

adoption west

Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel

March-October 2021

Annual report



*“sometimes superheroes
reside in the hearts of
children fighting huge battles”*



Bath & North East
Somerset Council



Wiltshire Council



Foreword by the chair of Adoption West Board

Although the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel does not fall under the banner of 'Overview and Scrutiny' as defined by the Local Government Act 2000, it clearly still provides a needed and valued scrutiny function, as evidenced in its first annual report.

The scrutiny arrangements as described in the terms of reference were thoroughly reviewed by each local authority and unanimously agreed by the Adoption West Board.

There is a strong belief, shared by the overview and scrutiny councillors involved at the time the panel was first thought of, and members of the Adoption West Board that more and better can be achieved through this joint approach; more depth to the joint scrutiny as it benefits from each local authority's councillor representative's skills, knowledge and input, better use of the finite time available to Adoption West's management to meaningfully engage with independent scrutiny of the Regional Adoption Agency's work.

I have no doubt that members of the joint scrutiny panel have been on a very steep learning curve in this first year, but I can also see that they have engaged with enthusiasm and really committed to developing their knowledge and understanding of Adoption West and its work, which I feel will be even further supported by developing the membership of the panel.

Looking at the joint scrutiny panel's forward work programme, I see a busy year ahead! It will be particularly interesting for the Adoption West Board to see the outcome of the review of adoption support and the review of the evaluation of the Regional Adoption Agencies.

I am also pleased to see that a key area of work for the panel in 2021-22 will be to work with all six local authorities to develop a process to ensure that reporting on adoption is co-ordinated as best as possible.

Much of my work over the past 15 years has been in building and sustaining partnerships and strategic relationships, so it is naturally important for me that there is a clear line of sight between the joint arrangements and local scrutiny functions and that the Adoption West Board remains open to enhancing those links as we move forward, albeit without creating parallel or duplicate processes.

As chair of the Adoption West Board, I am looking forward to engaging with the joint scrutiny panel in the year ahead to carry on developing robust and effective oversight and scrutiny of the work and management of Adoption West, whilst ensuring it remains an independent and democratically-led scrutiny process.

Andy Dempsey

Director of Partnerships and Strategy, Gloucestershire County Council

Chair of the Adoption West Board of Directors

Foreword from the chairman of the scrutiny panel

Right from when the plans were first spoken of for the new Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption West, it was my strong personal belief that any new body should include an effective overview and scrutiny involvement provision, and I could not have wished for it to go any better than it has for its first year (2020-21).

The panel members have seen real commitment and willingness to learn from the scrutiny panel's input from all six Local Authorities and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all for their engagement with this work.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the panel who have demonstrated a keen interest in the issues we have addressed and a willingness to learn and participate. I would especially thank Alana Buckingham, who recently joined the scrutiny panel as an adopter representative. There is incredible value in bringing in the voice of people for whom adoption is a day-to-day reality, not just a data-set. There are further ambitions for the scrutiny panel to develop its membership to include representatives from the "adoption triangle" (e.g. adoptive parent, adopted young person, adopted adults, birth family member, etc.) and I dare say this would bring invaluable strength and depth to the scrutiny panel's work.

I am pleased that Adoption West recognised the benefits that come from scrutiny by lay members and the value that can be added, and committed to openness and transparency. As a scrutiny panel, we have seen this at every meeting through the cooperation and engagement from Alison Lewis, Service Director for Adoption West. The scrutiny panel would like to recognise Alison's commitment to this process, but furthermore her evident commitment to adoption and making Adoption West a success – for the right reasons!

I believe there is great work to be achieved by the scrutiny panel and a key piece of work for 2021-2022 could be the review of adoption support. I believe this is an area of work where the scrutiny panel could add so much, by reviewing support offers across the country and helping create a clearer picture of the support that would be most beneficial for families supported by Adoption West.

I'll conclude with a wish. I hope the work of the scrutiny panel will carry on improving, for all councillors in all six Local Authorities, their understanding of the importance of Adoption West and the role it plays in the adoption journey, but never forgetting that adoption remains an integral part of all our Children's Services.

I wish that in time this scrutiny panel is seen as a natural extension of the overview and scrutiny we all undertake of our Children's Services.

*Cllr Jon Hubbard, Wiltshire Council
Chair of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel*

Purpose of the report

1. This report is written to:
 - a. publicly present the work undertaken by the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel (thereafter referred to as the “scrutiny panel”) from March 2021 to October 2021 to the following committees:
 - Children, Adults, Health & Wellbeing Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel, Bath and North East Somerset Council
 - People Scrutiny Commission, Bristol City Council
 - Children and Family Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Gloucestershire County Council
 - Children and young people’s services policy and scrutiny panel, North Somerset Council
 - Scrutiny Commission, South Gloucestershire Council
 - Children’s Select Committee, Wiltshire Council
 - b. enable the Adoption West (AW) Board to monitor the efficiency of the scrutiny panel.
 - c. invite suggestions from the scrutiny committees (as listed in a. above) and the AW board on:
 - areas of focus for the scrutiny panel in 2021-22;
 - the contents that should be included in the scrutiny panel’s annual report in future; and
 - formatting and presentation of the information to ensure ease of reading for future reports.
2. It should be noted that this is a short report only covering a 6-month period (with the previous report covering May 2020 to March 2021). The reason being that the panel resolved to present its annual report in the autumn rather than May (to avoid any impact from the elections cycles for the different authorities), and preferred to produce a shorter report now, rather than a report covering 18-months in the autumn in 2022.

Background

3. Adoption West (AW) started operating on 1 March 2019, as a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) created by Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Wiltshire Council as a response to the government’s plans, published in June 2015, to regionalise adoption services across England and Wales.
4. Adoption West is a local authority trading company which is owned by the six local authorities and commissioned by them to provide adoption services. Adoption West is registered with Ofsted as a Voluntary Adoption Agency. Further information can be found on its [website](#).

5. The primary aim of this regionalisation was to deliver an adoption service which offer improved outcomes for both children and those who want to adopt.
6. The scrutiny panel (Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel) has been created to act as a critical friend, providing independent scrutiny of the work of AW and making constructive recommendations to ensure that AW meets its performance targets and expectations. The terms of reference for the scrutiny panel are included as Appendix 1.
7. The scrutiny panel is an essential element of assuring democratic accountability for the use of public funds; although it does not fall under the banner of 'Overview and Scrutiny' as defined by the Local Government Act 2000 in that it is not a body jointly formed by the six participating councils.
8. The scrutiny panel reports directly to the AW Board. The AW board will monitor the efficiency of the scrutiny panel, including through this annual report.

Membership

Elected Voting Member

Cllr Michelle O'Doherty, Bath and North East Somerset Council
Cllr Christine Townsend, Bristol City Council
Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Vice Chairman), Gloucestershire County Council
Cllr Wendy Griggs, North Somerset Council
Cllr Nic Labuschagne, South Gloucestershire Council
Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman), Wiltshire Council
Cllr Carole King, Wiltshire Council

Stakeholder (non-voting)

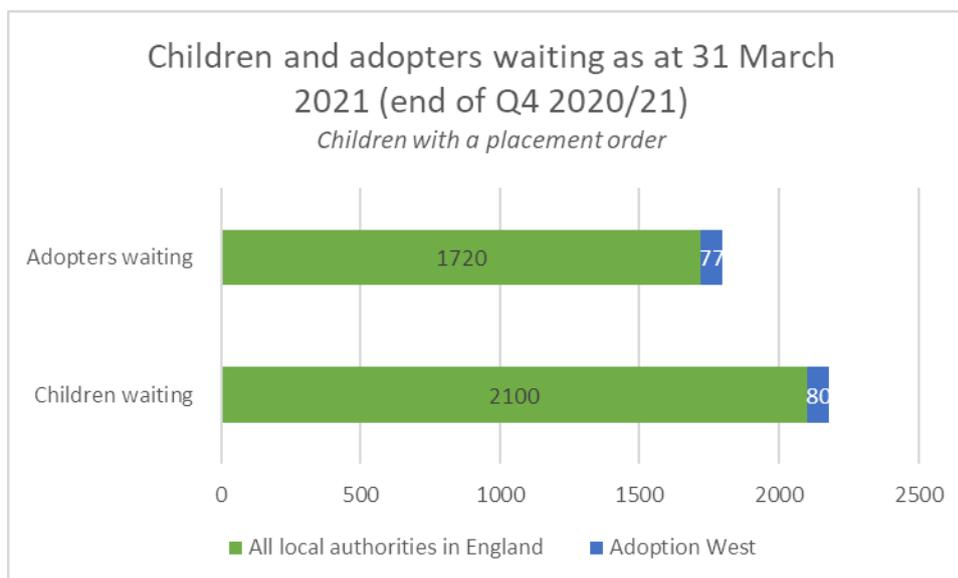
Alana Buckingham, adopter

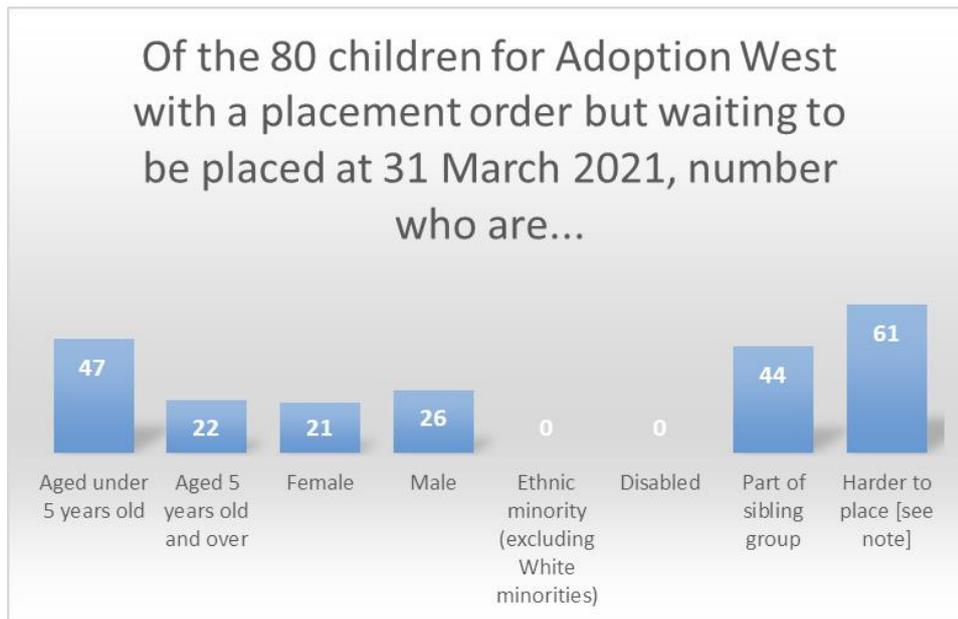
Snapshot

[Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting Year 2021](#)

Children looked after	CLA per 10,000 children	CLA who were adopted
80,850	67	2,870
Up 1% on 2020 and at an all time high	The same as 2020 and the highest in the time series	Down 18% on 2020

[Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board](#)





Note - "Harder to place" is defined as a child who is any of the following: 5 years or over, of an ethnic minority (excluding White minorities) background, disabled, or part of a sibling group. Children with more than one harder to place characteristic will be counted in each characteristic.

Work undertaken

9. Between March and October 2021, the scrutiny panel held three meetings (virtual meetings to comply with Covid-19 regulations and government's advice).

March 2021 meeting – Understanding adoption panels and adopters sufficiency

10. The scrutiny panel received information on the structure, pattern and duties of the adoption panel from AW.
11. The panel was also given a glimpse into "what it actually means to be a panel member" from an actual panel member.
12. The scrutiny panel resolved to annually consider the Adoption Panel Six-months reports (October / April) and focus on the following:
 - a. developing consistency across AW;
 - b. monitoring the provision and attendance of training;
 - c. monitoring panel members sufficiency and level of diversity.
13. The panel also resolved to focus, once a year, on adopters sufficiency (number of adopters, but also whether these adopters "match" the children waiting for adoption).

July 2021 meeting – the AW Board and the Adoption Support Fund

14. The chair of the AW Board attended this meeting and provided the scrutiny panel with an overview of the key priorities for the board for the year ahead, as well as a review of the main challenges faced in the past year and actions taken.
15. It was resolved that the chair of the AW Board would receive notification of all meetings of the scrutiny panel and would attend whenever possible to update the scrutiny panel on policies. On the other hand, the AW board would be regularly informed about the work of the scrutiny panel by receiving its forward work programme.
16. The scrutiny panel also considered information on the Adoption Support Fund (ASF); its benefits but also the issues faced by both adoptive families nationally and by AW.
17. The scrutiny panel will be informed of any changes to the ASF following the outcome of current reviews and lobbying and, at this point, will consider whether or not it should further scrutinise the ASF.

October 2021 – the adoption process and the adoption UK adoption barometer 2021

18. The scrutiny panel received a high-level overview of the adoption process for both children and adopters, including the different steps to be taken in accordance with the legislations to be complied with.
19. The scrutiny panel considered its second Adoption UK Adoption Barometer (2021).
20. It was noted that the scrutiny panel had explored issues which had prompted some of the six key recommendations made in the Adoption Barometer:
 - a. Quality standards for prospective adopters
 - b. Changes to the ASF (multi-year rather than single year)
 - c. Making support a priority, including increasing the age at which support stops (26y.o suggested in the Barometer).

Covid-19 impact

21. At each meeting throughout the year the scrutiny panel monitored the measures put in place to comply with government's guidelines with regards to Covid-19, whilst enabling delivery of services.
22. The scrutiny panel would like to express its recognition of the work undertaken by AW officers to ensure that after an initial (and understandable) short period of delays (March to May 2020), services have carried on being delivered at a high standard and with minimum delays.
23. It was also noted that AW had made the decision to maintain its quoracy for its adoption panels, wherever possible, which the scrutiny panel felt demonstrated a commitment to quality, and AW quickly implemented and supported online meetings to avoid delays in the adoption panels work.

24. At its October 2021 meeting the panel reviewed the “lessons learnt” by AW and scrutinised the changes proposed to “ways of working” to reflect some of the positives identified through the pandemic (e.g., online meetings).

Ambitions for 2021-2022

25. The scrutiny panel is committed to developing its membership to include up to five stakeholders within the “adoption triangle”, such as (but not limited to) adoptive parent, adopted young person, adopted adult, birth family member. This would have the dual benefit of deepening the scrutiny panel’s understanding of adoption and, hopefully, enable continuity of work through continuity of membership.
26. Having developed an understanding of both adoption and Adoption West over its first year, the scrutiny panel has set its work for 2021-2022 (Appendix 3 – forward work programme). Significant changes of membership could make it difficult for the scrutiny panel to complete its forward work programme (as new members would likely need time to develop their understanding of adoption and Adoption West). The scrutiny panel therefore amended its terms of reference to encourage long-term membership.
27. A key area of work for the panel in 2021-22 will be to work with all six local authorities to develop a process to ensure that reporting on adoption is co-ordinated as best as possible to enable robust scrutiny, including:
- a. Developing a common “core” report template;
 - b. “synchronising” consideration of different reports linked to adoption:
 - i. Local authority’s performance report with regards to adoption;
 - ii. AW’s annual report;
 - iii. This scrutiny panel’s annual report.

Conclusion

28. The scrutiny panel has been consistently deepening its understanding of adoption, in terms of process, data (including targets to be met) and the reality of it for those “living it”, as well as challenging AW’s reporting and will carry on doing so in 2021-22.

Proposal

For the scrutiny committees (as listed in paragraph 1.a. above) and the AW board to:

29. Note the annual report March to October 2021 of the scrutiny panel and make suggestion on contents to be included for future annual reports, and formatting and presentation of the annual report to ensure ease of reading;
30. Note the forward work programme for the scrutiny panel for 2021-22 (Appendix 3) and suggest any amendments or additional areas of focus for the scrutiny panel in 2021-22;

For the scrutiny committees (as listed in paragraph 1.a. above) to:

31. Endorse the amendments made to the Panel's Terms of Reference to promote continuity of membership.
32. Note that the scrutiny panel would like to invite all councillors to read the Adoption Barometer 2021 to gain some understanding of the difficulties and issues faced by adoptive families, as this is likely to inform the support offered, and financed, by adoption agencies (including AW). The Adoption Barometer 2021 can be accessed [here](#), alongside information on the 2019, 2020 and 2021 surveys: [Adoption Barometer](#).

Cllr Jon Hubbard, Wiltshire Council, Chairman of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Committee

Date of report: 18 October 2021

Report author: Marie Gondlach, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Wiltshire Council

Appendices

Appendix 1 – terms of reference of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel

Appendix 2 – Split of responsibilities between Regional Adoption Agency and Local Authority

Appendix 3 – forward work programme