

# adoption west



## Annual Report 2021-22

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## 1.0 Introduction

Adoption West is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) commissioned by Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Wiltshire Council. The agency is a local authority company wholly owned by the aforementioned local authorities. As a separate legal entity from the local authorities Adoption West is registered with Ofsted as a Voluntary Adoption Agency.

This report is also produced in accordance with National Minimum Standard 25.6, which details that the Voluntary Adoption Agency Board Members should:

- Receive a written report on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency, every six months
- Monitor the management and outcomes of the services provided, to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users
- Satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration

It is also a requirement of the Social Care Common Inspection Framework (SCCIF): voluntary adoption agencies, that the six-monthly reports are shared with Ofsted on an annual basis. A six-monthly report will be produced at the end of Q2 and Q4.

This report provides performance data for children's family finding service, adopter recruitment, adoption panels, adoption support, a staffing overview and financial arrangements linking this to the relevant National Minimum Standard (NMS). It also highlights what we have achieved and the key challenges in the last six months.

An appendix is provided which details the governance, commissioning, scrutiny and adopter participation arrangements for the agency.

## 2.0 Overview:

Adoption West has continued to deliver excellent support to children and families in the last year as we emerged from the Covid 19 pandemic, with increasing contacts with service users being face to face. Alongside this the learning with regards to the use of digital technology for meetings has been embedded, meaning that many staff have been able to have the flexibility and efficiency of hybrid working from home, whilst more recently including some time in office bases.

The period October to March has been particularly dominated by two key issues, a High Court ruling relating to the medical information required for children with plans for adoption that is now referred to as the Somerset Ruling and Adoption West's first Ofsted inspection.

**Somerset County Council v NHS Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group & Anor [2021] EWHC 3004(Fam)** highlighted issues of non-compliance with Adoption Agencies Regulations 15 and 17. Consequently, the courts requested that adoption agencies to review their processes to confirm that they were compliant with the adoption regulation. Unfortunately, one of the constituent local authorities of Adoption West identified non-compliance regarding the appointment of the Agency Medical Advisors (AMA), specifically the status of the person undertaking that role. When Adoption West was established, the appointment of the AMA was the responsibility of each local authority and Adoption West has accessed this role via the existing arrangements in place with the local authorities. The non-compliance of the specific Agency Medical Advisor therefore, had a direct consequence for Adoption West with some of the agency's adopter's medical reports not being compliant.

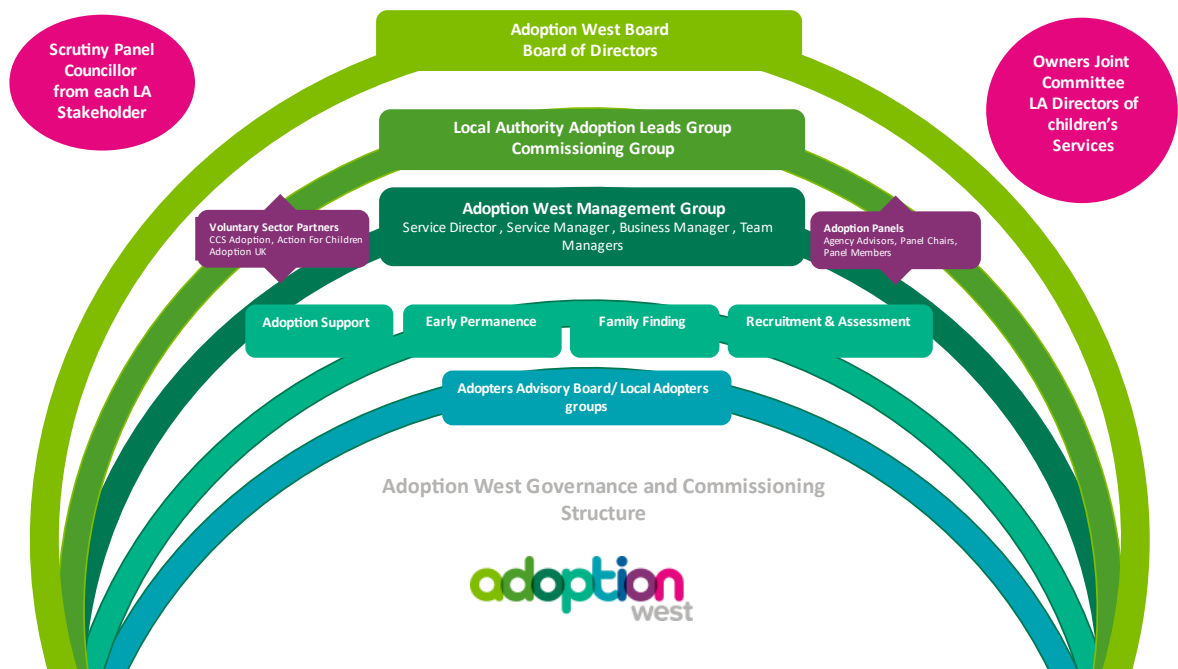
Having sought legal advice Adoption West took immediate action to address and remedy the medical reports that were non-compliant. We worked with the specific local authority to ensure an appropriate medical practitioner was appointed to the AMA role and via the adoption panels to ensure that all prospective adopter reports affected were rigorously reviewed by both the adoption panel and the Agency Decision Maker. All adopters affected had the issue addressed and amended by 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

The Ofsted inspection is discussed in more detail in part 4 of this report.

## 3.0 Governance and Scrutiny

As a local authority trading company, it has been essential that Adoption West established a rigorous and transparent mechanism of both governance and scrutiny. This is achieved via the Joint Committee of the local authority owners who discharge the strategic management of the agency to the Adoption West Board which meets quarterly. The Board comprises senior managers from the Local authorities along with a representative of the voluntary sector and the Adoption West Advisory Board. The work of Adoption West is presented to Scrutiny Panel which comprises an elected member representative of each local authority also meets quarterly following the Board meetings.

Adoption West operational managers meet bimonthly with the Adoption Lead Managers of the local authorities and focus on practice development for adoption and permanence practice across the region. Over the last year the group has developed a shared approach to managing adoption disruptions, a process for foster carers who wish to adopt a child in their care and has continued to embed the Moving to Adoption framework for enabling children to transition from foster carers to adoption.



## 4.0 Ofsted

As a registered voluntary adoption agency Adoption West is required to be inspected under the Social Care Common Inspection Framework [Social care common inspection framework \(SCCIF\): voluntary adoption agencies until 31 March 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-common-inspection-framework).

The first inspection of Adoption West had been delayed due to the Covid 19 pandemic and eventually took place between 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

Outcome of the inspection
Overall experiences and progress of service users - <b>Good</b>
How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected - <b>Good</b>
The effectiveness of leaders and managers - <b>Requires improvement to be Good</b>
<b>The voluntary adoption agency (Adoption West) provides effective services that meet the requirements for Good.</b> <b>Good</b>

The inspection took place during a critical time when issues of compliancy with Adoption Regulations were emerging. As a key factor in this inspection is the focus on the adherence to National Minimum Standards and the Adoption Regulations. The noncompliance relating to Adoption Regulations 26(a)(b) and specifically regarding the appointment of a suitably qualified Agency Medical Advisor in one of the local authorities was a significant factor as evidenced by the inclusion of a Requirement in the report on this matter. This issue has now been resolved with Gloucestershire appointing an appropriately qualified Agency Medical Advisor. All the remedial work to ensure that adopters medical summary reports are compliant with the adoption regulations has been completed.

The inspection report highlights how far Adoption West as an agency has developed in the last three years. The overall Good judgment is welcomed by Adoption West and recognises the passion and commitment of all Adoption West staff to deliver good outcomes for children. In the report there is recognition of the “momentous” task of bringing six separate adoption teams together to form a single Regional Adoption Agency and Voluntary Adoption Agency that is delivering good quality adoption services for children and families across the region.

The agency is considered to be recruiting and supporting adoptive families that provide safe loving permanent homes for children and is focused on the needs of children as reflected in the recruitment strategy and the training and development of its work force. The preparation and training of adopters was highlighted and within verbal feedback, the Lead Inspector commented that it was some of the best training she had observed.

The adoption support provided to children and families by social workers in the agency is a strength, alongside enabling families to access services via the Adoption Support Fund. Even though only operating for a year at the time, the agency has progressed during the pandemic and ensured that its services remained effective. The agency is realistic about its achievements and areas for further development. The five recommendations provided in the report are all issues the agency had previously highlighted and is addressing within its 2022-23 Development Plan.

In the same period Ofsted inspected adoption services as part of their ILAC inspections in:

#### Gloucestershire County Council

*“Planning for children with a plan of adoption is a strength. Working through the regional adoption agency, the numbers of children leaving care to join adoptive families have increased. There is a greater consideration for early permanence placements, as well as targeted recruitment resulting in more brothers and sisters being placed together for adoption.”*

#### Bath and North East Somerset

*“When adoption is in children’s best interests, the local authority ensures that the regional adoption agency delivers a good service for children. Children are matched quickly and prepared sensitively, and their adoptive parents are supported well. Adoption breakdown is rare.”*

## 5.0 Children’s Adoption Activity

### 5.1 Agency decision maker Activity

Adoption West provides advice to all six local authorities on making Should be Placed for Adoption decisions for children. This includes advice and support in relation to the quality assurance of the paperwork for the Agency Decision maker. The Agency Advisors work closely with the social work teams providing guidance and working to the court timetables.

The Agency Advisors have now established training for social workers and managers across the region, who are writing Child permanence reports. This year we have provided 2 days for managers

Children 2021-2022	BANES	Bristol	GCC	North Somerset	South Glos	Wiltshire	Total YTD	Total for 2020/21
<b>ADM (Should be Placed for Adoption) decisions</b>	7↑	16↓	50↓	4↓	9↓	21=	107↓	132
<b>Matches of children with Families</b>	2↓	25↑	29↓	14=	11↑	16=	97↑	93

The number of children with a plan for adoption has decreased by 19% this year. The most recent data from Coram i indicates a decrease in the number of ‘best interest decisions’ across England and the current ‘year to date’ figure would indicate that this trend is reflected in the Adoption West data.

## 5.2 Children matched and placed for adoption

	Children Matched YE 21/22	Children Matched YE 20/21	Children Placed YE 21/22	Children Placed YE 20/21
BANES	2↓	7	2↓	7
Bristol	25↑	17	24↑	18
Gloucestershire	29↓	31	33↑	30
N Somerset	14=	14	12↓	16
S Glos	11↑	7	11↑	6
Wiltshire	16=	16	17↑	16
	97↑	92	96↑	93

The number of children matched and placed for adoption has increased this year and is reflected in lower numbers of children waiting for an adoptive family.

One of our aims has been to increase the number of children who are placed with Adoption West adopters. During 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 74% of children were placed with Adoption West adopters and increase from 66% the previous year:

Children placed	YE 21/22	YE 20/21
Outside Adoption West	25 26%	24 34%
Within Adoption West	72 74%	46 66%

Children placed outside Adoption West are with adopters approved by either a Voluntary Adoption Agency or another Regional Adoption Agency. Placing children with Adoption West adopters enables children to remain local which facilitates transitions and support in early placement and longer term

## 5.3 Timeliness for Children

One of our key performance indicators is the time it takes us to find the right family for a child. The data in the table below sets out the amount of time between the placement order being made and the child being matched with their adoptive family (Coram I data Q3 2021-22). The timeliness is improving with Placement order to Match being shorter than the England average for 4 of the local authorities and the average across Adoption West as a whole is less than the England average for Placement to Adoption Order.



	Placement Order to Match	Placement to Adoption Order
<b>Target figure (days)</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>274</b>
<b>England Average</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>Adoption West Average</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>277</b>
<b>BANES</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>274</b>
<b>Bristol</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>235</b>
<b>Gloucestershire</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>310</b>
<b>North Somerset</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Sth Gloucestershire</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>Wiltshire</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>293</b>

There were 44 children with Placement Orders at 31/03/22, whom Adoption West were actively family finding for. This is significantly lower than the 69 children at the same period last year. It is positive to report that there are only 7 children waiting longer than 6 months compared with 23 children at 31/03/21. Of the 44 children with placement orders, yet to be matched at the end of Q4, 23 were linked for adoptive placements.

#### 5.4 Early Permanence

A total of 22 children were placed in EP placements during 2021-22. This is 8 less than the previous year. Recruitment for adopters who will consider providing Early Permanence has remained, however there are some challenges to finding suitable EP placements which include;

- uncertainty about whether a child will need an EP placement, for example if the child is living with a parent in a residential assessment centre.
- there may be limited information about children still living with birth parents or relatives, particularly if this is within their own home, these children tend to be older rather than newborn babies. Whilst some EP carers may consider older children, many EP carers will be motivated by the desire to care for a child as young as possible.

Working collaboratively with other Regional Adoption Agencies and Voluntary Adoption Agencies across the south west of England, Adoption West has been successful in a bid for National Adoption Strategy monies. This will enable the appointment of a project worker for 12 months to work across the South West to promote Early Permanence champions in each local authority and work nationally to develop webinar based training materials. The aim is to ensure that early permanence is promoted as an option for children to include older children and groups of brothers and sisters.

*To increase the number of children placed in Early Permanence placements (NMS 13)*

## 6.0 Marketing and Recruitment

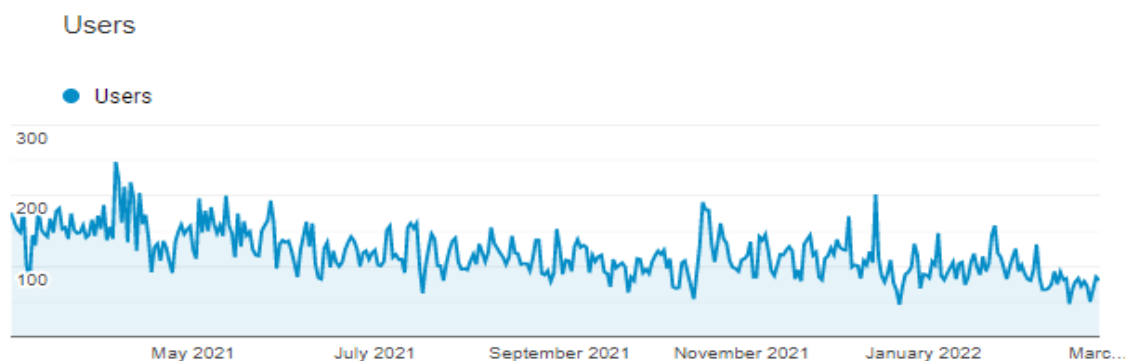
Our main three objectives of the recruitment strategy have been:

1. To recruit enough adopters willing to consider children from the harder to place cohort (specifically groups of brothers and sisters and those children with complex needs)
2. To make potential adopters' early on, of the need for adopters for brothers and sisters and what this might look like.
3. To provide and promote support to enable people to adopt brothers and sisters and children with complex needs

We are continuing to understand and analyse our social media and webpage activity to learn from this information to inform future recruitment plans. The activity focussed on and built upon the efforts made in the earlier part of 2021 (discussed in detail in the previous report)

### Acquisition of website visitors

Comparing this period (September 2021 > March 2022) with the previous six months, there has been a decline in the number of visitors to the website, however we have seen a reduction in Bounce Rate and an increase in Session Duration and Pages looked at, this may indicate that the visitors that are coming to the site are seeing the content they are interested in and that is relevant to them.



We can see that the highest number of searches are organic enquiries as opposed to directed from other sites.

1<sup>st</sup> September 2021 – 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022

	Acquisition			Behavior		
	Users	New Users	Sessions	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration
	15,602	15,386	21,641	58.74%	2.15	00:01:52
1 Organic Search	7,693			60.37%		
2 Paid Search	3,069			67.17%		
3 Direct	3,034			66.53%		
4 Referral	1,925			29.68%		
5 Social	437			64.18%		
6 Display	185			81.90%		

These Organic searches continue to show that awareness of Adoption West is increasing, this is reflected in the number of people reaching Adoption West's website directly and the decline in

number of people reaching us through Referral (i.e. local authority sites). It should be noted the Bounce Rate for Paid Search is significantly higher than that of Referral, attention will be paid over the coming year on the content of referring sites, to ensure this is relevant, current and capitalises on the potential audience interest. While we will continue with GoogleAds, the decision has been taken not to continue with display advertising.

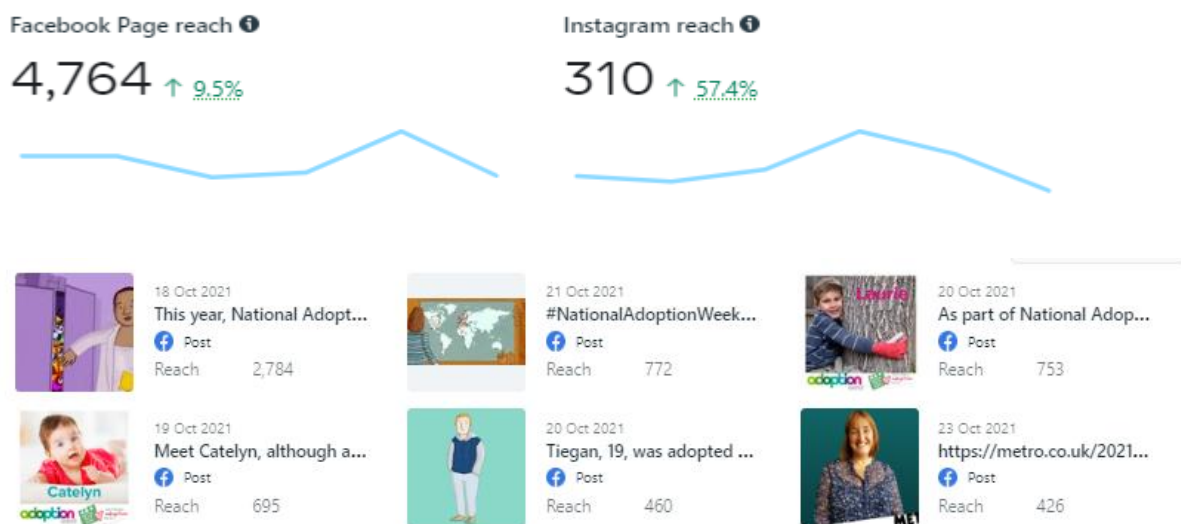
Focus for the coming two quarters will be to have a reviewed focus on web content, bringing some areas up to date and produce more real-life stories, with the aim to increase average session duration, and reduce bounce rate.

Social Media Posts for the last year focussed on the type of children waiting (with a particular focus on brothers and sisters) what we look for in adopters, sharing the real-life stories of adopters and what we offer in terms of support.

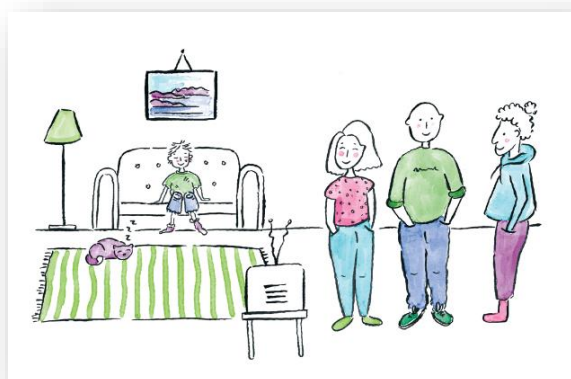
### National Adoption Week 18<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2021

The National Adoption Recruitment Campaign focus was given to “The Voices of Adoption”, allowing us to revisit ‘Tia’s Story’ as part of our campaigns for the period.

The reach from two main recruitment social channels for the w/c 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021



The main areas of focus for the coming year will be looking at our Instagram and LinkedIn presence as these have seen an increase in activity over the previous year and look set to continue.



‘Tia’s Story’ was used extensively across marketing material over the last year, with excellent results (close to 900 YouTube views and a reach of nearly 500 on one post in National Adoption Week). This was also seen in the sharing of stories as part of National Adoption Week (NAW).

There is a growing trend of increased engagement from short form video. When we shared 'The Voices' video as part of NAW we reached 2800 people.

We aim to create further animations over the coming year, to share the voices of adoption.

## Social Media plan over the three platforms

### Key Messages

- Modern Adoption, this is what adoption looks like in 2022
- Shift from #YouCanAdopt to #CanYouAdopt?
- Who are the children we represent?
- What are the stories of the people in their lives?

Putting the balance back into adoption and shifting the focus to the children

*To implement an effective recruitment strategy, meeting the needs of children with a plan for adoption in the AW region (NMS 10.1)*

## 7.0 Adopter Recruitment Activity

### 7.1 Enquiries

There has been a 26% increase in enquiries against the same period last year. However, there was variation between quarter 1 and 2 with a decrease in enquiries Q2. While the number of ROI's has reduced from the high numbers received in Q1, these were still 42% above the same period the previous year. The conversion rate from 'Enquiries' to 'Registrations of Interest' reduced on the peak of last quarter but was equivalent to the same period last year.

Enquiries have reduced significantly in the second half of 21/22 as was anticipated due to the change in the front door process. The process change requires applicants to attend an information session prior to making an enquiry. Based on this change in process, enquiry rates remain at a reasonable level, especially when the conversion rate to 'Registration of Interest' is considered. Importantly, the number attending information sessions is higher than for the same quarter last year and for the year overall is 31% higher than in 2020/21.

	2021-22	2020-21
Enquiries from people considering adoption	251	398
Prospective Adopters attending info sessions	331	253
ROIs received	82	106
Conversion rate: Enquiry to ROI	33%	37%
Average Time - ROI to Allocation (Days)	18.5	8.9
Average Time - Stage 1 to Approval (Days)	299	318
Started Stage 2		

## 7.2 Adopter Approvals

Adopters continue to be recruited from across the Adoption West region

Adopters Approved	2021/22	2020/21
BANES	2↓	5
Bristol	15↓	16
Gloucestershire	22↓	28
North Somerset	14↑	7
South Glos	10↑	8
Wiltshire	18↓	33
Other	2↓	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>87↓</b>	<b>100</b>

Adoption West approved 87 adopters in 2021-22, this is a reduction of 13 from the previous year. The number of approvals was slower in the last quarter due to issues relating to the medical regulatory compliance matter. Also there continues to be a high number of approved adopters and consequently we have been prioritising the Registration of Interest for potential adopter for children who wait longest.

Last year only 15 % of adopters approved were for sibling placements, compared with approximately 50% of the children requiring these placements. We set ourselves a target of increasing this figure to between 25-35% target. This has been achieved with 32% of adopters identifying as being available for brothers and sisters.

Feedback about the adoption process:

*I thought you may like to know that X had plenty of good things to say about their social workers and the trainers. They referred to them as being exceptional and talked about how all the training and support transformed their views of adoption. They were also very complimentary about the what's app group you helped them to form and the social interactions they have already had with other adopters.*

*We are so grateful for your support in what we have actually found to be quite a cathartic and enjoyable process.*

*D has been such a wise, thoroughly supportive influence in our journey and I felt that all through the process she asked the right questions, she was intuitive and encouraging.*

## 7.3 Sufficiency of Adopters to Children in Adoption West

Coram 1 provisional data Q3 2021

	<b>Approvals 01/01/21 – 31/12/21</b>	<b>Families available 30/12/22</b>	<b>Families needed 31/12/21</b>	<b>Adopter gap</b>
<b>Adoption West</b>	<b>101=</b>	<b>80↓</b>	<b>46 ↓</b>	<b>75% =</b>
<b>England</b>	<b>3044↑</b>	<b>2474↑</b>	<b>1449 ↑</b>	<b>71%↑</b>

The Adopter Gap tells us the difference between the number of children waiting for an adoptive family and the number of approved adopters in a given area. In the Adoption West region there has been fewer children waiting for adoptive homes than the number of families available. This has remained the position since the mid-2020. Whilst this is a positive situation, we need to continue our recruitment efforts for the children who wait longest for an adoptive family who are older children, those with additional needs, from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, as well as brothers and sisters who need to grow up together.

*The adoption agency approves prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of looked after children who are to be placed for adoption and who can provide them with a home where the child will be able to recover from the impact of their early life experience of loss and trauma, feel loved, safe and secure (NMS 10)*

## 8.0 Adopter Preparation Training

Plans had been in place to go back to face to face training for prospective adopters from January 2022 but had to be put on hold due to the continuing covid restrictions. However, as these were eased in late January, we were able to quickly respond to the request of the adopters who were in the middle of their stage 2 training and wished to have the opportunity to meet one another. Since then, all stage 1, 2 and EP full day training has been in person. EP information and Friends and Family training will remain as virtual courses.

The trainers have been working on several developments and have now provided the first workshop for adopters who are planning to adopt brothers and sisters. The Birth Links support workers are currently liaising with the trainers to produce film and/or audio recordings of birth relatives' and adopted adults' lived experiences, particularly regarding contact and life story. The hope is that these can be used in preparation of prospective adopters and perhaps in student social work training/induction of staff. In addition, Birth Links are also in discussion with the trainers and Recruitment and Assessment teams about developing 'Twilight' sessions which will be sessions outside of the preparation course where adopters can meet birth parents and adopted adults to hear about their lived experience and ask questions directly.

## Training courses provided 2021- 2022

	Stage1	Stage 2	EP info session	Early Permanence	Friends and Family
<b>Number of courses</b>	12	9	11	6	12
<b>Number of participations</b>	212	174	189	121	312

The training provided continues to receive very good feedback from adopters many commenting at adoption panel about their learning and the average evaluation being 9/10.

The following comments reflect prospective adopters learning from the training programme:

***“I have loved these training sessions, and left the last one wishing we could do more, because I enjoyed them so much. I really appreciate the honesty of the trainers, and how open they were about their own experiences, so thank you. I feel like we learnt so much in a short space of time. It was brilliant.”***

***“We would like to say thank you to Catherine and Raychel for their knowledge, experiences and willingly for sharing their stories with us to enhance our understanding. This really helped us to gain an insight into what parenting children with past trauma could be like, and the taking time to explain each section of the training in a deep and educated way. we left each session fully informed with no unanswered questions.”***

*Applicants are given the opportunity to talk to approved adopters, adoptees and birth parents whose children were adopted. (NMS10.7)*

*Preparation courses are held and made available to all prospective adopters, including foster carers who wish to adopt the child (NMS10.8)*

*Prospective adopters are prepared to become adoptive parents in a sensitive way, which addresses and gives them skills knowledge and practical techniques to manage the issues they are likely to encounter (NMS10.9)*

## 9.0 Adoption Disruptions

There was one disruption involving an Adoption West child during Q4 who was placed at the age of 6 and left her adoptive placement approximately three months later. The learning will be shared across the Adoption West an Local Authority workforce.

## 10.0 Adoption Panels

Adoption Panels have continued to be provided via digital platform. In this period there have been no relinquished children considered by the panel. 37 adopter assessments were considered and 32 matches for 43 children. Panel business was covered by the following hub panels during this period:

Panel	Bristol hub panel	Gloucester hub panel	Trowbridge hub panel
Relinquished children	0	0	0
Matches	14 matches (17 children)	11 matches (16 children)	7 matches (10 children)
Approvals	17 approvals	9 approvals	11 approvals
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>31 items</b>	<b>20 items</b>	<b>18 items</b>

During this six month period a total of 29 panels were originally scheduled and 26 panels were held. One panel was cancelled in December (Gloucester) and three panels were cancelled in February (two Trowbridge and one Gloucester). One reserve panel was used in March (Trowbridge) to accommodate the additional medical reviews required to ensure medical reports were compliant.

Panel training was provided on 3<sup>rd</sup> November and focused on, Learning from Disruptions, Feedback from Panel attendees, Adoption outcomes and Relinquished children

### Panel Membership

The most significant change to panel membership in this six-month period was the retirement of Sarah Achieson who had chaired the Trowbridge panel since 2017 and made a significant contribution to the development of panels during the transition to a regional adoption agency.

We are very pleased that Matthew Turner has been appointed as the new chair. Matthew is an experienced social work manager and has been a vice chair of the adoption panel since 2021

The adoption panel and decision-maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children throughout their lives. (NMS 17)

## 11.0 Non-Agency Partner Adoption (referred to as Step-Parent Adoption)

Assessments for non-agency partner adoptions are undertaken by the recruitment and assessments teams in each hub. This year there has been 104 enquires, with 60 assessments being completed and 34 Adoption Orders granted by the courts.



## 12.0 Adoption Support

### 12.1 Provision of Adoption Support Services

The table below provides comparative data for the last three years, showing that the need for adoption support services across the region continues to grow, this is also reported by Regional Adoption Agencies across England and evidenced in the national use of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF). Social workers are managing high caseloads which are rag rated to reflect the level of need with some families needing a review of their therapy, regular keeping in touch calls or visits and others more intensive social work involvement to support with education issues, family relationships, challenging behaviours such as child to parent violence and the impact of early life trauma, identity and life story issues.

Annual Adoption Support Data	2021- 2022	2020- 2021	2019- 2020
Adoption Support Enquiry	783↑	703	694
Appointments for Assessment of need	132↑	126	142
Av time from enquiry to Appointment(weeks)	4.5↓	5.4	4.6
No Assessments of need completed	144↑	126	272
No allocated families	640↑	483	377
Average caseload	56(FTE) ↑	46 (FTE)	
Waiting allocation	4.3↓	11	16

Even though there is high demand for service the time from enquiry to appointment of assessment of need has decreased and on average remains below the 6 week target. We do have to acknowledge that there have been periods in the year that the time has exceeded 6 weeks as this has been the experience for a small number of families. Throughout the year only the Gloucester hub have had families waiting for allocation following enquiry or assessment and the average for this is 4.3 families waiting at any time, with a period when no families have been waiting. This demonstrates a service that is responsive and timely to the needs of families whilst supporting high numbers of children and families.

The service capacity is vulnerable to changes in personnel such as vacancies and absence. As previously reported, the opportunities to focus on service development and an offer that provides early intervention support which can divert families need for therapeutic intervention, are limited due to the current level of demand. The need to improve the consistency of the adoption support offer across the region was a recommendation of the Ofsted inspection and we are currently working with the local authorities via the Adoption West Board to develop the adoption support offer.

## Groups provided by Adoption West via contract with CCS Adoption Bristol

The contract with CCS Adoption has been reviewed for 2022/23 with the inclusion of

- **The A-Team** – six week focused activity group for adopted teens to be provided in different locations across the region meets regularly to have fun together trying out new skills and initiatives
- **Prime Team Programmes** - two pilot groups for primary aged children based in the Bristol area.
- **Family Fundays**

Services that have been continued

- **The Tots** – three weekly groups for parents and their adopted pre-school children
- **Mums group** – meets monthly facilitated by a member of CCS therapy team
- **Dads Group** – every other month facilitated by a member of CCS therapy team
- **STEP Group** – group for early permanence carers facilitated by an experienced EP carer
- **LGBT Coffee Morning** – meets monthly on a Saturday also opportunity for children to join a planned activity
- **Single Adopters Catch up** – Virtual – every other Thursday
- **Training and Workshops**

## TESSA –Adoption UK

Adoption UK TESSA service has been available to families in the Adoption West region since October 2020. This has been a lottery funded service until March 2022. The core elements of the service for families are:

- Consultations with psychologists from their clinical partner organisation, The Family Place
- Peer support through parent partners (employed, trained and supervised by Adoption UK)
- Reflective therapeutic parenting groups facilitated by one of their psychologists and a parent partner

In 2021-22 83 families have been referred to the service with 61 families taking up the offer.

Hub	Families Referred	Families taken up the service	Families on hold or withdrawn
Bristol	31	22	9
Gloucester	18	14	4
Trowbridge	34	25	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>22</b>

## Therapeutic Parenting Courses

Adoption West has provided 3 therapeutic parenting courses during the year with 22 adopters attending. These are facilitated by experienced adoption support social workers.

### Feedback from participants:

- *It was good timing for me (parent of 3 year old)*
- *Think this training should be offered after the first year of child being placed and a year later as a refresher*
- *Understanding brain development and that our son is not just being naughty and that this happens so young. We got our son very young and expected everything to be plain sailing and it hasn't been*
- *The weekly reset and reminder of what we're doing and why*
- *The community and hearing other's feedback which is exactly the same as our experiences*

The role of adoption support social workers and support workers is central to the support provided to families even when the therapeutic support is commissioned from other services. They are the point of contact in a crisis, assess the level of need and co-ordinate all the services that are necessary to support a family. Here are some comments from families:

*I just want to thank you for all your help and support since we approached you in a time of crisis. I would like you to know that you've made a real difference to our lives ..You've allowed us to feel understood, without judgment but with a deep understanding and empathy for us, for our boys and all our needs around coping with the impact of our boys' early life experiences. Even though we know there will be a lifetime of challenges ahead of our family, I feel sure the help we will need along the way will be out there*

*Gratitude to K in an adoption support review. K was calm, accepting, curious, and really kind and supportive throughout. This made a potentially very difficult situation, so much easier.*

## 10.3 Adoption Support Fund

The table below shows that the number of applications and level of grant funding received from the ASF to support children and families continues to increase each year. Adoption West continues to rely heavily on the ASF to provide adoption support services. Managing the associated tasks and functions when completing applications draws heavily on the capacity of adoption support social workers and business support. There is currently a business case before the board seeking additional resources to increase the support worker capacity and develop the core offer of peer to peer support.

2021-22 Total Applications Approved by ASF in the quarter	Count of ASF Application Reference	Sum of Number of Funded Recipients (new)	Sum of Total Service Costs
BANES	105	120	£334,803.21
BCC	179	199	£602,253.37
GCC	333	36	£1,222,458.76
N Somerset	108	125	£3699,538.53
South Glos	51	61	£196,543.15
Wiltshire	183	201	£569,087.39
<b>AW Total</b>	<b>959↑</b>	<b>1082↑</b>	<b>£3,294,688.41↑</b>
<b>Year total 2020-21</b>	<b>891</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>£3,109,024.27</b>

*Adoption National Minimum Standard 15*

*Adoption support*

*Children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs.*

*Children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs. Service users confirm that the adoption support service provided met or are meeting their assessed needs. (NMS 15)*

## 12.4 Keeping in Touch with Families

### Letterbox arrangements

A key aspect of our universal support to families is via the letterbox service. This enables adopted children and young people to keep in contact with birth family via letters exchanged between the adopters and agreed significant members of the birth family. Letterbox plays a significant part in helping children and young people understand their identity and life story. For some, when the time is right it can be a platform for face to face contact. There are now over a thousand letterbox

agreements in place and each will have a minimum of two exchanges of letters a year, many have much more than this.

As at 31/03/2022	Total letterbox arrangements
BANES	113
Bristol	312
Gloucestershire	272
North Somerset	93
South Gloucestershire	88
Wiltshire	260
<b>AW Total</b>	<b>1,138↑</b>

*Thank you for enclosing a letter from my daughter's birth father. I am so pleased that we have heard from him. It is going to be so important for my daughter to have these....I am so pleased to be hearing from the birth families. We are so lucky that they are at least starting to engage with the letterbox process. Thank you for all the thought and effort that has gone into helping us with communication.*

## Direct contact

The number children with plans for direct contact with members of their birth family has steadily increased each month for the last two years. This reflects the importance that is now being given to providing opportunities to adopted children to keep in touch with significant people in their lives. These arrangements are nearly all supervised initially and may progress to be facilitated in time. This is now becoming an increasingly significant part of the adoption support service.

As at 31/03/2022	BANES	Bristol	GCC	N Som	S Glos	Wiltshire	Total	2020/21
<b>No. agreements</b>	5	19	22	3	4	46	<b>99↑</b>	<b>86</b>

Contact with birth parents, siblings, other members of the birth family and significant others is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child. (NMS 8)

## 13.0 Birth Links/Adopted Adult/Birth Parent Support



Support to adopted Adults and birth parents is provided by our Birth Links team which now works across the whole region.

The number of birth parents accessing support has significantly increased by 44% however this does still not reflect the level of children who have a plan for adoption. Therefore, continues to be an area of development in 2022/23 and we will be work with the local authorities to promote referrals of birth family to the service at an earlier stage in the process. Adopted Adult work remains consistent with the length of time between enquiry to allocation reducing.

Birth Links has been running a group for birth parents in Bristol once a month since the middle of September 2021. It has been a very successful group with a core membership of 5 birth mothers who have come to every single session. The support workers are in the process of encouraging a further 4 identified birth mothers to attend. Various activities have been provided to enable the group members to talk about their feelings, share common experiences and support each other.

There is a plan to run a similar service in Gloucester as a 'pop up group' that will run for 6 sessions over 6 months which will then be reviewed. Birth mothers have already been identified who are keen to participate.

Birth Links is developing policy, procedure and practice in regard to Post-Commencement accessing of files, which is governed by different law and regulations.

Total for 2021/22	Adopted Adult (Schedule 2)	Adopted Adult/Support (Access to Records)	Intermediary Advice	Birth Family	Adopted Adult/Support Post Commencement
BANES	1	7	3	1	0
BCC	10	12	12	31	0
GCC	17	27	7	21	0
N Somerset	2	5	8	9	0
South Glos	6	7	3	7	1
Wiltshire	10	17	8	13	0
<b>AW Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Total 2020-21</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>0</b>

*Birth parents are given access to, and are actively encouraged to use, a support worker from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child. The support worker is independent of the child's social worker. (NMS12.3)*

*Birth parents are helped to work through their concerns through the counselling they receive and understand what is proposed for their child and how the child will benefit if they take an active part in their child's adoption.(NMS12.6)*

## 14. Quality Assurance

To support the improvement of our services Adoption West has developed a quality Assurance Framework and which will help us to reflect on our practice. Audits have been completed of the support to Early Permanence carers and of the caseloads that social workers are managing in adoption support.

We have also introduced an evaluation at different stages of the adoption process to provide service users the opportunity to give regular feedback. We intend to introduce a similar process for adoption support. We have worked with the Adopters Advisory Board to seek views of adopters to identify a process that adopters will find meaningful and easy to engage with.

## 15. Complaints & Data Breaches

As in the previous six month report we have had 2 stage 1 complaints and no stage 2 complaints. One complaint was complex and related to an adopter assessment and transition of a child. It was partially upheld and there is learning for the agency about the quality of records ensuring they provide accounts of contacts with service user and also an acknowledgement that as the agency transitioned to the "Moving to Adoption" model for transitions some adopters, who had already been approved, hadn't covered this as part of their preparation.

The second complaint was in relation to the delay in processing and deciding upon an adoption allowance which is the responsibility of the local authority and was passed to them.

There have been 2 data breaches in this period which is a significant improvement from the previous 6 month period. One related to information shared with an approved adopter as part of an EP referral the information was quickly contained and deleted. The other incident was more significant and was referred to the ICO, it related to confidential information that was shared via a letterbox exchange. The decision of the ICO was there would be no further action. The agency had taken action to prevent a recurrence by reviewing our control measures.

## 16.0 People

### 16.1 Senior Management Team

- Alison Lewis, Service Director- Agency Decision Maker (Adopter Approvals)
- Stuart Babbage, Business Manager
- Sue White, Service Manager – Recruitment, Assessment & Adoption Support
- Alison Hall, Service Manager – Family Finding and Panels (30hrs)

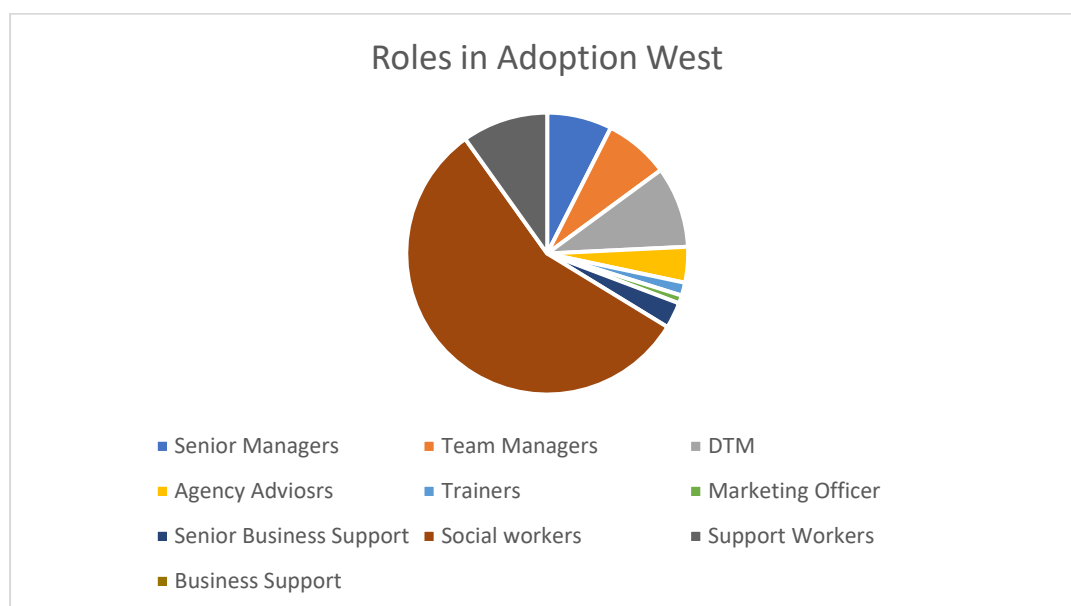
## 16.2 Establishment at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022

The number of staff employed is 84 with 63.23 fte  
Permanent staff – 82, Temporary Staff - 2 (1 Team Manager, 1 social worker)

Four members of staff who were on fixed term contracts were confirmed as Permanent following the Adoption West Board meeting in March 2022. This then enabled another two further members of staff to be offered permanent posts. Currently, Adoption West has 1 social worker in adoption support on a temporary contract and a Team Manager working 3 days a week on a temporary basis. Both posts are in the Gloucester hub

8 Independent Workers have been employed over the year to complete Prospective Adopter assessments.

Currently we have vacancies for 4 fte social workers and two part time support worker posts all the post are in the process of being recruited to, with two social work appointments being progressed. We have had a long term vacancy for a team manager in the Gloucester hub. Despite efforts by HR recruitment and offering a significant additional package including welcome offer, retention and relocation there have been no suitable applicants to interview. The decision has now been made to halt recruitment and trial a temporary structure with the Recruitment and Assessments teams in Gloucester and Trowbridge being managed by one Team Manager. This means that the Deputy Team Managers for adoption support in Gloucester and Trowbridge are being supervised by the Service Director and Service Manager respectively, on a temporary basis.



## 16.3 Workforce Development

It is the aim of Adoption West to provide development opportunities for staff that will enhance the service and meet the needs of adopters, children and birth families. We currently have 20 social workers who are qualified in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy level 1, and 2 social workers qualified at level 2. In February 2022 41 staff attended introduction to the BUSS model (Building Underdeveloped Sensorimotor Systems in children who have experienced developmental trauma). 3



social workers are completing the Level One Training in this model. Plans are in place for 20 staff to complete their level 1 in Theraplay in spring 2022. In addition to these courses;

### **South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC)**

SWAC includes all Regional Adoption Agencies and Voluntary Adoption Agencies in the South West of England. The consortium is funded by contributions from all agencies and has a focus on practice development and training. There are established meetings for Adoption Panel Chairs, Agency Medical Advisors, Service managers and Operational Managers. The training provided by SWAC has included:

- Best Practice - Recruitment, Training and Preparation of adopters
- CoramBAAF – Safeguarding – Learning from Serious Case Reviews
- Education for Adoptees
- Harnessing the energy of sibling bonds – a renewable energy source
- CoramBAAF – Legal Update
- How can NVR be helpful in supporting adoptive families?

## **16.4 Adoption West staff Values statement**

During the year the staff have developed a statement which they feel represents the values they hold and bring to their practice



## 17.0 Financial Arrangements

Adoption West received commissioned contract income of £3.401m in 2021/22 from its 6 local authority partners to deliver adoption services. The breakdown of budget allocation is shown below:

Category	Budget (£'000)
Employee Salary, NI & Pensions	2,856
Other employee related spend	117
Commissioned Services, subs & adopter recruitment activity	144
Post Adoption Support activity	61
ICT & Office Costs	142
Other Support Services	81
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,401</b>

Adoption West has also received £3.218m Adoption Support Fund grant income and manages the related expenditure on behalf of the 6 local authority partners. As a Voluntary Adoption Agency, Adoption West operates on a not-for-profit basis and any surpluses are returned to the local authority partners that control the organisation. Account balances cover in-excess of 3 months operating expenses and there is therefore no perceived risk regarding organisational cashflow.

Adoption West has managed its finances effectively during 2021/22 to deliver services within budget under the added pressures of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and various other organisational challenges. The financial processes and systems in place have proved effective and are being continuously improved to meet requirements, increase efficiency and enable Adoption West to realise new opportunities.

*Financial viability and changes affecting business continuity. The Voluntary Adoption Agency/Adoption Support Agency is financially sound. (NMS20)*

## 18. How have we done – Service Priorities for 2021-22

Adoption West said it would ....	Adoption West has...
To take forward lessons learnt regarding what has worked well in delivering the service during the pandemic and incorporate this into new ways of working.	Continued with Virtual panels Has a hybrid approach with some virtual training and core training face to face Continued a Virtual Information session to ensure accessibility
To establish ways of working in accordance with the Adoption West Quality Assurance framework.	Completed a Quality Assurance framework along with Supervision and recording Policies that are bespoke for the agency (To ensure AW is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently and delivering good quality services, which meet the needs of children and service users (NMS 25) Managers to regularly monitor all records kept by the Agency (NMS25.2)
To continue to review and develop the adopter recruitment strategy to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption.	Increased the number of adopters for brothers and sisters from 15%-32% To implement an effective recruitment strategy, meeting the needs of children with a plan for adoption in the AW region (NMS 10.1)
To improve experiences for adopters by routinely seeking user feedback and reviewing the information sessions.	We have developed a process for user feedback which is now embedded into the process from enquiry to adoption order. We are seeking to develop this for adoption support services and have sought the involvement of the adopter advisory board to seek feedback for the process. To ensure that people who are interested in becoming adopters are treated fairly without prejudice, openly and with respect (NMS 10.2) Service users confirm that the adoption support service provided met or are meeting their assessed needs (NMS 15)
To further develop the use of the “Moving to Adoption” model in children’s Transitions. Guidance and training have been completed and shared.	All transitions are planned in accordance with this model. The local authorities are providing training to foster carers to prepare them for transitions The adoption agency has procedures for introducing a child to the prospective adopters and others living in the household that can be adapted to the individual needs of the child and prospective adopters. (NMS13.8)
To develop robust tracking and management processes for children pre-adoption order, placed in ‘out of region’ placements.	This has been achieved by the introduction of the central Family Finding who are now monitoring all such placements. To ensure best outcomes for children when moving to adoption placements (NMS 13.8)
To complete an audit of Early Permanence placements to ensure that appropriate levels of support are in place that meet fostering standards. To action outcomes from this audit	The audit has been completed which has resulted in guidance for Adoption West social workers when supporting EP placements and has clarified roles and responsibilities between Adoption West and the Local authorities

To work in partnership with the local authorities to deliver Child Permanence Report Writing Training to social workers across the region.	This is now scheduled on a regular basis with social work managers and agency advisors are working with local authorities to deliver training to social workers Birth parents are given the opportunity to comment on what is written about them or their circumstances before the information is passed to the adoption panel or to the child's proposed adoptive parents. (NMS 12.7)
A 3yr strategic plan for an adoption support core offer to be developed using outcomes from Adoption Support Audit.	We are continuing to work with the Adoption West Board and local authorities to develop the adoption support offer
The transition of the current management of Letterbox system to be undertaken on CHARMS across each three hubs.	This is completed in the Trowbridge hub. It has been delayed in the other hubs and an action plan is in place to address this
Establish protocols across AW for management of direct contact post adoption.	The Local Authority Lead Managers have agreed that this is a key action for the group for 2022/23 Promoting children's positive identity, so that they have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and understanding of their background (NMS 2) and contact is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child (NMS 8)
Establish clear and efficient protocols with the Local Authorities for accessing records held in adoption archives.	There had been some initial progress ,but this is not consistent across the region. It is now a key priority for the LA lead Managers Adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to adoption (NMS 16)

## 19. Adoption West Board Vision Statement

Adoption West believes that every child deserves the right to grow up in a caring and loving family, who will nurture them and prepare them for adult life.

Our vision is for Adoption West to increase the number and diversity of adoptive families available to children in the Adoption West sub region, who are unable to live with their birth families. We also intend to increase the number of early permanence placements available in order to minimise placement moves for children and the number of adoptive families able to consider sibling placements.

We aim to bring a consistent approach towards permanence planning and adoption support across the participating local authorities and, over time, broaden our approach to encompass other forms of permanence, including special guardianship.

## 20. Service Priorities 2022/23

The priorities for the year are set within the context of our vision statement and each priority is subject to a number of specific actions to ensure the priority is delivered:

- To improve timeliness of Stage 1 and Stage 2 assessments

- Ensure that placements are timely either through placing children as soon as they are subject to a Placement Order or through an early placement scheme, in order to promote positive attachment - Improved children's performance data across the region
- To increase the number of children placed in Early Permanence placements
- To obtain the CORAM BAAF EP Quality Mark
- The long term needs of adopted children in the region to be understood and reflected in a regional adoption support offer
- Promoting children's positive identity, so that they have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and understanding of their background
- Adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to adoption
- To improve the consistency of the adoption support offer.

## 21. Conclusion

This report comes at the end of our third year of operating as a Regional Adoption Agency. Adoption West is now an established agency with a clear identity across the region. Again, this year the service has responded to challenges including the continuing changes and uncertainty of the Covid 19 pandemic and more recently the issues related to the Somerset Judgement.

Throughout we have remained focused on the key priorities of improving the timeliness for children by recruiting sufficient adopters who are prepared and understand the needs of the children. There remain challenges in relation to improving and providing a more consistent adoption support offer. However, the agency is committed to improving the support available to children, adopters and birth families.



**Alison Lewis**  
**Service Director**

### Contributors:

Sue White: Service Manager  
 Alison Hall: Service Manager  
 Stuart Babbage: Business Manager  
 Anjali Gupta: Team Manager Bristol  
 Jane Priborsky: Team Manager Trowbridge  
 Kate Worthington: Team Manager Family Finding  
 Rebecca Myers: Marketing and Communications  
 Anita Huggins: DTM Adoption Support Bristol  
 Denise O'Connor, DTM Adoption Support Trowbridge  
 Rebecca Kay: DTM Adoption Support Gloucester  
 Claire Jarvis: DTM Birth Links

## Appendix 1

### Governance Arrangements:

As a local authority company, Adoption West is owned by the six partner local authorities through the Joint Committee of Directors of Children's Services. The management of Adoption West is delegated to the Adoption West Board of Directors and to the Service Director.

### Adoption West Board of Directors:

#### Voting members:

- Andy Dempsey – Director of Partnerships and Strategy, Gloucestershire County Council (Chair)
- Martin Davis – Assistant Director Children and Families, Wiltshire Council
- Fiona Tudge – Director of Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council
- Jo Cross – Head of Integrated Children Services, South Gloucestershire Council
- Becky Hopkins – Assistant Director, North Somerset Council
- Mary Kearney-Knowles – Director Children and Young Peoples Service, Bath and North East Somerset Council

#### Non-Voting members:

- Mustafa Salih – Head of Financial Management and Business Support, South Gloucestershire Council
- Vicky Reynolds – Chair of Adoption West Adopter Advisory Board, Adoption UK (to join from December 2021)
- Maggie Pitts – CEO, CCS Adoption

### Commissioning Arrangements:

Adoption West is commissioned by the six local authorities to provide adoption services. The Lead Managers group is responsible for oversight of the commissioning arrangement and developing shared practice between Adoption West and the Local authority children's social care teams.

### Local Authority Adoption Lead Managers Group:

- Rachael Ward – Head of Service: Care Outcomes, Bath & North East Somerset Council
- Tara Parsons – Service Manager, Placements Team, Permanency and Specialist Services, Bristol City Council
- Tammy Wheatley – Head of Service, Permanence, Gloucestershire County Council

- Shelley Caldwell – Service Leader Service Leader Resource Service, North Somerset Council
- Aimee Williams– Service Manager, South Gloucestershire Council
- Pier Pritchard – Service Manager, Children in Care and Placement Service, Wiltshire Council

### Scrutiny Arrangements:

As an adoption agency that is funded by public finances to provide statutory adoption services it is crucial that there is effective scrutiny of Adoption West. The Joint Scrutiny Panel has been established to provide this function. The panel meets quarterly and each meeting includes a briefing about adoption issues. In this period adopters have met with councillors and shared their experience of support via the ASF and being an Early Permanence carer.

### Joint Scrutiny Panel:

#### Elected Voting Members:

- Cllr Michelle O’Doherty Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Cllr Christine Townsend Bristol City Council
- Cllr Dr Andrew Miller 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

### Adopter Participation:

Adoption West has commissioned Adoption UK to provide Adopter Voice services across the region. An Adopter Advisory Board has been created which consists of a Chair and Adopter Champions across the region. The Chair also attends the Adoption West Board to ensure the voice of adopters is included in the governance and scrutiny of the work of Adoption West.

The current Chair of the Advisory Board June 2021 is Vicky Reynolds.