Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

Date of meeting: 2 July 2019

Subject: Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2018-19 Year End Report

Cabinet member: Councillor Laura Mayes Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills

Key Decision: Non Key

Executive Summary

It is a statutory requirement that the Adoption Service provides a year-end report to the Council. It describes the management arrangements, outcomes, priorities and finances of the Agency for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

There has been a significant change since the last Annual Report was received by Cabinet; the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), Adoption West launched on 1st March 2019, towards the end of this reporting period. This means that Wiltshire Council *now* retains aspects of responsibility for the adoption of children whilst others are now undertaken by Adoption West. Adoption West is a Local Authority Trading Company that is owned by the six partner Local Authorities and commissioned by them to provide defined adoption services. Adoption West is registered with Ofsted as a Voluntary Adoption Agency. It is managed by a Service Director who reports to the Board of Directors, currently chaired by Terence Herbert, Wiltshire Council Executive Director and Director of Children's Services.

This reporting period ends on 31 March 2019, a short time after Adoption West was launched. Whilst figures reported therefore relate largely to Wiltshire Council, the narrative of this report indicates the close partnership which developed before operational implementation of Adoption West, and after it. As Adoption West was launched for the final month of the reporting period, it was agreed that reporting would remain with the local authority.

Wiltshire Council's Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted in July 2015 as part of the wider inspection of Children's Services. The overall inspection judgement was Requires Improvement (RI). Since this time, the Families and Children's Service, and within it the Adoption Service, has continued to develop and improve how it works to best effect. Two areas for improvement were indicated regarding the Adoption Service. Increased timeliness of both:

- Assessment of adopters and their match with a child to be adopted, and
- Adoption of children with complex needs.

In 2017/18, 22 adoption orders were granted and 19 families were approved as suitable to adopt. For the year 2018/19, 33 Adoption Orders have been granted and 27 families have been approved as suitable to adopt, demonstrating an increasing need for adoptive families and family finding. The regional picture is positive with an overall increase in adopters being approved with Wiltshire being part of this; this is different from the national picture where the overall number of approvals each year is falling.

It is anticipated that 40-45 children, who live in Wiltshire, are likely to require adoption per year (benchmarking 10% of the care population).

In 2016/2017 Wiltshire's recruitment target was revised to recruit 30 adoptive families, through targeted and general recruitment, to meet anticipated needs.

Recruitment, assessment and approval activity is now completed by Adoption West; increasingly, 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.

Adoption West has not set specific recruitment targets for the year; the original targets were set in the project two to three years ago and have not been met due to the national decline in adopter recruitment. The forecast for the next six months, based on potential adopters in the assessment process, is 65 families. This is the sufficient for the numbers of children requiring adoptive families, and maintaining a "pool" of adopters who are prepared and waiting to adopt.

The Adoption Service was delivered successfully by Wiltshire Children's Services and was underpinned by the Government's Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay (2011). The new Adoption West was launched March 1st. 2019.

Comparative performance for local authorities uses the Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows overall continued improvement. The Government has not yet given clarity about how the Scorecard will be used by the Regional Adoption Authorities (RAA). In the meantime, Wiltshire continues to use the Scorecard to track improvement.

Proposal(s)

It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and accepted.

Reason for Proposal

Wiltshire Council is an Adoption Agency registered with Ofsted. The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards (25.6) and 2013 Statutory Guidance (3.93 and 5.39) describe the information that is required to be regularly reported to the executive side of the local authority to provide assurance that the adoption agency is complying with the conditions of registration whilst being effective and achieving good outcomes for children and service users.

Terence Herbert
Executive Director

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

Date of meeting: 2 July 2019

Subject: **Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2018-19 Year End Report**

Cabinet member: **Councillor Laura Mayes Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills**

Key Decision: **Non Key**

Purpose of Report

1. This report provides a year-end report to Cabinet regarding the performance of the Adoption Service within Wiltshire Council alongside a consideration of the effectiveness of Adoption West. It is a requirement of the condition of registration, as described in the 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards and 2013 Statutory Guidance, that Cabinet is satisfied the Adoption Agency complies with the conditions of registration, is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. These Standards and Guidance have not yet been specifically revised to describe the reporting requirements for the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

2. Cabinet last received an Annual Report regarding the Adoption Service in July 2018, covering the period from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018. This report relates to the full year 2018/19 reporting period. Cabinet also received an interim six-month report in January 2019.

3. The Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in July 2015, (arriving at the overall judgement of Requires Improvement) which included the Adoption Service, noted strengths alongside two areas that required further attention:

- The timeliness of the assessment of adopters and their match with a child to be adopted, and
- The timeliness of the adoption of children with complex needs.

4. This report includes information regarding the management of the Wiltshire Council Adoption Service, the role of Adoption West, the Wiltshire Adoption Scorecard, children who require adoptive families and those who are placed, the recruitment and approval of adopters by Adoption West, the disruption of placements, children where the plan for adoption changes and the work of the Adoption West Panel.

5. It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and accepted.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

6. The Wiltshire Council Adoption Service contributes to a central priority as set out in the Wiltshire Council Business Plan 2017-2027; namely to protect those who are most vulnerable and provide permanent homes for children in care.

7. Identifying adoptive families for Wiltshire children remains a priority for the Council. Wiltshire Council remains as an adoption agency because it retains responsibility for children requiring adoption. The arrival of Adoption West as the RAA means that from March 2019, the recruitment, assessment and approval of adoptive families, family finding and adoption support has become the responsibility of the new agency.

Main Considerations for the Council

8. The main consideration for the Council is to be assured about statutory compliance and the effectiveness of the Adoption Service. In 2016/17, 33 children were adopted. In 2017/18, 22 children were adopted and in 2018/19 this number was 33. Of these, 30 (91%) were placed within 12 months of the decision that adoption was in their best interest being made. In 2016/17, 26 adoptive families were approved, in 2017/18, 19 families were approved and in 2018/19, 27 families living within Wiltshire were approved as suitable to adopt. These are significant increases, particularly in the context of a national reduction in the number of new approvals. Sufficiency of approved families must be maintained through the work of Adoption West.

9. Wiltshire's current Adoption Scorecard (most recently published performance to March 2018) shows overall continued improvement and is included below (para 13), for reference. National performance targets are no longer published by the Government and it has not yet indicated what national and local reporting will be in place when an RAA is in operation and functions pass to it from the local authority. At present, each local authority Adoption Agency still has a scorecard and there are three key measures that are included:

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

- The local authority three-year average (2015-18) is **397** days. This is significantly shorter than the three-year average of 469 days in 2014-17 and shorter than the England three-year average for 2015-18 of 486 days. The Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- Excluding two legacy cases, adopted in 2016, the three-year average figure becomes **337** days for 2015-18
- The local authority figure for 2018-19 is 342 days, up slightly from 326 in the previous year.
- Including Early Permanence placements and legacy cases, locally reported data estimates the figure for 2016-19 as **377** days, a continued improvement on 397 days and a marked improvement on 486 days, remaining significantly less than the England average.

A2: the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family:

- The local authority three-year average (2015-18) is **173** days. This is a small decrease on the three-year average of 186 days in 2014-17. Excluding two legacy cases this figure becomes 139 days for 2015-18.
- It remains shorter than the England three-year average of 201 days. Overall the Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- The local authority one-year figure for 2018-19 is **100** days. In 2017-18 the figure was 132 days.
- The three-year figure still includes 2 children adopted in May 2016 following protracted court proceedings, who were originally placed for adoption in 2014 with the placement orders being granted in 2011. One child has significant additional needs and the second experienced placement disruption prior to being matched with adoptive parents. In addition, 2 children were adopted by their foster carers whose adoption assessments needed to be completed once placement orders were granted. Three adoptive placements were found for a family of 7 children, meaning significant sibling contact was required.
- Including legacy cases where they remain in the three-year period, locally reported data estimates the figure for 2016-19 as **152** days. 2016-19 will be the final three-year average where these legacy cases will have an impact.
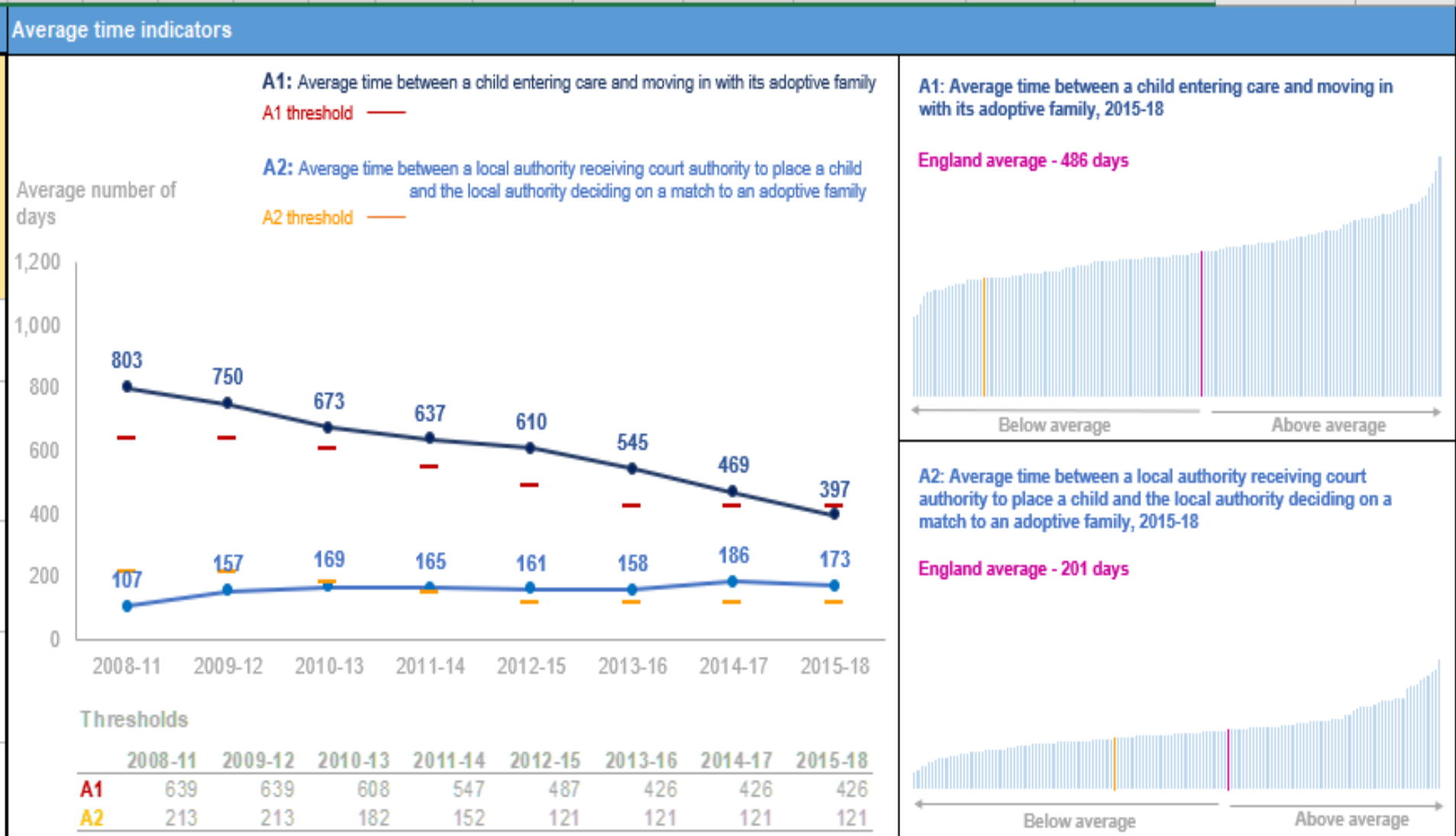
A3: the number of children who waited less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family:

- In the three-year period 2015-18, there were **76%** (95) of children who waited less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. This is an increase from 69% (85) in the previous cycle. The England three-year average (2015-18) is 56%. Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2016-19 as 76% (99) of children. This shows maintenance of high levels of performance over time.

10. The most recent Scorecard three-year averages relate to 2015-18, therefore there has been a further year of work taking place in Wiltshire which has produced the unverified averages described above. This data indicates that the three key measures have continued to improve this year, with the overall pace and trajectory of improvement being positive. There is significant improvement for indicator **A1,** meaning that more children are being placed in their adoptive families in a shorter time after being received into care. **A3** also continues to improve. This is good progress. There is small increase in **A2** due to the legacy cases; it is anticipated in local data that the positive trajectory will return in 2016-19 figures. This reflects the impact of two children who have been hard to place and who are now in adoptive placements, demonstrating commitment to seek secure, permanent arrangements for all children where adoption is in their best interest. To ensure continued progress and improvement, careful attention must be given to all aspects of adoption work that remain the responsibility of Wiltshire Council Adoption Agency, whilst ensuring, through governance arrangements, the effectiveness of Adoption West.

11. Within the Score Card data, there is detailed comparative information available regarding Wiltshire Council's performance in relation to Statistical Neighbours. This shows strong performance.

12. Robust processes have remained in place and have continued to be developed within the Council functions and in Adoption West, to ensure that family finding starts at the earliest opportunity and that all activities are monitored and completed in a timely fashion. Adoption West will identify best practice nationally and from within the partnership, making sure that it is recognised and delivered within Wiltshire and across the Adoption West area.

13. The 2018 Scorecard is as follows:

Children

	A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)	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	A3: Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)
LA's 3 year average (2015-18)	397	173	95 (76%)
Distance from 2015-18 performance threshold (426 and 121 days)	Threshold met	52 days	n/a
1 year trend - Improvement from 2017 to 2018	Average time in 2018 was shorter than in 2017	Average time in 2018 was shorter than in 2017	n/a
3 year trend - Improvement from 2014-17 to 2015-18	Average time in 2015-18 was shorter than in 2014-17	Average time in 2015-18 was shorter than in 2014-17	n/a
England 3 year average (2015-18)	486	201	11010 (56%)

Average time indicators

A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
A1 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
A2 threshold ——

Average number of days

Thresholds	2008-11	2009-12	2010-13	2011-14	2012-15	2013-16	2014-17	2015-18
A1	639	639	608	547	487	426	426	426
A2	213	213	182	152	121	121	121	121

A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, 2015-18

England average - 486 days

Below average — Above average

A2: Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family, 2015-18

England average - 201 days

Below average — Above average

Adopters

	Number of approved adoptive families waiting to be matched as at 31 March 2018	Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March 2018	Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2017-18 who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child
LA	10	25	82%
England	1,600	1,760	63%

Related Information

New ADM decisions   New placement orders granted

35   30   25   30

THESE ARE NOT PERFORMANCE MEASURES

	LA % change		LA % change	
	-17%		16%	
National % change	-9%	National % change	-15%	

	Adoptions from care during 2015-18 (with % leaving care who are adopted)	Children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption during 2015-18	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March 2018)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order	A10: A1 timeliness where timer for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days)	Number of children in a Fostering for Adoption / Concurrent Planning foster placement for children leaving	Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds during 2015-18 (number adopted and % of BME children leaving	Adoptions of children aged five or over during 2015-18 (number adopted and % of children aged 5 or over leaving care who	Average length of care proceedings locally during 2015-18 (weeks)
LA	75 (17%)	10 (9%)	20	10	343	x	5 (10%)	15 (5%)	29
England	12900 (14%)	2450 (11%)	4,500	2,760	412	410	1930 (7%)	2910 (5%)	30

14. Management arrangements and staffing within the Council are compliant with regulation in terms of qualification and experience. The Executive Director (with the responsibility of Director of Children's Services) has overall responsibility for aspects of adoption retained by the Council. Reporting to the DCS is the Director with responsibility for the Families and Children's Service. The Head of Service: Care and Placement Services and their Service Manager ensure the effectiveness of overall adoption provision and the Service Manager is the designated link with Adoption West. This provides strength and clear accountability with an opportunity to develop and challenge the strategy for improvement and ensure best outcomes for children.

15. 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 where a child is relinquished) where work is carried out with colleagues from 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.

16. During the reporting period, the Wiltshire Adoption Service was appropriately staffed and managed, in accordance with regulation. The senior management structure was as above and there was a Team Manager responsible for the day to day operations, supported by an Assistant Team Manager (Adoption West has two Deputy Team Managers in each hub team) and social workers. There was also designated administrative support. There was no significant staff absence during this reporting period.

17. Alison Lewis, who was the Adoption Team Manager, took up the post of Service Director for Adoption West in July 2018 and a social worker in the team acted up to provide cover until the permanent position was filled in November 2018. All the staff in the Adoption Service have coped with an unsettled period as the launch of Adoption West, and therefore their TUPE transfer from the Council, was delayed on three occasions. In addition, tragically a member of the team suddenly died, which understandably had an impact on staff and service users. The team coped extremely well with these sets of circumstances and ensured that they maintained operational services.

18. The core task of adoption work, as carried out by the Wiltshire Adoption Service and now 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 now provided by Adoption West. Within the latter organisation and previously within the Council), work is managed within the agency 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 currently made by the Wiltshire Agency Decision Maker, adopters are then matched with children through the family finding process; Wiltshire social workers work closely with colleagues, previously from the Adoption Service and now from Adoption West.

- The support of adoptive families and their children to ensure placement stability and that the needs of children are fully met: Services that can be made available include therapeutic support, counselling, training, family days, newsletters and a link to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Staff are also responsible for managing referrals to the Adoption Support Fund which increases adopters' access to specific services for adoption support.

19. In addition, in the reporting period, the local authority was responsible for providing 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. These functions have now also transferred to Adoption West along with the Adoption Support services described above.

20. A Wiltshire Council Adoption Service development plan, supported by an adopter recruitment strategy, was published in autumn 2015, refreshed in autumn 2016, with further review in 2017. This reflected the priorities of the Service and the areas of improvement indicated in the Ofsted inspection of 2015, linking to the developments and improvements required to improve performance as evidenced within the Scorecard. (Adoption West is developing a recruitment strategy and a business plan for adoption services in the region, reflecting the need of Wiltshire children as well as those from the other local authorities.) The Council does have clear policy and guidance regarding permanence for children which ensures that those requiring adoptive families move towards permanence in a timely way.

21. For reference, and to make sure that they are replicated in Adoption West planning, the priorities of the Adoption Service Development Plan included:

- Identification of suitable adoptive families without delay for children for whom adoption is in their best interest
- Adopter recruitment and retention
- Provision of an effective and efficient family finding service
- Provision of an adopters' training pathway
- Promotion and continued development of Early Permanence for children
- Provision of an adoption support service that is responsive to the needs of adopters, special guardians, adopted children and their families
- Ensure that the Adoption Panel is effective
- Ensure that the Adoption Service is integral to the development of Adoption West

All these activities are now carried out between the Council and Adoption West.

22. The Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services carried out in July 2015 graded the overall Service as Requires Improvement. A culture of continuous improvement was noted with a positive trajectory towards Good. Children and young people were considered to enter Care when they needed to, and the timeliness of care proceedings had improved. Inspectors identified an Adoption Service that "made well informed and well-matched placements supported by effective family finding". There was evidence that good performance information was used to inform practice and service development. Adopters were prepared and assessed well, and the Adoption Support Team was seen to be effective, innovative and forward looking. The Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) ensured that children were effectively matched with the most appropriate families. These judgments describe the foundation of continuing improvement and it is anticipated that subsequent inspections of both the local authority and Adoption West will be similarly positive.

23. As indicated above, Adoption West become registered and was launched in March 2019. However, in the preceding time, work had been done to develop practice in the "shadow" organisation which existed before all staff moved to the new organisation through TUPE arrangements. The business model for Adoption West is that of an independently managed Voluntary Adoption Agency, discrete from the local authorities it serves. It is the only RAA in the country that uses this approach. As it matures, it is anticipated that Adoption West will continue to improve the timeliness of adoption for children and the effectiveness of adoption support. Staff and managers from Wiltshire Council were fully involved in the development of Adoption West, not only to ensure it became an effective agency but also so that the interests of children from Wiltshire were well served. The chairing of the Board of Directors is with a Wiltshire Council Executive Director, a Head of Service attends the meetings and there is representation on the Service Manager Group which supports the partnership. All this represents a significant commitment from the Council.

24. The governance task is to ensure that the new service and partnership is robust and can deliver sustained improvement, can meet the needs of the region through each of the six local authorities working in partnership with the 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.

25. As required to be provided to Cabinet, this report provides performance information relating to the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

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

Legal status	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Section 20	0	0	0
Interim Care Order	7	17	19
Care Order	7	0	0
None	10	3	2
Total	24	20	21

Ethnic Origin	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
White British	20	19	20
Mixed/Other	3	0	0
White Irish	0	0	0
Other Ethnic Group	1	1	1
Total	24	20	21

Age	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
0-11 months	4	9	3
12-23 months	3	2	2
2-4 years	11	5	6
5-10 years	6	4	10
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	24	20	21

26. To be noted is that some children remained at home with birth family whilst subject to care proceedings with a care plan for adoption. This meant that other permanence options (such as Special Guardianship Orders) will be considered by the court for these children.

Wiltshire Children adopted

Age	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
0-11 months	3	5	4
12-23 months	7	8	15
2-4 years	14	5	9
5-10 years	8	4	5
11 and over	1	0	0
Total	33	22	33

Wiltshire Children matched within Adoption West	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
	N/A	N/A	13 children placed in 11 placements within Wiltshire Another 8 children in 5 placements within Adoption West

Out of county children matched with Wiltshire adopters	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
	8 children in 5 placements	8 children in 5 placements	N/A

Rescissions of Placement Orders and Disruptions

27. In 2018-19, 5 rescissions were made where the plan for the child moved away from adoption (7 in the previous year), leading to the rescission of Placement Orders. Wiltshire Council applies rigorous scrutiny to care planning and it is inevitable that there will be developments in a case or a child's situation that means that adoption is no longer in that child's best interest; for example, a family member or parent can resume the care of a child where it had not previously been envisaged, a court may not grant a Placement Order but make a Special Guardianship Order instead or a plan will move to long term fostering, particularly for older children. There is one child who is currently in the rescission process.

28. During 2018-19, there have been no adoption placement disruptions notified to the Adoption Service before an Adoption Order was made, although on one occasion a child did not progress to be placed as the match disrupted during introductions. There have been no placement breakdowns that occurred post-order, when the child returned to being looked after.

Prospective adopters

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Enquiries to be an adopter	85 (households)	66 (households)	67
Applications to be an adopter	n/a	30	35
Number of newly approved adopters	26	18	27
Application to approval: 0-3 months	3	0	3
4-6 months	15	3	19
7-12 months	7	13	4
Over 12 months	1	1	1
Number approved adopters unmatched	14	12	23
Number approved adopters matched	14	18	12

29. Of the 23 adopters, unmatched and "waiting", 4 families were linked and waiting to go to Adoption Panel for a match and 2 are on hold due to personal circumstances, one has an Early Permanence placement, leaving 16 families actively looking to be matched with children. There were 7 children with Placement Orders who were waiting for placements at the year end and where active family finding was happening.

30. Through Adoption West, there are 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 meet the long term, permanence needs of the child is paramount. The increased access to adopters will support children where

there are concerns about the location 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 the agency knows well, within Adoption West is a benefit.

Financial summary of the agency

31. The tables below indicate the budget, actual and predicted expenditure, for the financial years 2017/18 to 2018/19.

32. Adoption West went live on 1st March 2019 therefore the 2018/19 table, includes 11 months of internal team costs and 1 month of contractual payment to Adoption West.

2017/18	Budget (£)	Actual Expenditure (£)
Salaries and team running costs	557,900	531,326
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	215
Adoption allowances (all types)	501,500	712,048
Special Guardianship Allowances	1,835,600	1,533,815
Adoption income	-200,000	-183,000
Total	**2,712,000**	**2,614,404**
2018/19	Budget (£)	Predicted Outturn (£)
Salaries and team running costs	436,500	437,873
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	2,723
Adoption allowances (all types)	610,600	860,199
Special Guardianship Allowances	1,654,700	1,602,679
Adoption income	-200,000	-213,013
Contractual Payment: Adoption WEST	140,300	140,202
Total	**2,659,100**	**2,830,663**

33. There have continued to be adoptive families who are financially supported to look after Wiltshire children. Numbers of families and total costs are indicated below:

	At 31 March 2017 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2018 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2019 Children/Carers
RO Allowance	14/11	11/10	10/9
Adoption Allowance	38/31	32/26	34/27
Other (SGO)	184/136	195/150	213/164
Total	236/178	238/186	257/200

	2016/17 Actual Expenditure (£)	2017/18 Actual Expenditure (£)	2018/19 Provisional Outturn (£)
RO Allowance	108,706	93,404	84,964

		291,330	308,632
Adoption Allowance	332,757		
Other (SGO)	1,397,912	1,553,815	1,602,679
TOTAL	**1,839,375**	**1,938,549**	**1,996,274**

- In addition to the direct budgets above, adoptive families have access to ringfenced therapist services, the estimated value of the contract is £40,000.

34. 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 31.3.2019 there were 80 allocated Wiltshire families who were receiving adoption support and 117 applications had been made to the ASF (this is the number of applications relating to therapy delivered in the reporting period. The actual applications may have been made earlier), with the current budget being administered of approximately £266,082. Adoption West works actively within the £5,000 fair access limit per child and has sought match funding from the local authority for 4 children when there has been significant risk of placement breakdown. The most common types of therapy provided remain DDP, Sensory Integration Therapy and creative therapies such as art or play therapy.

35. The outturn budget for Adoption Allowances is broadly in line with the activity. Cost per adoption have increased over time. This reflects more "complex" adoptions being supported (often in adolescence and to prevent placement breakdown). In addition, the limitations of the Adoption Support Fund only financing therapy for children plus the requirement of the local authority to contribute, means that some adoptive placements require additional financial support to maintain stability.

Adoption Panel

	2016/17	2017/18 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW)	2018/19 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW)
Panels held	19	19	18
Adoptive families considered	25	24* (including 4 assessed by other AW local authorities)	26
Matches considered	31	36 (28 Wiltshire children and 8 from other AW local authorities)	32 (24 Wiltshire children and 8 from other AW local authorities)
Relinquished Children	0	1 (Wiltshire child)	0
Reviews of Adopters notified	0	0	0

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

36. 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. Although they are different panels, information is included, in the table above, relating to Wiltshire Panels and Adoption West Panels, one of the latter panels is hosted by the Council under the partnership "hub" arrangement. These 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. There are dedicated Administrators in place within the three Adoption West hubs to support the work of the Adoption Panels.

37. 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 Wiltshire Panel day was in June 2018 and for Adoption West, 30 April 2019. This ensures that panel members are updated regarding statutory and legislative changes along with Adoption West developments and improvements to practice. Panel members have an opportunity to consider how well the Panel is operating and what could be done better. The Chairs meet regularly with the Panel Advisers to discuss operational and developmental issues relating to the panels' work and consistency, making any changes and improvements as required.

38. The arrangement for Panel recommendations being considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is robust, although interim. In the period between October 2017 and the implementation of Adoption West as an Adoption Agency in March 2019, decisions regarding Wiltshire children being matched with adopters and the suitability of adopters assessed by the Wiltshire Adoption Service were made by a Wiltshire ADM. Following Adoption West becoming operational, decisions about matches remained with the local authority responsible for the child and decisions about suitability to adopt were made by the ADM from the local authority where the assessing Adoption West worker was linked.

39. To ensure capacity and availability within Wiltshire, there are currently three senior managers who take the ADM responsibility 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. This means that adopters are informed of decisions promptly following Panel recommendations. When Adoption West has secured more senior management capacity, all suitability to adopt assessments/approvals related ADM decisions will rest with that organisation.

Commentary

40. The main externally reported performance information for Wiltshire Council is included in the Adoption Scorecard and is summarised above. There

has been steady improvement in performance over the three-year rolling period. The impact of legacy cases is noted alongside local reported actual and predictive figures.

41. Sustained improvement is evident when considering the two priority areas of development (the time between assessment of adopters and matching and the timeliness of the adoption of children where it was in their best interest, including those with complex needs), the unverified data indicates that strong improvement continues, with attention to be paid to performance following the implementation of Adoption West so that momentum is maintained. Overall, over the last 10 years practice has improved year on year because of improved planning that is focussed on outcomes for children and is part of the wider Looked After Children improvement agenda. Robust management arrangements are in place within the local authority and, now, in Adoption West, providing a solid foundation for continued improvement.

42. Continued improvement of performance at **A1** requires permanence planning to be timely and responsive to a child's needs. The second review (held four months after a child becomes looked after) must identify an appropriate plan where the decision is that permanence is the preferred option. To ensure timely planning and decision making, the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer, working alongside the child's Social Worker, provides challenge and oversight to a case. This is checked through audit. Permanency Planning Meetings are used on all cases to decide which options are right for a child and required actions are identified, supporting the care planning process. The terms of reference of the monthly Permanence Panel ensures that children have an appropriate plan for permanence, including adoption, at the right time in their care pathway. In addition, the pace at which matters proceed through the legal process has improved over recent years. The Scorecard shows that as of March 2019, the average time was 29 weeks (28 weeks at March 2018); several complex cases requiring lengthy finding of fact hearings have maintained the average figure.

43. Cabinet will have been encouraged to see the number of adopters recommended for approval in 2016-17 to be an increase on the previous year. However, a decrease followed with a recovery in this reporting period. The decrease mirrored the national trend whereas, as previously indicated, the recent upturn does not. Whilst this is clearly very encouraging, 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 2016-19 in Wilshire was 17% (14% nationally). The Adoption Leadership Board states that there is a national decrease in adopter recruitment figures. By way of comparison, currently Adoption West has 96 assessments in progress, of which 22 are "Wiltshire based". The previous annual report stated that Wiltshire Adoption Service had 21 assessments in progress (the highest since 2016), an increase of 33% from the end of the previous financial year. Recognising this is not an exact comparison, it does reflect growth in numbers of families approved as suitable to adopt.

44. The number of children who are "waiting" for adoption in this period is close to the number last year. At the same time, the number of children adopted has increased; this shows that there is a significant rise in the number of Wiltshire children who need adoptive families.

45. Promoting the needs of Wiltshire's children, during the reporting period the local authority, and now Adoption West, has continued to use Link Maker, 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 will continue to have a vital place in family finding for children since the National Adoption Register was closed on 31st March 2019. The DfE is reviewing the purpose and function of a national register with a permanence focus following the Fostering stocktake. 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 with existing Wiltshire adopters, or from Voluntary Adoption Agencies or from Adoption West. Adoption West will have a positive impact on the timely placement of children with adoptive families as it will widen the pool of approved adopters available.

46. Early Permanence (EP) practice is established in Wiltshire. In 2018-19, 9 children were referred for EP and 3 were placed with EP carers. In 2017-18, 10 children were placed, and 3 in the preceding year. Of the 6 not placed, arrangements did not go ahead for different reasons such as uncertainty about sibling adopters or no one coming forward for the child. Four children from surrounding authorities were placed with Wiltshire approved EP carers. Of the 27 adoptive families approved in this period, 8 were open to consider EP placements. There are currently 5 adopters approved for EP without a child placed (one is on hold) and 4 families in assessment who will be approved as EP carers. Adoption West positively assesses potential adopters and seeks approval of their suitability through the Adoption West Panel. It is important that there is a pool of adopters who can look after children on an EP basis and where the long-term plan is adoption - and for children where there is concurrent planning for a potential return home. Such placements fall under the umbrella of Early Permanence. Regulation allows for children to be placed in these circumstances with the approval of the local authority. Adoption West is working towards implementing Panel arrangements whereby prospective adopters can also be approved as foster carers (dual approved), further facilitating EP arrangements. For the potential adopters, there is some uncertainty associated with such placements, as the child could return home or move to family, and so adopters need to be able to manage this and appropriate support is provided. The local authority should be confident in presenting the legal case to court and being assertive in matching children with adopters where it is in their best interest to do so. This will further improve outcomes for children, timeliness and, therefore, Scorecard performance.

47. 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, the time is reduced that children wait to be matched. This activity, linked to the development of Early Permanence and the larger pool of Adoption West adopters, will allow placements to be made and matches agreed through Panel quickly and without reducing the rigour applied to ensuring that all decisions are in the child's best interest. This activity will support improvement of **A2**.

48. It is anticipated that **A3** performance will continue to improve as the scrutiny and challenge provided by the Independent Reviewing Service and the work of Permanence Panel continue to drive timeliness and permanence planning. It is important to note that the target has "tightened" in recent years and the measure is now taken over 14 months (previously 16 and 18 months), with progress remaining 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, with an alternative permanence plan agreed. Current care planning practice and robust challenge will not allow cases to drift, thus securing permanence for children.

49. As indicated, the effective development of Adoption West was increasingly an area of priority involvement for the local authority. It remains a priority to ensure the new organisation is effective in helping to achieve best outcomes for Wiltshire's children.

Next Steps and Recommendations

50. To continue to improve outcomes for children who need adoptive families, the Local Authority will:

- By using a range of management and performance information, closely track the effectiveness of adoption practice in terms of children requiring adoptive families to be confident that the implementation of Adoption West does not adversely affect outcome for Wiltshire's children
- Through the Board of Directors, maintain a high level of involvement with Adoption West; considering the needs of Wiltshire's children through ensuring good matching and support of adopters
- Identify an officer within the Senior Management Team of the Families and Children's Service to be the lead on adoption and to be the primary connection to Adoption West
- Through specific discussion and regular liaison meetings, continue to work with the local judiciary to further improve the way that the courts deal with care cases in a timely manner, recognising the potential delays for children where additional family members (sometimes multiple) may be considered as carers late in proceedings or where additional assessments are indicated
- Provide Early Permanence placements for children via Adoption West
- Working closely with Adoption West, ensure proactive family finding practice (anonymised profiles, information days and events, Link Maker, child appreciation events) to ensure the effectiveness of the process to

bring about timely identification of potential adoptive matches for children who require adoption

- Hold Adoption West to account to ensure a sufficiency of adopters who can meet the diverse needs of the population of children requiring adoption in Wiltshire. A suitably diverse pool of approved adopters allows matching to begin early in the process, often before a Placement Order is made.
- In cases where it is recognised that the agency may struggle to match children with in-house prospective adopters, request Court consent to feature the children's profiles beyond Wiltshire's boundaries and, through Adoption West, be pro-active in referring children to regional and national family finding services once a Placement Order has been granted (sooner with the consent of the court)
- Continue to ensure that formal Disruption Meetings take place where adoption placements breakdown before Adoption Orders are made to consider key learning to inform whole service improvement.

Background

51. Adoption is a route to provide permanency 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.

52. 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 Panel and this is ratified as a decision by the appropriate 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.

53. 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 Children's Services in July 2015. From April 2019, Adoption West has been the operating Regional Adoption Agency and Wiltshire no longer carries out the full range of adoption functions as it did. The Council retains some aspects of an adoption work and is an Adoption Agency; the requirement to be inspected and for Cabinet to be assured remains.

54. The local authority, through reporting to Cabinet, must be assured of regulatory compliance and effectiveness through performance monitoring, challenge and improvement planning.

55. Adoption West has the responsibility to recruit, assess and approve adopters for infants and younger 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 is developing a close working relationship with RAAs across the SW and nationally. Adoption West subscribes to Link Maker, an online adopter-lead resource.

56. 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. It is anticipated that Adoption West will have significant impact on outcomes for Wiltshire's children as it will deliver a more effective regional response to adoption and the needs of children. The case responsibility for children will remain with Wiltshire Council.

Safeguarding Implications

57. 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.

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

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

Public Health Implications

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

Corporate Procurement Implications

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

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

62. Throughout the adoption process due regard is had to the Public Sector equalities duties but as this report is for noting, there is are no specific equalities issues raised by this report.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

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

Risk Assessment

64. Risks that may arise if the performance and management of adoption work, and that of Adoption West with whom the Council is in partnership, is not effective and does not achieve good outcomes for children:

- Safeguarding risk to looked after children if they are placed with adopters who have not been fully assessed, prepared and supported. Safeguarding is considered a high-level risk within the corporate risk register
- An inadequate supply of adopters to meet the needs of children requiring permanence through adoption
- Reputational risk if the Agency or Adoption West is not effective and does not achieve good outcomes for children who require adoption
- Reputational risk if statutory timescales are not met regarding adoption
- Reputational risk if the Agency or Adoption West is rated as Inadequate through inspection
- Financial risk if placements are made, are unstable and subsequently breakdown leading to children returning to local authority care
- Financial risk if Adoption West is not effectively managed
- Risks associated with the safety and effectiveness of overall service delivery provided by Adoption West.

Effective delivery of the provision of adoptive families to children who need them, supported by appropriate improvement and service plans, reporting and challenge will mitigate these risks. The secure operation of Adoption West, with appropriate accountability and reporting to the Board and to Wiltshire Council, as required, will support this.

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

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

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

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

Financial Implications

67. The previous budget for the Adoption Service is indicated, in summary, above. The Service has been managed within budget due to 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 will make to the new organisation. This annual report relates to how well Wiltshire Council carries out responsibilities regarding the adoption of children, it cannot be separated from considerations of the effectiveness of Adoption West.

Legal Implications

68. 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 this annual report and so it ensures that legal requirements are met. There are no additional legal implications arising.

Options Considered

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

Conclusion

70. Recent years have seen considerable change within the world of adoption 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. Adoption West has brought further significant change and further anticipated improvement to this. 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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May 2019

Background Papers

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

None

Appendices

None