

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

14 December 2021

Subject: Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2020-2021 Year End Report

Cabinet member: Cllr Laura Mayes Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Skills

Key Decision: Non Key

Executive Summary

It is a statutory requirement that the Wiltshire Council Adoption Service provides a year-end report to the Council. It describes the management arrangements, outcomes, priorities, and finances of the Agency for the period 01 April 2019 to 31 March 2021.

This is the Wiltshire Council Adoption Service report, with the Council retaining responsibility for the child's journey to adoption.

The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), Adoption West (AW), launched on 01 March 2019. This is the second annual report which relates to two full years of the new organisation being operational. Adoption West is a Local Authority Trading Company that is owned by the six partner Local Authorities and commissioned by them to provide defined adoption services, including responsibility for recruiting, assessing and approving adopters for our children. Adoption West is registered with Ofsted as a Voluntary Adoption Agency and it is managed by a Service Director who reports to the Board of Directors. Wiltshire Council retains overall responsibility for the adoption of our children whilst other functions are undertaken by Adoption West.

This reporting period ends on 31 March 2021, two years since the launch of Adoption West. There are some national Scorecard measures that cover a three-year period and thus aspects of this report relate to Wiltshire Council performance, where functions have since moved to Adoption West. The most recent nationally published Scorecard available is from 2020 which covers 2017-2020.

Wiltshire Council's adoption work was inspected by Ofsted in June 2019 as part of the wider inspection of Families and Children's Services. This included discussion with the Service Director of Adoption West and the scrutiny of information from that organisation. The overall inspection judgement was Good. The inspection report referred to adoption as one of the Council's options for permanence for children. It said the arrangements for finding children adoptive parents are a strength and that the relationship with Adoption West "is working well and has been seamless for both children and carers". The report added

that “children in Wiltshire are waiting less time than ever to move in with their adoptive family, scrutiny of the performance of the RAA is thorough and challenging”. The report also stated that there “has been no detriment to Wiltshire children; in fact, performance has improved”. There were no improvement recommendations made.

In 2019/20, 22 Adoption Orders were granted, and 21 families living in Wiltshire were approved as suitable to Adopt. For the year 2020/21, 23 Adoption Orders have been granted for Wiltshire children and 33 families living in Wiltshire have been approved as suitable to adopt. Across the Adoption West area there have been 100 adopter approvals; exceeding the target of 95 approvals by 5%. The target for 2020/21 remains 95 approvals, with a focus on more adopters for siblings and older children.

Over the last six years, the number of children entering care where adoption is in their best interest has decreased. This has been more pronounced in the last 2 years, primarily driven by an increase in the number of children where a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangement Order has been determined to be a more desirable and suitable permanence option for them; adoption being the last resort. Nationally over the last six years there has been a gradual decline in Adoption being the outcome: from 17% in 2014/15 to 12% in 2019/20. The % decline for Wiltshire was from 14% in 2014/15 to 12% in 2019/20. In the same period Special Guardianship Orders have increased from 11% to 13% nationally. For Wiltshire this is particularly the case for very young children under the age of 4 years old who are often able to find a loving and supportive home environment with a set of grandparents or connected carers. It is anticipated that over future years this trend, will continue. What this is likely to lead to is the total cohort of children requiring an adoptive placement being older children, who may have more complex needs and as a result be more challenging to find suitable adopters for. Adoption West has a strategy in place to recruit more adopters for older children and sibling groups to account for this.

The recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters is completed by Adoption West; children from Wiltshire can be placed for adoption with any Adoption West approved adopters, not only those living in Wiltshire. Previously, interagency placements have been made outside Wiltshire, so these now only apply where children move to live outside the Adoption West area, meaning a reduced spend on such placements.

Within Adoption West, there are currently 35 prospective adopters in Stage 1 and 43 in Stage 2 of the assessment process. As of 31 March 2021, there are 56 approved adopters waiting for a match, not including those with an Early Permanence (EP) placement. An EP placement refers to the situation where children in care may be placed in a home at the earliest opportunity by being placed with adopters who are also approved as foster carers, who initially foster the child and may become their adopters once the court proceedings have been concluded.

Comparative performance for local authorities is via the Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows that performance remains strong with overall

continued improvement. The Government has not yet given clarity about how the Scorecard will be used by the Regional Adoption Agencies.

Adoption West has not yet been inspected by Ofsted. An inspection was anticipated before the Covid-19 pandemic effectively suspended all Ofsted inspection activity, but this has now resumed. Adoption agencies are inspected every 3 years and thus we anticipate an inspection of Adoption West within the next 12 months.

Proposal(s)

It is recommended that the contents of this report are considered against the Corporate Parenting Strategic Priority for children looked after to have a loving home, good relationships, and respect. It is requested that this report is noted and accepted.

Reason for Proposal

Wiltshire Council is an Adoption Agency registered with Ofsted. The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards (25.6) and 2013 Statutory Guidance (3.93 and 5.39) describe the information that is required to be reported to the executive side of the local authority, on a six-monthly basis, to provide assurance that the adoption agency is complying with the conditions of registration whilst being effective and achieving good outcomes for children.

Adoption West is subject to separate scrutiny arrangements through its own Joint Scrutiny Panel, the current Chair being Cllr Jon Hubbard.

Terence Herbert
Chief Executive

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

14 December 2021

Subject: Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2020-21 Year End Report

Cabinet member: Cllr Laura Mayes Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Skills

Key Decision: Non Key

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report provides a year-end report to Cabinet regarding the performance of the Wiltshire Council Adoption Service, alongside a consideration of the effectiveness of Adoption West. It is a requirement of the condition of registration, as described in the 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards and 2013 Statutory Guidance, that Cabinet is satisfied the Adoption Agency complies with the conditions of registration, is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. These Standards and Guidance have not yet been specifically revised to describe the reporting requirements for the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).
- 1.2 Cabinet received an Annual Report regarding the Adoption Service in July 2020, covering the period from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. This report relates to the full year 2020/21 reporting period. Cabinet also received an interim six-month report in January 2021.
- 1.3 The Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in June 2019 (arriving at the overall judgement of Good) which included the Adoption Service, noted that adoption work in the local authority, and in partnership with Adoption West, is a strength.
- 1.4 This report includes information regarding the management and performance of the Wiltshire Council Adoption Service and the Wiltshire Adoption Scorecard, relating to children who require adoptive families and those who are placed, the disruption of placements and children where the plan for adoption changes. It also includes summary information about the recruitment and approval of adopters by Adoption West and the work of the Adoption West Panel. It should be noted that details of the performance of Adoption West as an organisation can be accessed in that organisation's annual report.
- 1.5 It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and accepted.

2. Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

- 2.1 The Wiltshire Council Adoption Service contributes to a central priority as set out in the Wiltshire Council Business Plan 2017-2027; namely to protect those who are most vulnerable and provide permanent homes for children in care.
- 2.2 The identification of adoptive families for Wiltshire children remains a priority for the Council. Wiltshire Council remains an adoption agency because it retains responsibility for children requiring adoption. Adoption West has responsibility for the recruitment, assessment and approval of adoptive families, family finding and adoption support.

3. Main Considerations for the Council

- 3.1 The main consideration for the Council is to be assured about statutory compliance and the effectiveness of the Adoption Service. In 2018/19, 33 children were adopted and in 2019/20 22 children were adopted. In 2020/21 23 children were adopted, of these 18 (78%) were placed within 12 months of the decision that adoption was in their best interest being made. In 2018/19, 27 adoptive families were approved by the Council, in 2019/20, 21 families living in Wiltshire were approved by Adoption West as suitable to adopt, and in 20/21 33 families living in Wiltshire were approved by Adoption West as suitable to adopt. In the wider RAA area (including Wiltshire) 100 were approved. Sufficiency of approved families must be maintained through the work of Adoption West. Adoption West are currently reviewing their adopter recruitment strategy to ensure that this targets more directly adopters for older children and sibling groups.
- 3.2 Wiltshire's current Adoption Scorecard (most recently published performance to March 2020) shows that performance remains strong with overall continued improvement over the 3 year period. We have seen some fluctuation in the past year; this is not significant and given the considerable change brought about through the launch of Adoption West, this is not a cause for concern but will continued to be monitored. Due to the time lag in the nationally published data no scorecard has been produced for the period that all RAAs have been in operation. At present, each local authority Adoption Agency still has a scorecard and there are three key measures that are included:

A10: the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (date of adoptive placement or fostering for adoption placement i.e. Early Permanence approved Adopters that have joint Fostering approval), for children who have been adopted:

- The latest nationally published adoption scorecard three-year average (2017-20) for Wiltshire is 300 days. This is shorter than the three-year average of 315 days in 2016-19 and shorter than the England three-year average for the same period of 367 days. The statistical neighbour average in 2017-20 was 352 days.

- Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2018-21 to be 354 days, an increase on the 2017-2020 published data and largely reflective of a greater proportion of adoptions in 2020-21 being from a 'harder to place' demographic which has had an impact. At the outset of Covid-19 there was some initial minimal delay within the courts, but Swindon quickly set up virtual courts. Adoption West implemented a risk assessment model to ensure that transitions could progress for children transitioning to their adoptive placements. This has not had a significant impact upon the increase.
- The local authority figure for the single year 2020-21 is estimated at 420 days, up from 333 in the previous year. Factors contributing to time taken are discussed in paragraph 10.

A2: the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family:

- The latest published local authority three-year average (2017-20) is 120 days for Wiltshire. This is a decrease on the previous year's data of 154 days (2016-19) and shorter than the national average of 175 days over the same period. The statistical neighbour average in 2017-20 was 184 days.
- Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2018-21 as 128.
- The locally reported one-year figure for 2020-21 is estimated at 157 days, again a slight increase from 142 days in 2019-20 and 100 days in 2018-19. Whilst showing an increasing trend this still remains lower than the latest published average for England and our statistical neighbours.

A20: the average time between entering care and placement order:

- In the latest published data (2017-20), the three-year average was 214 days against a national average of 256 days and a statistical neighbour average of 224 days.
- Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2018-21 as 224 days. The one-year figures for the 2020-21 and 2019-20 are 234 and 209 respectively, both of which remain below the latest published 2020 averages for England and our statistical neighbours.

3.3 The most recent Scorecard three-year averages relate to 2017-20. The scorecard data for 2018-21 will be published by the DfE in the Summer of 2022. Due to reporting delays with the scorecard, this report includes the indicative locally reported figures described above. This data highlights a slight decrease in performance in 2020-21 after successive years of continual improvement. Indicator A10, for example, shows that it took longer for children to be placed in their adoptive families after being received into care whilst indicator A2 shows that it has taken slightly longer to match a child to a family, after the placement order has been made. Recognising

the numbers are small, these indicators can be impacted by a local authorities' persistence in delivering permanence for a child where adoption continues to be in their best interest, despite factors which may make them "harder to place" such as sibling groups and children with complex health needs.

In 2020-21, for example, 5% of the children aged 5 and over who left care were adopted compared to 1% in 2019-20 and 2% in 2018-19.

These rises are accounted for as the cohort of children counted includes:

Two sibling groups one of which included children aged 6 and 4 years whose adoption was completed in November 2020, where there were protracted care proceedings due to a family member putting themselves forward at a late stage and assessments then being negative.

A sibling group aged 8 and 2 years where the younger child's placement with adopters was purposefully delayed to enable his older sister, with complex emotional needs, to settle first into placement. With older children adopters often require more time for children to settle prior to them making a formal application to adopt to give them more confidence in their application.

Two older single children aged 7 and 11 years, for one child there had been protracted Care Proceedings and delays through the Care and Adoption proceedings due to father seeking to appeal court decisions at each stage.

For two younger children care proceedings were protracted due to international elements.

All these children achieved adoption orders during 2020.

Removal of these children from the above scorecard measures would result in 2020-21 figures of 327 days for A10 (vs 420 where included), 128 days for A2 (vs 157) and 179 days for A20 (vs 234). This evidences the detrimental impact on timeliness measures that can be caused by a local authority persisting in pursuing the best interests of a particular child or sibling group.

- 3.4 Overall, this demonstrates continued commitment to seek secure, permanent arrangements for all children where adoption is in their best interest, even though they are hard to place. To ensure continued progress and improvement, careful attention will be given to all aspects of adoption work that remain the responsibility of Wiltshire Council Adoption Service, whilst ensuring, through governance arrangements and challenge, the effectiveness of Adoption West.
- 3.5 Robust processes have remained in place and have continued to be developed within the Council functions and in Adoption West, to ensure that family finding starts at the earliest opportunity and that all activities are monitored and completed in a timely way. Adoption West has developed

best practice to ensure good outcomes for Wiltshire's children who require adoptive families.

- 3.6 Management arrangements and staffing within the Council are compliant with regulation in terms of qualification and experience. The Director of Children's Services (DCS) has overall responsibility for aspects of adoption retained by the Council. Reporting to the DCS is the Director with responsibility for the Families and Children's Service. Until December 2020 the Head of Service and Service Manager for Children in Care and Young People held responsibility to ensure the effectiveness of overall adoption provision and the Service Manager was the designated link with Adoption West. Following the retirement of the Service Manager in the Children in Care and Young People service the decision was taken that this area of responsibility would move to the Support and Safeguarding service on the basis that most Wiltshire children on an adoption journey are held within the Support and Safeguarding Service. The Service Director for Adoption West came into post in July 2018. This provides strength and clear accountability with an opportunity to develop and challenge the strategy for improvement and ensure best outcomes for children.
- 3.7 Wiltshire Council retains case responsibility for children who require adoptive families. These children are usually allocated to social workers within the Support and Safeguarding part of the organisation (occasionally in Children in Care Teams, when a child is relinquished), where work is carried out, with support from colleagues in Adoption West, to ensure appropriate and timely decision making to achieve adoption. Each of these case holding teams is appropriately managed within the Families and Children's Service.
- 3.8 The core task of adoption work, as carried out by Wiltshire Council and Adoption West, is to provide secure, stable adoptive families for children who require legal permanence and are no longer able to remain living safely with their parents or other family members. The Council retains case holding responsibility and, therefore, responsibility for the outcomes for children, although direct services are provided by Adoption West, as follows:
- The recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters: this provides permanency options for children through the recruitment, assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. Recommended for approval by the Adoption West Adoption Panel, with decisions made by the Service Director of Adoption West, adopters are then matched with children through the family finding process. Wiltshire social workers work closely with colleagues from Adoption West to do this in a timely way.
 - The support of adoptive families and their children to ensure placement stability and that the needs of children are fully met: Services that can be made available include therapeutic support, counselling, training, family days, newsletters and a link to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Staff are also responsible for managing referrals to the Adoption Support Fund

which increases adopters' access to specific services for adoption support.

- The provision of an intermediary service for adopted adults and birth relatives wishing to trace family members, for those wishing to trace adopted children, support for non-agency adoptions (typically step-parents wishing to adopt), support for birth families and those wishing to adopt children from overseas.

4. The Council has policy and guidance regarding permanence for children which ensures that those requiring adoptive families move towards that outcome in a timely way.

4.1 The Adoption West Statement of Purpose is available on that organisation's website and states the key objectives of the agency as:

- More children will be identified earlier for an adoption plan
- We will recruit a larger pool of adopters with diverse skills and abilities including more adoptive parents able to consider "hard to place" children
- Fewer children will wait more than 6 months for an adoptive family
- Children will experience fewer moves before being settled into a permanent home
- Our adopters will be better prepared with relevant training and support
- There will be fewer disrupted adoptions
- We will be more efficient with our resources to achieve best value
- An increased range of post-adoption services will reach more adoptive families to improve the quality of family relationships
- Children and young people will have a strong sense of their identity.

5. The key governance task is to continue to ensure that the work of Adoption West is effective, that management is robust and can deliver sustained improvement which can meet the needs of the region through each of the six local authorities working in partnership with other Voluntary Adoption Agencies. There are benefits to be gained in terms of the recruitment and sharing of a pool of adopters across the area who can best meet the needs of children requiring adoptive families and therefore increased opportunity for timely matching of children with those families, particularly those who may be considered harder to place.

As required to be provided to Cabinet, this report provides performance information relating to the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

6. **Profile of Wiltshire children waiting for an adoptive placement at year end**

Legal status	2018/19	2019/20	20/21
Section 20	0	7	0
Interim Care Order	19	5	4
Care Order	0	5	9
None	2	0	0
Total	21	17	13

Ethnic Origin	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
White British	20	16	10
Mixed/Other	0	0	3
White Irish	0	0	0
Other Ethnic Group	1	1	0
Total	21	17	13

Age	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
0-11 months	3	3	4
12-23 months	2	1	2
2-4 years	6	7	5
5-10 years	10	6	2
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	21	17	13

To be noted is that some children remained at home with birth family whilst subject to care proceedings with a care plan for adoption. This meant that other permanence options (such as Special Guardianship Orders) will be considered by the court for these children.

7. **Wiltshire Children adopted**

Age	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
0-11 months	4	2	1
12-23 months	15	12	6
2-4 years	9	6	8
5-10 years	5	2	8
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	33	22	23

Wiltshire Children matched within Adoption West	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
	13 children placed in 11 placements within Wiltshire. 8 children in 5 placements	15 children placed with Adoption West Families 6 children placed with families	19 children placed with Adoption West Families 4 children placed with families

	within Adoption West	outside Adoption West	outside Adoption West
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8. Rescissions of Placement Orders and Disruptions

- 8.1 In 2020/21, 6 rescissions were made where the plan for the child moved away from adoption (5 in the previous year), leading to the rescission of Placement Orders. In one case following an updating parenting assessment of father the child became subject to a Child Arrangement Order with her father and in another case following a grandparent challenging the Local Authority assessment via the court arena the court ordered the child become subject to a Special Guardianship Order with her grandmother.

Three of these were older children where there had been agreed time limited searches, and one child had significant health complexities recognising that it was likely to be challenging to identify an adoptive family. These four children are now in long-term fostering arrangements. Wiltshire Council applies rigorous scrutiny to care planning and it is inevitable that there will be developments in a case or a child's situation that means that adoption is no longer in that child's best interest; for example, a family member or parent can resume the care of a child where it had not previously been envisaged, a court may not grant a Placement Order requested by the Local Authority but may make a Special Guardianship Order instead or a plan will move to long term fostering, particularly for older children and those with complex health needs. We have introduced a protocol whereby the ADM will urgently review any case where a Court doesn't grant a Placement Order. This ensures senior management oversight wherever there is a change of care plan away from adoption

- 8.2 During 2020-2021, there has been 1 adoption placement disruption, relating to Wiltshire a child, notified to the Council before an Adoption Order was made. This involved an older child aged 6 years, who had experienced neglect prior to coming into care aged 4 years and remained in the same foster placement forming a strong attachment with these carers whilst adoptive carers were identified. The search for an adoptive placement given the child's needs and age were relatively lengthy. The transition was positively managed, the child initially appeared settled, however after a period of 4 months an incident occurred where the child alleged being hurt by being pushed by the female adopter, the adopters felt unable to accept support and requested the placement come to an end. It was considered by the professional group that the best interests of the child would be met by returning to the previous foster carers. Following formal review by the ADM the decision has been made to rescind the decision for adoption, and the child will be remaining with her foster carers long term with consideration to an SGO in the longer term to further secure permanence. A formal disruption meeting has taken place to identify learning. There have been no placement breakdowns that occurred post-order when the child returned to being looked after. This demonstrates strong matching on the whole.
- 8.3 Full details of the recruitment and assessment activity of Adoption West is available in their Annual Report and so is not included here. However,

Cabinet requires assurance of sufficiency for Wiltshire children and so, in summary, at 31st March 2021, Adoption West had approved 100 families in the year of which 33 lived in the Wiltshire area. 15 families in Wiltshire have children placed for adoption, 1 is currently matched with a child. In the Adoption West area there are currently 56 families approved of which 18 live in Wiltshire. There are 12 Wiltshire based families in the assessment and approval process. This indicates the scope of the pool of adopters that is potentially available for our children and it is anticipated that this will be a sufficient pool of adopters in Adoption West for Wiltshire's children.

One principle of Adoption West is that there will be more people becoming approved as adopters who are more immediately accessible to social workers looking for families for Wiltshire children. It is not necessarily the case that these children will be placed with adopters living in Wiltshire as the match with the family best placed to provide permanence through adoption, and meet the needs of the child, is paramount. The wider access to adopters will support children where there are concerns about the proximity of birth parents and families to adopters' homes. It is nationally recognised that it is more challenging to find placements for children with complex needs, older children and sibling groups and so a larger pool of prospective adopters, who Adoption West knows well, is a benefit. During 2020/21, only 15 % of adopters approved have been for sibling placements, compared with approximately 50% of the children requiring these placements. Therefore, the target for 2021/22 is to increase the number of sibling places to 25-35% of all approvals. This will still mean that 'out of region' placements will be required, but with a decreased reliance on them.

9. Financial summary of the agency

9.1 The tables below indicate the budget, and actual expenditure for the financial year 2020/21 compared to the actual spend for 2019/20. Spend on Special Guardianship allowances continues to increase; however, adoption Allowances spend for 2020/21 has reduced. The increase expenditure of the Special Guardianship allowances reflects children moving up through the age-related bands with more children aged 11yrs and over. There has been a steady increase in Special Guardianship Orders being made; in 2018/2019, 24 SGO's were granted, 2019/2020 this increased to 28 and in 2020/2021 this has increased to 38.

	20-21 Budget (£)	20-21 Year End Final Spend (£)	Comparison 19-20 Year End Final Spend (£)
Salaries and team running costs	0	1,271	13,470
Adoption Allowances (all types)	785,860	560,239	759,261
Special Guardianship Allowances	1,833,190	2,014,203	1,782,259
Adoption income	0	-140,333	-191,072

Contractual Payment: Adoption WEST	764,960	732,220	762,634
Total	3,384,010	3,167,599	3,126,551

9.2 There have continued to be adoptive families who are financially supported to look after Wiltshire children in addition to those who are supported through Residence Order (RO) and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) allowances. Numbers of families and total costs are indicated below:

	At 31 March 2019 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2020 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2021 Children/Carers
RO Allowance	10/9	8/8	7/7
Adoption Allowance	34/27	33/27	28/22
SGO Allowance	213/164	243/185	195/150
Total	257/200	284/220	280/211

	2019/20		2020/21	
	Budget (£)	Actual Expenditure (£)	Budget (£)	Actual Expenditure (£)
RO Allowance	87,520	68,224	87,520	64,405
Adoption Allowance	324,390	340,506	368,590	309,718
SGO Allowance	1,714,190	1,782,259	1,833,190	2,014,203
TOTAL	2,126,100	2,190,989	2,289,300	2,388,326

- In addition to the allowances indicated above, Wiltshire adoptive families have access to therapeutic services provided by CAMHS through the partnership with the local authority. The structure of the offer is currently changing, due to CAMHS service reconfiguration, within the specific service provision value of approximately £80,000.

9.3 In this reporting period, and prior to Adoption West becoming operational, the local authority continued to apply for funds from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to enable families to access commissioned therapeutic services. At 31 March 2021 there were 93 allocated Wiltshire families who were receiving adoption support (92 in the previous year) and 131(149) applications had been made to the ASF (this is the number of applications relating to therapy delivered in the reporting period, the actual applications

may have been made earlier), with the current budget being administered of approximately £328,114. Adoption West works actively within the £5,000 fair access limit per child and has sought match funding from the local authority for 4 children when there has been significant risk of placement breakdown. As in previous years, the most common types of therapy provided remain DDP, Sensory Integration Therapy and creative therapies such as art or play therapy.

- 9.4 The outturn budget for Adoption Allowances is broadly in line with the activity. Costs per adoption have increased over time. This reflects more “complex” adoptions being supported (often in adolescence, as the needs of the child change or are better understood, and to prevent placement breakdown as the cohort of children grows older). In addition, the limitations of the Adoption Support Fund only financing therapy for children plus the requirement of the local authority to contribute, means that some adoptive placements require additional financial support to maintain stability.

10. Adoption Panel

	2018/19 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))	2019/20 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))	2020/21 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))
Panels held	18	56	68
Adoptive families considered	26	30	101
Matches considered	32 (24 Wiltshire children and 8 from other AW local authorities)	90 (21 Wiltshire matches)	73(14 Wiltshire matches)
Relinquished Children	0	4 (0 Wiltshire Council)	4 (1 Wiltshire Council)
Reviews of Adopters notified	0		0

- 10.1 The Adoption West Adoption Panel complies with Regulation. This is important assurance as children who are the responsibility of Wiltshire Council are matched with adopters at these panels. One Panel is hosted by the Council under the partnership “hub” arrangement although the management and dedicated administration rests with Adoption West. Adoption Panels are not the direct responsibility of the local authority. The panel is chaired by a suitably skilled and experienced Independent Chair who ensures that the functions of panel are delivered effectively. There are Agency Panel Advisers from Adoption West to ensure that the panel is always adequately supported. To ensure that panels are quorate, there is an Adoption West central list of panel members established which includes members with direct experience of adoption, including adopters, and those who have been adopted.
- 10.2 To comply with regulation, all Panel members, including the Chair, receive annual appraisals which consider their effectiveness as panel members and

any areas for development. There is an annual training day; the most recent for Adoption West took place in November 2020 with a focus on diversity. This ensures that panel members consider their effectiveness and are updated regarding statutory and legislative changes along with Adoption West developments and improvements to practice. The Chairs meet regularly with the Panel Advisors to discuss operational and developmental issues relating to the panels' work and consistency, making any changes and improvements as required. There are regular liaison meetings between Council managers and Adoption West managers and the Panel Advisor.

- 10.3 The arrangement for Panel recommendations being considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is robust. ADM decisions about Matches are made by the Local Authority responsible for the child with decisions about suitability to Adopt being made by the ADM within Adoption West. This ensures that adopters are informed of decisions promptly following Panel recommendations.
- 10.4 The Matches Considered section in the table above highlights the decline in children overall being matched for adoption in the Adoption West area. Over the three years there has also been a decline in children being matched for adoption in Wiltshire from 24 in 2018-2019 to 14 in 2020-2021 this fits the national trend as noted earlier in the report.
- 10.5 To ensure capacity and availability within Wiltshire Council, there are currently three senior managers who take the ADM responsibility for children on a rota basis within the organisation, with administrative support and a clear process in place to make sure that ADM decisions are made within timescale.

11. Commentary

- 11.1 The main externally reported performance information for Wiltshire Council is included in the Adoption Scorecard and is summarised above. The impact of legacy cases is noted alongside local reported actual and predictive figures. Of note are some aspects of performance that have slowed in improvement or have decreased due, in part, to the age and complexities of individual children who need adoptive families, and the complexities within the Court decision making arena. The journeys of children to adoption are tracked and scrutinised, including through the Council's Permanence Panel. Any delay or drift is robustly challenged and prevented.
- 11.2 The locally reported data indicates that improvement is needed to maintain the positive trajectory noted over the last 10 years and so attention will be paid to the role of the Council and Adoption West in these areas of work. This is regularly discussed at the Board of Directors meetings and within other performance and scrutiny forums. Overall, for the last 10 years, timeliness of adoption for Wiltshire's children has improved year on year because of improved systems and planning that are focussed on outcomes for children. Robust management arrangements are in place within the local authority and in Adoption West, providing a solid foundation for continued improvement.

- 11.3 Continued improvement of performance of indicator A10 requires permanence planning to be timely and responsive to a child's needs. The second review (held four months after a child becomes looked after) must identify an appropriate plan where the decision is that permanence is the preferred option. To ensure timely planning and decision making, the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer, working alongside the child's Social Worker, provides challenge and oversight to a case. This is checked through audit and supervision. Permanency Options Meetings are used on all cases to decide which options are right for a child and required actions are identified, supporting the care planning process. The terms of reference of the monthly Permanence Panel ensures that children have an appropriate plan for permanence, including adoption, at the right time in their care pathway. In addition, the pace at which matters proceed through the legal process has improved over recent years. The average duration of proceedings for 20/21 was 32.9 weeks, whilst this is slightly down from 28 weeks in March 2019/20 through robust tracking, we know that Covid-19, amongst other key factors (i.e. international elements, late identification of family members, and need for expert witness/assessments) had a slight impact whilst Courts adjusted to virtual working.
- 11.4 Whilst there have been some fluctuations in the number of newly approved adopters over recent years, but as noted there needs to be more choice for our harder to place children. Adoption West are presently undertaking a targeted campaign to recruit adopters who are interested in adopting sibling groups and older children, which will increase the pool for those children, and intend specific recruitment targeting for children with complex medical needs for the later part of this year. Whilst this is positive, perhaps a better indication of overall effectiveness and impact upon outcomes for children is how many children are adopted and in what timescale. The percentage of children leaving care through adoption in 2020/21 in Wiltshire was 13% (12% nationally in 2018-19, the most recent national comparative figure). Currently Adoption West has 73 assessments in progress, of which 12 are "Wiltshire based". As previously indicated, it is this larger pool which is available for Wiltshire children, but this will only meet our needs if the adopters for older children and complex needs are approved and if the overall pool is sufficient to meet the needs of the other six Local Authorities in Adoption West.
- 11.5 As of 31st March 2021, there were 10 children "waiting" for adoption only 1 of these children had waited for 6-12 months, with the majority having been waiting less than 3 months. Promoting the needs of Wiltshire's children, Adoption West uses Link Maker for all children, initially using anonymised profiles to identify potential links before Placement Orders are secured. When a Placement Order is made, a fuller profile is added and if children are considered "hard to place", the circulation of the profile will be broadened, this may include submission to national and regional activity days where potential adopters can "see" the children. There is development of "virtual events" underway. Adoption West have a dedicated Family Finding Team from within existing resources to improve this area of work. Link Maker is a national on-line resource that is adopter-led and provides adopters with information about children needing adoptive families. It has produced quicker matching for some children and national searches are

made for children considered 'hard to place'. The use of Link Maker continues to have a vital place in family finding for children since the National Adoption Register was closed on 31st March 2019. No specific advertising took place and Link Maker remains the main source of out of county adopters. In some situations, and if required, adopters may be recruited either locally or via another adoption agency for specific children waiting. This strategy has not recently been used for Wiltshire children as placements have been identified from Adoption West, from Voluntary Adoption Agencies or other Local Authorities. Adoption West will have a positive impact on the timely placement of children with adoptive families as it widens the pool of approved adopters available. Adoption West have a dedicated Family Finding Team from within existing resources to improve this area of work. Since December 2020 the Service Manager within Wiltshire Council with lead for adoption has established monthly meetings with the Manager of the Adoption West Family Finding team to track and monitor all children on the adoption Journey in Wiltshire and ensure any potential blocks are considered and discussed at an early stage.

- 11.6 Early Permanence (EP) practice is established in Wiltshire with all EP carers within Adoption West being potentially available for Wiltshire children. In 2020-21, 9 Wiltshire children were referred for EP and 4 were placed with EP carers. The issue of location can be key in placing children in an EP placement due to the need to facilitate regular contact and ensure young children are not travelling long distances on a regular basis. In the preceding year, 11 children were referred and 1 were placed. Of the 33 adoptive families approved in the Wiltshire area in this reporting period, 19 were open to consider EP placements. Two of these Wiltshire EP Carers have been matched with children from other LA's and currently there are 7 Wiltshire EP carers approved who do not yet have a child placed. adopters not yet
- 11.7 Adoption West positively assesses potential adopters and seeks approval of their suitability through the Adoption West Panel. It is important that there is a pool of adopters who can look after children on an EP basis and where the long-term plan is adoption - and for children where there is concurrent planning for a potential return home. Such placements fall under the umbrella of Early Permanence. Regulation allows for children to be placed in these circumstances with the approval of the local authority. Adoption West is working towards implementing Panel arrangements whereby prospective adopters can also be approved as foster carers (dual approved), further facilitating EP arrangements. For the potential adopters, there is some uncertainty associated with such placements, as the child could return home or move to family, and so adopters need to be able to manage this and appropriate support is provided. The local authority should be confident in presenting the legal case to court and being assertive in matching children with adopters where it is in their best interest to do so. This will further improve outcomes for children, timeliness and, therefore, Scorecard performance.
- 11.8 The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) process is designed to meet statutory requirements and not bring undue delay into the system. It is under

continual review to ensure it is effective, by ensuring that family finding, and matching work can begin at the earliest opportunity so that the time is reduced that children wait to be matched. This activity, linked to good Early Permanence practice and the opportunities provided by the pool of Adoption West adopters, allows placements to be made and matches agreed through Panel quickly and without reducing the rigour applied to ensure that all decisions are in the child's best interest. This will support improvement of A2.

- 11.9 It is anticipated that A20 performance will improve as the scrutiny and challenge provided by the Independent Reviewing Service and the work of Permanence Panel continue to drive timeliness and permanence planning.
- 11.10 It is important to note that the target has "tightened" in recent years and the measure is now taken over 14 months (previously 16 and 18 months), with progress remaining broadly positive. The emphasis placed on effective planning means that several children, where adoption was identified as being in the child's best interest, have had the ADM decision reversed and the Placement Order rescinded (6 this year), with an alternative permanence plan agreed without further undue delay for the child. Current care planning practice and robust challenge will not allow cases to drift, thus securing permanence for children. The Local Authority have recently updated the Recission Policy to ensure more timely decision making where the Court decision does not reflect ADM decision for adoption.
- 11.11 An Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel (JSP) is now in place, bringing the scrutiny function of the six local authorities into one panel. It is currently chaired by the Chairperson of Wiltshire Council's Children's Select Committee. In summary, the purpose of the JSP is to provide scrutiny and assurance to the respective local authorities regarding the effectiveness of Adoption West. Acting as a "critical friend", it will provide independent scrutiny whilst making constructive recommendations for improvement. The JSP will produce its own annual report.
- 11.12 Improving adoption practice within the Council and, in turn, supporting and improving the effectiveness of Adoption West remain priorities for the local authority. In doing so, the Council will ensure best outcomes for Wiltshire's children.

12. Actions

In considering this report, Cabinet is asked to endorse the following actions to continue to improve outcomes for children who need adoptive families. Wiltshire Council will:

- i. Use a range of management and performance information to track the effectiveness of adoption practice in terms of children requiring adoptive families to be confident that the work the Families and Children's Service and the partnership with Adoption West has positive impact on outcomes for Wiltshire's children.

- ii. Through the Board of Directors and the Service Leads Group, maintain a high level of involvement and challenge with Adoption West, meeting the needs of Wiltshire's children through ensuring good matching and support of adopters. The service leads meet bimonthly with Adoption West with their newly developed Homefinding Team. Wiltshire ADM's meet quarterly with other ADM's in the Adoption West area and Panel Chairs to discuss quality and areas for development.
- iii. Use the scrutiny and challenge of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel to improve outcomes for Wiltshire's children.
- iv. Regularly convene operational and strategic meetings between Council staff and Adoption West staff regarding the decision-making processes for children. Adoption West will also be asked to provide a copy of their quarterly return to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB).
- v. As new leads in the Directorate the Support and Safeguarding Service lead on adoption and are the link to the manager to Adoption West. We will work closely with Adoption West to ensure proactive and effective family finding practice to bring about timely identification of potential adoptive matches for children who require adoption. We plan to agree an auditing schedule to quality assure and improve oversight of timeliness so we can work jointly to identify any delay for children, early in the process and reduce any delay for children. Quarterly performance data will be scrutinised by the Performance and Outcomes Group chaired by the Head of Support and Safeguarding.
- vi. Through specific discussion and regular liaison meetings with the Wiltshire Family Justice Board we aim improve the way that the courts deal with care cases in a timely manner, recognising the potential delays for children where additional family members (sometimes multiple) may be considered as carers late in proceedings or where additional assessments are indicated. The Service Lead is a member of the Wiltshire Family Justice Board and oversees Pre-Proceedings and the Care Proceedings Manager. This gives improved oversight of cases across the service.
- vii. Continue to provide training, led by Adoption West, for children's social workers in writing Child Permanence Reports which are used in court, to match children to adopters and to be the central record of their life story. Child Permanence Training has taken place this year and further dates will be agreed to ensure that all staff undergo this training. Life Story Training is also be offered as part of our Directorate training plan.
- viii. The Scrutiny Board need to hold Adoption West to account to ensure a sufficiency of adopters who can meet the diverse needs of the population of children requiring adoption in Wiltshire with oversight of what Wiltshire children need and consider targets for the

recruitment of adopters for older children, siblings and those with complex needs. This would reduce delay for these children's, improve timeliness of our scorecard but more importantly achieve lasting permanence for these children via adoption.

- ix. In cases where it is recognised that the agency may struggle to match children with in-house prospective adopters, request Court consent to feature the children's profiles beyond Wiltshire's boundaries and, through Adoption West, be pro-active in referring children to regional and national family finding services once a Placement Order has been granted (sooner with the consent of the court).
- v. Ensure that where required and appropriate, match funding is applied to ASF applications to provide high quality support to adoptive families
- xi. Hold formal Disruption Meetings where adoption placements breakdown before Adoption Orders are made to consider key learning to inform whole service improvement.

13. Background

- 13.1 Adoption is a route to provide permanence for children who are no longer able to live safely with their parents or other family members. This is achieved through the provision of quality adoptive placements for Wiltshire's children where a decision has been made that adoption is in their best interest. This is achieved through effective working between the local authority and Adoption West.
- 13.2 The fundamental requirement is that children are placed with families who have been assessed as being suitable to adopt. A recommendation of suitability is made by the Adoption West Panel and this is ratified as a decision by that organisation's Agency Decision Maker (ADM). Through this process, there is rigorous assurance that approved adopters can provide safe, secure and enduring family placements for this vulnerable group of children. In turn, this allows them to grow, develop and thrive in a nurturing, supportive and loving family environment, removed from the stigma of being looked after by the local authority. To do this, there must be an appropriate range of enduring adoption placements to meet the assessed needs of children who need permanent adoptive families. These families must promote stability, safety and positive outcomes for children by working in partnership with all agencies, as required.
- 13.3 The legislative basis of this work is the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the accompanying 2005 Regulations. As indicated, Ofsted inspected the Service as part of the wider Ofsted inspection of the Families and Children's Service in June 2019. Adoption West is the Regional Adoption Agency and Wiltshire no longer carries out the full range of adoption functions as it did. The Council retains some aspects of adoption work and is an Adoption

Agency; the requirement to be inspected and for Cabinet to be assured remains.

- 13.4 The local authority, through reporting to Cabinet, must be assured of regulatory compliance and effectiveness through performance monitoring, challenge and improvement planning.
- 13.5 Adoption West has the responsibility to recruit, assess and approve adopters for children. This includes those who can provide permanence for children who may be considered “harder to place”. This group includes older children, sibling groups and children with disabilities. Adoption West remains part of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) which works regionally to identify matches for children across the area and it is also developing close working relationships with RAAs across the South West and nationally. Adoption West subscribes to Link Maker, an online adopter-lead resource.
- 13.6 Adoption West is a Voluntary Adoption Agency; a partnership of six local authorities working with a small number of locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies. It is the Regional Adoption Agency, providing adoption services in line with government requirement, from the point of expression of interest to adopt, through to assessment and approval at panel and beyond, to Adoption Support. Over time, it is anticipated that Adoption West will have an increasingly significant impact on outcomes for Wiltshire’s children as it delivers an effective regional response to adoption and the needs of children. The case responsibility for children remains with Wiltshire Council.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

All members of the Children’s Select Committee will also be made aware of the report prior to Cabinet, as well as having the opportunity to consider the report in advance.

14. Safeguarding Implications

- 14.1 Children who require adoptive families remain the responsibility of Wiltshire Council’s Families and Children’s Service. This service is delivered in accordance with Wiltshire Children’s Services Policy and Procedures, overseen by the Wiltshire Safeguarding Vulnerable People Panel. The local authority has clear and effective safeguarding procedures in place for children and vulnerable adults.
- 14.2 The partnership with Adoption West is carefully regulated and Adoption West has the appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures in place.
- 14.3 This report is for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

15. Public Health Implications

Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

16. Corporate Procurement Implications

Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

17. Equalities Impact of the Proposal (detailing conclusions identified from Equality Analysis, sections 4 and 5)

Throughout the adoption process due regard is had to the Public Sector equalities duties but as this report is for noting there are no specific equalities issues raised by this report.

18. Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

19. Risk Assessment

19.1 Risks that may arise if the performance and management of adoption work, and that of Adoption West with whom the Council is in partnership, is not effective and does not achieve good outcomes for children:

- Safeguarding risk to looked after children if they are placed with adopters who have not been fully assessed, prepared and supported. Safeguarding is considered a high-level risk within the corporate risk register
- An inadequate supply of adopters to meet the needs of children requiring permanence through adoption
- Reputational risk if the Agency or Adoption West is not effective and does not achieve good outcomes for children who require adoption
- Reputational risk if statutory timescales are not met regarding adoption
- Reputational risk if the Agency or Adoption West is rated as Inadequate through inspection
- Financial risk if placements are made, are unstable and subsequently breakdown leading to children returning to local authority care
- Financial risk if Adoption West is not effectively managed
- Risks associated with the safety and effectiveness of overall service delivery provided by Adoption West.

19.2 Effective delivery of the provision of adoptive families to children who need them, supported by appropriate improvement and service plans, reporting and challenge will mitigate these risks. The secure operation of Adoption West, with appropriate accountability and reporting to the Board and to Wiltshire Council, as required, will support this.

20. Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

See above. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

21. Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

See above. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

22. Financial Implications

The previous budget for the Adoption Service is indicated, in summary, above. The Service has been managed within budget, supported by external incomes collected. The cost of supporting an adopted child is less than the average cost of looking after a child in the care system and is often time limited as opposed to costs of care which extend to 18 years old and beyond. Cabinet has previously received information relating to the financial implications of Adoption West and the contribution that the Council makes to that organisation. This annual report relates to how well Wiltshire Council carries out responsibilities regarding the adoption of children, it cannot be separated from considerations of the effectiveness of Adoption West.

23. Legal Implications

It is a requirement of registration as an Adoption Agency that the Executive side of the Council receive regular written reports regarding the effectiveness, compliance and management of the Agency. It has been agreed that this will be in the form of an annual report and an interim report, ensuring that legal requirements are met. There are no additional legal implications arising.

24. Options Considered

Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

25. Conclusion

Recent years have seen considerable change within the world of adoption with the introduction of RAAs and a focus on improving adoption performance. This has led to the need to review and develop services, amend policy and practice and so increase the effectiveness in achieving best outcomes for children to be adopted. At the heart of this is the belief that, for some children, adoption is the best route to legal permanence, security and the opportunity to achieve their potential. Wiltshire Council is committed to improving service delivery and, therefore, outcomes for children, including those for whom adoption is considered to be in their best interest. Adoption West has brought significant change to this landscape. The Council is an Adoption West partner, working collaboratively and regionally to ensure a whole service approach to prevent delay in securing appropriate adoptive placements for children in a timely and safe way.

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