

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

Date of meeting: 3 July 2018

Subject: Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2017-18 Year End Report

Cabinet member: Councillor Laura Mayes – Children’s Services

Key Decision: No

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 2017 to 31 March 2018.

Wiltshire Council’s Adoption Service was most recently 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 Family and Children Service has continued to develop and improve how it works to best effect. Two areas for improvement were indicated regarding the Adoption Service. These remain as priorities:

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

In 2016/17, 33 adoption orders were granted (higher than the Wiltshire average in recent years) and 26 families were approved as suitable to adopt. For the year 2017/18, 22 adoption orders were granted and 19 families were approved as suitable to adopt. The reduction in adoption orders granted is because 4 children with complex emotional needs were placed, requiring significant levels of support prior to the families feeling able to make an application to adopt. These are now all progressing to application. Had they been adopted within the reporting period, the figure would have been closer to the Wiltshire average for the last five years.

It is anticipated that 35-40 children will require adoption in any full year (an approximate benchmark is 10% of the care population). Therefore, two years ago the recruitment target was revised with the aim to recruit 30 adoptive families through targeted and general recruitment to meet anticipated needs. This annual target remains in place and is designed to provide sufficiency for children requiring adoptive families whilst maintaining a “pool” of adopters who are prepared and waiting to adopt.

As reported in previous annual reports, driven by the Government’s stated commitment to improving adoption services in terms of numbers of children

being adopted and the timeliness of matches for children requiring adoptive placements, the development of the Adoption Service has continued. Comparative performance is measured using the Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows overall continued improvement. In previous annual reports, it was recognised that further acceleration of improvement was needed although the overall trajectory was positive and this has continued. The Service is balancing the need to ensure continual improvement whilst maintaining a clear focus on the Adoption West initiative, discussed below.

In spring 2015, the Government made it an expectation that local authorities were to develop collaborative arrangements to improve adoption performance. The regional response to this was the Adoption West project, comprising of six local authorities and a small number of locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies working together to design and deliver a new adoption agency. Wiltshire Council is a member of the Adoption West partnership and has recently taken the responsibility of chairing the Adoption West Governance Group, following the retirement of the previous chair.

Cabinet has previously received detailed information regarding Adoption West and the role, responsibility and accountability arrangements that are being developed.

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
Corporate Director

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

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Cabinet member: Councillor Laura Mayes – Children’s Services

Key Decision: No

Purpose of Report

1. This report provides a year-end report to Cabinet regarding the performance of the Adoption Service within Wiltshire Council. It is a requirement of the condition of registration, as described in the 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards and 2013 Statutory Guidance, that Cabinet is satisfied the Adoption Agency complies with the conditions of registration, is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children.
2. Cabinet last received an annual report regarding the Adoption Service in July 2017, covering the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017. This report relates to the full year 2017/18 reporting period. Cabinet also received an interim six-month report in January 2018.
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 Adoption Service, the Adoption Scorecard, children who require adoptive placements and those who are placed, the recruitment and approval of adopters, the disruption of placements, children where the plan for adoption changes and the work of the Adoption 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; 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. Wiltshire Council will remain as an adoption agency because it will retain responsibility for children requiring adoption. The arrival of Adoption West as the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) will mean that the provision of adoptive families, home finding and adoption support will 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 2015/16, 22 children were adopted. In 2016/17, 33 children were adopted (higher than the recent Wiltshire average) and in 2017/18 this number was 22. Of these, 19 (86%) were placed within 12 months of the decision that adoption was in their best interest being made. In 2015/16, 13 adoptive families were approved, in 2016/17, 26 families were approved. In 2017/18, 19 families were approved as suitable to adopt. This indicates the need to increase the number of families approved as suitable to adopt.
9. Wiltshire's current Adoption Scorecard (most recently published performance to March 2017) shows overall continued improvement and is included below, for reference. National performance targets are no longer in place and it is not clear what national and local reporting will be in place when the RAA is in operation. At present, each local authority Adoption Agency 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 (2014-17) is 469 days. This is shorter than the three-year average of 545 days in 2013-16 and shorter than the England three-year average for 2014-17 of 520 days. The Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- Excluding two legacy cases the three-year average figure becomes 419 days for 2014-17
- The local authority figure for 2017-18 is 326 days, down from 445 in the previous year.
- Including Early Permanence (Fostering for Adoption) placements and legacy cases, locally reported data estimates the figure for 2015-18 as 392 days, a continued improvement on 469 days and a marked improvement on 545 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 (2014-17) is 186 days. This is an increase on the three-year average of 158 days in 2013-16. Excluding two legacy cases this figure becomes 154 days for 2014-17.
- It remains shorter than the England three-year average of 220 days. Overall the Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.

- The local authority one year figure for 2017-18 is 126 days. In 2016-17 the figure was 221 days, excluding 2 legacy cases this figure becomes 144 days for 2016-17
- This 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 2015-18 as 171 days. 2019-20 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:

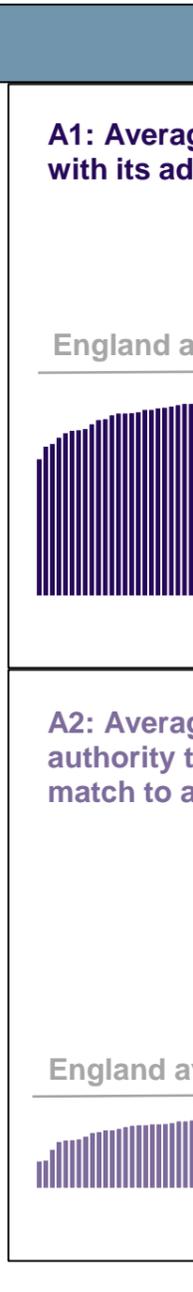
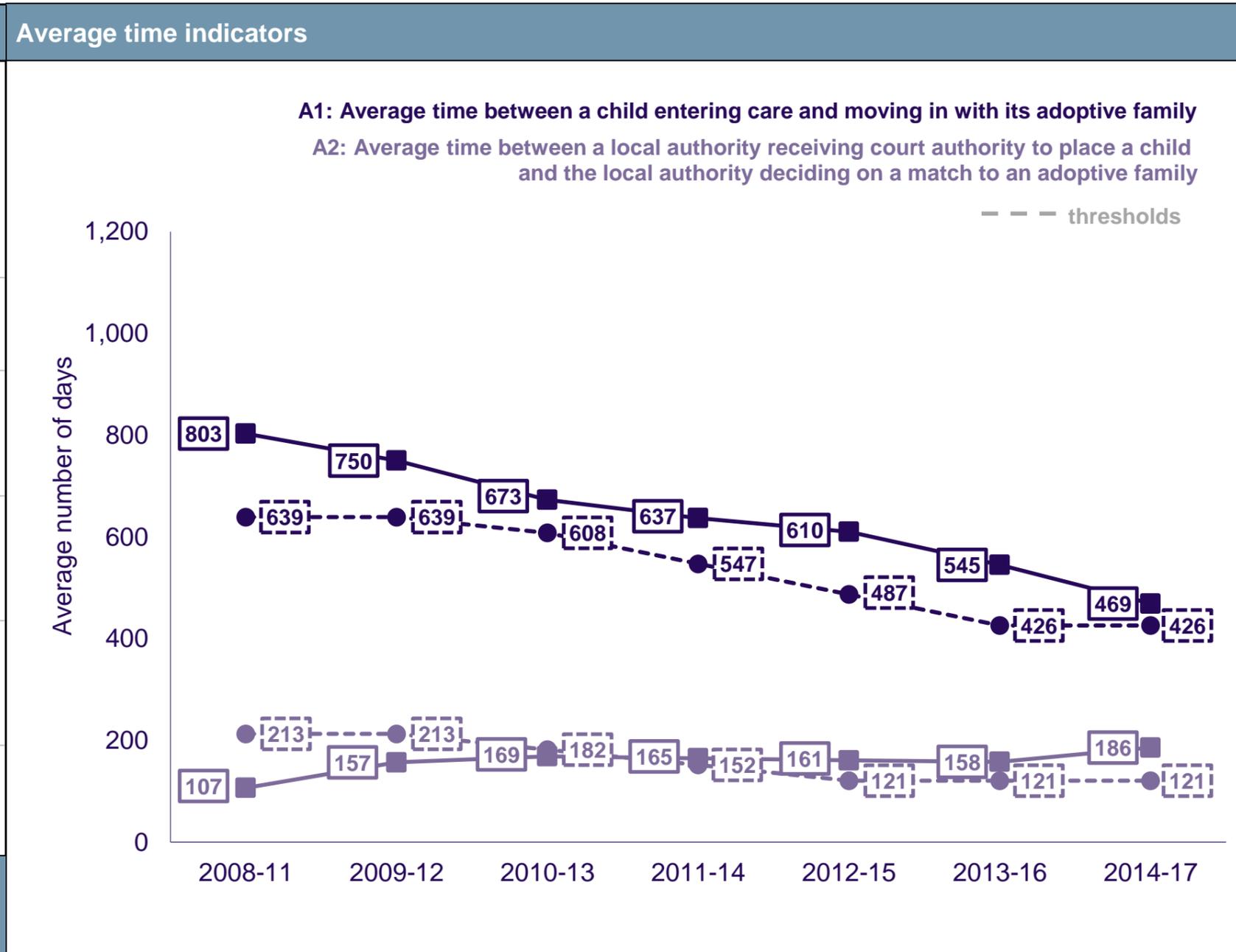
- In the period 2017-18, there were 69% (85) of children who waited less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. This is an increase from 48% (60) in the previous cycle when the measure was those who waited *less than 16 months*. The England three-year average (2014-17) is 53%. Locally reported data estimates the figure for 2015-18 as 94 children (73%). This shows steady improvement over time.

10. The most recent Scorecard three year averages relate to 2014-17, 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** (which is showing an improvement of about 20%, meaning that more children are being placed in their adoptive placements in a shorter time after being received into care) and **A3** where there is an improvement of about 20 percentage points and in the context of a tougher definition (a reduction of two months each reporting year). This is good progress. The increase in **A2** includes 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 considered to be in their best interests. To ensure continued progress and improvement, careful attention must be given to all aspects of the work of the Adoption Service whilst the current responsibilities of the Wiltshire Council Adoption Agency continue to apply, prior to the implementation of Adoption West which is scheduled for October 2018.

11. Improvements to processes have continued, to ensure that home finding starts at the earliest opportunity and that all activities are monitored and completed in a timely fashion. Previous practice had home finding beginning later in the child's journey with the resultant impact on timeliness. This work will continue in the coming year and into the development of Adoption West, making sure that best practice is recognised and delivered within Wiltshire and across the Adoption West area.

12. The 2017 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 (days)	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 (2014-17)	469	186	85 (69%)
Distance from 2014-17 performance threshold (426 and 121 days)	43 days	65 days	n/a
1 year trend - Improvement from 2016 to 2017	Average time in 2017 was longer than in 2016	Average time in 2017 was longer than in 2016	n/a
3 year trend - Improvement from 2013-16 to 2014-17	Average time in 2014-17 was shorter than in 2013-16	Average time in 2014-17 was longer than in 2013-16	n/a
England 3 year average (2014-17)	520	220	11120 (53%)



Adopters

Related Information

	Number of approved adoptive families waiting to be matched as at 31 March 2017	Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March 2017	Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2016-17 who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child	New ADM decisions				Adoptions from care during 2014-17 (with % leaving care who are adopted)	Children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption during 2014-17 (number and %)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March 2017)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2017)	A1 timeliness where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days) (2014-17)					
				New placement orders granted		THESE ARE NOT PERFORMANCE MEASURES											
LA	25	20	79%	30	35	30	25	2016	2017	2016	2017	LA	80 (16%)	30 (19%)	20	10	402
England	2,040	1,690	74%	LA % change	20%	LA % change	-17%	England	14410 (15%)	2880 (12%)	4,100	2,580	435				
				National % change	-3%	National % change	-%										

Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2017)
31

13. Management arrangements and staffing are compliant with regulation in terms of qualification and experience. The Corporate Director (with the responsibility of Director of Children's Services) has overall responsibility for the Adoption Service. Reporting to the DCS is the Director with responsibility for Family and Children Services. The Head of Service: Care and Placement Services has day-to-day operational responsibility for the Service. There is a Service Manager and Adoption Team Manager in post. This provides strength and clear accountability to the Service with an opportunity to develop the strategy for improvement, ensure appropriate line management arrangements in the Service, provide operational accountability and maintain an important and continuing significant contribution to the development of Adoption West.
14. The Adoption Team Manager has recently been appointed as the Service Director for Adoption West. Whilst this will result in a staff deficit within the Service from mid-July, there will be cover provided by the Service manager and Assistant Team Manager and the impact will be short-term as all adoption staff will transfer to Adoption West in October 2018. It is positive that the new Service Director has shaped and improved the Adoption Service in Wiltshire and knows it well.
15. The core task of the Adoption Service is to provide secure, stable adoptive placements for children who require legal permanence and are no longer able to remain living safely with their parents or other family members. Services provided are broadly delivered by two teams within the Adoption Service:
 - The Adoption Recruitment and Assessment Team: provides permanency for children through the recruitment, assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. Recommended for approval by the Adoption Panel with decisions made by the Agency Decision Maker, adopters are then matched with children through the home finding process.
 - The Adoption Support Team: supports adoptive families and their children to ensure placement stability. It also provides support to Special Guardians (although this responsibility will stay with the local authority when Adoption West becomes operational). Services include therapeutic support, counselling, training, family days, newsletters and a link to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This team is also responsible for managing referrals to the Adoption Support Fund which increases adopters' and Special Guardians' access to specific services for adoption support.
16. In addition, the Adoption Service is 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), and those wishing to adopt children from overseas.

17. The establishment operational staffing of the Service (Recruitment and Assessment and Adoption Support) comprises one full-time equivalent Team Manager and one full time equivalent Assistant Team Manager. There are 8 full time equivalent qualified social work posts. There are 1.95 full time equivalent Adoption Support Workers who, between them, have responsibilities across the full range of support work within the Adoption Service. There is currently one vacancy for an Adoption Support Social Worker, the post is not being recruited to as it will need to be considered when moving staff into Adoption West. This is a small team with county-wide responsibilities. The demands upon the team have grown over time with the increase of Special Guardianship Orders in Wiltshire. They also have responsibility for the work generated by potential and actual adoption breakdowns that can occur at any time post-Adoption Order. Most commonly, these involve adolescents who are challenging and can be hard to place if they are unable to remain with their adoptive families.
18. A development plan, supported by an adopter recruitment strategy, was published in autumn 2015, refreshed in autumn 2016, with further review in 2017. This reflects 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. It is anticipated that Adoption West will begin full operation in October 2018 at which time it will assume responsibility for most functions of the Wiltshire Adoption Service. Adoption West will have its own development and implementation plan.
19. The priorities of the current Adoption Service Development Plan include:
- 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 home 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
20. 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.

21. In early 2015 the Government stated that local authorities (and Voluntary Adoption Agencies) should work collaboratively to ensure more effective arrangements were in place to deliver adoption where it was in a child's best interest. Adoption West is the local response to this initiative. Comprising of six local authorities and locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Adoption West will be an independently operating Adoption Agency. Cabinet has already given approval to the design, budget and implementation arrangements of the partnership. It is anticipated that Adoption West will improve the timeliness of adoption for children whilst providing other aspects of the work carried out by current local authority Adoption Agencies. Staff and managers from Wiltshire are fully involved in the development, not only to ensure it is an effective agency but also that the interests of children and adopters from Wiltshire are well served. The chairing of the Governance Group has recently been taken on by the Corporate Director. All this represents a significant commitment from the Service and care will be taken that it does not affect "business as usual".
22. There are significant implications for the Adoption Service and staff in Wiltshire, not least because those staff whose jobs are wholly or mostly associated with the work of the Adoption Service will transfer, via TUPE, from the local authority to Adoption West in October 2018. The final structure of this service is being developed and the process of allocating specific posts and roles to transferring staff has begun. Recruitment will take place where there are vacancies within the new structure. The scope will include administration, direct services (pre and post-approval), and the Adoption Panel function. This process is being carefully managed to reduce anxiety for those concerned. As indicated, the current Adoption Team Manager has been appointed as Adoption West Service Director.
23. The development of Adoption West is managed through the Governance Group which consists of the Associate Directors (or equivalents or delegates) from each authority who in turn report to their DCS who meet when required. The Governance Group is currently supported by a Service Manager Group. The task is to ensure that the new service is robust and can deliver and sustain improvement, meeting the needs of the region, each of the six local authorities and 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 placements and therefore increased opportunity for timely matching of children with adoptive families, particularly those who may be considered harder to place.
24. In autumn 2017 local authority adoption panels were closed and Adoption West panels began operating. Progress has been good and the new arrangements are working effectively. The next part of Adoption West to begin operation is the "front door", allowing access, for those who wish to be considered as potential adopters, to information about adoption and what assessment will entail. It is anticipated that this will have commenced operation by the summer of 2018. Clear management, regulatory and

accountability arrangements will be in place for Adoption West with the Corporate Director for Wiltshire being the Ofsted Registered Individual. A Wiltshire Council group remains in place to monitor the ongoing impact of the development of Adoption West on the Council, as work progresses. This includes consideration of human resource, ICT, legal and budgetary issues.

25. As required to be provided to Cabinet, this report provides performance information relating to the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018.

Profile of children waiting for an adoptive placement at year end

Legal status	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Section 20	0	0	0
Interim Care Order	7	7	17
Care Order	5	7	0
None	1	10	3
Total	13	24	20

Ethnic Origin	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
White British	7	20	19
Mixed/Other	2	3	0
White Irish	1	0	0
Other Ethnic Group	3	1	1
Total	13	24	20

Age	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
0-11 months	1	4	9
12-23 months	7	3	2
2-4 years	3	11	5
5-10 years	2	6	4
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	13	24	20

26. To be noted is that several 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.

Children adopted

Age	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
0-11 months	0	3	5
12-23 months	7	7	8
2-4 years	7	14	5
5-10 years	8	8	4
11 and over	0	1	0
Total	22	33	22

Children matched out of county	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
	4 children in 3 placements	15 children in 11 placements	10 children in 7 placements

Out of county children matched with Wiltshire adopters	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
	7 children in 5 placements	8 children in 5 placements	8 children in 5 placements

Rescissions of Placement Orders and Disruptions

27. In 2017-18, 7 rescissions were made where the plan for the child moved away from adoption, leading to the rescission of Adoption and 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 are a further 4 children who are currently in this rescission process.

28. During 2017-18, there have been no adoption placement disruptions notified to the Adoption Service before an Adoption Order was made. There has been one placement breakdown that occurred post-order, when the child returned to being looked after. The child was 8 years old and had been placed for adoption, by Devon, at the age of 4, with Wiltshire adopters. A disruption meeting was held in June 2018 and the resultant learning has been disseminated.

Prospective adopters

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Enquiries to be an adopter	147 (individuals)	85 (households)	66 (households)
Applications to be an adopter	29	n/a	30
Number of newly approved adopters	13	26	18
Application to approval: 0-3 months	0	3	0
4-6 months	4	15	3
7-12 months	7	7	13
Over 12 months	2	1	1
Number approved adopters unmatched	21	14	12
Number approved adopters matched	17	14	18

29. Of the 12 adopters, unmatched and "waiting", 1 family was linked and waiting to go to Adoption Panel for a match and 2 had withdrawn from wanting to adopt and required deregistration, leaving 9 families actively looking to be matched with children. There were 10 children with Placement Orders who were waiting for placements at the year end. Although it is anticipated that these children will be placed with Wiltshire adopters, it is

nationally recognised that it remains more challenging to find placements for children with complex needs, older children and sibling groups.

Financial summary of the agency

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

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	559,000	559,000
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	17,000
Adoption allowances (all types)	610,000	610,000
Special Guardianship Allowances	1,654,700	1,654,700
Adoption income	-200,000	-200,000
Total	2,641,300	2,641,300

- In addition to the direct budgets above, adoptive families have access to ringfenced therapist services, estimated value of the contract is £40,000.
- Please note that pay inflation has not yet been applied to the 2018-19 salary budgets. From 1st October 2018, Wiltshire's Adoption Service will be moved to Adoption West and approximately 50% of the Adoption Budget will transfer to support staff, moving via TUPE arrangements, and other operational net costs.

31. There have continued to be adoptive families who are financially supported. Numbers of families and total costs are indicated below:

	At 31 March 2016 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2017 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2017 Children/Carers
RO Allowance	20/16	14/11	11/10
Adoption Allowance	50/40	38/31	32/26

Other (SGO)	165/124	184/136	195/150
Total	235/180	236/178	238/186

	2015/16 Actual Expenditure (£)	2016/17 Actual Expenditure (£)	2017/18 Provisional Outturn (£)
RO Allowance	123,472	108,706	96,036
Adoption Allowance	371,081	332,757	301,064
Other (SGO)	1,081,967	1,397,912	1,530,644
TOTAL	1,576,520	1,839,375	1,927,744

The local authority continues to apply for funds from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to enable families to access commissioned therapeutic services. There are about 65 allocated families who are receiving adoption support and almost 100 applications have been made to the ASF, with the current budget being administered of approximately £332,000. The team works actively within the £5,000 fair access limit per child and has sought match funding from the local authority for 3 children when there has been significant risk of placement breakdown. The most common types of therapy provided are DDP, Sensory Integration therapy and creative therapies such as art or play therapy.

32. The outturn budget for Adoption Allowances has slightly fallen in the last two years, despite the number of children attracting these allowances falling more significantly. 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

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18 (Wiltshire Council and Adoption West (AW))
No. Panels held	21	19	19
Adoptive families considered	14 (including one deferred and not reconsidered)	25	24* (including 4 assessed by other AW local authorities)
Matches considered	28	31	36 (28 Wiltshire children and 8 from other AW local authorities)
Relinquished Children	2	0	1 (Wiltshire child)
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.

33. The Adoption West Panel (and the Wiltshire Council Panel before it) 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, which are 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 is an Agency Panel Adviser in place (currently from the local authority) 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, and other locations, to support the work of the Adoption Panel.
34. To comply with regulation, all Panel members, including the Chair, receive annual appraisals which consider their effectiveness as panel members and any areas for development. There is an annual training day, the most recent in June 2018, which 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 of all three Adoption West panels to discuss operational and developmental issues relating to the panels’ work and consistency, making any changes and improvements as required.
35. The arrangement for Panel recommendations being considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is robust. In the interim period between October 2017 and the implementation of Adoption West as an Adoption Agency in October 2018, decisions regarding Wiltshire children being matched with adopters and the suitability of adopters assessed by the Wiltshire Adoption Service are made by a Wiltshire ADM. To ensure capacity and availability, 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 becomes an Adoption Agency, it will have its own ADM who will make the decisions.

Commentary

36. The main externally reported performance information 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 predictive figures.

37. 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 improvement continues, with attention to be paid to performance through to the implementation of Adoption West to maintain momentum. Starting from a poor position in 2008-11, 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, providing a solid foundation for continued improvement. There is now a short time before Adoption West becomes the Regional Adoption Agency when most aspects of adoption performance will become the responsibility of that organisation.
38. 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 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. The average time between the initiation and conclusion of care proceedings shortened from 23.6 weeks in March 2015-16 to 21.9 weeks for 2016-17. As of March 2018, the average time was 28 weeks; several complex cases requiring lengthy finding of fact hearings have increased the average figure.
39. Cabinet will previously have been encouraged to see the number of adopters recommended for approval in 2016-17 to be an increase on the previous year. The reason for this rise was given in the last annual report. Of concern, however, is the drop in numbers approved in this reporting period when 18 have been approved as suitable to adopt. The Adoption Leadership Board states that there is a national decrease in adopter recruitment figures. Currently the Service has 21 assessments in progress (the highest since 2016), an increase of 33% from the end of the previous financial year. This indicates a recovery in figures although it is important to maintain rigorous oversight of this, particularly in view of the national trend and the challenge of moving to Adoption West.
40. There is a slight drop in the number of children who are "waiting" for adoption, alongside a reduction in the number of children who have been adopted this year. When there are less children who require adoptive placements, it is likely that there will be smaller number who are waiting. More recent figures indicate that the number of children requiring adoptive placements is rising once again and so an increase in these numbers is anticipated in the next annual report.

41. As was the case last year, the impact of Link Maker, a national on-line resource that is adopter-led and provides information about children needing adoptive families to adopters, continues to be seen. It has produced quicker matching for some children and national searches are made for children considered 'hard to place'. 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 been used for Wiltshire children this year as placements have been identified with existing Wiltshire adopters, those from Voluntary Adoption Agencies or Adoption West partners. The development of 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 with the agency.
42. Early Permanence (EP) practice is continuing to develop in Wiltshire. In 2017-18, 10 children were placed with EP carers, compared to 3 in the preceding year. The Adoption Service will continue to assess potential adopters, and seek approval of their suitability through the Adoption West Panel, who can act as foster carers for children who do not yet have a Placement Order, but for whom 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. 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.
43. 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 home 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 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**.
44. 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, 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.

45. The Adoption Service has previously considered performance against statistical neighbours. Comparative Scorecards are not available for this report and so comparison can only be made with the England average.
46. As indicated, Adoption West is increasingly an area of priority involvement for the local authority. Wiltshire staff are involved at all levels of planning and active in not only the Governance Group, including providing the chair of the group, and the service manager "lead" group but also in the work groups that are considering specific areas of adoption practice. There is an impact on the Service as staff are called away from the local authority and it is important that this does not damage overall performance. It is positive that the current Adoption Team Manager has been appointed as the Adoption West Service Manager. This will cause some anxiety for Wiltshire staff transferring to the new organisation but will also provide reassurance as they will have confidence in their senior manager. Although some staff will join from other local authorities, this will help to provide stability and consistency for the current Wiltshire staff group.

Next Steps and Recommendations

47. To continue to improve the effectiveness of the Adoption Service, the Local Authority will:
 - Through the chairing of the Governance Group, maintain a high level of involvement in the development and implementation of Adoption West before and after implementation; considering the needs of children and adopters in Wiltshire, staff currently working in the local authority and other stakeholders
 - 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 through to the implementation of Adoption West and continue to support them once they are provided by the new Agency.
 - Use positive Home 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
 - Until the implementation of Adoption West, continue 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. Approved adopters will move to Adoption West in time, if they are still waiting to be matched with a child
 - 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 be proactive in referring children to regional and national placement 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 in to inform whole service improvement

Background

48. The Adoption Service provides 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 children who live in Wiltshire and where a decision has been made that adoption is in their best interest.
49. The fundamental requirement of the Service 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 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. 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.
50. 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.
51. 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 October 2018, Adoption West will be the Regional Adoption Agency and Wiltshire will no longer carry out the full range of functions as it does at the current time. The Council will retain some aspects of an Adoption Agency and so the requirement to be inspected and for cabinet to be assured will remain.
52. The local authority, through reporting to Cabinet, must be assured of regulatory compliance and effectiveness through performance monitoring, challenge and improvement planning.
53. The Adoption Service continues to be able to recruit adopters for infants and younger children. Through a programme of recruitment, this will be maintained, until the inception of Adoption West, and the pool of adopters will be expanded to include 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. The Service is part of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) which works regionally to identify matches for children across the area. Where necessary, children are also referred to the National Adoption Register (NAR) which provides

national opportunity to identify adopters for children who cannot be placed locally. The authority subscribes to Link Maker, an online adopter-lead resource.

54. Adoption West is a regional development involving six local authorities and a small number of locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies. It will provide a single Regional Adoption Agency 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. Adoption West is intended to have significant impact on outcomes for 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

55. Wiltshire Council Adoption Service is part of Family and Children Services, all of which are delivered in accordance with Wiltshire Children's Services Policy and Procedures, overseen by the Wiltshire Safeguarding Children Board. The local authority has clear and effective safeguarding procedures in place for children and vulnerable adults.

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

Public Health Implications

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

Corporate Procurement Implications

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

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

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

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

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

Risk Assessment

61. Risks that may arise if the performance and management of the Adoption Service is not effective and it 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 meet 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
- Risks associated with the safety and effectiveness of overall service delivery provided by Adoption West.

Effective delivery of the Service, improvement plan, reporting and challenge will mitigate these risks whilst Wiltshire retains its Adoption Team. The secure operation of Adoption West, with appropriate accountability and reporting to Wiltshire Council will support this now and when Adoption west is operational.

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

62. 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

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

Financial Implications

64. The budget for the Adoption Service is indicated, in summary, above. The Service has been managing 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 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 the work of the Wiltshire Adoption Service and *not* Adoption West, the implementation of which does have financial implications.

Legal Implications

65. 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

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

Conclusion

67. 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 of the Adoption Service. 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's Adoption Service is committed to improving service delivery and, therefore, outcomes for children. Adoption West will bring further significant change and improvement in coming years. 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.

68. The interim six-month report (January 2019) and subsequent Annual Report (July 2019) show the considerable change anticipated between now and the time when Adoption West becomes fully operational.

Terence Herbert
Corporate Director

Report Author: Martin Davis
Head of Service: EDS and Placement Services
Contact Details: Martin.Davis@Wiltshire.gov.uk
01225 712590

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Background Papers

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

None

Appendices

None

Notes for users of this template

Font - Arial 12 point

No block capitals

Use plain English, avoid technical jargon where possible and explain any abbreviations. Remember your audience includes members of the public who may not be familiar with local authority terminology.

Reports should not assume prior knowledge of the issues so should be 'stand alone' and be self-explanatory.

Keep your report as concise as possible and use appendices for the more detailed information.

Number each paragraph for reference purposes.

Do not number pages as they will be numbered as part of the agenda.

Allow time to consult with other departments or bodies as appropriate.