

# adoption west

## Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel September 2022 – September 2024 Annual report



*“sometimes superheroes  
reside in the hearts of  
children fighting huge battles”*



Bath & North East  
Somerset Council



Wiltshire Council



*Foreword by the chair of Adoption West Board*

Although the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel does not fall under the banner of 'Overview and Scrutiny' as defined by the Local Government Act 2000, it is providing a much-needed scrutiny function within the management and framework governance established to oversee the effectiveness of Adoption West.

*Name*

*Job title, LA*

*Chair of the Adoption West Board of Directors*

## *Foreword from the chairman of the scrutiny panel*

We always anticipated that this would be a complex area of work, and a challenge for councillors to develop sound knowledge and understanding of the world of adoption. We have not been disappointed!

It has also become clear that being on this panel will mean continuous learning for its members – and quite rightly so.

During the period covered by this report we have seen considerable changes to the membership of the panel and as grateful as I am for the enthusiasm and commitment shown by our new members, I wanted to thank our previous members for being part of this unique venture.

Thank you, Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Gloucestershire County Council), for your energy and contribution as vice-chairman, Cllr Wendy Griggs (North Somerset Council) and Cllr Nic Labuschagne (South Gloucestershire Council) for your positive challenge and insights. At the time of writing this foreword, it was also announced that Cllr Christine Townsend (Bristol City Council) had to step down from the panel due to increases in work commitments with her own local authority.

I would like to welcome Cllr Beki Hoyland (Gloucestershire County Council), Cllr Joe Tristram (North Somerset Council) and Cllr Sandra Emms (South Gloucestershire Council) to the panel. You have all already shown interest and dedication to this work and I look forward to carrying on working with you.

The report focuses on the past and the work we have undertaken, so I will take the opportunity to instead focus this foreword on the future. You will see in the appendix that we have an ambitious work programme for 2024-2025. We appreciate this will be a change of pace for the panel and requires increased commitment. However, we do believe that it dovetails better with the work of the Adoption West Board. We are looking to maximise on the flexibility of the panel and its ability to reach out directly to adoptive families, adopted adults and birth families, as well as seeking the views of adopted children and young people. We are exploring creative ways of delivering effective, but also sensitive, scrutiny as we are increasingly aware of the personal and potentially emotional nature of some of the areas of work we want to focus on, particularly support for adoptive families and “customer satisfaction”.

I think delivering our work programme will be challenging but I also believe that it will be tremendously rewarding as our first opportunity to provide evidence to support change where it may be needed.

*Cllr Jon Hubbard, Wiltshire Council  
Chair of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel*

## Purpose of the report

1. This report is written to:
  - a. publicly present the work undertaken by the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel (thereafter referred to as the “scrutiny panel”) from September 2022 to September 2024 to the following committees:
    - Children, Adults, Health & Wellbeing Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel, Bath and North East Somerset Council
    - People Scrutiny Commission, Bristol City Council
    - Children and Family Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Gloucestershire County Council
    - Children and young people’s services policy and scrutiny panel, North Somerset Council
    - Scrutiny Commission, South Gloucestershire Council
    - Children’s Select Committee, Wiltshire Council
  - b. enable the Adoption West (AW) Board to monitor the efficiency of the scrutiny panel.
  - c. invite suggestions from the scrutiny committees (as listed in a. above) and the AW board on:
    - areas of focus for the scrutiny panel in 2024-25;
    - the contents that should be included in the scrutiny panel’s annual report in future; and
    - formatting and presentation of the information to ensure ease of reading for future reports.

It should be noted that this report is out of the usual pattern due to factors including significant changes to the membership of the scrutiny panel and supporting officers.

## Background

2. Adoption West (AW) started operating on 1 March 2019, as a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) created by Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Wiltshire Council as a response to the government’s plans, published in June 2015, to regionalise adoption services across England and Wales.
3. Adoption West is a local authority trading company which is owned by the six local authorities and commissioned by them to provide adoption services. Adoption West is registered with Ofsted as a Voluntary Adoption Agency. Further information can be found on its [website](#).
4. The primary aim of this regionalisation was to deliver an adoption service which offer improved outcomes for both children and those who want to adopt.

5. The scrutiny panel (Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel) has been created to act as a critical friend, providing independent scrutiny of the work of AW and making constructive recommendations to ensure that AW meets its performance targets and expectations. The terms of reference for the scrutiny panel are included as Appendix 1.
6. The scrutiny panel is an essential element of assuring democratic accountability for the use of public funds; although it does not fall under the banner of 'Overview and Scrutiny' as defined by the Local Government Act 2000 in that it is not a body jointly formed by the six participating councils.
7. The scrutiny panel reports directly to the AW Board. The AW board will monitor the efficiency of the scrutiny panel, including through this annual report.

## **Membership**

### Elected Voting Member

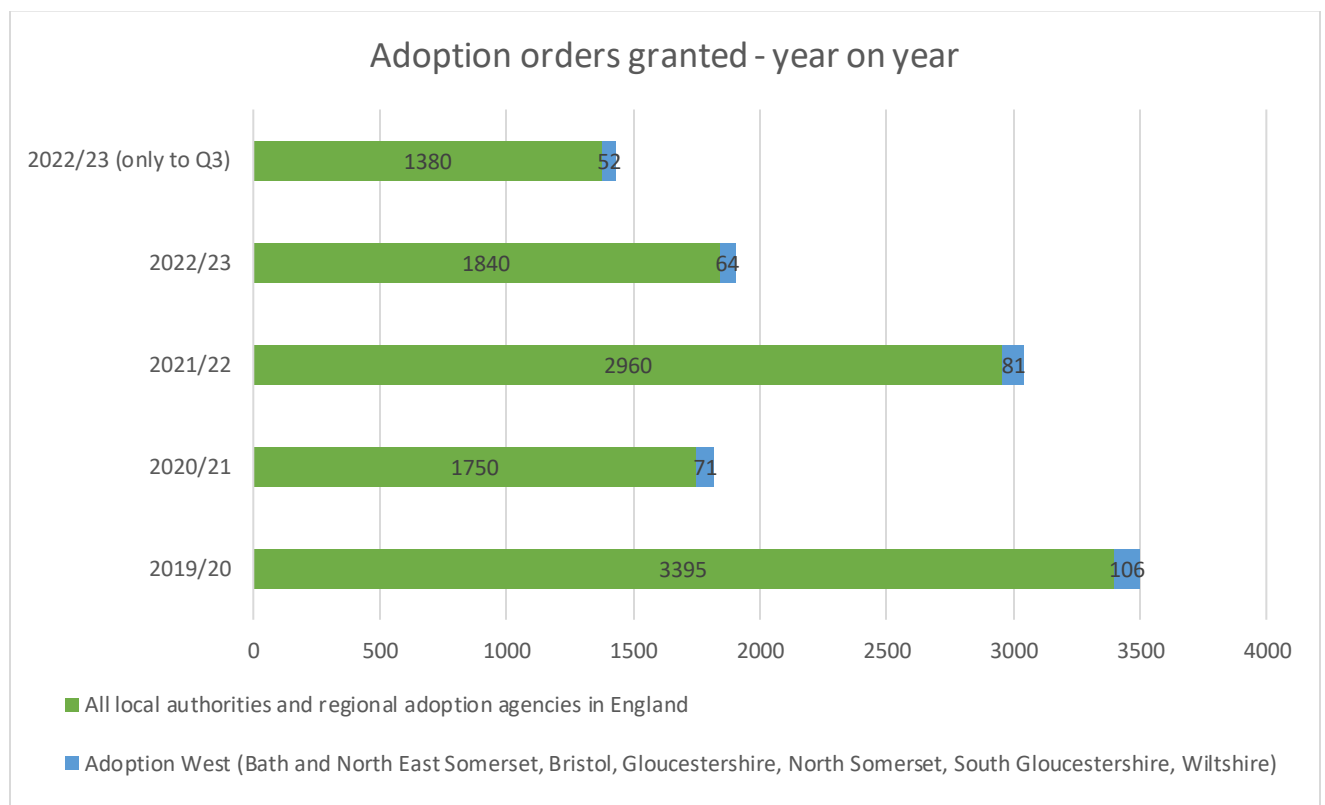
Cllr Michelle O'Doherty Bath and North East Somerset Council  
Vacancy, Bristol City Council  
Cllr Beki Hoyland Gloucestershire County Council  
Cllr Joe Tristram North Somerset Council  
Cllr Sandra Emms South Gloucestershire Council  
Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman) Wiltshire Council  
Cllr Carole King Wiltshire Council

## Snapshot overview of adoption figures

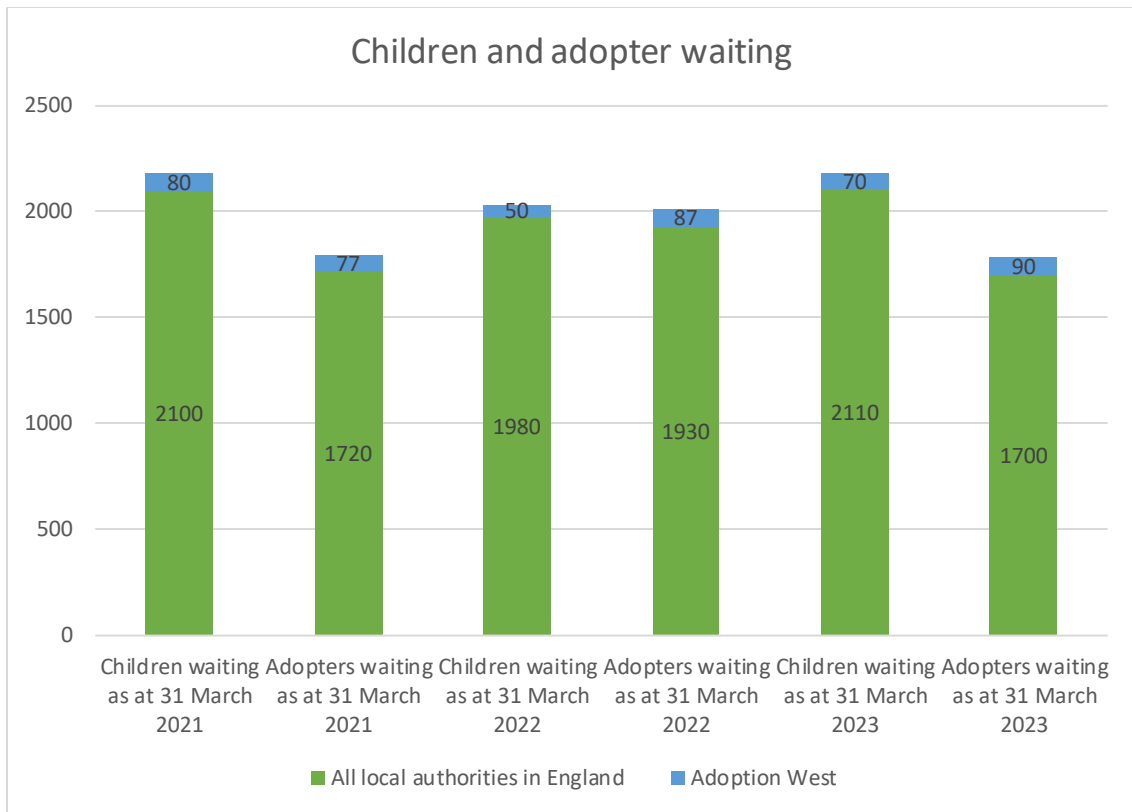
[Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2023](#)  
(figures as at 31 March 2023)

Children looked after (CLA)	CLA (Children Looked After) per 10,000 children	CLA who were adopted
<b>83,840</b> ↑	<b>71</b> ↑	<b>2,960</b> ↓
Up 2% on 2022, continuing the rise seen in recent years	The same as 2020 and the highest in the time series	Down 2% from 2022, following up 2% in 2021 but down 18% on 2020

### [Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board](#)

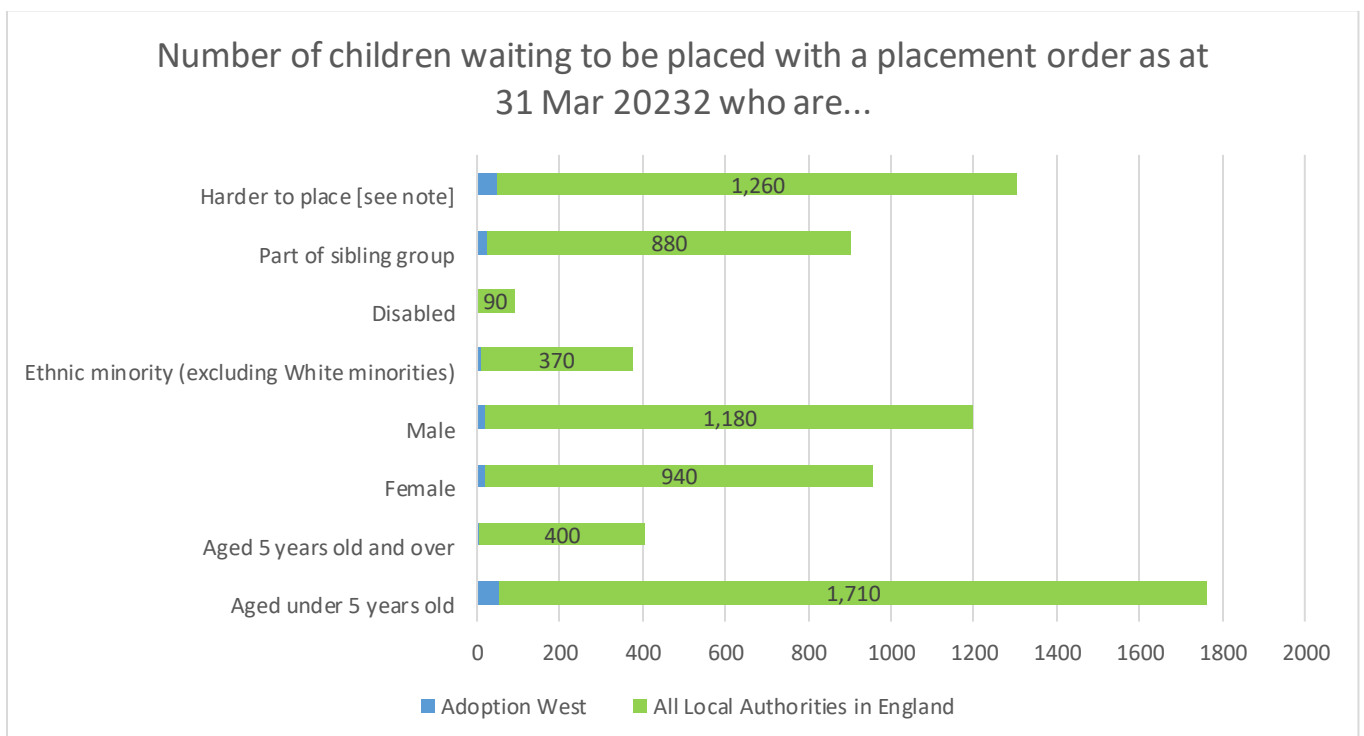


**NB** It should be noted that for the table above for 2022-23 the only data currently available is Q1 to Q3.



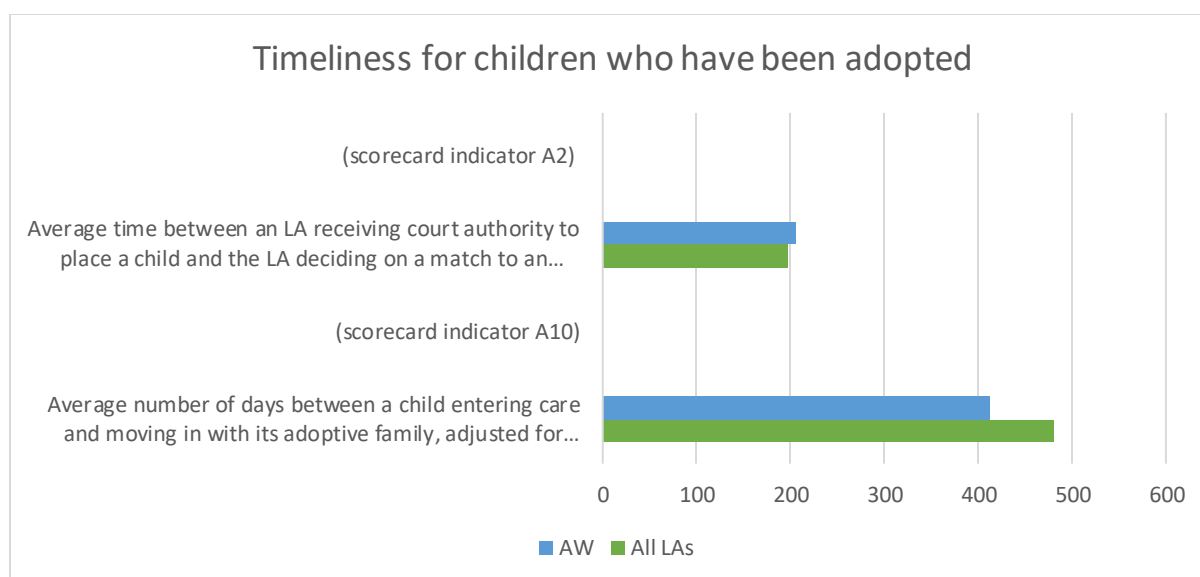
Children with a placement order but not yet placed

Number of approved adoptive families waiting to be matched with children



*Note - "Harder to place" is defined as a child who is any of the following: 5 years or over, of an ethnic minority (excluding White minorities) background, disabled, or part of a sibling group. Children with more than one harder to place characteristic will be counted in each characteristic.*

*Note – the figures for Local Authorities were often suppressed due to low numbers – where a count is 5 or fewer, or times and percentages are based on a count of 10 or fewer*



## Work undertaken

8. Between September 2022 and September 2024, the scrutiny panel held six meetings.

### **October 2022 – performance monitoring**

9. The scrutiny panel considered Quarter 1 performance for Adoption West, as well as its recruitment strategy and evaluation of the “front door” pilot. No critical issues were identified based on the information presented.
10. The meeting highlighted the need for the panel to gain deeper understanding of other permanency options such as Special Guardianship Orders.
11. The panel recognized the potential to gather further information from prospective adopters who pulled away from the process to identify possible stumbling blocks and made that recommendation to Adoption West.
12. This also linked with the “sufficiency gap” (number of adopters compared to number of children) especially with the difficulty in ensuring that adopters waiting or being trained were the right match for the children for whom adoption would be identified as the option for permanency that were anticipated based on previous years demand. The sufficiency is not just the numbers but also ensuring that adopters are within the categories needed (e.g. sibling groups, older children, disabled children, etc.). Trends on these numbers are monitored locally, regionally and nationally as may have an impact on the sufficiency gap.



### **July 2023 – performance monitoring**

13. The panel considered many reports on performance including the AW 6-months report, performance data for Q2, AW development plan and the outcome of the evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies.
14. Overall performance appeared to be at expected levels, and where performance was lower the panel was reassured that this had not, of itself, created delays for children waiting for adoption.
15. The panel was reminded that each Local Authority would still have its own Ofsted inspection with regards to performance linked to adoption for the activities undertaken by the Local Authority (in a simplistic summary – the journey of the child prior to the adoption order being granted). This reinforced the purpose of the scrutiny panel as the conduit for overview and scrutiny for all aspects of adoption.

### **September 2023 – contact and support**

16. The panel was offered a first glimpse into the complex area of contact between adoptive families and birth families.
17. It was concluded that, as reflected in research on contact undertaken since the 1990s, contact remains complex due to the multitude of possible family situations as well as the fact that the children's need for and interest in contact are likely to change and evolve as they grow. The research seem to indicate that contact is generally seen as positive for the children.
18. The panel received a presentation by two members of Adoption West's Birth Links team. Birth Links is an independent support service for adopted adults and for birth relatives affected by adoption. It aims to provide advice, support, information and guidance. The presentation also offered some information about the Pause Projects which is completely independent from Adoption West but whose purpose aligns with Birth Links' work (Pause works with women who have or are at risk of their child/ren being removed and works to break the cycle of pregnancies leading to repeat removals.).
19. The panel also considered the annual Adoption UK Adoption Barometer 2023. It was positive to note that the recommended support for prospective adopters within the Barometer matched the plans presented by Adoption West. However, there were still concerning, and saddening, data shown nationally for support of young adults and adult adoptees.

*“There were 526 respondents who had children aged 13-25 at the time of completing the survey, representing nearly 700 children between them. These respondents were twice as likely to describe their family as facing severe challenges or at crisis point in 2022 than parents of younger children (46% compared to 23%), more likely to not be in paid work (23% compared to*

16%), and less likely to feel optimistic about their family's future (66% compared to 83%).”

“Only one in five of the adult adoptees who responded to the survey had ever been given materials produced by adoption professionals that were designed to help them understand their histories and life stories (e.g., life story books, later life letters), and more than half of these were adopted during the 1990s or later.”

### **February 2024 – contact and adopter sufficiency**

20. The panel delved deeper into the complex area of contact between adopted children, adopted adults and members of their extended birth family. Contact may also be between siblings who live with different adoptive families or other forms of permanence (long term fostering, Special Guardianship orders, etc.).
21. In a crude summary contact may be indirect (aka letterbox contact – an exchange of letters between birth and adoptive families facilitated by adoption services) or direct (meet ups – some being supported by adoption services and some arranged directly between birth and adoptive families or between adoptive families). Adoption West managed over 1000 indirect contacts and 140 direct contacts (meetings) in the past year.
22. Feedback was collected from participants for direct contact to inform development. A key message given to the panel was the evolving nature of contact (both direct and indirect). It was also noted that supporting direct contact entailed communication, imagination, flexibility and planning whilst ensuring that the meetings were child-focused and as positive as possible.
23. The panel then focused on recruitment, retention and support for adopters. The challenges in recruitment over the last 12-18 months were noted and the concerns expressed by Adoption West as the number of children requiring adoption were not lessening. Adoption West updated its recruitment strategy every year and recruitment remained a priority to ensure adopters sufficiency.
24. The panel had received two articles that highlighted the impact on children of the trauma they experienced in early life and the resulting challenges for them and their families. It was noted that families had reported that the social care system did not recognise their unique position and support services were not available. The panel noted that respite was often mentioned and was available for foster carers and highlighted the development of the Mockingbird Project, but not currently widely available for adoptive families.
25. Reassurance was offered that support for adopters and understanding how adopters and children experience the adoption process was a priority for the national adoption strategy.

26. Finally, the panel considered the Adoption West's Quarterly report and Supervision Audit report. Both were overall positive reports but the panel expressed again its concern over the resources provided for Adoption West against the panel's understanding of the longer term support needed for adoptive families. It was felt that a first step may be members of the panel to challenge their own Local Authority to ensure that adopted children are included in the definition of "care experienced", which may enable the children to access support and services currently not available to them.

### **March 2024 -**

27. Following a significant change in membership for the panel, the meeting was centred around a recap on adoption, including:
- a. What adoption means and other options for permanency.
  - b. Why there are Regional Adoption Agencies (such as Adoption West).
  - c. The different functions of Adoption West and the six Local Authorities involved.
  - d. The adoption journey from the perspective of the children and the adopters.
  - e. Living with adoption (including support available).
28. The panel also considered the Q3 (October to December 2023) performance report and noted Adoption West's concerns with regards to adopter sufficiency (number of placement orders going up but number of people coming forward to adopt dropping, which is a trend seen nationally).
29. In considering the report of Adoption West's Panel Chair, the panel sought reassurance of measures put in place by Adoption West to incorporate the findings of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review undertaken by the Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership following the murder of Leiland-James Corkill by his prospective adopter.
30. It was confirmed that greater checks of medical circumstances, as well as financial circumstances, were undertaken throughout the adoption process.

### **July 2024 – adoption panel**

31. An Adoption West service manager who oversees the work of the adoption panel attended the meeting and gave a very detailed presentation on the work of the adoption panel.
32. It was agreed that to further their understanding of the work of the adoption panel, members of the scrutiny panel may be invited to attend some of the adoption panel meetings.
33. The issue of ensuring consistency of the quality of the Child Permanency Reports (CPRs) drew the attention of the panel who asked for further update through the year of the training offered.

## **Ambitions for 2024-2025**

34. The scrutiny panel remains committed to developing its membership to include up to five stakeholders within the “adoption triangle”, such as (but not limited to) adoptive parent, adopted young person, adopted adult, birth family member. This would have the dual benefit of deepening the scrutiny panel’s understanding of adoption and, hopefully, enable continuity of work through continuity of membership.
35. A key area of work for the panel in 2024-25 remains to work with all six local authorities to ensure that reporting on adoption is co-ordinated as best as possible to enable robust scrutiny, including “synchronising” consideration of different reports linked to adoption:
  - a. Local authority’s performance report with regards to adoption;
  - b. AW’s annual report;
  - c. This scrutiny panel’s annual report.
36. The scrutiny panel has set its work for 2024-2025 (Appendix 3 – forward work programme) and welcomes input on this.
37. The panel is determined to work more closely with the Adoption West board to ensure that scrutiny happens at the right time and at the right level to provide the most added value, as reflected in the work programme.

## **Conclusion**

38. The scrutiny panel has an ambitious forward work programme for 2024-25 and the enthusiasm to deliver it.
39. Adopters have expressed an interest in joining the scrutiny panel which would also support the delivery of the forward work programme.

## **Proposal**

For the scrutiny committees (as listed in paragraph 1.a. above) and the AW board to:

40. Note the annual report October 2021 to September 2022 of the scrutiny panel and make suggestion on contents to be included for future annual reports, and formatting and presentation of the annual report to ensure ease of reading;
41. Note the forward work programme for the scrutiny panel for 2024-25 (Appendix 3) and suggest any amendments or additional areas of focus for the scrutiny panel;

For the scrutiny committees (as listed in paragraph 1.a. above) to note that:

42. The scrutiny panel would like to invite all councillors to read the executive summary for the Adoption Barometer 2023, to gain some understanding of the

lives of adoptive families. The Adoption Barometer 2023 can be accessed, alongside previous ones, here: [Adoption Barometer](#).

For each member of the panel to:

43. Present this report to the relevant overview and scrutiny committee within their own Local Authority and feedback any comments to the panel.

**Cllr Jon Hubbard, Wiltshire Council, Chairman of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Committee**

Date of report: 20 August 2024

Report author: Marie Gondlach, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Wiltshire Council

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – terms of reference of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel

Appendix 2 – Split of responsibilities between Regional Adoption Agency and Local Authority

Appendix 3 – forward work programme