

# adoption west

Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel

October 2021 - September 2022  
Annual report



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



Bath & North East  
Somerset Council



Wiltshire Council



Gloucestershire  
COUNTY 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. The joint scrutiny arrangements as described in the terms of reference were thoroughly reviewed by each local authority and unanimously agreed by the Adoption West Board.

When the panel was first conceived there was a consensus that more could be achieved through a joint approach to scrutiny as it would draw upon each local authority's councillor representative's skills, knowledge, and input. It would also allow for the efficient use of the finite time available to Adoption West's management to meaningfully engage with independent scrutiny of the Regional Adoption Agency's work.

I believe that aspiration has been realised and that members have engaged with great enthusiasm and commitment in developing their appreciation and understanding of Adoption West and its work. Adoption is a complex area of practice with a profound and enduring impact upon the children and families involved. As such, we must be constantly striving to improve and refine our offer. You have provided a valuable source of challenge and support as we continue that journey, for which I am grateful.

This has been a challenging year. In February, we had our first Ofsted inspection with a very positive outcome, albeit with some areas for development. We have also had to deal with the consequences of the Somerset judgement on the appointment of Agency Medical Advisers which impacted on several local authorities within the partnership, particularly Gloucestershire County Council.

I will be stepping down as chair of the Adoption West Board in November 2022 but can assure the joint scrutiny panel that my successor will continue to work with you in developing the oversight and scrutiny of Adoption West, as will the Director and her team.

*Andy Dempsey*

*Director of Partnerships and Strategy, Gloucestershire County Council*

*Chair of the Adoption West Board of Directors*

*Foreword from the chairman of the scrutiny panel*

Right from when the plans were first spoken of for the new Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption West, it was my strong personal belief that any new body should include an effective overview and scrutiny involvement provision, and I could not have wished for it to go any better than it has since its first year (2020-21).

I am pleased that Adoption West has remained committed to independent scrutiny by lay members and I hope the board can see its value through the work reflected in this annual report.

As always, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the panel who have been committed to the work we do and for their willingness to engage and learn, because learning we certainly still are at every meeting! I'd also like to thank Alison Lewis, Service Director for Adoption West for her engagement with the panel, enthusiasm and openness.

A key piece of work for 2022-23 will be the review of adoption support, including the views of adopters. I believe this is an area of work where the scrutiny panel could add so much, by reviewing support offers across the country and helping create a clearer picture of the support that would be most beneficial for families supported by Adoption West.

There is incredible value in bringing in the voice of people for whom adoption is a day-to-day reality, not just a data-set. It is still an ambition for the scrutiny panel to develop its membership to include representatives from the "adoption triangle" (e.g. adoptive parent, adopted young person, adopted adults, birth family member, etc.) and I dare say this would bring invaluable strength and depth to the scrutiny panel's work.

My foreword for the first annual report the panel produced concluded with a wish that the work of the panel would carry on improving and that, in time, this scrutiny panel is seen as a natural extension of the overview and scrutiny we all undertake of our Children's Services. I believe I can say that we have taken steps towards these two goals ever since the panel started, and will carry on doing so in 2022-23.

*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 October 2021 to September 2022 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 2022-23;
    - 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.

## 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

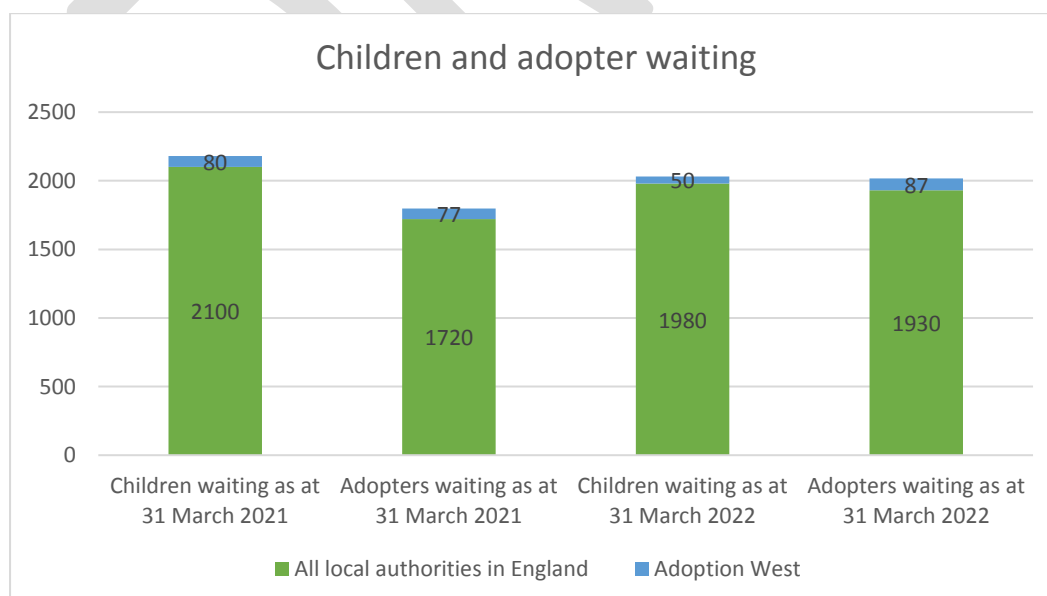
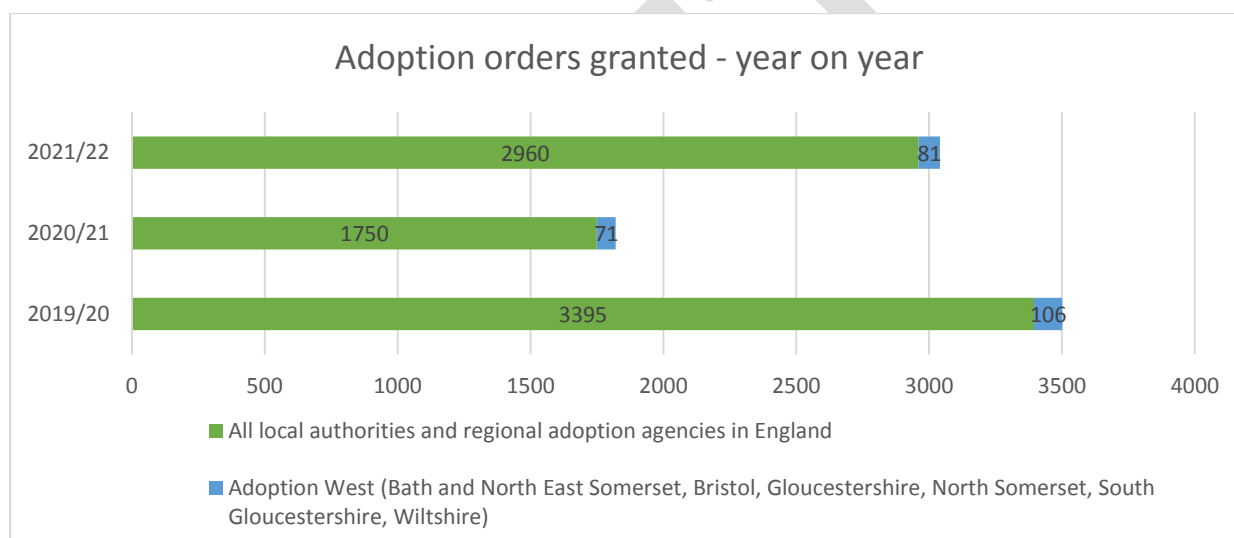
Cllr Michelle O'Doherty, Bath and North East Somerset Council  
Cllr Christine Townsend, Bristol City Council  
Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Vice Chairman), Gloucestershire County Council  
Cllr Wendy Griggs, North Somerset Council  
Cllr Nic Labuschagne, South Gloucestershire Council  
Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman),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

## Snapshot

[Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting Year 2021](#)  
(figures for year ending on 31 March 2022 will be released in November 2022)

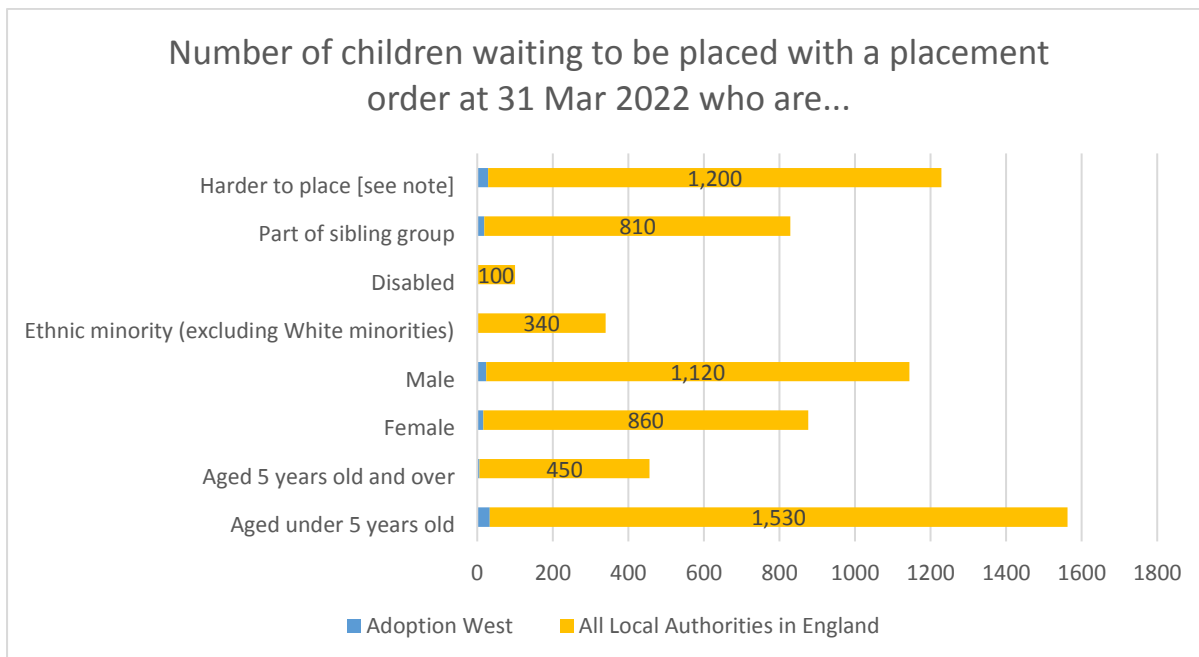
Children looked after (CLA)	CLA (Children Looked After) per 10,000 children	CLA who were adopted
80,850	67	2,870
Up 1% on 2020 and at an all time high	The same as 2020 and the highest in the time series	Down 18% on 2020

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



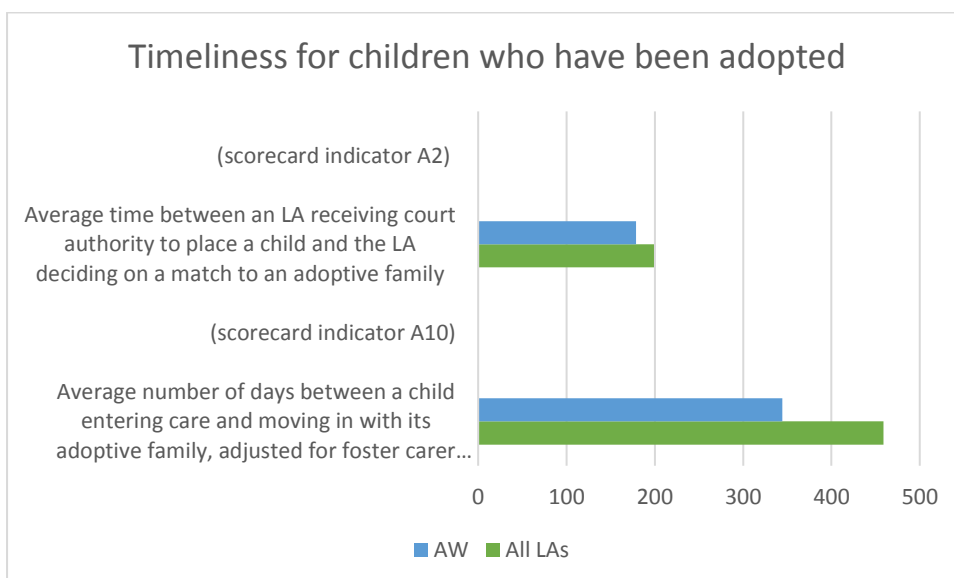
Children with a placement order but not yet placed

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 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*



*Note – the figures were suppressed for 3 LAs within AW 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 October 2021 and September 2022, the scrutiny panel held four meetings (three virtual meetings due to geographical distances between members and one in person).

### *October 2021 – the adoption process and the adoption UK adoption barometer 2021*

9. The scrutiny panel received a high-level overview of the adoption process for both children and adopters, including the different steps to be taken in accordance with the legislations to be complied with.
10. The scrutiny panel considered its second Adoption UK Adoption Barometer (2021).
11. It was noted that the scrutiny panel had explored issues which had prompted some of the six key recommendations made in the Adoption Barometer:
  - a. Quality standards for prospective adopters
  - b. Changes to the ASF (multi-year rather than single year)
  - c. Making support a priority, including increasing the age at which support stops (26y.o suggested in the Barometer).
12. The panel noted that the Barometer had included, for the first time, a focus on young adults who had been adopted and agreed to direct some of its future work on what appeared to often be a difficult transition to adulthood in terms of accessing the support services needed.

### *February 2022 - performance*

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.

### *April 2022 – outcome of the Ofsted inspection*

15. Adoption West had its first Ofsted inspection in January 2022 and was rated good for “Overall experiences and progress of service users” and “How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected”, and rated as requires improvement to be good for “the effectiveness of leaders and managers”.
16. Five recommendations in the Ofsted report were linked to leadership and management and the panel focused on the proposed actions to address these, as summarised below.



- i. Supervision records and caseload management – the panel recommended default reporting of unsigned supervision and will consider the outcome of the supervision audit once available.
- ii. Prospective adopters understanding and support following panel – the panel will conduct a rapid scrutiny on this issue using the outcome of two Adopters Voice Forum that focused on this, as well as consult witnesses and review how other RAAs (Regional Adoption Agencies) are managing this.
- iii. Consistent level of support across the region - the panel will carry on monitoring this through the year in the data presented in the 6-monthly report from AW and the quarterly performance reports. Depending on information presented this may lead to a more in-depth scrutiny activity (such as deep dive or rapid scrutiny) to develop a clear picture of the levels of support accessible across the region.
- iv. Data breaches – the panel will monitor this through the 6-monthly report from AW.
- v. Views and opinions – the panel will dedicate one of its meetings to a deep dive on a formal system to capture the views of adopters, children and staff (a “you said, we listened, we did” approach).

#### *July 2022 – Adoption UK 2022 Barometer*

17. The panel considered the Adoption UK 2022 Barometer, which, this year, had a focus on direct contact with birth families, including the perspectives of adopted adults. This really highlighted for the panel the profound changes in adoption, from the almost “secretive” and often closed adoptions of the 60s to the ever-evolving openness of current adoptions (including the exploration of technology to facilitate direct contact with birth family members) and the fine balance this demanded to ensure that the needs of each child is best met.
18. The Barometer also offered a glimpse into the differences of approaches to adoption across the different nations in the UK. *“Two hundred and eighty respondents had a child or children move into their family during 2021. Of these, 80% were standard adoptions, and the remaining 20% were early permanence arrangements. In Northern Ireland, 78% of newly placed respondents were welcoming children on early permanence arrangements, whereas in Wales this was just 3%”.*
19. The panel noted the six recommendations in the Adoption UK Barometer and that these reflected the feedback they had previously received from adopters:
  - quality standards for the journey of prospective adopters,
  - ringfenced multi-year funding,
  - support plans for every child to be placed for adoption,
  - adoption agencies duty to provide the adoption support set out in a child’s assessment of support need,
  - to train education and health professionals in early childhood trauma and associated conditions,

- Provide free, expert, lifelong support for establishing and maintaining birth family relationships.
20. The panel resolved to explore further which recommendations from the Adoption UK Barometer AW would implement and how (as the responsibility for some of these may fall on each of the local authority, others on AW).
21. This also was the “once a year in person” meeting for the panel at which they met one of Adoption West’s in-house trainers and got to experience a step on the emotional journey adopters are taken on when they receive their training. This reinforced the panel’s ambition to widen its own membership to bring these experiences, and voices, into its work.

### **Ambitions for 2022-2023**

22. 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.
23. A key area of work for the panel in 2022-23 remains to work with all six local authorities to develop a process to ensure that reporting on adoption is co-ordinated as best as possible to enable robust scrutiny, including:
- a. Developing a common “core” report template;
  - b. “synchronising” consideration of different reports linked to adoption:
    - i. Local authority’s performance report with regards to adoption;
    - ii. AW’s annual report;
    - iii. This scrutiny panel’s annual report.
24. The panel will also endeavour 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.
25. The scrutiny panel has set its work for 2022-2023 (Appendix 3 – forward work programme), with “deeper” scrutiny exercises planned (paragraphs 18, 19 and 21 above refer) and welcomes input on this.

### **Conclusion**

26. The scrutiny panel has been consistently deepening its understanding of adoption, in terms of process, data (including targets to be met) and the reality of it for those “living it”, as well as challenging AW’s reporting and will carry on doing so in 2022-23.

### **Proposal**

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

27. 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;
28. Note the forward work programme for the scrutiny panel for 2022-23 (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:

29. The scrutiny panel would like to invite all councillors to read the Adoption Barometer 2022, with its focus on direct contact with birth families, to gain some understanding of the difficulties and issues faced by adoptive families, as this is likely to inform the support offered, and financed, by adoption agencies (including AW). The Adoption Barometer 2022 can be accessed here, alongside information on the 2019, 2020 and 2021 surveys: [Adoption Barometer](#).

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

Date of report: 12 October 2022

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