

## **Wiltshire Council**

### **Cabinet**

**14 July 2020**

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**Subject: Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2019-2020 Year End Report**

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

**Key Decision: Non-Key**

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#### **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 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

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, launched on 1st March 2019 and so this is the first annual report which relates to a full year of the partnership arrangement being operational.

Wiltshire Council retains overall responsibility for the adoption of our children whilst other functions are undertaken by Adoption West. 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. 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.

This reporting period ends on 31 March 2020, just over a year since Adoption West was launched. There are some Scorecard measures that cover a three-year period and so aspects of this report relate to Wiltshire Council performance, where functions have now moved to Adoption West. It should also be noted that the most recent nationally published Scorecard available is from 2018.

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 2018/19, 33 adoption orders were granted, and 27 families were approved as suitable to adopt. For the year 2019/20, 22 Adoption Orders have been granted for Wiltshire children and 21 families living in Wiltshire have been approved as suitable to adopt. Across the Adoption West area there have been 84 adopter approvals; the generally accepted target for adopter assessments is 8-10 approvals per social worker. Based upon staffing levels within Adoption West, this represents a meeting of that target; few other RAAs have achieved this rate.

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.

Although this Annual Report is retrospective, it is important to maintain adopter sufficiency. Within Adoption West, there are currently 69 prospective adopters in Stage 1 and 42 in Stage 2 of the assessment process. It is too early to be certain of the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the recruitment of adopters although the target is likely to be close to 100 adoptive families. At the time of writing all aspects of recruitment were continuing with little change in numbers of enquiries.

Comparative performance for local authorities is via the Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows overall continued improvement. The Government has not yet given clarity about how the Scorecard will be used by the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) and there is delay in releasing the 2019 Scorecard, in part due to the Covid-19 situation. In the meantime, Wiltshire continues to use the 2018 Scorecard to track performance.

Adoption West has not yet been inspected by Ofsted. An inspection was anticipated before the Covid-19 pandemic effectively suspended all Ofsted inspection activity. At the time of writing this report, it is not known when inspections might restart.

### **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.

### **Overview and Scrutiny Engagement**

Under the Covid-19 overview and scrutiny arrangements, a briefing was offered to the chair and vice-chair of the Children's Select Committee prior to the report being considered by Cabinet.

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 when the committee resumes holding meetings.

### **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 and service users.

Adoption West will be subject to separate scrutiny arrangements through its own Scrutiny Board, arrangements which are still in development.

**Terence Herbert - Chief Executive Officer**

## **Wiltshire Council**

### **Cabinet**

**Date of meeting: 14 July 2020**

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**Subject: Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2019-20 Year End Report**

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

**Key Decision: Non-Key**

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### **Purpose of Report**

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).
2. Cabinet received an Annual Report regarding the Adoption Service in July 2019, covering the period from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019. This report relates to the full year 2019/20 reporting period. Cabinet also received an interim six-month report in January 2020.
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.
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.
5. It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and accepted.

### **Relevance to the Council's Business Plan**

6. 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.
7. 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.

### **Main Considerations for the Council**

8. The main consideration for the Council is to be assured about statutory compliance and the effectiveness of the Adoption Service. In 2017/18, 22 children were adopted. In 2018/19, 33 children were adopted and in 2019/20 this number was 22. Of these, 6 (27%) were placed within 12 months of the decision that adoption was in their best interest being made. In 2017/18, 19 adoptive families were approved by Wiltshire Council, in 2018/19, 27 families were approved by the Council and in 2019/20, 21 families were approved by Adoption West as suitable to adopt, living within Wiltshire and 84 in the wider RAA area (including Wiltshire). Sufficiency of approved families must be maintained through the work of Adoption West.
9. Wiltshire's current Adoption Scorecard (most recently published performance to March 2018) shows that performance remains strong with overall continued improvement and is included below (para 13), for reference. 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 be monitored closely. National performance targets are no longer published by the Government and it has not yet indicated what national and local reporting will be in place when an RAA is in operation and functions pass to it from the local authority. At present, each local authority Adoption Agency still has a scorecard and there are three key measures that are included:

#### **A1: the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted:**

- The local authority scorecard three-year average (2015-18) is **397** days. This is significantly shorter than the three-year average of 469 days in 2014-17 and shorter than the England three-year average for 2015-18 of 486 days. The Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- Excluding two legacy cases, adopted in 2016, the three-year average figure becomes **337** days for 2015-18
- The local authority figure for 2019-20 is **369** days, up from 342 in the previous year.
- Including Early Permanence placements and legacy cases, locally reported data estimates the figure for 2017-20 as **339** days, a continued improvement on 397 days and a marked improvement on 486 days, remaining significantly less than the England average.

**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 local authority three-year average (2015-18) is **173** days. This is a small decrease on the three-year average of 186 days in 2014-17. Excluding two legacy cases this figure becomes 139 days for 2015-18.
- It remains shorter than the England three-year average of 201 days. Overall the Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- The local authority one-year figure for 2019-20 is **142** days. In 2018-19 the figure was 100 days and in 2017-18 the figure was 132 days.
- Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2017-20 as **116**. This is down from 152 days in 2016-19. (2016-19 was the final three-year average where the legacy cases will have an impact.)

**A3: the number of children who waited less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family:**

- In the three-year period 2015-18, there were **76%** (95) of children who waited less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. This is an increase from 69% (85) in the previous cycle. The England three-year average (2015-18) is 56%. Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2017-20 as **72%** (87) of children and for 2019-20 as **64%** (42).

10. The most recent Scorecard three-year averages relate to 2015-18. As a more recent Scorecard is not available, this report includes the indicative locally reported figures described above. This data indicates that there are some concerns with the measures after some years of continual improvement. Indicator **A1** shows that it is currently taking longer for children to be placed in their adoptive families after being received into care. Recognising the numbers are small, the indicator can be affected by delay for some children. There is an increase in the locally reported **A2** figure. These rises are accounted for as the cohort of children counted includes:

- Four sibling groups of older children, including two 7-year olds and a 6-year-old with decisions that adoption is in their best interest who are awaiting final orders or matches with adopters
  - Two sibling groups (including a 9-year-old) who are matched and awaiting transition
  - Five sibling groups, including older children who are now living with adopters but where identifying adoptive parents took longer.
11. There are children within the cohort where their transition to adoptive parents or their adoption hearing is delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, this demonstrates continued commitment to seek secure, permanent arrangements for all children where adoption is in their best interest. Indicator **A3** also shows a slight decrease although it remains significantly higher (which is positive) than the England average. 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.

12. Within the Scorecard data, there is detailed comparative information available regarding Wiltshire Council's performance in relation to Statistical Neighbours. This shows positive comparative performance although the caveat is that it is 2018 data and more recent comparisons cannot be made.
13. 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 fashion. Adoption West has developed best practice to ensure good outcomes for Wiltshire's children who need adoptive families.
14. The 2018 (most recently available) Scorecard is as follows:

Children				Average time indicators																																				
	<b>A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)</b>	<b>A2: 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 (days)</b>	<b>A3: Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)</b>	<p><b>A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family</b> A1 threshold —</p> <p><b>A2: 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</b> A2 threshold —</p>					<p><b>A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, 2015-18</b> England average - 486 days</p> <p><b>A2: 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, 2015-18</b> England average - 201 days</p>																															
LA's 3 year average (2015-18)	397	173	95 (76%)																																					
Distance from 2015-18 performance threshold (426 and 121 days)	Threshold met	52 days	n/a																																					
1 year trend - Improvement from 2017 to 2018	Average time in 2018 was shorter than in 2017	Average time in 2018 was shorter than in 2017	n/a																																					
3 year trend - Improvement from 2014-17 to 2015-18	Average time in 2015-18 was shorter than in 2014-17	Average time in 2015-18 was shorter than in 2014-17	n/a																																					
England 3 year average (2015-18)	486	201	11010 (56%)	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Year</th> <th>2008-11</th> <th>2009-12</th> <th>2010-13</th> <th>2011-14</th> <th>2012-15</th> <th>2013-16</th> <th>2014-17</th> <th>2015-18</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>A1</td> <td>639</td> <td>639</td> <td>608</td> <td>547</td> <td>487</td> <td>426</td> <td>426</td> <td>426</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A2</td> <td>213</td> <td>213</td> <td>182</td> <td>152</td> <td>121</td> <td>121</td> <td>121</td> <td>121</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>										Year	2008-11	2009-12	2010-13	2011-14	2012-15	2013-16	2014-17	2015-18	A1	639	639	608	547	487	426	426	426	A2	213	213	182	152	121	121	121	121
Year	2008-11	2009-12	2010-13	2011-14	2012-15	2013-16	2014-17	2015-18																																
A1	639	639	608	547	487	426	426	426																																
A2	213	213	182	152	121	121	121	121																																
Adopters				Related Information																																				
	Number of approved adoptive families waiting to be matched as at 31 March 2018	Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) or as at 31 March 2018	Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2017-18 who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child	New ADM decisions	New placement orders granted	Adoptions from care during 2015-18 (with % leaving care who are adopted)	Children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption during 2015-18	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March 2018)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2018)	A10: A1 timeliness where foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days)	Number of children in a Fostering for Adoption / Concurrent Planning placement for	Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds during 2015-18 (number adopted and % of BME children leaving)	Adoptions of children aged five or over during 2015-18 (number adopted and % of children aged 5 or over leaving care who)	Average length of care preceding locally during 2015-18 (weeks)																										
LA	10	25	82%	35	30	25	30	75 (17%)	10 (3%)	20	10	343	5 (10%)	15 (5%)	29																									
England	1,600	1,760	69%	LA -17% National -9%	LA 16% National -15%	England 12900 (14%)	2450 (11%)	4,500	2,760	412	410	1930 (7%)	2910 (5%)	30																										



15. Management arrangements and staffing within the Council are compliant with regulation in terms of qualification and experience. The Director of Children's Services 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. The Head of Service for Children in Care and Young People and their Service Manager ensure the effectiveness of overall adoption provision and the Service Manager is the designated link with Adoption West. 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.
16. 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.
17. 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.**

18. 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.
19. 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.
20. Wiltshire Council's adoption work was inspected by Ofsted in June 2019 as part of the wider inspection of the Families and Children's Service. This included discussion with the Service Director of Adoption West and 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 and in doing so 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. As indicated above, more recent performance information indicates that due to the nature of the adoptive arrangements being sought, there has been some decrease in reported performance.
21. Adoption West became registered and was launched in March 2019. The business model for Adoption West is that of an independently managed Voluntary Adoption Agency, discrete from the local authorities it serves. It is the only RAA in the country that uses this approach. As it matures, it is anticipated that Adoption West will continue to improve the timeliness of adoption for children and the effectiveness of adoption support by increasing the pool of adopters available for children and developing a comprehensive range of adoption support options. The chairing of the Board of Directors has now changed following the first year where the chair was from Wiltshire Council. There is representation on the Service Manager Group which supports the partnership. There is a continued strong commitment to support, and further develop, the work of Adoption West.

22. 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.

23. As required to be provided to Cabinet, this report provides performance information relating to the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

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

<b>Legal status</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
<b>Section 20</b>	0	0	7
<b>Interim Care Order</b>	17	19	5
<b>Care Order</b>	0	0	5
<b>None</b>	3	2	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>17</b>

<b>Ethnic Origin</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
<b>White British</b>	19	20	16
<b>Mixed/Other</b>	0	0	0
<b>White Irish</b>	0	0	0
<b>Other Ethnic Group</b>	1	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>17</b>

<b>Age</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
<b>0-11 months</b>	9	3	3
<b>12-23 months</b>	2	2	1
<b>2-4 years</b>	5	6	7
<b>5-10 years</b>	4	10	6
<b>11 and over</b>	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>17</b>

24. 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.

#### **Wiltshire Children adopted**

<b>Age</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
<b>0-11 months</b>	5	4	2
<b>12-23 months</b>	8	15	12
<b>2-4 years</b>	5	9	6
<b>5-10 years</b>	4	5	2
<b>11 and over</b>	0	0	0

<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Wiltshire Children matched within Adoption West</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
	N/A	13 children placed in 11 placements within Wiltshire  Another 8 children in 5 placements within Adoption West	15 children placed with Adoption West Families  6 children placed with families outside Adoption West

### **Rescissions of Placement Orders and Disruptions**

25. In 2019-20, 5 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. All these were older children where there had been agreed time limited searches, recognising that it was likely to be challenging to identify adoptive families. These 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 but make a Special Guardianship Order instead or a plan will move to long term fostering, particularly for older children.
26. During 2019-20, there have been no adoption placement disruptions, relating to Wiltshire children, notified to the Council before an Adoption Order was made. There have been no placement breakdowns that occurred post-order, when the child returned to being looked after. This demonstrates good matching and adoption support arrangements.
27. 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 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, Adoption West had approved 84 families in the year of which 21 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 15 live in Wiltshire. There are 23 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.
28. 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.

### Financial summary of the agency

29. The tables below indicate the budget, actual and predicted expenditure, for the financial years 2018/19 to 2019/20. The predicted overspend for financial year 2019/20 is due to the spend above budget of special guardianship and adoption support packages.

<b>2018/19</b>	<b>Budget (£)</b>	<b>Actual Expenditure (£)</b>
<b>Salaries and team running costs</b>	436,500	437,873
<b>Adopter recruitment and training</b>	17,000	2,723
<b>Adoption allowances (all types)</b>	610,600	860,199
<b>Special Guardianship Allowances</b>	1,654,700	1,602,679
<b>Adoption income</b>	-200,000	-213,013
<b>Contractual Payment: Adoption WEST</b>	<b>140,300</b>	<b>140,300</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,659,100</b>	<b>2,830,663</b>
<b>2019/20</b>	<b>Budget (£)</b>	<b>Predicted Outturn (£)</b>
<b>Salaries and team running costs</b>	0	13,470
<b>Adopter recruitment and training</b>	0	0
<b>Adoption allowances (all types)</b>	596,060	759,261
<b>Special Guardianship Allowances</b>	1,714,190	1,782,259
<b>Adoption income</b>	0	-191,072
<b>Contractual Payment: Adoption WEST</b>	764,960	762,634
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,075,210</b>	<b>3,126,551</b>

30. 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:

	<b>At 31 March 2018 Children/Carers</b>	<b>At 31 March 2019 Children/Carers</b>	<b>At 31 March 2020 Children/Carers</b>
<b>RO Allowance</b>	11/10	10/9	8/8
<b>Adoption Allowance</b>	32/26	34/27	33/27
<b>SGO Allowance</b>	195/150	213/164	243/185
<b>Total</b>	238/186	257/200	284/220

	2017/18 Actual Expenditure (£)	2018/19 Actual Expenditure (£)	2019/20 Outturn (£)
RO Allowance	93,404	84,964	75,705
Adoption Allowance	291,330	308,632	342,418
SGO Allowance	1,553,815	1,602,679	1,782,664
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,938,549</b>	<b>1,996,274</b>	<b>2,200,787</b>

- 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.

31. 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 2020 there were 92 allocated Wiltshire families who were receiving adoption support (80 in the previous year) and 149 (117) 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 £370,282. 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.

32. 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.

### Adoption Panel

	2017/18 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))	2018/19 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))	2019/20 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))
<b>Panels held</b>	19	18	56
<b>Adoptive families considered</b>	24* (including 4 assessed by other AW local authorities)	26	30

<b>Matches considered</b>	36 (28 Wiltshire children and 8 from other AW local authorities)	32 (24 Wiltshire children and 8 from other AW local authorities)	90 (21 Wiltshire matches)
<b>Relinquished Children</b>	1 (Wiltshire child)	0	4 (0 Wiltshire Council)
<b>Reviews of Adopters notified</b>	0	0	0

\* Two suitability assessments were considered by panel on 27.3.18 and their ADM decision was made in April. Therefore, they do not appear in the 2017-18 count.

33. 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.

34. 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 on 22.11.19. 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.

35. The arrangement for Panel recommendations being considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is robust. Until recently, decisions regarding Wiltshire children being matched with adopters and the suitability of adopters assessed by Adoption West were made by a Wiltshire ADM. With increased senior management capacity in Adoption West, decisions about matches remain with the local authority responsible for the child and decisions about suitability to adopt are made by the ADM from Adoption West (with additional capacity support from the Council’s ADMs if required). This means that adopters are informed of decisions promptly following Panel recommendations.

36. 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.

## Commentary

37. The main externally reported performance information for Wiltshire Council is included in the Adoption Scorecard and is summarised above. There has been steady improvement in performance over the three-year rolling period. 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. The journeys of children to adoption are tracked and scrutinised, including through the Council's Permanence Panel. Any delay or drift is robustly challenged.
38. Sustained improvement over time is evident when considering the three key areas of practice within the Scorecard; A1, A2 and A3. The locally reported data indicates that improvement is once again needed to maintain this trajectory and so attention must be paid to the role of the Council and Adoption West in these areas of work. This is regularly discussed at the Board of Governors meetings and within other meetings. Overall, for more than 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.
39. Continued improvement of performance of indicator **A1** 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 is currently 27.5 weeks, down from 28 weeks in March 2018.
40. Whilst there have been some fluctuations in the number of newly approved adopters over recent years, the overall pool has continued to demonstrate sufficiency although greater choice is always desirable. Previous decreases mirrored the national trend whereas the more recent upturn does not. (The Adoption Leadership Board states that there is a national decrease in adopter recruitment figures.) 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 2019-20 in Wiltshire was 12% (12% nationally in 2018-19, the most recent national comparative figure). Currently Adoption West has 111 (96 in the equivalent area at this time last



year) assessments in progress, of which 33 (22) are “Wiltshire based”. As previously indicated, it is this larger pool which is available for Wiltshire children and so it should *not* be seen that there are only 22 families potentially available.

41. There are fewer children “waiting” for adoption in this period, compared to the previous year. 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 is considering the development of a dedicated Family Finding Team from within existing resources to improve this area of work.
42. 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 31<sup>st</sup> 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.
43. Early Permanence (EP) practice is established in Wiltshire with all EP carers within Adoption West being potentially available for Wiltshire children. In 2019-20, 11 Wiltshire children were referred for EP and 1 was placed with EP carers. (Of the 10 not placed, 3 searches remain open for the children, 4 children had a change of plan away from EP placements, 3 were placed with foster carers and 2 have subsequently been placed for adoption.) EP searches were not successful for the 3 children as at the time there was uncertainty about potential placements with other family members or concerns about long term health issues which prevented adopters coming forward. 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, 9 children were referred and 3 were placed. In 2017-18, 10 children were placed. Of the 21 adoptive families approved in the Wiltshire area in this reporting period, 5 were open to consider EP placements. These adopters have either been matched with non EP children or provided EP placements for children in other Adoption West local authorities. Therefore, there are no adopters in the Wiltshire area approved who would consider an EP placement.

44. Adoption West is working to address this in the Trowbridge hub and actively promoting EP with the 23 families in the approval process. 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.
45. 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**.
46. It is anticipated that **A3** 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. 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 (5 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.
47. 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.

48. 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.

## **Actions**

49. 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:

- 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
- 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
- Use the scrutiny and challenge of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel to improve outcomes for Wiltshire's children
- Regularly convene operational and strategic meetings between Council staff and Adoption West staff regarding the decision-making processes for children
- Have an officer within the Senior Management Team of the Families and Children's Service to be the lead on adoption and to be the link manager to Adoption West
- Through specific discussion and regular liaison meetings, continually work with the local judiciary to further 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
- Provide Early Permanence placements for our children via Adoption West
- 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
- 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 component of their life story
- 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. A strong pool of approved adopters allows matching to begin early in the process, often before a Placement Order is made.
- 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)

- Ensure that where required and appropriate, match funding is applied to ASF applications to provide high quality support to adoptive families
- Hold formal Disruption Meetings where adoption placements breakdown before Adoption Orders are made to consider key learning to inform whole service improvement.

## **Background**

50. 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.
51. 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.
52. 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 an adoption work and is an Adoption Agency; the requirement to be inspected and for Cabinet to be assured remains.
53. The local authority, through reporting to Cabinet, must be assured of regulatory compliance and effectiveness through performance monitoring, challenge and improvement planning.
54. 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.

55. 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.

### **Safeguarding Implications**

56. 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.

57. The partnership with Adoption West is carefully regulated and Adoption West has the appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures in place.

58. This report is for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

### **Public Health Implications**

59. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

### **Corporate Procurement Implications**

60. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

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

61. 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.

### **Environmental and Climate Change Considerations**

62. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

### **Risk Assessment**

63. 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.

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.

#### **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken**

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

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

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

#### **Financial Implications**

66. 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.

#### **Legal Implications**

67. 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.

### **Options Considered**

68. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

### **Conclusion**

69. 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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### **Background Papers**

The following documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

### **Appendices**

None

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