

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

10 October 2023

Subject: Wiltshire Council Annual Adoption Service: 2022-2023
Year End Report

Cabinet Member: Councillor Laura Mayes - Cabinet Member for Children's
Services, Education, and Skills

Key Decision: Non-Key

Executive Summary

It is a statutory requirement that Wiltshire Council's Adoption Service provides a year-end report to the Council in relation to the child's journey to adoption. It describes the management arrangements, outcomes, priorities, and finances for the period 01 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), Adoption West (AW), is commissioned to provide defined adoption services, and has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and approving adopters for our children. Adoption West is registered with Ofsted and has a separate inspection.

In this reporting period, 80 adopters were approved, this is a slight reduction on the previous year where 87 adopters were approved (85-95 target). However, there are fewer children waiting for adoptive homes than the number of families approved which means the demand can be met. As of 31 March 2023, there are 64 approved adopters waiting for a match. 36% of adopters approved in 2022/23 are available to adopt siblings, which exceeds the target range of 25-35%, a 15% increase on the previous year.

The focus for Adoption West is to recruit adopters for older children, those with additional needs, children from black and minority ethnic communities and larger sibling groups.

Nationally over the last nine years there has been a gradual decline in adoption being the outcome for children leaving care. In Wiltshire, the rate has remained relatively stable, ranging between 11-14%. Where adoption is the right permanence plan for a child, this is pursued by the Council and predominantly endorsed by the Court.

Comparative performance for local authorities is via the National Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows that performance remains strong. There are some fluctuations related to the commitment to deliver permanence via adoption for some children, despite factors which may make it more challenging to find a match, which impact on timeliness performance. Progressing the right permanence plan for a child will always remain the priority.

The national three year scorecard data is not yet published (due by the end of this year) and therefore comparator data is not currently available. Wiltshire has local reporting and therefore continues to have visibility of performance, but is unable to make comparisons against other authorities performance due to the lag in published data.

The three key scorecard measures each local authority Adoption Agency uses are as follows:

- A10: the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family:

The estimated figure for 2022-23 is 491 days, up on the previous year at 369. The target is 300-380 days.

- 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 estimated figure for 2022-23 is 162 days, a slight increase from 145 in 2021/22. The target is 140-160 days.

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

The estimated figure for 2022-23 is 283, a minor increase from the 282 days in 2021/22. The target is 210–230 days.

These measures on the surface indicate a decline, however those children outside of target have been reviewed to ensure the reason for delays are reasonable, and to determine whether there are practice improvements required to increase timeliness. For all children outside of targets, all delays were purposeful and in the child's best interests, or outside of the Local Authorities control. Where improvements could be made via the performance of courts, these are highlighted at the Family Justice Board. 4 children (1 sibling group) representing 25% of the total cohort was outside of timescale for reasons relating to their best interests; and 11 children (2 sibling groups) representing 69% of the total cohort were outside for reasons not within the Local Authority's control.

Whilst local measures show a decline, Wiltshire continues to perform well nationally and has robust quality assurance mechanisms in place to analyse practice outside of target ranges. Adoption performance remains strong, as evidenced within the data and quality review of individual children's experiences through routine audit. Annual target setting takes place to ensure targets remain appropriate, with a review of the targets taking place at the Performance and Outcomes Board on 05 September.

Adoption performance is reported quarterly to the Director of Families and Children's Services and to the Performance and Outcomes Board, chaired by the Corporate Director for People (DCS) and attended by the Cabinet Member.

Proposal

Cabinet is asked to approve the report and that the contents of it are considered against the Corporate Parenting Strategic Priorities for children in care to have a loving home, good relationships, and be respected.

Reason for Proposals

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. A report to Cabinet is prepared annually.

Adoption West is subject to separate scrutiny arrangements through its own Scrutiny Board.

Terence Herbert
Chief Executive

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

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Purpose of Report

1. This report provides a year-end report to Cabinet regarding the performance of Wiltshire Council's 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.
2. Cabinet received an Annual Report regarding the Adoption Service in October 2022, covering the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. This report relates to the full year 2022/23 reporting period.
3. This report includes information regarding the management and performance of Wiltshire Council's Adoption Service and the 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.
4. It is recommended that the contents of this report are for approved.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

5. Wiltshire Council's Adoption Service contributes to a central priority as set out in Council's Business Plan 2022-2032; namely to protect those who are most vulnerable and provide permanent homes for children in care.
6. 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.

Background

7. 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.
8. 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.
9. The legislative basis of this work is the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the accompanying 2005 Regulations.
10. The Local Authority, through reporting to Cabinet, must be assured of regulatory compliance and effectiveness through performance monitoring, challenge and improvement planning.
11. 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 additional needs and disabilities.
12. Adoption West is a Regional Adoption Agency: a partnership of six local authorities. It provides adoption services in line with government requirements, from the point of expression of interest to adopt, through to assessment and approval at panel and beyond, to Adoption Support.

Main Considerations for the Council

13. The main consideration for the Council is to be assured about statutory compliance and the effectiveness of the Adoption Service.
14. Wiltshire has set local performance targets in addition the national scorecard data, and this is the first reported year. In Wiltshire 16 children were made subject to adoption orders in 2022/23.
15. A10: 32% (5/16) children adopted moved in with their adopters in less than 380 days from entering care.
16. A2: 69% (11/16) children adopted were matched with an adoptive family within 160 days of the Local Authority receiving authority to place a child.

17. A20: 44% (7/16) children adopted were made subject to a placement order below 230 days from the date of coming into care.
18. These children's journeys have all been reviewed and the reasons for delays are not practice related or generally within our control i.e. relate to protracted care proceedings, the impact of additional assessments being ordered within the court arena, family members coming forward to be assessed at a late stage, and positively assessed family members withdrawing prior to final orders and/or placement. Given the significance of adoption for birth families, it is understandable that when family members present late in proceedings the Court and all those involved will want to make every effort to ensure families are assessed and considered as a kinship carer for a child.
19. There remain challenges with care proceedings concluding within the 26-week timescale, due to a number of factors outside of the Local Authority's control as described above. These challenges are subject to continued scrutiny via the Wiltshire Family Justice Board and Nationally informed by research findings, National reviews and DfE innovations which Wiltshire is at the forefront of.
20. Wiltshire are the regional lead in DfE Research: The National Pre-Proceedings Data Set project which should better enable us to measure the effectiveness of Pre-Proceedings and in turn improve delivery and timeliness for children at risk of going into the court arena.
21. Wiltshire have also recently (July 2023) been successful in a bid with the DfE to involve the Childrens Guardian (CAFCASS) prior to the first Case Management hearing in a care proceedings case, with the overall aim to seek to reduce the use of experts in proceedings and the overall length of proceedings. The shortening of care proceedings will have a direct impact on the timeliness of adoptions.
22. Overall, this demonstrates continued commitment to secure permanent arrangements for all children where adoption is in their best interests, even though it could take longer to find an adoptive match. 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.
23. Management arrangements and staffing within the Council are compliant with Regulations in terms of qualification and experience. The Director of Children's Services (DCS) has overall responsibility for aspects of adoption retained by the Council. Reporting to the DCS is the Director with responsibility for the Families and Children's Service. The Head of Service for Support and Safeguarding and one of their Service Managers ensure the effectiveness of overall adoption provision; this 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 enhance the strategy for improvement and ensure best outcomes for children.

24. The Director of Families and Children is the Adoption West company Director and sits on the Board of Directors. Adoption West is subject to a Scrutiny Committee that reports into Children's Select Committee.
25. Only three children were placed outside of the Adoption West area, either to be placed with siblings or to ensure a cultural match; both good reasons for placing outside of the area. Adoption West have however sought support/advice from the National Adoption Recruitment team regarding the recruitment from within BME communities across the region and are developing an action plan to address the issue.
26. In 2022/23, two rescissions of ADM decisions that children should be placed for adoption were made, where the plan for the child moved away from adoption (six in the previous year).
27. During 2022-2023 there have been no adoption placement disruptions and no placement breakdowns. This demonstrates strong matching.
28. Early Permanence (EP) is one of the DfE's aims in the 2021 National strategy: Achieving Excellence Everywhere. Adoption West has taken the lead in the South West. Of the 80 household approvals in 2022/23 56% of these adopters will consider Early Permanence. Increasing EP carers should see a positive improvement for children in the timeliness of their adoption journey and achieving permanence.
29. Adoption West will be involved in a new project which is due to be implemented in June 2023 'the South West Project for children with disabilities' Working with Oxford University. The Aim of this project to look at bespoke models of recruitment for children with a disability.
30. The Adoption West Adoption Panel complies with Regulations. This is important assurance as children who are the responsibility of Wiltshire Council are matched with adopters at these panels. 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.
31. To comply with Regulations, 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 and Chairs meet regularly with the Panel Advisers to discuss operational and developmental matters 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.
32. The average duration of Care Proceedings for Wiltshire 2022/23 was 33 weeks, this is an improvement from 36.9 weeks in March 2021/22; and significantly lower than the national CAFCASS figure for 2022/23 which is 44 weeks. Through robust tracking, we know that there are key factors beyond the control of the

Local authority impacting on timeliness. The Care Proceedings Case Manager (CPCM) has specific oversight of adoption from pre-proceedings.

Safeguarding Implications

33. This service is delivered in accordance with Wiltshire Children's Services Policy and Procedures. The local authority has clear and effective safeguarding procedures in place for children and vulnerable adults. The partnership with Adoption West is regulated and Adoption West has the appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures in place. There are no safeguarding implications arising from this report.

Public Health Implications

34. The risk of poor health and wellbeing outcomes is known to be greater for children looked after. Safe and high-quality environments provided by adoption placements are, therefore, an opportunity to mitigate these risks and improve long term outcomes for these children and young people.

Procurement Implications

35. There are no procurement implications arising from this report.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

36. 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

37. There are no implications arising from this report.

Workforce Implications

38. There are no workforce implications arising from this report.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

39. The Performance and Outcomes Board will meet on 05 September 2023 to consider this report prior to the report being presented to Children's Select Committee on 21 September 2023 and the Adoption West Scrutiny Task Group on 27 September.

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

40. This report is for approval; no decisions are being requested.

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

41. This report is for approval; no decisions are being requested.

Financial Implications

42. The service has been managed within budget, and therefore no financial implications arise from this report.

	2022-23 Budget (£ Million)	2022-23 Year End Final Spend (£ Million)	Variance (£ Million)
Adoption Support and Allowances	0.465	0.363	(0.102)
Adoption income	-	(0.068)	(0.068)
Contractual Payment: Adoption WEST	0.806	0.845	0.039
Total	1.271	1.140	(0.131)

Legal Implications

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

Options Considered

43. This report is for approval; no decisions are being requested.

Conclusion

44. Recent years have seen considerable change within the sphere of adoption with the introduction of RAAs and a focus on improving adoption performance nationally. 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 monitoring and improving service delivery where necessary for these children, with robust local measures in place to oversight practice.
45. Adoption practice in Wiltshire is strong, as evidenced within this report; and where timeliness is impacted, the reason for this is known and scrutinised.

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Appendices

None

Background Papers

None