delay in finding an alternative form of permanence for them.

Example of Family Finding Activities



Timeliness for matching and placing children (A10 and A2 figures) remain better in Adoption West than the national average. The A2 figure below of 196, which is 41 days better than the England average, is reflective of the work of the Family Finding time to progress placements for the children when adopters can be identified.

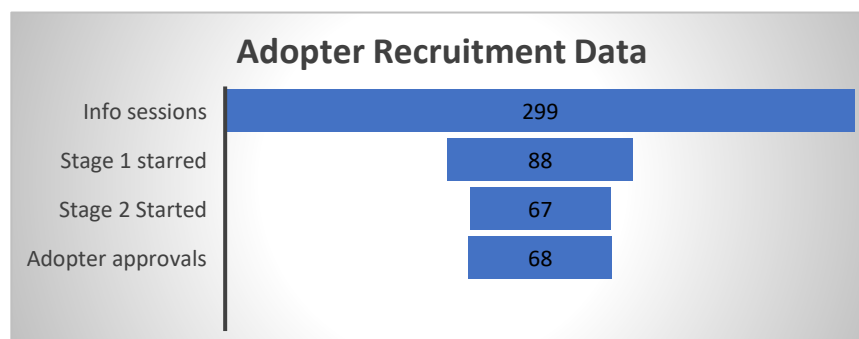
	A1 (Target=426)		A10 (Target=426)		A2 (Target=121)		A20	
	24/25	25/26	24/25	25/26	24/25	25/26	24/25	25/26
Adoption West	521	533	421	451	217	196	270	299
England	561	554	491	481	218	237	320	312

Adoption Disruptions

Unfortunately, there were four adoption placement disruptions for five children, the most recent in March 2026. In the last two years there has been a greater rate of disruption than Adoption West has experienced in previous years. Analysis of this indicates that one local authority is experiencing a higher rate, this is therefore being reviewed with senior managers in that area.

Adopters

The number of adopters approved this year has increased to **68**, a 5.5% decrease which is slightly higher than the 1% decrease across England (*Coram-i provisional data 25/26*). The number attending information sessions continues to fall with a conversion rate of approximately 29%.



Bill Boon - Recruitment, Assessment and Placement Support (RAPS) Team Manager writes:

“There’s been a change within the structure of the team over the last 12 months, and a name change to Recruitment and Placement Support (RAPS). We now have a separate Recruitment part of the team, which has become more established since the new year. As a result, we can focus more specifically on recruitment and getting people interested in adopting to be allocated a Social Worker and start an assessment.

Recruitment of adopters is an ongoing challenge within Adoption West and nationally. Whilst this is likely to continue to be the case, we have developed processes and structures to support people interested in adopting to progress in their journey with us. This has included a more targeted approach to contacting people who have shown an interest in adopting but have not yet booked an enquiry or sent in their Registration of Interest.

There’s been many positives over the course of the last 12 months. Our timescales for Stage 2 assessment have improved significantly; the team has worked hard to support prospective adopters to be approved in a timelier way. The focus of the majority of the team is assessing and supporting adopters. Their good work is evident every day. Our team continues to support adopters through this journey up until an Adoption Order is granted and prepare them for the challenges ahead in caring for an adopted child.”

The recruitment of adopters remains uncertain with continued fluctuations in the number of ROI’s received quarter to quarter. With the numbers of prospective adopters in the process at the start of the year 2026/27 being 43, 32 adopters booked for panel by end of Q2 and 17 ROI’s received by early June 2026, the coming year will also be a very challenging year regards adopter recruitment.

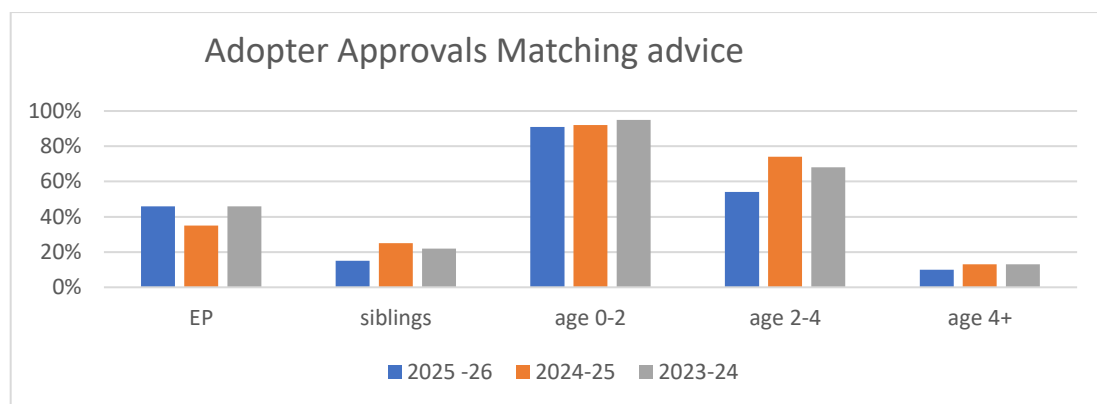
A Front Door team has now been established for one year, which is allowing focus on recruitment and follow up to Information Sessions, as well as social workers completing Stage 1 of the process with applicants ensuring assessments focus on

improving timeliness. This has been impacted by long term sickness and staffing changes however as from the end of Q4 is now fully staffed. However, all Registrations of Interest have been allocated within 5 days of receipt and Stage 1 continues to be better than the England average at 98 days compared with 133 days. *(Coram-i provisional Q4 25/26 data).*

Along with a more settled workforce in the Recruitment, Assessment and Placement Support Team (RAPS), there are improved systems in place to manage, track and monitor assessments. This has enabled us to be very close to the England average for the first time. The average stage 2 timescale is 145 days, four days longer than the England average, the percentage of families being approved within the four-month timescale 37% and the England average is 39%

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 24% increase in the prospective adopters open to providing an early permanence placement. We have been working to address this and since January 2025 have provided a 4-day course in Stage 2, so all adopters attend the EP training, which appears to have positively impacted the figure. Currently 46% of all approvals are open to considering Early Permanence placements.



On 31st March 2026 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 **23**, this 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 **86%**, very similar to previous three years which ranged from 85-89%.

Recruitment and Marketing

The Adoption West Recruitment and Marketing Strategy 2025–27 was approved by the Adoption West Board in March 2025. Considering the ongoing challenges in adopter recruitment and the number of children waiting, we continue to hold six-weekly recruitment meetings and regularly review our activity. Our key areas of focus are:

- **Providing a positive and supportive experience** for prospective adopters when they contact Adoption West. This includes improving the timeliness and responsiveness of the process.
- **Strengthening the recruitment process**, including a structured review of the adopter journey from initial website engagement through to information sessions. This has involved refining the 'front door' script, improving tracking systems, and ensuring consistent follow-up of enquiries that have not progressed.
- **Increasing visibility among those considering adoption**, through enhancements to the website, consistent weekly social media activity, expanded Google advertising since January 2026, and attendance at community events.
- **Collaborating with fostering colleagues** across the region in recognition of sufficiency challenges across the wider social care sector. We are exploring opportunities to work together, share resources, and develop joint approaches. This is particularly important in reaching diverse communities and increasing the number of adopters from the global majority.
- **Improving the Adoption West support offer**, recognising that the challenges faced by adoptive families are well documented. Strengthening our support services is integral to giving prospective adopters confidence to come forward, knowing that adoption today means remaining connected to their agency and having access to timely, needs-led support.

Examples of Social media Posts



Placement Support

The introduction of the term *Recruitment Assessment and Placement Support Team (RAPS)* recognises the vital role this team plays in providing early placement support to prospective adopters and children. As of 31 March 2026, the team was supporting the adoptive placements of 53 children.

From the point of linking through to the granting of the adoption order, social workers within the team provide essential support to help adopters adjust to parenting a new child within their family. Across Adoption West, the average time from placement to adoption order is nine months. During this period, adoption social workers support prospective adopters to develop a deeper understanding of the child, consider therapeutic parenting approaches, and build their support networks. They also work closely with the child's social worker to ensure that all "staying in touch" arrangements are established and that families receive the necessary information to support the child's identity.

In some circumstances, additional specialist support is required and must be sourced. All adopters are also connected to the adoption support core offer to ensure they understand where to access support both during and beyond the adoption process.

The team has also contributed to the Adoption England feasibility study, *"Becoming a Family."* An early evaluation report has made recommendations for further work to embed this practice across all five pilot sites.

Feedback from different stages of the process

"I just wanted to drop you a quick note in recognition of the support Roxy has offered me during the matching process. I am ecstatic to have been linked with K but I have clearly had a challenging matching process. Following the unsuccessful link, I felt truly heard and understood by Roxy.... I could not have asked for more and I will forever be grateful for her support, straight talking, kindness and humour."

"I've genuinely appreciated this experience – the meetings, the paperwork, the courses, and especially our conversations. You've made what could have been a very hard process into something meaningful."

"Thank you for your unwavering support, kindness and guidance throughout our adoption journey. Your compassion and steady presence helped us navigate the challenges and celebrate the joys - you truly made this possible for our family. We are forever grateful for everything you have done!"

"To Vicky, Thank you for teaching me about adoption, Love N'. – a birth child"

Thank you so much for all your help and support to us on this journey. Your calmness and kindness has kept us sane! We will be forever arateful

*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)*

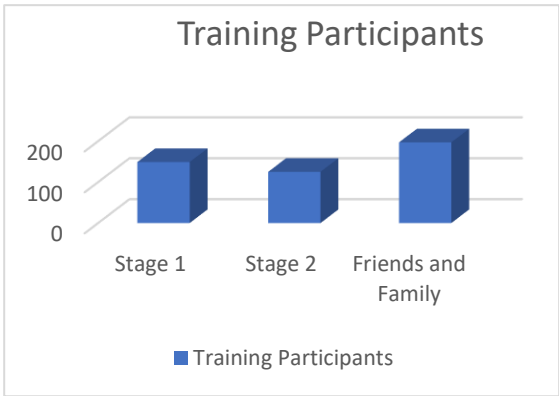
To implement an effective recruitment strategy, meeting the needs of children with a plan for adoption in the AW region (NMS 10.1)

Adopter Preparation Training

During Stage 1 to aid their learning and development all prospective adopters are provide with a year’s membership of Children and Trauma Community Hub-CATCH. The platform hosts hundreds of resources including videos, audio and written content plus live webinars, webchat and a dedicated forum.



2025 - 2026	Stage1 1 day	Stage 2 4 days	Friends and Family
Number of courses	12	8*	10
Number of participations	149	125	197



*Aug cancelled due to low numbers

Feedback from propective adopters of 75 respondents :

- How would you rate the overall training: 87% excellent 13% Good 1% Fair
- Did the training meet your expectations: 70% yes, exceeded expectations , 30% Yes met my expectations
- Were the trainers accessible and available for questions or concerns: 100%

The Adoption West trainers are both adopters and one is also a experienced adoption social worker. This lived experience and professional knowledge is reflected in the feedback provided:

Raychel Thomas and Deb Howatson are highly knowledgeable. They create a great learning environment where it's easy to ask questions.

I found the training session so helpful and informative. Deb made sure it ran as a conversation rather than just feeding us information. I particularly liked hearing directly from someone who had fairly recently adopted.

The training was well delivered and informative. It helped me understand the realities of adoption and gave me valuable insight into the needs of children and the responsibilities of adopters. I found it supportive and helpful in preparing me for the next stage

The training was excellent and more than met my expectations. It was obvious how important a part it plays in the assessment of readiness for adoption. The ability to share with others in a similar boat and at a similar stage, draw upon the experiences of the trainers and hear different views and insights was invaluable. I really enjoyed it even though the content at times is tricky. It has left me excited for the future in our adoption journey - and eager to get stuck in

In addition to the preparation training prospective adopters are invited to join a **Keeping Connected session**

These sessions provide an opportunity for birth relatives talk with prospective adopters about their lived experience of a child being adopted. There have been three sessions this year, one each in Bristol, Gloucester & Trowbridge. We receive very positive feedback from adopters.

Birth Links workers prepare and support birth relatives to attend and Emily Porrit from the RAPS team supports the prospective adopters.

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)

Non-Agency Partner Adoption (referred to as Stepparent 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 and Placement Support (RAPS) Team. Assessments can be complex, for example involving foreign or overseas elements or being legally contested. We have noted an increase in Special Guardians applying for adoption orders. This presents additional challenges, including obtaining medical information and consent from birth parents, securing medical reports for both the child and prospective adopter, and legal representation from the Local Authority during court proceedings.

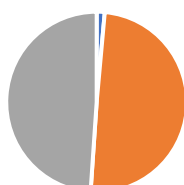
Enquiries have increased this year, especially towards year end, alongside a rise in the number of Annex A reports requested and completed by the team

2025/26	No. enquiries	No of initial assessment	Pre 3 mth letter of intent	Post 3mth letter of intent no application made	Annex A allocated	Annex A completed	No. Adoption Orders
AW total	57	34	26	6	42	31	30
2024/25	49	30	23	19	38	21	35

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 Activity



■ Relinquished Children ■ Matches ■ Approvals

Panel Business this year has included:

3 relinquished children,
69 matches for 96 children
68 approvals considered.

Adoption West continues to run on average 4.5 panels a month with 33 active panel members as follows:

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

Adoption West remains strongly committed to broadening the diversity of the panel membership and continues to prioritise the recruitment of members from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Overall diversity has been sustained across professional, lived experience and ethnicity. Gender representation was strengthened with the appointment of a male social worker representative.

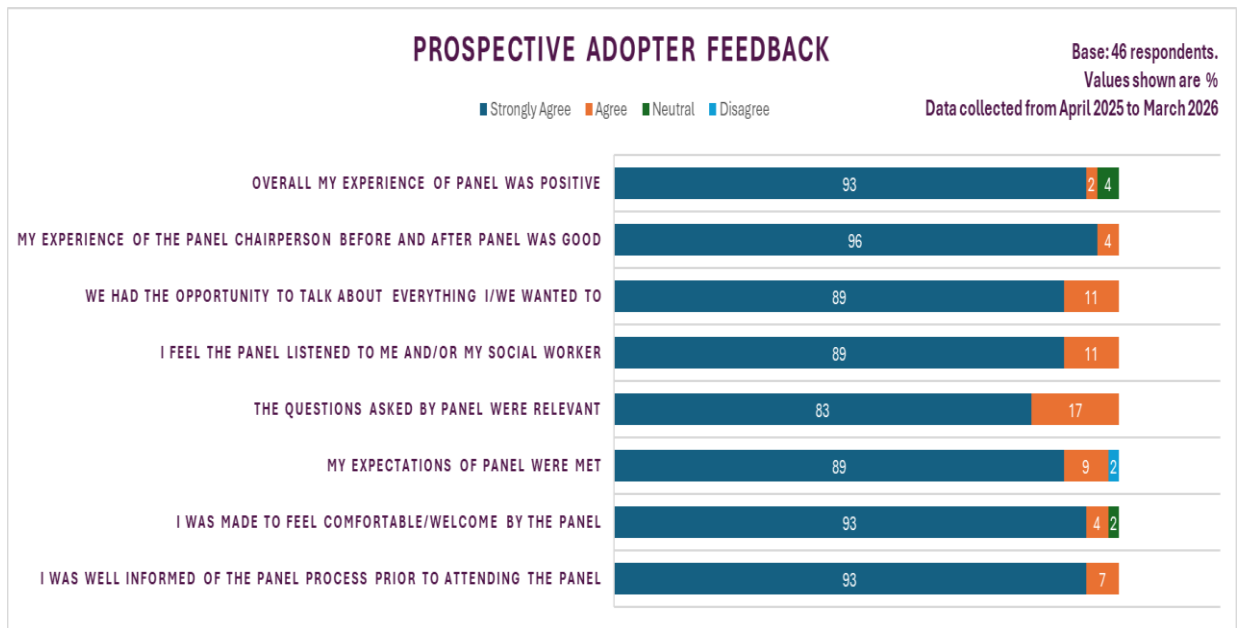
The Panel chairs in their report conclude:

- Review scheduling of Panel members to optimise diversity of Panel membership
- Continue to seek to expand all aspects of diversity within the pool of Panel members including aspects related to identity, ethnic backgrounds and life experiences including a birth parent or birth relative of a child who has been adopted

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:

- “Legal and the Panel’s Role” delivered by two legal advisers from a partner local authority
- Update on Adoption West staffing, structure and practice
- Brief presentation of the new CPR, including the AFDiT tool
- Feedback from panel attendees
- Incorporating Birth Relative questions at panel
- Learning from adoption disruptions
- Positive adoption stories

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.



At the end of March 2026, we said goodbye to Elaine Dibben who had been a valuable and much respected Panel Chair. Successful recruitment has taken place to appoint a new chair.

National and Regional Developments

Adoption England is led by the Strategic Adoption Lead Sarah Johal and enables 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. Adoption West is developing practice in accordance with the strategy in the following ways

- Staying touch working group
- Voice and Influence – Youth Group, Birth Parent Groups, Adopter participation in the Board and Scrutiny Panel

- Improving the local Adoption Support offer and participating the pilot for adoptions support data
- Becoming a Family Pilot – improving early placement support

Two further keys area are:

South West Permanence Project - improving performance for children with disabilities



The project has been successfully led by Claire Downs who is seconded from Adoption West and works across the south west pan region in partnership with Aspire Adoption and Adopt South West. The project was extended last year until September 2026.

We are keenly awaiting the evaluation report by Dr Andrew Brown Rees Centre (Oxford University), which is expected to be published in September 2026. Adoption England have also asked to extend Claire’s secondment by another year so she will be able to work with the south west and then other RAAs across England to embed, earning from the project.

Commissioning Innovation Grant

Adoption England have provided funding to RAAs across England to work on a pan regional basis to improve adoption support services and consider more effective commissioning arrangements.

Adoption UK has been commissioned to work in partnership to deliver online therapeutic parenting courses. The programme consists of 8-week online courses, delivered across 14 cohorts. Each cohort will support up to 12 families and will be co-facilitated by experienced clinicians alongside a member of staff from the commissioning authority.

The courses provide practical therapeutic strategies, including PACE, low-demand parenting approaches, and sensory regulation techniques. Sessions will be facilitated by an Adoption UK clinician and a social worker from the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), ensuring a safe, engaging environment that promotes reflective learning. This co-facilitation model will strengthen expertise within adoption agencies while enabling the seamless delivery of therapeutic support to families. As a result, all three RAAs will be able to offer regular, accessible courses to adoptive families throughout the year.

With a continued focus on developing effective commissioning arrangements, the potential for a pan-regional commissioning framework for the delivery of therapeutic services is currently being explored. This work is underway and will include an updated needs assessment across the pan-regional footprint. However, there are recognised challenges in coordinating this approach across three Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), which collectively cover 15 local authorities. These challenges are

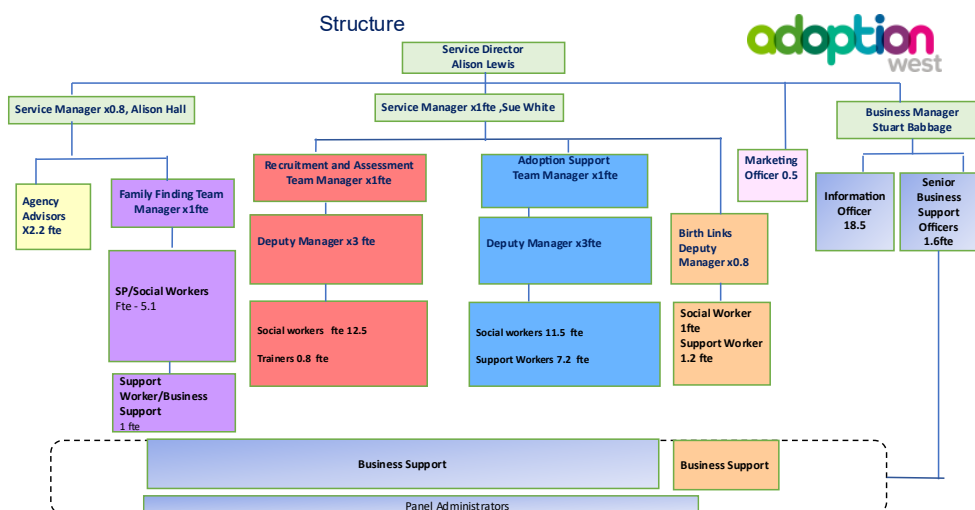
particularly significant in relation to aligning procurement processes and accessing appropriate legal services within the South West local authority context.

Multi-Disciplinary Team

In 2025 Adoption West was successful in a bid that had been previously put forward to Adoption England in 2023, for grant funding to begin the development of a multidisciplinary team to bolster the support service for families both pre and post order. This enable Adoption West to create an internal post for a clinical psychologist which we successfully recruited to with Helen Woods starting in post on 7th April 2026. The grant funding has been increased for 2026/27 which will enable Adoption West to recruit to further posts and develop the team. We look forward to sharing more information about this exciting development during 2026-27.

People

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



Efforts to improve staff retention have had a successful impact with only 7 permanent members of staff leaving, 4 of whom retired:

- Jane Priborsky – Team Manager had been in social work for over 30 years
- Julia Medin Perez – had worked as a social worker for 20 years
- Julia Chandler a member of business support who had worked for over 40 years for Wiltshire Council then Adoption West.
- Amanda Haskins – member of business support

We have welcomed a new team manager for the Recruitment and Assessment team Bill Boon who joined us from South Gloucestershire Council in April.

Through the course of the year there has been seven members of staff on maternity leave at some point in the year with two returning in year. Along with supporting development worked funded by Adoption England and providing opportunities for flexible working there has been movement within the staffing arrangements. Consequently, there have been a number of temporary posts in place to provide the required cover.

Additional Adoption England funding enabled the South West Permanence project to recruit a support worker.

On 31st March, there was a part time support worker and part time deputy manager vacancy.

The Senior Management Team, as detailed below, remains very stable. All four managers have been with Adoption West since March 2019 and have been in their current posts for at least 5 ½ years:

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 and Placement Support (RAPS) & 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 £4.659 million in 2025/26 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	4,027
Other employee related spend	96
Commissioned Services, subs & adopter recruitment activity	169
Post Adoption Support activity	104
ICT & Office Costs	168
Other Support Services	95
Total	4,659

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

In accordance with the Adoption West complaints procedure managers strive to resolve issues that arise by discussion and local resolution. There have been 3 complaints that were managed at stage 1. 2 were resolved being partially upheld with outcomes accepted. The third progressed to stage 2 and at the end of the year was being managed jointly with BANES Council complaints team under the statutory complaints' guidance. A further complaint was received but was suspended due to ongoing legal proceedings and no further action since.

There was one data breach by Adoption West staff in this period, which was remedied, considered low risk. There have also been a data breach by a local authority which has impacted a family, we have been working with that team to ensure there has been a satisfactory robust risk assessment and appropriate support for the family.

Concluding Remarks

As we reflect on the past year, it is clear that the landscape of adoption continues to evolve amid both opportunity and challenge. The changes to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund have been particularly significant. While the continuation of the Fund demonstrates an ongoing commitment to supporting some of our most vulnerable children and their families, the adjustments to funding arrangements and thresholds has been challenging for families and required the adoption support team, adopters and providers to adapt quickly. We recognise the dedication of practitioners and adopters who have navigated these changes with resilience, adapting previous plans to ensure that children continue to receive therapeutic support.

At the same time, the Department for Education's consultation on the future of adoption support presents an important moment for reflection and influence. It highlights a national recognition that current systems must evolve to better meet the needs of adoptive families. In Adoption West we welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this dialogue and work with our partner local authorities to do so; we will continue to advocate for a sustainable, flexible, and child-centred support framework—one that recognises the complexity of trauma and the lifelong nature of adoption support.

However, these developments sit alongside a persistent national challenge: the recruitment of adoptive families. Across the sector, there remains a mismatch between the needs of children waiting for permanent homes and the number and

diversity of adopters coming forward. Addressing this requires a collective effort locally and nationally to strengthen our recruitment strategies, deepening our understanding of barriers to adoption, and ensuring that prospective adopters feel confident in the support they will receive, both before and long after a child joins their family. This report highlights the continued improvements being made in the support that is offered.

The stability of our team, is a key strength, enabling consistency of practice, the development of expertise, and strong, trusting relationships with families and local authority partners. This stability provides a solid foundation as we continue to evolve and respond to emerging needs. We have also maintained a clear focus on delivering our priorities within the resources available, ensuring that we operate effectively and responsibly within budget.

In conclusion, this year has seen significant progress and a number of important developments across the agency. These achievements reflect both our strategic focus and our commitment to continuously improving services for children and families and there remains more to do. We recognise that this progress would not have been possible without the ongoing dedication, professionalism, and resilience of the staff team. Their continued hard work and commitment ensures that we can continue to strive to deliver high-quality, responsive support to adopters, children, young people and birth relatives across the region. Sincere thanks to the whole team.

Looking ahead, we will build on this strong position to further enhance our services, strengthen partnerships, and continue to improve outcomes for children and adoptive families.

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

Bill Boon: Team Manager recruitment and Assessments

Jen Brennan: Team Manager Family Finding

Rebecca Myers: Marketing and Communications

Claire Jarvis: DTM Birth Links

Catherine Bull and Fran Emery – Senior Business Support Officers

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:

- Phoebe Holland – Interim Assistant Director Children and Young Peoples Service, Bath and North East Somerset
- Hannah Woodhouse – Director of Children's Services Bristol City Council (Chair and Responsible Individual)
- Paul Shallcross – Service Director Children and Families, Gloucestershire County Council (Vice Chair)
- Gary Jones/Ben Short – Interim/Permanent Assistant Director of Children's Services, North Somerset Council
- Leigh Zywek – Service Director Children's Social Care and Preventative Services, South Gloucestershire Council
- Nicole Mills - Director Families and Children's Services, Wiltshire Council

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 - Adoptive Parent, It Takes a Village Director
- Alison Lewis – Adoption West Service Director
- Stuart Babbage - Adoption West Business Manager

Local Authority Adoption Lead Managers Group:

- Jo Parker – Interim Head of Service: Care Outcomes, Bath & North East Somerset Council
- Carrie Yeates – Head of Permanence and Specialist Services and Tara Parsons Head of Children's Safeguarding and Targeted 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 Careswell – Service Manager, South Gloucestershire Council
- Clare Smith– 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 Dine Romero (Chair) - Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Katja Hornchen -Bristol City Council
- Cllr Natalie Rothwell-Warn - Gloucestershire County Council
- Cllr Joe Tristram - North Somerset Council
- Cllr Sandra Emms - South Gloucestershire Council
- Cllr Julie Vine - Wiltshire Council

Non-voting Members

- Lisa Bradley – Adoptive parent, It Takes a Village Trustee