

## Wiltshire Council

### Cabinet

27 September 2022

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**Subject:** Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2021-2022 Year End Report

**Cabinet Member:** Cll Laura Mayes – Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Children’s Services, Education and 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 01 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

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 (AW), launched on 01 March 2019. This is the third annual report which relates to three full years of the new organisation being operational. 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, including responsibility for recruiting, assessing and approving adopters for our children. 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.

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

There are national scorecard measures that cover a three-year period and thus aspects of this report relate to Wiltshire Council performance, where functions have since moved to Adoption West. The most recent nationally published scorecard available is from 2020 which covers 2017-2020. The scorecard data for 2018-21 will be published by the DfE in the Summer of 2022.

Since the last annual report, Adoption West has been inspected by Ofsted (January 2022), with an overall inspection Judgement of Good with Requires Improvement to be Good for leadership and the inclusion of a requirement in the report related to compliancy with Adoption regulations.

It Stated:

*‘Children placed by the agency make progress and achieve positive outcomes. This is because the agency places them with adopters who can meet their*

*needs and provide them with a stable and loving family, adopters speak of love and pride about the progress their children are making since being in their care'. 'Adopters are comprehensively assessed and prepared to adopt a child' 'It has been a momentous task and much hard work and commitment from leaders and managers to bring six local authority adoption services together, to form one agency and merge different standards of practice and different systems. There is a realistic awareness by leaders and managers of the agency's achievements to date and what needs to be achieved to further develop the agency. This work is effectively supported through comprehensive management scrutiny and oversight from the board.'*

In respect of the Requires Improvement to Good in relation to Leadership, the Ofsted inspection took place during a critical time when issues regarding compliancy with Adoption Regulations were emerging nationally, following a High Court ruling relating to medical information required for children being adopted and adopters that is now commonly known as the 'Somerset Ruling' (Somerset County Council v NHS Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group & Anor [2021] EWHC 3004(Fam). Unfortunately, one of the constituent Local Authorities (not Wiltshire) of Adoption West identified non-compliance regarding appointment of the Agency Medical Adviser which had a direct consequence for Adoption West with some of the agency's adopters' medicals not being compliant. Having sought legal advice, Adoption West took immediate action to address and remedy the medical reports that were non-compliant, and all adopters had the issues addressed and amended by April 2022.

In relation to the Somerset Judgment, Wiltshire Council undertook an immediate audit of all children in the adoption journey and sought assurance from the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) regarding the appointment of Medical Agency Advisers, which provided assurance that all medicals undertaken previously and in the future are and will remain compliant.

In 2020/21, 23 Adoption Orders were granted, and 33 families living in Wiltshire were approved as suitable to adopt. For the year 2021/22, 19 Adoption Orders have been granted for Wiltshire children, and 18 families living in Wiltshire have been approved as suitable to adopt. Across the Adoption West area there have been 87 adopter approvals; within the target of 85-95 approvals. This is less than last year as the last quarter was impacted by issues relating to medical regulatory compliance as described above. Positively, 32% of adopters approved in 2021/22 are available to adopt siblings, which is well within the target range of 25-35% set in 2021/22, compared to only 15% in the previous year. The target for approvals for adoptive families remains at 85-95 approvals for 2022/2023.

Over the last six years, the number of children entering care where adoption is in their best interest has decreased. This has been more pronounced in the last 2 years, primarily driven by an increase in the number of children where a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or Child Arrangement Order has been determined to be a more desirable and suitable permanence option for them; adoption being the last resort. Nationally over the last six years there has been a gradual decline in adoption being the outcome: from 17% in 2014/15 to 12% in 2019/20. The % decline for Wiltshire was from 14% in 2014/15 to 12% in

2019/20. In the same period, Special Guardianship Orders have increased from 11% to 13% nationally. For Wiltshire there has been a steady increase in SGO's with 25 in 2019/20, 31 in 2020/21 and 30 in 2021/22, equating to 14%, 18% and 22% respectively in children leaving care as a result of an SGO being made. For Wiltshire this is particularly the case for very young children under the age of 4 years old who are often able to find a loving and supportive home environment with a set of grandparents or connected carers.

Whilst it is anticipated that over future years this trend will continue, there has in this last 6 months been a change in the profile of children with a marked increase of single children under 2 years old with Should Be Placed for Adoption decisions. We have seen spikes previously and thus this does not indicate an overall change in the direction of travel. Four out of seven of these families have a key risk factor related to substance misuse; Wiltshire Council working with the Wiltshire Family Justice Board launched a Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) in June 2022 and it is envisaged that this innovative project will reduce the number of children coming into care where substance misuse is a key factor.

In the Adoption West region, there have been fewer children waiting for adoptive homes than the number of families available to adopt and this has remained the position since mid-2020. Whilst this is positive, Adoption West need to continue to focus recruitment efforts for the children who wait the longest for an adoptive family; older children, those with additional needs, children from black and minority ethnic communities and sibling groups.

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. In 2021/22 within the Adoption West region as a whole, 26% of children have been placed with adopters outside of Adoption West compared to 34% in 2020/21. For Wiltshire children in 2021/22 10% were placed with adopters outside of Adoption West compared to 17% in 2020/21.

Within Adoption West, as of 31 March 2022 there are currently 32 prospective adopters in Stage 1 and 30 in Stage 2 of the assessment process. As of 31 March 2022, there are 63 approved adopters waiting for a match, excluding those with an Early Permanence (EP) placement. An EP placement refers to the situation where children in care may be placed in a home at the earliest opportunity by being placed with adopters who are also approved as foster carers, who initially foster the child(ren) and may become their adopters once the court proceedings have concluded.

Comparative performance for local authorities is via the Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows that performance remains strong whilst recognising some fluctuations related to factors which may make it more challenging to find a match i.e. older children, and children with complex health needs. The Government has not yet given clarity about how the Scorecard will be used by the Regional Adoption Agencies.

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

- A10: the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (date of adoptive placement or fostering for adoption placement i.e. Early Permanence approved Adopters that have joint Fostering approval), for children who have been adopted:

The local authority estimated figure for the single year 2021-22 is estimated at 369 days, down from the previous year at 420.

- 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 locally estimated reported one-year figure for 2021-22 is 145 days, a decrease from 157 days in 2020-2021. 140-160 is our target and through practice auditing we have identified ways to decrease the days, as we aspire to be at the lower end of this target.

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

The locally estimated reported one-year figures for 2021-22 is 282, an increase from 234 days in 2020/21. Our target is 210-230 days, and as above, practice auditing has identified ways in which we can reduce the number of days moving forwards (as outlined in detail below).

A full account of these scorecard measures is detailed below starting on page 6. Each child/sibling group outside of the expected timescales has been reviewed for practice learning. There are no themes indicating timescales could have been reduced based on our practice alone. We have however set up additional internal quality assurance and scrutiny measures to enable any possible positive impact on timeliness there can be, however small.

### **Proposal(s)**

It is requested that this report is for approval. 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.

### **Reason for Proposal(s)**

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.

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

**Terence Herbert**  
**Chief Executive**

# Wiltshire Council

## Cabinet

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**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Laura Mayes – Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Children’s Services, Education and Skills

**Key Decision:** Non-Key

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### 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 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).
- 1.2 Cabinet received an Annual Report regarding the Adoption Service in October 2021, covering the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. This report relates to the full year 2021/22 reporting period.
- 1.3 The Ofsted inspection of Adoption West in January 2022 concluded with a judgement of Good, recognising the momentous task and much hard work and commitment from leaders and managers to bring six local authority services together to form one agency.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 It is recommended that the contents of this report are for approval.

### 2. Relevance to the Council’s Business Plan

- 2.1 The Wiltshire Council Adoption Service contributes to a central priority as set out in the Wiltshire Council Business Plan 2022-2032; namely to protect those who are most vulnerable and provide permanent homes for children in care.
- 2.2 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.

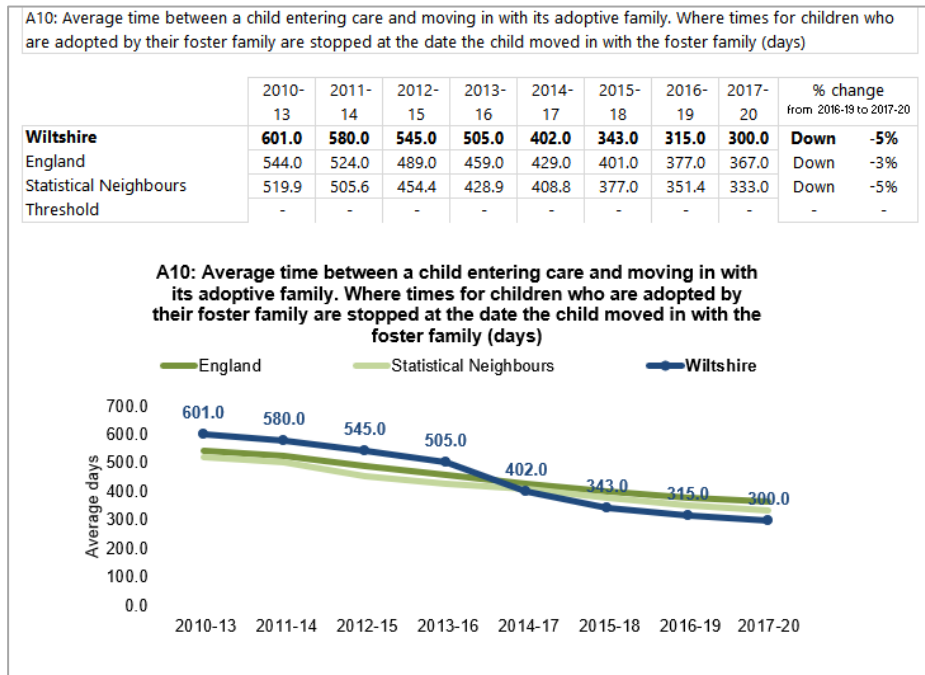
### **3. Main Considerations for the Council**

- 3.1 The main consideration for the Council is to be assured about statutory compliance and the effectiveness of the Adoption Service. In 2019/20, 22 children were adopted and in 2020/21 23 children were adopted. In 2021/22 19 children were adopted, of these 89% were placed within 12 months. In 2019/20, 21 adoptive families living in Wiltshire were approved, in 2020/21, 33 families living in Wiltshire were approved and in 21/22 18 families living in Wiltshire were approved as suitable to adopt. In the Adoption West region (including Wiltshire) 87 families were approved to adopt for 2021/22. Sufficiency of approved families must be maintained through the work of Adoption West.
- 3.2 The next National Adoption Scorecard for 2018-2021 will be published by the DfE in the summer of 2022. 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 continue to be monitored. Due to the time lag in the nationally published data, no scorecard has been produced for the period that all RAAs have been in operation. At present, each local authority Adoption Agency still has a scorecard and there are three key measures that are included:

**A10: the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (date of adoptive placement or fostering for adoption placement i.e. Early Permanence approved Adopters that have joint Fostering approval), for children who have been adopted:**

- The latest nationally published adoption scorecard three-year average (2017-20) for Wiltshire is 300 days. This is shorter than the three-year average of 315 days in 2016-19 and shorter than the England three-year average for the same period of 367 days. The statistical neighbour average in 2017-20 was 333 days.
- Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2019-22 to be 381 days, an increase on the 2017-2020 published data and largely reflective of a greater proportion of adoptions in 2020-21 and 2021-22 being from a 'harder to place' demographic which has had an impact.

- The local authority figure for the single year 2021-22 is estimated at 369 days, down from the previous year at 420. Factors contributing to time taken are discussed below.
- The graph below depicts Wiltshire’s published performance since 2010 against England and statistical neighbour comparators. As can be seen, our performance has improved significantly since 2010 and since 2014-17, we have performed better than the England and statistical neighbour 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:**

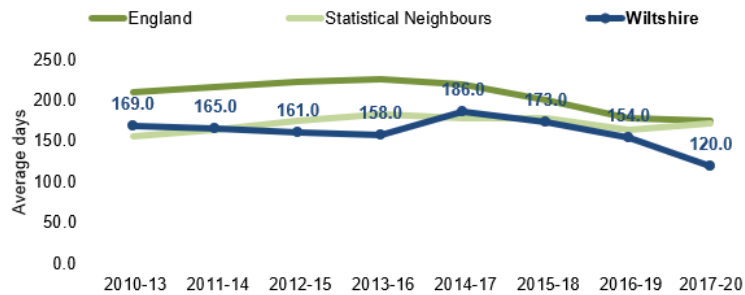
- The latest published local authority three-year average (2017-20) is 120 days for Wiltshire. This is a decrease on the previous year’s data of 154 days (2016-19) and shorter than the national average of 175 days over the same period. The statistical neighbour average in 2017-20 was 172 days.
- Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2019-22 as 143.
- The locally reported one-year figure for 2021-22 is estimated at 145 days, a slight decrease from 157 days in 2020-2021 and 137 days in 2019-20. Performance for this indicator remains lower than the latest published average for England and our statistical neighbours.
- The graph below depicts Wiltshire’s published performance since 2010 against England and statistical neighbour comparators. Performance on this indicator has remained consistently below the England average since 2010, and in 2017-20 improved considerably.



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)

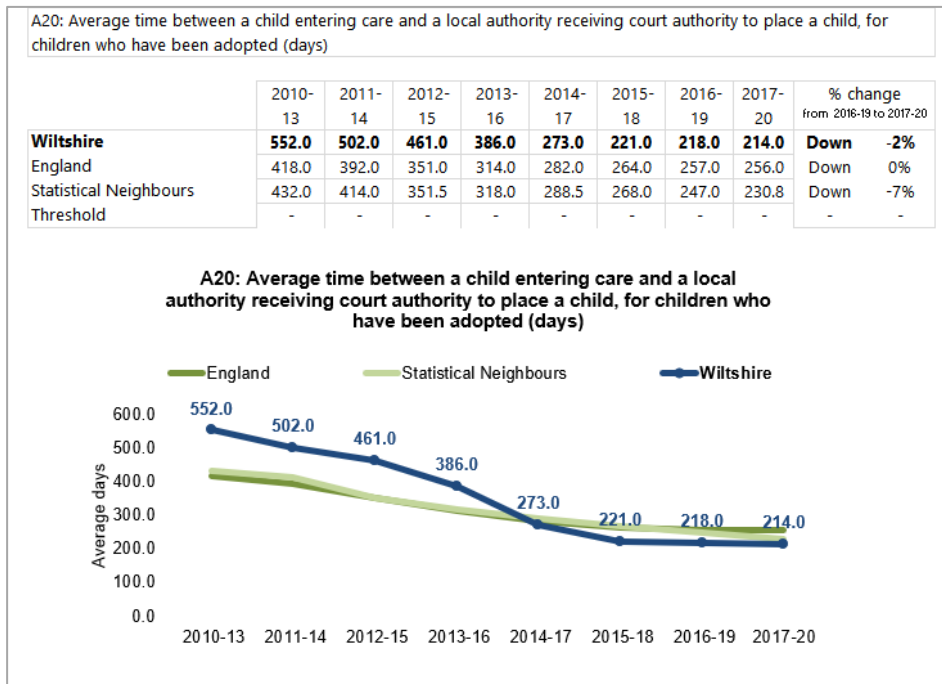
	2010-13	2011-14	2012-15	2013-16	2014-17	2015-18	2016-19	2017-20	% change from 2016-19 to 2017-20
<b>Wiltshire</b>	<b>169.0</b>	<b>165.0</b>	<b>161.0</b>	<b>158.0</b>	<b>186.0</b>	<b>173.0</b>	<b>154.0</b>	<b>120.0</b>	<b>Down -22%</b>
England	210.0	216.0	223.0	226.0	219.0	201.0	178.0	175.0	Down -2%
Statistical Neighbours	155.8	164.6	174.6	182.8	177.6	178.3	163.9	172.1	Up 5%
Threshold	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

**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)**



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

- In the latest published data (2017-20), the three-year average was 214 days against a national average of 256 days and a statistical neighbour average of 231 days.
- Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2019-22 as 239 days. The one-year figures for the 2021-22 is 282, slightly above the latest 2020 averages for England and our statistical neighbours.
- The graph below depicts Wiltshire's published performance since 2010 against England and statistical neighbour comparators. As can be seen, up until 2014, Wiltshire's performance was significantly worse than the England and statistical neighbour averages however for the last three data periods performance has remained consistently lower than these comparators.



3.3 The most recent scorecard three-year averages relate to 2017-20. The scorecard data for 2018-21 will be published by the DfE in the Summer of 2022. Due to reporting delays with the scorecard, this report includes the indicative locally reported figures described above. This data highlights a slight decrease in performance in 2020-21 and 2021-22 compared with previous years. Indicator A10, for example, shows that it took longer for children to be placed in their adoptive families after being received into care whilst indicator A20 shows that it has taken slightly longer between entering care and a child being subject of a placement order.

These children’s journeys have been reviewed and the reasons for this increase are not practice related or within our control i.e. relate to protracted care proceedings, and the impact of additional assessments being ordered within the court arena and family members coming forward to be assessed at a late stage.

- In one situation where there was delay from being placed into care to moving in with adopters (Indicator A10), siblings of 2 and 8yrs had been made subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) with family carers. The SGO carers made the decision to withdraw in the early stages of the children transitioning to their care. This resulted in the Local Authority having to re-issue care proceedings which became a contested hearing as the parents and Guardian opposed the Local Authority’s Care Plan for adoption in favour of the children remaining with their foster carers long term under a Care Order. Once made subject to placement orders these children’s adoption journey was further delayed due to the covid pandemic impacting on the timeliness for them to transition to their adoptive carers.
- For another child where there was delay from being placed in care to moving in with adopters (Indicator A10) Care Proceedings were

protracted, due to international elements with assessments needing to be considered of grandparents who lived in Poland.

- In one situation where there was delay from coming into care and Placement Order being issued (Indicator A20) siblings of 4 and 5 years had experienced protracted Care Proceedings with addendum assessments completed for mother and then timetabling delays for the final hearing.
- For another 2 siblings aged 4 and 8 years, there were delays in both coming into care and being made subject to placement orders and being placed for adoption (Indicators A10 and A20). The children came into care at the start of pre-proceedings there was an initial delay in completing assessments at this stage in part due to mother having a mental health crisis and when the matter was then in the court arena additional and addendum expert assessments were requested for the mother and the children which protracted the care proceedings creating further delays. For one of these children, her teacher came forward to adopt her at the stage she became aware this was the child's care plan, with the necessary assessments being required for the family to be formally approved.

In relation to A2, there has also been a slight increase in the days taken. The reason for this being that following reforms in Public Law there is a more prominent expectation to secure children within their extended family if they are unable to be cared for by their parents. This has led positively to an increase in the percentage of children being made subject to Special Guardianship Orders. The impact of this however is that children requiring adoptive carers will more often be those with more complex needs or older children; this will make family finding more challenging and can impact on the length of time it takes to achieve this.

- One child whose match took longer had complex health needs, and 2 children were older and had complex needs (aged 4 and 8 years at the time they were matched to adopters).

Adoption West has a recruitment strategy in place to address this. There also remain challenges with care proceedings concluding within the 26-week timescale, due to a number of factors outside of the Local Authority's control. These challenges are subject to debate and scrutiny via the Wiltshire Family Justice Board, and the newly appointed Designated Family Judge (DFJ) for Wiltshire has indicated her views of the need to reduce the number of experts being appointed in Care Proceedings which can lead to delays. There is a view that court decisions are impacting upon delays and that the new DFJ intends to make changes to reduce these moving forwards.

Recognising the numbers are small, these indicators can be influenced and improved upon by the local authority's persistence in delivering permanence for a child where adoption continues to be in their best interest, despite factors which make it more challenging to find a match i.e. older children, sibling groups and children with complex health needs. In the 2021-22, for example, 6% of the children aged 5 and over who left care were adopted compared to 5% in 2020-21, 1% in 2019-20 and 2% in 2018-19.

- 3.4 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.
- 3.5 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 way. Adoption West has developed best practice to ensure good outcomes for Wiltshire's children who require adoptive families.
- 3.6 Management arrangements and staffing within the Council are compliant with regulation 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 and 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.
- 3.7 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.
- 3.8 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 including 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.

4. 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.

4.1 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.

5. 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'.

6. Profile of Wiltshire children in the Adoption Journey as the end of the year 31 March 2022: As of 31 March 2022, thirty-one children were in their adoption journey, this includes all children who have had an Agency Decision Maker decision of Should Be Placed For adoption (SBPFA) to those placed with adopters, and not yet adopted.

Children waiting to be placed for adoption: 17

Legal status	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Section 20	7	0	0
Interim Care Order	5	4	5
Care Order and placement Orders	5	9	12*
None	0	0	0
Total	17	13	17

Ethnic Origin	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
White British	16	10	11
Mixed White Black Caribbean	0	3	4*
White Irish	0	0	0
White Eastern European	1	0	2
Total	17	13	17

Age	2019/20	2020/21	2020/21
0-11 months	3	4	6*
12-23 months	1	2	4
2-4 years	7	5	3
5-10 years	6	2	0
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	17	13	17

\* one child placed with early permanence carers not formally matched as of 31 March 2022

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 means that other permanence options (such as Special Guardianship Orders) can be considered by the court for these children.

Timescales for Children waiting to be placed for adoption from date of Placement Orders (PO) relates to 11 children:

Children with PO (waiting)	0-3 months	3-6 months	6-12 months	13 months	total

days to match)					
	9	1	0	1	11

Positively of those children waiting to be placed from the date of a Placement Order being made 9 have waited less than 3 months, the one child waiting 13 months is a child who has complex health needs and her present foster carers have now put themselves forward to adopt her.

Children matched as 31 March 2022 not yet placed:

One child, subject to Care and Placement Orders as at the end of March 2022 was matched with adopters and transitions to the adopter's fulltime care were underway.

	Age	Ethnicity
Child 2	11 months	White British

Children placed for Adoption not yet adopted:

Thirteen children, subject to Care and Placement Orders, as at the end of March 2022 were placed with adopters.

	Age	Ethnicity	Date placed for adoption	Adoption application made
2 siblings	2yrs 1yrs	White British	18/05/2021	01.03.2022
2 siblings	6yrs 3yrs	White British	28.05.2021	11.01.2022
1 Child	4yrs	White British	31.08.2021	Not yet made due to therapeutic work to support adopters' confidence in managing child's emotional needs – application due July 2022
1 Child	3yrs	White British	31.08.2021	Not yet made due to impact of sudden and unexpected family bereavement and Covid illness for adopters. Application confirmed as scheduled to be made later this month (June 2022).
1 Child	5yrs	White British	26.07.2021	02.02.2022
1 Child	4yrs	White British	06.12.2021	Not yet made due to the older child requiring time to form

				attachments, therapy being provided.
1 Child	2yrs	Mixed White/Black Caribbean	25.10.2021	Not yet made due to younger sibling also due to be matched and joint application will be made for both children together.
2 siblings	1yrs 5yrs	White British	24.01.2022	Pending.
1 Child	8yrs	White British	02.03.2022	Pending.
1 Child	2yrs	White British	30.03.2022	Pending.

In all situations where there have been delays in making a formal application for Adoption, these have been endorsed through the child's review with oversight of the child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

#### 7. Wiltshire Children Adopted in 2021/22

Age	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
0-11 months	2	1	3
12-23 months	12	6	6
2-4 years	6	8	5
5-10 years	2	8	5
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	22	23	19

Ethnic Origin of children placed for adoption	Number
White British	17
White Eastern European	1
White European	1
Total	19

Wiltshire Children Matched within and externally to Adoption West Region:

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Wiltshire Children matched within Adoption West	15 children placed with Adoption West Families	19 children placed with Adoption West Families	17 children placed with Adoption West Families
Wiltshire Children matched external to Adoption West	6 children placed with families outside of Adoption West	4 children placed with families outside Adoption West	2 children placed with families outside Adoption West



With the establishment of Adoption West, we are beginning to benefit from the wider cohort of adopters available for our children and year on year fewer placements external to the region which reduces the cost of external placements. Of the two children placed externally in 2021/22 one was for an 8-year-old boy with complex emotional needs and another of a 2-year-old girl with complex health needs.

## **8. Rescissions of ADM Decisions, and Disruptions:**

- 8.1 In 2021/22, 6 rescissions of ADM decisions that children should be placed for adoption were made where the plan for the child moved away from adoption (6 in the previous year).

In one case the Court ordered in favour of an SGO to grandparents who resided in Poland, legal advice was sought and advised that the Judgement was well balanced, the Judge had reflected on the evidence and law in considering his Judgement and there were no grounds for appeal.

For three siblings aged 9, 7 and 6 years, the Court ordered Care Orders with a plan for long term fostering, this was supported by the Court appointed Guardian. The decision of the Court was on the basis that the children had complex needs and, as older children there would be challenges in finding adoptive placements in a suitable timeframe for them together or separately, and to allow the continuation of positive family time between the girls if placed separately, and with their baby sister who had remained in mother's care. Mothers' ability to care for her youngest child also evidenced that she could in future seek to care for all her children and seek revocation of the Care Order. No additional evidence could be provided to the court to achieve Placements Orders for these children.

For one child aged 8 years the court ordered a Care Order, this was supported by the court appointed Guardian. The Judgement concluded that the child's needs would be best met by a Care Order and remaining in long term foster care which would enable him to maintain a relationship with his mother and wider family. The Judge had reflected on the evidence and law in her decision, the decision was finely balanced and there were no grounds for appeal.

For one child aged 4 years with very complex health needs the court endorsed the Local Authority's plan of adoption with a plan for twin tracking searches for the child to be placed either with or separately from her younger sibling. National and local searches for both children together did not identify a placement and a decision was made to place her younger brother for adoption separately given his younger age and need for securing early attachments to adopters. Robust family finding continued for this child; twin tracked with long-term fostering searches recognising the potential limitations on finding adopters who could meet her needs. Eighteen months of robust twin tracked searches identified skilled foster carers with experience of caring for children with disabilities and the decision was made to rescind the decision for adoption and support a long-term match with these foster carers.

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 requested by the Local Authority but may make a Special Guardianship Order instead or a plan will move to long term fostering, particularly for older children and those with complex health needs. In August 2021 we introduced a new protocol whereby the ADM will urgently review any case where a court does not grant a Placement Order. This will include involvement of Legal Services to provide legal advice and will ensure Senior Management has oversight wherever there is a change of Care Plan away from adoption.

- 8.2 During 2021-2022, there has been no adoption placement disruption, relating to a Wiltshire child before an Adoption Order was made and there have been no placement breakdowns that occurred post-order when the child returned to being looked after. This demonstrates strong matching overall.
- 8.3 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:

On 31 March 2022, Adoption West had approved 87 families in the year of which 18 live in the Wiltshire area. Positively 32% of adopters approved in 2021/22 are available to adopt siblings, which is well within the target range of 25-35% set in 2021/22, compared to only 15% in the previous year. The target for approvals for adoptive families remains at 85-95 approvals for 2022/2023.

During 2021/22 seventeen families in Wiltshire have had children placed with them for adoption, and as of 31 March 2022 13 families in Wiltshire have children placed for adoption all children have been placed for less than 6 months. In the Adoption West area there are currently 63 families approved who do not yet have a child placed with them of which 13 live in Wiltshire. There are 16 Wiltshire based families in the assessment and Approval process and 78 families in the assessment and approval process across the Adoption West region. 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.

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. This will still mean that 'out of region' placements will be required, but with a decreased reliance on them.

## 9. Financial summary for Wiltshire

9.1 The tables below indicate the budget, and actual expenditure for the financial year 2021/22 compared to the actual spend for 2020/21. Spend on Special Guardianship allowances continues to increase; however, adoption Allowances spend for 2021/22 has reduced. The increased expenditure of the Special Guardianship allowances reflects children moving up through the age-related bands with more children aged 11 years and over. There has been a steady increase in Special Guardianship Orders being made; in 2019/2020, 25 SGO's were granted, 2020/2021 this increased to 31 and in 2021/2022 this has maintained at 30. Residence Order allowances continue to decrease and given these Orders are no longer made, and children with such orders will reach 16 we will continue to see a decrease in this spend.

	21-22 Budget (£)	21-22 Year End Final Spend (£)	Comparison 2020-21 Year End Final Spend (£)
Adoption Allowances (all types)	729,410	430,627	497,103
Special Guardianship Allowances	2,425,760	2,291,931	2,014,203
Residence Order allowance	87,520	59,049	64,405
Adoption income	0	-126,000	-140,333
Contractual Payment: Adoption WEST	805,660	801,181	762,634
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,048,350</b>	<b>3,456,788</b>	<b>3,198,021</b>

9.2 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:

	On 31 March 2020 Children/Carers	On 31 March 2021 Children/Carers	On 31 March 2022 Children/Carers
RO Allowance	8/8	7/7	6/6
Adoption Allowance	33/27	28/22	23/18
SGO Allowance	243/185	195/150	305/223
<b>Total</b>	<b>284/220</b>	<b>280/211</b>	<b>334/247</b>

	2020/21		2021/22	
	Budget (£)	Actual Expenditure (£)	Budget (£)	Actual Expenditure (£)
RO Allowance	87,520	64,405	87,520	59,049
Adoption Allowance	368,590	309,718	399,660	261,594
SGO Allowance	1,833,190	2,014,203	2,425,760	2,291,931
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,289,300</b>	<b>2,388,326</b>	<b>2,912,940</b>	<b>2,612,574</b>

9.3 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 2021 there were 132 allocated Wiltshire families who were receiving adoption support (93 in the previous year) and 183 (131) 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 £559,087. Adoption West works actively within the £5,000 fair access limit per child and has sought match funding from the local authority for 2 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.

9.4 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.

## 10. Adoption Panel

	2019/20 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))	2020/21 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))	2021/22 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))
Panels held	56	68	58
Adoptive families considered	30	101	93

Matches considered	90 (21 Wiltshire children)	73 (14 Wiltshire matches)	97 (16 Wiltshire matches)
Relinquished Children	4(0wiltshire children)	4 (1Wiltshire Council)	3 (1 Wiltshire child)
Reviews of Adopters notified	0	0	0

10.1 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.

10.2 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 in November 2021 with a focus on lessons learnt from disruption. 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 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.

10.3 The arrangement for Panel recommendations being considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is robust. ADM decisions about Matches are made by the Local Authority responsible for the child with decisions about suitability to Adopt being made by the ADM within Adoption West. This ensures that adopters are informed of decisions promptly following Panel recommendations.

10.4 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.

## 11. **Commentary**

11.1 The main externally reported performance information for Wiltshire Council is included in the Adoption Scorecard and is summarised above. Of note are some aspects of performance that have slowed or have decreased due,

in part, to the age and complexities of individual children who need adoptive families, and the complexities within the Court decision making arena. The journeys of children to adoption are tracked and scrutinised to ensure timely progression.

- 11.2 Continued improvement of performance of indicator A10 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.
- 11.3 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. The average duration of proceedings for 21/22 was 36.9 weeks, whilst this is slightly down from 32.9 weeks in March 2020/21; through robust tracking, we know that the key factors are beyond the control of the Local authority and relate to international elements, late identification of family members, judicial delay, and need for expert witness/assessments. The Care Proceedings Case Manager has recently been given additional responsibility for specific oversight of adoption from pre-proceedings, this has also highlighted some aspects of practice which could positively impact on court outcome timeliness; including greater emphasis on the use of family group conferences at each stage of a child's journey to identify kinship carers, and ensuring assessments in pre-proceedings specifically identify where parents capacity to care will not improve with time, thus reducing the need for addendum assessments in care proceedings, this, supported by the new Wiltshire Family Justice Designated Judge's commitment to reduce the use of expert witnesses; should see a reduction in weeks children stay in the court arena and positively impact on timescales from when children come into care to when they become subject to a placement order (A20) and are placed with adoptive carers (A10).
- 11.4 Whilst there have been some fluctuations in the number of newly approved adopters over recent years, as noted, there needs to be more choice for our 'harder to place' children. Adoption West continue to undertake a targeted campaign to recruit adopters who are interested in adopting sibling groups and older children, which will increase the pool for those children. Specific recruitment for children with complex medical needs is planned for the latter part of this year. 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 2021/22 in Wiltshire was 14% (12% nationally in 2018-19, the most recent national comparative figure). Currently Adoption West has 78 assessments in progress, of which 16 are "Wiltshire based". As previously indicated, it is this larger pool, which is available for Wiltshire children, but this will only meet our needs if the adopters for older children

and complex needs are approved and if the overall pool is sufficient to meet the needs of the other six Local Authorities in Adoption West.

11.5 As of 31 March 2021, there were 17 children “waiting” for adoption, of these 5 children remain subject to care proceedings and thus formal family finding cannot yet progress. Of those 11 children with Care and Placement Orders only 1 of these children had waited for over 12 months, with a positive plan to be formally adopted by her foster carers, and with the majority having been waiting less than 3 months. 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. Adoption West have a dedicated Family Finding Team from within existing resources to improve this area of work. 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 March 2019.

11.5.1 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 has a positive impact on the timely placement of children with adoptive families as it widens the pool of approved adopters available. Since December 2020 the Service Manager within Wiltshire Council with lead for adoption has established monthly meetings with the Manager of the Adoption West Family Finding team to track and monitor all children on the adoption journey in Wiltshire and ensure any potential blocks are considered and discussed at an early stage, as of June 2022 the decision has been made to change the tracking meeting to a formal adoption permanence panel meeting, which will include attendance of the Wiltshire Operational Service Manager, Care Proceedings Case Manager Wiltshire, Team Manager Family Finding Adoption West and all operational Wiltshire Team Managers who are responsible for case holding children in the adoption journey. This Panel will provide for more robust and dynamic tracking of children, improve joint working with the family finding team, prevent any unnecessary delay, and improve timeliness for children in the adoption journey.

11.6 Early Permanence (EP) practice is established in Wiltshire with all EP carers within Adoption West being potentially available for Wiltshire children. In 2021-22, 4 Wiltshire children were referred for EP and 2 were placed with EP carers. In the preceding year 6 children were referred and 3 placed. 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. Working

collaboratively with other Regional Adoption Agencies and Voluntary adoption agencies across the Southwest, 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 Southwest to promote Early Permanence champions in each Local Authority and work nationally to develop webinar-based training materials. The aim is to ensure Early Permanence is promoted as an option for children to include older children and groups of brothers and sisters.

- 11.7 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.
- 11.8 It is anticipated that A20 performance will improve as the scrutiny and challenge provided by the Independent Reviewing Service and the work of Adoption Permanence Panel continue to drive timeliness and permanence planning.
- 11.9 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 (6 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. The Local Authority updated the Recission Policy in 2021 to ensure more timely decision making where the Court decision does not reflect ADM decision for adoption.
- 11.10 An Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel (JSP) is now in place, bringing the scrutiny function of the six local authorities into one panel. 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.
- 11.11 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.



## 12. Actions

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:

- i. 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.
- ii. 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. The service leads meet bimonthly with Adoption West with their newly developed family finding Team. Wiltshire ADM's meet quarterly with other ADM's in the Adoption West area and Panel Chairs to discuss quality and areas for development.
- iii. Use the scrutiny and challenge of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel to improve outcomes for Wiltshire's children.
- iv. Regularly convene operational and strategic meetings between Council staff and Adoption West staff regarding the decision-making processes for children. Adoption West will also be asked to provide a copy of their quarterly return to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB).
- v. As new leads in the Directorate the Support and Safeguarding Service lead on adoption and are the link to the manager to Adoption West. We will 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. Quarterly performance data will continue to be scrutinised by the Performance and Outcomes Group chaired by the Head of Support and Safeguarding.
- vi. Through specific discussion and regular liaison meetings with the Wiltshire Family Justice Board we aim to improve the way that all parties involved in the court arena 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. The Service Lead is a member of the Wiltshire Family Justice Board and oversees Pre-Proceedings and the Care Proceedings Manager. This gives improved oversight of cases across the service.
- vii. Continue to 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 record of

their life story. Child Permanence Training has taken place this year and further dates will be agreed to ensure that all staff undergo this training. Life Story Training is also be offered as part of our Directorate training plan.

- viii. The Scrutiny Board need to 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 with oversight of what Wiltshire children need and consider targets for the recruitment of adopters for older children, siblings and those with complex needs. This would reduce delay for these children's, improve timeliness of our scorecard but more importantly achieve lasting permanence for these children via adoption.
- ix. 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).
- v. Ensure that where required and appropriate, match funding is applied to ASF applications to provide high quality support to adoptive families.
- xi. Hold formal Disruption Meetings where adoption placements breakdown before Adoption Orders are made to consider key learning to inform whole service improvement.

### **13. Background**

- 13.1 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.
- 13.2 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.

- 13.3 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 adoption work and is an Adoption Agency; the requirement to be inspected and for Cabinet to be assured remains.
- 13.4 The local authority, through reporting to Cabinet, must be assured of regulatory compliance and effectiveness through performance monitoring, challenge and improvement planning.
- 13.5 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.
- 13.6 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.

#### **14. Safeguarding Implications**

- 14.1 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.
- 14.2 The partnership with Adoption West is carefully regulated and Adoption West has the appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures in place.
- 14.3 This report is for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

**15. Public Health Implications**

The risk of poor health and wellbeing outcomes is known to be greater for children looked after. We also know from the evidence that safety and mattering are critical to a healthy functioning nervous system and healthy brain development. Safe and caring environments provided by quality adoption placements are, therefore, an opportunity to mitigate these risks and improve long term outcomes for these children and young people.

**16. Procurement Implications**

Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

**17. Equalities Impact of the Proposal**

(detailing conclusions identified from Equality Analysis, sections 4 and 5)  
Adoption West continue to undertake a targeted campaign to recruit adopters who are interested in adopting sibling groups and older children, which will increase the pool for those children. Specific recruitment for children with complex medical needs is planned for the latter part of this year.

**18. Environmental and Climate Change Considerations**

Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

**19. Overview and Scrutiny Engagement**

A Standing Task Group will meet on 05 September 2022 to consider this report prior to Cabinet on 06 September 2022

**20. Risk Assessment**

20.1 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.

20.2 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.

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

See above. Not applicable - for approval by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

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

See above. Not applicable - for approval by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

**23. Financial Implications**

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 and the appropriateness of the level of funding from local authorities compared to the demand for services and therefore adoption activity is dealt with annually as Adoption West (AW) agrees its annual budget.

**24. Legal Implications**

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.

**25. Options Considered**

Not applicable - for approval by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

**26. Conclusion**

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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June 2022

**Appendices**

None

**Background Papers**

None