

Continuous Improvement Plan 2021 - 2023
The Road to Excellence



Leicestershire Adoption Service Annual Report 2021-2022



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Executive Summary

The Annual Report for the Adoption Service sets out the performance for the service in 2021/22 and identifies our priorities for the forthcoming year 2022/23.

Key messages within this report are:

Achieving permanence for children

The impact of coronavirus

Regionalisation

Timeliness of adopter assessments

The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a 3 year trend and 1 year trend. The three main key performance indicators are:

- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
- A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child

Against all three key performance indicators the 3-year trend data remains relatively stable. We do not yet have figures from our statistical neighbours for comparison.

Against two out of three indicators, the 1-year trend data for 2021/22 is highlighting an increase in the number of days in comparison to the previous year and therefore a decrease in the timeliness to achieve permanence. Detailed consideration of information regarding individual children was completed by managers. Similarly, to last year this analysis reflects outliers in the data set – a small number of children who have waited longer to achieve permanence due to the complexity of their needs and matching requirements, as well as delays related to court proceedings. Of those children, we have a sibling group of 4 who have experienced a significant bereavement. Although the children have a PO and are placed (the couple were previously foster carers) we cannot progress to matching panel without a re-assessment of the female carer as a single adopter.

Another child has had a change of care plan to long term fostering, he continues to have a Placement Order which is in the process of be revoked.

We have a further sibling group of 2 who have experienced delay due to placement breakdown for one of them, delay in being able to start a psychological sibling assessment – the first psychologist gave timescales and was commissioned but then subsequently was uncontactable.

One set of adopters were due at panel when significant information about them emerged that needed further assessment, this caused some delay for the child.

There are 3 sets of sibling groups of 2 and one sibling group of 4 included in the figures.

Despite the delays within the court process the Permanence Team continued to strive to find adoptive homes for all of the children including commissioning nationwide, Facebook campaigns and paying for specialist therapeutic training for identified adopters. We will continue to have robust monitoring and oversight of the progression of children whose permanence plan is adoption and recognise that matching for children with additional complex needs may require more time, consideration, and intervention. We pride ourselves on making child centred decisions and recognising the importance of relationships. This focus can result in longer timescales but the right outcome for the children

Adoption Score Card	2020	2021	Statistical Neighbours
A10 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family	489 days	627 days	TBC from scorecard
A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family	311 days	259 days	
A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child	352 days	364 days	

Regional Arrangements

Leicestershire County Council is part of the Family Adoption Links (FAL), a regional partnership of Adoption Services. The government's agenda for adoption was set out in a paper, "Regionalising Adoption", published by the Department of Education (DfE) in June 2015 setting out arrangements for the formation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's) by 2020.

This partnership comprises of Lincolnshire County Council (who provide adoption services for Rutland Council), Leicestershire County Council, Leicester City Council, North Lincolnshire Council. Northampton Children's Trust joined the partnership in January 2022. Lincolnshire County Council remains acting as host for the arrangement.

The interagency agreement creating the partnership commenced on 14th October 2020 and describes how FAL manages the provision of all core adoption functions on behalf of the local authority. Agency decision making for adults and children are maintained within the local authority in line with corporate parenting responsibilities.

Through working in partnership, we are starting to benefit from the regional sharing of best practice, pooling of resources and developing a strategic approach to the development of a range of services from the marketing of adoption across the region through to the commissioning of post adoption support services.

The vision of the RAA is that:

- Children have the widest range of adopters trained to meet the needs of children placed with them
- Matching delivers the best quality outcomes for all children
- Adopters receive a consistent, high quality and professional service at all stages of the process
- The same high standard of adoption support for all adoptive families across the region
- Family Adoption Links, local authorities and VAAs work together to promote and maximize choice for children and adopters

Governance and Management

The RAA will be accountable to the Family Adoption Links (FAL) Management Board which is aligned to the agreed vision and will enable partners to have a continuing demonstrable focus on achieving permanence through adoption for Looked After Children. The FAL Management Board is accountable for delivery of services within scope and will continue to provide strategic leadership as the service develops. The Board includes representatives of each partner and takes decision by consensus. The Board is chaired by a Director of Children's Services (on behalf of the respective Local Authorities) and includes Assistant Directors responsible for permanency. The FAL Management Board will ensure there are clear strategic plans in place to manage future demand, develop quality services, deliver value for money, and achieve appropriate efficiencies and cost savings. The board has appointed a temporary Head of Service for the Regional Adoption Agency who oversees the work of the adoption service in each local authority. The Head of Service reports to the

board and is responsible for the delivery of adoption services within each LA. Each partner LA retains its own adoption service manager who is the Registered Manager.

The FAL Management Board will keep members fully informed regarding the progress and performance of the RAA.

Since its launch FAL has held monthly management meetings where updates are provided from each of the three dedicated workstreams and the planning of continued and improved service delivery is decided. The dedicated workstreams are focussed on the following areas – Assessment and support of prospective adopters, Family finding and post adoption support.

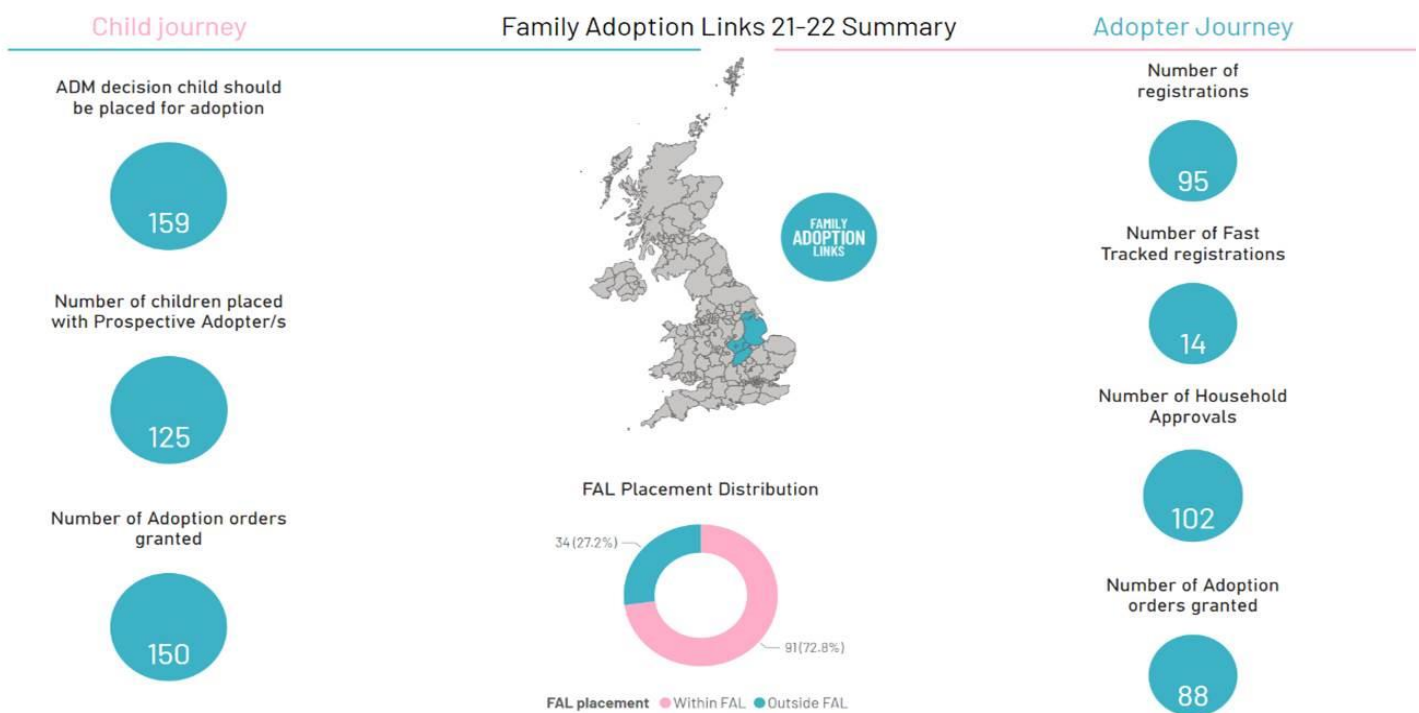
Assessment and Support - a 12 month programme has been devised that includes both face to face and on line training. Prepare to Adopt training will be run as an in person 3 day event and will be co-hosted by Leicestershire and Leicester County Council, with Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire running the training for their cohort. Leicestershire have also taken the lead for the devising and running of a training event that focusses on parenting siblings. A face to face meeting of all of the trainers across the region took place on 17th March 2022. This meeting was designed to build relationships as workers had only ever met virtually, due to the pandemic and also to ensure consistency across all areas in the delivery of the training.

Family Finding - The ambition of the partnership is to provide a consistent approach to family finding and ensuring that the partnership is able to meet the needs of most children requiring adoption. The workstream has effectively developed an agreed process for the partnership and the refreshed approach to family finding will be in place in 2022. This will bring together information of all adopters, children matched within partner authorities and identify those who would benefit from a broader range of adoptive homes and importantly offer an integrated and creative opportunity to identify families for children who have additional needs and developmental complexities. The first regional family finding meeting will take place on 6th April 2022 and will be chaired by Michelle Robinson (Service Manager – Leicestershire). These meetings will take place on a monthly basis and will have a focus on children who wait longer for adoptive homes. There is a clear objective that as a region we are finding families for children and are ensuring that our service is led by the needs of

our children rather than being an adult led service. Our aim is to find appropriate homes for our children in a timely manner that minimises drift and delay.

Post Adoption Support – all of the areas have different levels of post adoption support available. Specific training needs are being identified and developed. Leicestershire provides a lifelong service to adopters within the area, and this will remain the case.

Data management is overseen by Benjamin Richardson and has been invaluable in supporting local and regional information and provision of ASGLB data.



1. Introduction

OUR VISION Leicestershire is the best place for all children, young people, and their families

This means that we will describe the outcomes we want to achieve for children, young people and their families and identify measures that can tell us how well we are achieving against them. We will aim to be the best performing local authority in the country against these measures, and where we are not yet there, we will set stretching targets for annual improvement.

OUR MISSION

Children and young people in Leicestershire are safe and living in families where they can achieve their potential and have their health, wellbeing and life chances improved within thriving communities.

Under the 2011 National Minimum Standards 25.6, all Adoption Agencies are required to provide one six month and one annual report to the Executive regarding the activity and work of the Adoption Agency and Adoption Panel. To meet this standard the Adoption Service submits a monthly report to the Lead Member and Director and an annual report to the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

1.1 Our Service

Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Adoption Agency. It undertakes statutory and regulated responsibilities relating to adoption. The main roles of the Adoption and Permanence Service is to provide high quality adoptive placements, a range of adoption and special guardianship support and other permanency options, including profiling for long term placements for children who are looked after by Leicestershire County Council and are unable to live with their birth families.

Adoption and Permanence Services are provided to:

- Children who are to be adopted
- Birth parents
- Prospective and approved adopters
- Children and adoptive parents who require adoption support services
- Children and Special Guardians who require therapeutic support and advice, where the child lives permanently in Leicestershire
- Adopted adults

The Adoption Service is led by the Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption, Children in Care and the Virtual School and managed through a Service Manager who has responsibility for the three teams that make up the adoption service, Assessment and Support, Permanence and Post-Order Support.

Name	Designation
Jane Moore	Director Children and Families Service
Sharon Cooke	Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Childrens Social Care
Nicci Collins	Deputy Assistant Director, Transformation
Kelda Claire	Head of Service
Michelle Robinson	Service Manager
Helen Gronhaug	Agency Decision Maker
Gemma Barber/Katie Bancroft	Manager, Post-Order Support Team
Emma Bulgin/Judith Collins	Managers, Permanence Team
Caramjit Supra/Ellie Taylor	Manager, Assessment and Support Team
Lisa Deakin	Senior Practitioner, Post Adoption and SGO Support
Lauren Nichols	Senior Practitioner, Permanence
Claire Pepper, Sophie Cotterill, Angela Saduera, Megan Bramley plus 3 vacancies	Permanence Team Social Workers
Katie Charter	Long-term Fostering Family Finding Social Worker
Michelle Smith	Life Story Worker
Sameerah Makda, Debbie Bevan, Bethany Fox, Wendy Marsh, Leonara Hubbard	Adoption Assessment and Support Social workers
Scott Barrowcliffe, Stephanie Denham	Assessment support workers
Charlotte Fanshawe, Zeena Shepherd, Harriet Pearson Cole	Post Adoption Support Social Workers
Sarah Greaves, Anne Barton	Birth Records Counsellors
Sheryl Peberdy Sammy-Jo Squires	Special Guardianship Support Workers
Lianne Graham-Halford	Post Adoption Support Worker
Vacant	Therapist
Yashma Koria	Permanence coordinator
Helen Daft	Interim Panel Advisor

In September 2019 Leicestershire's Children and Family Service was inspected by Ofsted. Whilst the Adoption Service was not subject to its own inspection the feedback for the service was exceptional. The overall judgement for services for children in care, was **Good**.

This report should be read alongside the Departmental Plan CFS 2020-2023 and CFS Placement Market Position Statement 2021-2023. These are dynamic strategies, geared towards supporting the recruitment of a diverse and confident mix of adoptive families, ensure enduring relationships and high-quality adoption support services. They are integrally linked with other key strategic plans and strategies for the Council:

- Children and Family Departmental Plan 2021-25
- Children & Families Partnership Plan
- Continuous Improvement Plan – The Road to excellence 2021-25
- Adoption Service, Statement of Purpose

1.2 National/local Political Implications

Adoption has been a key part of the Government Agenda since 2012 and has seen significant change, including the publication of various key documents such as the 2013 *Statutory Guidance on Adoption*, the 2013 Amendments to the *Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005* and *Regionalising Adoption* in 2015.

In 2018 the Adoption Leadership Board became the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB), with a remit to cover previously looked after children subject to adoption or special guardianship orders. This reflects a recognition of the increasing numbers of children leaving care on Special Guardianship Orders, and the need for these children to be able to access support akin to that of their peers who are adopted. Leicestershire County Council Post-Order Support Team already contains provision for the support of families with children on SGOs, with a dedicated support worker located in the team. There is

further work being progressed to develop the support offer available to these families as part of the *Defining Children and Family Services for the Future* programme.

The Department for Education (DfE) has been clear that all local authorities should form Regional Adoption Agencies by 2020. Leicestershire County Council has worked with Leicester City, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, and Rutland to form Family Adoption Links (FAL). The Regional Adoption Agency went 'live' in October 2020, with the Local Authorities agreeing to a partnership arrangement.

The work of Leicestershire County Council adoption service during the last 2 years has inevitably been affected by the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. The regulatory framework for adoption was amended by the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (Regulations) 2020 and Leicestershire was able to make some use of the relaxed regulations, in relation to conducting assessments and panels remotely. However, we were able in many ways to limit our use of the amendments, instead adapting our practice in line with restrictions and continuing to conduct robust assessments. Our adoption panels remain virtual in line with our RAA partners. There are no current plans to change this arrangement.

Like all other services, the adoption service has had to make considerable concessions in the way the day-to-day business is carried out. All staff have worked primarily from home, enabled by flexible working arrangements and equipment grants. Home visits were limited during some parts of the year, with workers creatively utilising technology to complete virtual 'visits', meetings and direct work. Adopter assessment and preparation was conducted almost exclusively online, and in-person visits to children limited to those where it is necessary. Post-order support was also delivered flexibly, again utilising online tools and virtual platforms but completing in-person visits where this has been necessary. Despite the huge challenges present during the last 2 years, staff have continued to work safely and effectively to support children and families across Leicestershire and move children to their adoptive families where this has been possible and appropriate. Since the lifting of restrictions, all visits have now returned to face to face. Staff continue to work in a hybrid manner with a mixture of home and office working. The use of

technology has enabled greater flexibility and work life balance but ensured that our children and families remain being seen and supported.

1.3 Progress against last year

Recommendation from previous annual report	Progress
<p>Continue working and developing alongside our colleagues in the Regional Adoption Agency, with specific and effective action plans agreed by operational leads and overseen by the Board.</p>	<p>The launch of the Regional Adoption Agency was achieved in October 2020. Family Adoption Links' is a partnership agreement between Leicestershire, Leicester City, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, and Rutland. Northamptonshire Children's Trust joined FAL in January 2022.</p> <p>The management team meet monthly and there are also monthly workstream meetings chaired by Service managers primarily focussing on training and assessment of prospective adopters, family finding and post adoption support. A further workstream will be added this year which will focus on the development of our Early Permanence offer.</p>
<p>Focus on the key performance indicators related to the assessment and recruitment of adopters, identify barriers to improvement and learn from areas of good practice.</p>	<p>Extensive work has been carried out since the appointment of a further permanent team manager in the assessment team in September 2021. New systems are in place to minimise drift and delay for prospective adopters and our assessments have moved back 'in house' rather than being</p>

	<p>commissioned out. This has already improved relationships with prospective adopters and lead to earlier matching.</p>
<p>Focus on timeliness for children by developing our understanding of children's journey through care to point of Best Interest Decision; developing early linking and matching processes; increasing our use of Fostering for Adoption where appropriate to meet children's needs.</p>	<p>Our collection of data is improving and is supported internally and externally via FAL. Permanence team managers have monthly meetings set up with locality managers to track and review children's journeys and where new children who may be in need of a Best Interest Decision can be identified. This is more established in some areas than others and work is on-going to improve this.</p>
<p>Develop our panel, ensuring that the central list meets the needs of the service and panels continue to provide robust scrutiny of the agency.</p>	<p>Recruitment has taken place and the central list is now bigger and more diverse. 2 new panel chairs and vice chairs have been appointed. Quarterly panel business meetings take place between the service and panel chairs. Panel members received a full day's training in January 2022 with a further day planned for the autumn of 2022. The service manager also attends panel quarterly to give service updates to panel members.</p>
<p>Develop processes to strengthen feedback and how this influences change and development</p>	<p>This is an area that we continue to develop. We liaise with LAFs (a local support group for adopters and foster carers across Leicester City and Leicestershire) and attend their meetings. FAL is provided feedback from Adopter Voice. FAL is in the early stages of developing a Children's Council and</p>

	initial indicators suggest we have a good number of children and young adults across the region who are eager to participate and have their views heard.
Reinvigorate the service offered to birth parents/first family members	Unfortunately, this area of work has yet to be developed. This has been in part due to the continuing restrictions in relation to the pandemic not being lifted until earlier this year and staff capacity. This will remain on the agenda for 2022/23.
The service will explore the possibility of mirroring our Post Adoption support offer to those family members and children subject to a Special Guardianship Order	The life-long service to SGO carers went live in January 2022 and now mirrors the post adoption support offer.
Further consideration needs to be given to whether Leicestershire dually approves adopters as part of the Family Adoption Links arrangement to keep in line with our partners.	Leicestershire County Council does not currently have any plans to dually approve adopters i.e. to approve them as both prospective adopters and foster carers at the same time. This will be considered as part of the FAL workstream looking at Early Permanence.

2. Our service – roles and responsibilities

2.2 Permanence Team

The role of the Permanence Team is to work alongside colleagues in locality teams to progress plans for children where adoption may be required. Permanence team social workers also undertake all family finding activity for children who need permanence via adoption.

Permanence social workers are co-allocated to work with children where a decision has been made to twin- or triple-track their care plan, meaning that multiple options are being considered for the child, usually remaining with their birth parent(s), moving to live with a wider family member, or adoption if neither of the other options is possible. Permanence social workers complete Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) which draw together all the assessments that have been completed and provide a comprehensive assessment of the child's needs. These reports are presented to the Agency Decision Maker where the recommendation is that adoption is in the best interests of the child.

When children have a plan of adoption which is agreed in court by way of a Care Order and Placement Order, permanence team social workers become the allocated worker for the child. They are responsible for statutory social work visits and reviews as well as all family finding and matching activity for the child or children.

Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker, a secure online platform, to create and upload bespoke profiles for children. Permanence team workers collaborate with colleagues using Linkmaker to search for potential adoptive matches, communicate with adopters locally and nationally and share information securely to progress placements for children. Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker for all our children, whether they are matched 'in-house', with adopters approved by LCC, 'regionally' with our partners in Family Adoption Links, or in 'interagency' matches with other Regional or Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

Permanence team social workers present identified matches to the Adoption Panel, prepare transition plans and support agreements to help the child move to their adoptive family, and support the placement until the point of Adoption Order.

The team's workforce additionally includes a dedicated Life Story Support Worker and a Family Finding social worker for long-term fostering placements. Our Life Story Support Worker provides extensive specialist work for children in their transition to adoption; this includes completing direct work with children, drafting Life Story books, and offering 'telling and explaining' sessions to adopters to prepare them for the ongoing life story work they will do with their children. The Family

Finding social worker for long-term fostering works closely with other members of the team to track children who may need a permanent fostering placement and identify placements when this becomes required. The objective is to ensure that children with a plan of long-term fostering are able to access the same levels of life story work, transition planning and careful matching that is available to children moving to adoption.

In addition to day-to-day operations, the team continues to be committed to ongoing developmental projects such as the introduction of Life Appreciation Days, processes for the permanence planning of children in long-term foster care and, further embedding of the Signs of Safety methodology in our practice. Team members have participated in workshops to develop trauma-informed practice, offered training in Virtual Practice Forums, and offered training to foster carers.

W, I am raising a QA alert to recognise the excellent practice from your social worker, Katie. A ROA was held yesterday, and Katie was clearly very prepared for the meeting. Katie had prepared a report which was shared in plenty of time prior to the meeting. Katie was professional throughout the meeting and clearly had a good working relationship with your carers and the other professionals involved. She ensured information was shared appropriately and that you were at the centre of the meeting and decisions being made.

Since becoming your social worker, Katie has worked really hard to ensure all relevant paperwork is completed including your CPR which was previously delayed due to staff absence. She has also worked effectively to identify potential adopters in a timely manner. Overall, Katie has worked above and beyond to ensure that actions are completed with your needs as the focus.

P, I have been so impressed with the way Katie has prepared you for your move to mummy and daddy's care that I think she deserves recognition for this, and I hope you would agree and that is why I am raising a positive Quality Assurance alert to highlight to her manager the quality of the work she has done. Through the Words and Pictures Katie has helped you to understand why you have needed to be in foster care and the role of your carers, this was the first part as Katie was concerned, when she took over that you were not really aware of this. This then provided the foundation for Katie to complete the Little Dinosaur and Panda Paws books to help you understand and prepare for your move to your new mummy and daddy. I especially loved the creativity behind the Panda Paws book as this is your favourite TV character and Katie was able to describe your plan as if you were Panda Paws and the other characters were Katie, Mandy and mummy and daddy. The language was really simple, the graphics lovely and colourful and the story clear, also including some of the 'wobbles' you may have with all the changes. I know you still look at this and that tells me how much you like it and the level of care gone into this preparation has really helped you to settle into your just right family. Katie needs to be commended for the sensitive and P-centred practice she has undertaken!!

Within your meeting, Lauren shared information which was focussed and relevant to you. She clearly had a good relationship with you and E & L. Whilst you have lots of different appointments and needs, Lauren was proactive in identifying appropriate actions which she would complete in a realistic time period. A great piece of work.

Every word was great, the book was wonderful, it's a keepsake forever, she wouldn't let go of it. She loved it.

2.3 Recruitment, assessment, and preparation of adopters

The Adoption Service works closely with professional colleagues to provide a full recruitment, assessment, and preparation service to adopter applicants in Leicestershire.

People who are interested in adoption can find information on the Family Adoption Links website. Any enquiries about becoming an adopter are handled by the Recruitment and Marketing team initially, which is a shared resource with the Fostering Service. Potential adopters are then able to access adoption information events run by the Assessment and Support Team (AST) and, following this, request a social work visit before completing a formal Registration of Interest (ROI).

The AST complete all Initial Visits to help potential adopters begin their two-stage journey to becoming prospective adopters. Stage One of the process is managed by the AST, with support workers completing statutory checks. At this point social workers begin delivering preparation work directly to applicants, and this work continues throughout stage 2. During the year 2020/21, all preparation work was delivered virtually, with adopters accessing online training and virtual discussions with social workers. This has now changed with face to face preparation training being run in partnership with Leicester City since Spring 2022. When adopters progress to Stage Two, a social worker from AST is allocated to complete the home study and present their recommendations to the adoption panel in a Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). On some occasions, due to worker capacity, a social worker from Carter Brown is commissioned to complete this on our behalf.

In 2021/22, 48 Initial Visits were completed, 25 of which resulted in an ROI. During this period 26 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, 3 of which were deferred for further work.

25 adopter households were approved in this period, compared to 23 the previous year. This includes 2 households who attended panel prior to this reporting period but received their agency decision of approval in the year 2021/22. There were a further 19 households in assessment at 31st March 2022.

26 applications have been presented to Adoption Panel for approval. One application presented to panel had different outcome – deferrals, requests for additional information from ADM and unsuccessful/withdrawn applications. Of the 25 adopter households who attended panel and were approved, this was made up of 25 couples. 19 of the couples were heterosexual. 21 out of the 25 households were white British. No adopters are recorded as having a registered disability.

After adopters are recommended for approval at panel and formally approved by the Agency Decision Maker, all case responsibility remains allocated to a social worker in the Assessment and Support Team who has assessed them. In the case of those adopters who have been assessed externally, they are allocated to a social worker from AST. This is usually the Engagement Worker who will have been in contact with the adopter throughout their assessment. AST social workers go on to support prospective adopters through matching and placement, continuing to work alongside the family until the point of Adoption Order.

As with our children, Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker to support our adopters to identify potential matches. All of our adopters are encouraged to create a profile on Linkmaker. FAL is part of a nationwide group who are looking at improving the quality of Linkmaker in supporting matches between children and adopters.

The coronavirus pandemic did continue to have a considerable impact on the in-person activity for this team, as it was not possible to complete the same level of home visits or run preparation groups in which adopter applicants can develop

informal support networks. However, the AST were able to adapt many of its functions around the restrictions and have been successful in ensuring adopters have continued to be assessed and approved during the year. Now that the restrictions have been lifted all work is carried out face to face.

Making the structural changes to the Team to enable Prospective Adopter Reports to be completed internally rather than commissioned has strengthened our offer to Adopters from the front door to approval and match. It has provided a structure for consistent support for our adopters throughout the process.

We both just wanted to say thank you so much to you for your support today - we really appreciated you being there and how you had our backs in that meeting. We both really felt so much more at ease and comfortable with things after we talked them through and genuinely were so grateful for your understanding and making sure all of our open questions are being taken away for feedback.

One of the best PAR's Panel has read - well written with sound analysis - easy to read - no repeats or cut and pastes - clear narrative and evidence of the journey the applicants have been on - could be used as an exemplar for the assessment SW's.

I just wanted to take the opportunity to let you know how helpful and efficient Wendy has been. She has truly been an absolute star in assisting me with anything I've needed. I've not known anyone to respond so swiftly, irrespective of the time the email is sent, I've always had almost an instant response, which is very rare (but incredibly helpful)

It's an absolute pleasure working alongside you Wendy, so thank you for all your efforts.

They said that Scott had reduced T to tears with his general kindness and being supportive. And that you have been really reassuring to them Steph, and your 'communication is exemplary'!

2.4 Adoption Panels

Adoption panels are chaired by an Independent Chair in line with regulatory requirements, supported by a vice-chair, independent members, social work representatives and an agency adviser. Leicestershire has a stand-alone Agency Decision Maker who is responsible for ensuring that they have considered all the information presented to them before making a final decision.

Adoption panels make recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker regarding the suitability of prospective adopter applicants, adoption matching, and adoption plans for children who are relinquished for adoption. All matches for Leicestershire children are considered at this panel.

Leicestershire County Council hold adoption panels once or twice per month in response to service requirements. During the period 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022, Panel met on 19 occasions hearing a total number of 54 cases. This is a slight increase on the previous year (1st April 2020 – March 2021) when panel met on 19 occasions, hearing 49 cases.

A separate report including statements from Panel Chairs and Agency Decision Maker is appended and should be read alongside this report.

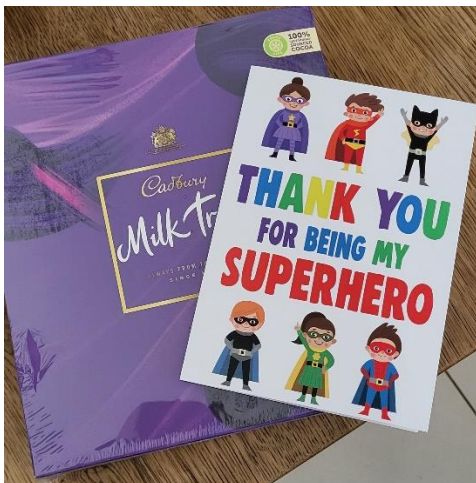
2.5 Post Order support

Support Offer

Pre and post adoption support is provided in a number of ways within Leicestershire. An adoption social worker offers support up to three years post adoption order, especially in cases where adoption breakdown or disruption is a threat. This is set out in legislation (Adoption and Children Act 2002/Adoption

Support Services Regulations 2005) as all placing authorities are required to provide support to a child, they have placed for adoption for the first three years. We also have a dedicated support worker who makes first contact with any adopter approved by Leicestershire at the point of 6 weeks post placement. This is the point when research suggests that post placement depression can become evident. During this visit the support worker will spend a significant amount of time discussing any concerns or issues, they will inform the adopters about our post adoption support offer and email a pack of useful contacts and information. During this financial year we have provided support to 62 adoptive households and completed 109 top up ASF applications. We have continued to run the Art Therapy group with 15 children being supported through this. We have also provided 11 1:1 play therapy sessions ranging from 3 months in duration to on-going and a further 7 families with therapeutic parenting support.

PLAY THERAPY FEEDBACK:



D appears more comfortable in his own skin and has lost the weight that caused him so much distress. His confidence, self-esteem and friendships are all improved.

Thank you, Sheryl,

The support worker is Theraplay (level 2) trained, if necessary, she can remain involved to support managing behaviour and completing direct work with children. She can also escalate any worries to the allocated social worker, who can then utilise the expertise of the post adoption service to inform their support package.

There are four Post Adoption Support social workers within the team with a variety of expertise, from DDP (level 2) to Person centred therapy. All are trauma and attachment trained and specialist training is provided as part of their continuous development. Once a case is allocated for Post Adoption Support the social worker completes a Post Adoption Assessment of Need, which enables a thorough assessment of support needs and recommendations for therapeutic and non-therapeutic interventions. Therapeutic provisions and specialist assessments are commissioned through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), providing that eligibility criteria is met.

The Post Order Support Team, which incorporates Post Adoption and Post SGO support have had access to an in-house Art Psychotherapist and Play Therapist. Both work individually with adopted children, plus facilitate an Art Therapy group for teenagers needing to therapeutically deal with issues around identity. They also create a support call model named 'Parent Support 6' as a result of the covid crisis. This was funded through the ASF and was used to support parents in acute stress over the phone. Its success has meant that we are continuing this offer despite covid developments. PS6 has continued to provide valuable short-term intervention, usually whilst ASF funding is awaited for more specific therapy to commence.

P and I just wanted to thank you for inviting us to the meeting on Tuesday. Please pass on our thanks to the other participants in the meeting. We felt that it was so worthwhile, informative, and inspiring. We felt that we barely touched the surface of topics and could have discussed for hours. We do hope that you will have more of these meetings and invite us along.

Harriet has been amazing with our family; all of the children look forward to seeing her and she makes them all feel relaxed and that they can talk freely with her. The support that she has given and arranged for us has been amazing and something that i never thought would be possible for my granddaughter has been made possible with Harriet's support.

A quarterly newsletter is distributed and receives a high level of positive feedback from adopters and professionals. Pre covid there were also two events per year, in

the summer and at Christmas, we are pleased that we are able to reintroduce these events with the first summer one being booked for August 2022.

Thank you so much for the SGO Newsletter 15 Spring 22 edition. It gave me lots of information about so many things. I liked reading about 'What are your parenting triggers?' section which gave a lot of useful information for parenting. The Healthy eating for the family section was also useful and I am glad me and my wife are on the same track on healthy eating with our two children. Last but not least the 3D Nature Suncatcher box is very interesting, and I will be helping my 8 year old making this box in the upcoming Easter break. Again thank you so much for this edition. 😊

Regards,

S. (A happy parent)

Despite only being required by legislation to provide support for the first three years post granting of an Adoption Order, Leicestershire now offers lifelong support so after the three-year period, adopters can contact the team directly if they require specific adoption support. For those cases where there is a chance of a child being placed back into care or there are child protection concerns it remains that support is provided via First Response Children's Duty and fieldwork locality teams. The post support team will continue to work as part of a team around the family, offering support to the child and parents relating to the therapeutic needs of the adopted child.

Birth Parents are routinely offered support prior to the adoption of their children. This support is offered through a leaflet provided at the point of ADM ratifying a care plan of adoption. The Permanence Team has a protocol of any such request for support to birth parents who are facing the knowledge that the Local Authority is not supporting a return of their child to their care. being presented to Permanence Panel where an application for an independent person to undertake this service will be considered. The Authority are currently reviewing how to facilitate this service so that the offer to Birth Parents is meaningful.

The Post Adoption Support Team liaises with the Virtual School and training is offered to schools particularly around attachment issues for adopted children and how to successfully manage these in the school setting. The training is highly valued

by schools who report a change in staff behaviour and interaction with children which in turn impacts on the children's ability to engage in education. Collaborations with the Peer Adoption Support group LAFS is also valuable and enables a connection with the wider adopter network. A monthly CAMHS consultation is held for any adopted child where a clinical nurse can offer advice and services provided by CAMHS.

The demand for Post Adoption Support continues to grow in all areas. Leicestershire has a Therapeutic Support Budget that can be accessed to support children emotionally prior to adoption. Each child can have an initial payment of up to £450 with a further £450 being available if required. The Service Manager for Children in Care has a role in monitoring applications and the progress of any therapy commissioned.

Adoption Support Fund

To 31st March 2022, Leicestershire has drawn down £862,468.48 from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families in Leicestershire. This is a significant decrease in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year (£1,494,524.94) and represents support to 335 families, up from 251 in 2019-20. Although we cannot evidence the reason for the decrease it would appear that schools re-opening for our adopted children has had a major impact on children's emotional wellbeing and this has led to a decrease in the amount being applied for. The total amount of drawn down also includes top up applications where therapy is assessed as being needed to be continued once the initial therapeutic period has ended. It should be noted that the art therapist post has been funded through this ASF funding at no cost to the Local Authority and Leicestershire has successfully trained workers therapeutically to ensure a better provision of services. Any money accumulated from the ASF also ensures that workers receive clinical supervision alongside regular supervision to ensure that their therapeutic practice is ethical and appropriate. Some of the most complex cases may be co-worked by the Locality Team with support from the Post Adoption Support Worker. In such cases an assessment will be conducted, and an application may be made for appropriate therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund.

Birth Records Counselling

Birth Records Counselling is a service provided to adults who have been adopted and wish to access their records and understand their life story prior to being adopted. A social worker reads the records and provides a detailed account to the adoptee alongside therapeutic emotional support that enables the adult to process their journey. This service continues to be highly successful, and adoptees regularly provide positive feedback. 39 referrals were received for this service during 2021/22. Intermediary services where adult adoptees are supported to find and meet their birth parents is not carried out by Leicestershire. Some initial advice may be given but as with other Local Authorities we signpost adoptees who request this service to third sector agencies.

Meeting you was lovely, and I am confident that you will handle my case with sensitivity and care

We all wanted to say a big Thank you for the visit this week. I really appreciated all the details you gave and sharing your experience with us.

The work undertaken by those who work with adopted children both in historical and current cases is so very important to those involved and I'm sure you don't always get the thanks you deserve from them. Whatever the outcome is from the searches for birth parents it does give those affected a platform to move forward from so I would like once again to give you my thanks for your assistance.

3. Performance

3.1 Adoption Score Card – Key Performance Indicators

The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a 3-year trend and 1-year trend. The 3 main key performance indicators are:

- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
- A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child

• 3 year trend	2018-21	2019-22
A10	426 days	494 days
A2	235 days	254 days
A20	242 days	317 days

1 year trend	2020	2021
A10	489 days	627 days
A2	311 days	259 days
A20	352 days	364 days

As shown in the tables above, Leicestershire Adoption Agency's average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family increased, the 3-year trend performance data with 2019-22 (494) being 68 days longer than in 2018-21 (426), however it is encouraging that this a decrease of 24 days from last year's 3 year average which was 92 days increase on the previous reporting period. The 1-year trend increased by 138 days, from 489 days in 2020 to 627 in 2021.

The average time between the local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family has increased across the 3-year trend and but decreased by 72 days across the 1-year trend.

The average time between a child entering care and the local authority being granted a Placement Order for a child, has slightly increase in the last year and over the 3-year period.

The 1-year trend data highlights an increase across two of the three key performance indicators, meaning children are waiting longer, on average, to achieve permanence. It must be noted that the cohort of children who need adoption is small, and the average easily distorted by outlying data; a few children who wait significantly longer mean that the average is increased even while most children are achieving permanency in a timely way. Cases where the children have waited longer for permanency have been explored individually and we are satisfied that the delays for these children have been unavoidable. It can take longer to identify the right adoptive matches for children who have complex needs and who are in larger sibling groups; Leicestershire County Council nevertheless continues to pursue adoption for these children whilst it remains in their best interests.

The adoption service is keen to reduce the time taken to achieve permanence for children and a detailed action plan as well as a regional service delivery plan aim to address some of the key areas for development: increasing our use of Fostering for Adoption placements, identifying adopters earlier from across the region to meet our children's needs and building on our achievements regarding quality assurance to enable efficient, thorough decision-making.

3.2 Adoption Plans

Where the Local Authority proposes a plan of adoption for a child, this plan must be presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a decision that adoption is in their best interests. In this period 23 children were subject to Best Interest Decisions. 5 of those children are waiting for final court hearings where Placement Orders (PO) may be made to allow their placement with adoptive families. Two children with a Best Interest Decision (BID) from a previous year continue to wait for a PO, making a total of 7 children with a BID and no PO. Six children with a BID made in the year were also placed with their adoptive families within the reporting period.

There has been an increase in the average days from BID to PO which partly reflects the difficulty in progressing proceedings to final hearings during the pandemic. Children who have a BID, but no placement order are tracked by managers to understand delays. Such delays are most commonly attributable to court processes and to additional assessments being completed where family members come forward to be considered to care for the child/ren at a late stage in proceedings.

National minimum standards require Local Authorities to track the time between children coming into care and receiving a Best Interest Decision. National minimum standards also require tracking from the time the Local Authority proposes a plan of adoption to the point of a BID. Children wait longer than average in Leicestershire County Council from the point of coming into care to the point of BID and further work is needed to understand the reasons for this. However, BIDs are made in a timely way once the Local Authority has confirmed a plan of adoption.

Children are referred to the permanence team, as above, where a twin- or triple-tracking decision is made as part of childcare proceedings. Permanence Team managers meet regularly with colleagues in locality teams to track the progress of children who are in proceedings or who may shortly enter proceedings. The Children's Decision-Making panel continues to be chaired by the Head of Service for Fieldwork and is the forum where decisions for pre-proceedings and issuing of care proceedings is made. This provides senior management oversight of cases that may progress to a permanence decision of adoption. These processes help the adoption service plan for children's expected needs and assist decision-making regarding the recruitment of adopters.

When children are relinquished for adoption by their birth parents, these plans must be presented to the Adoption Panel. In this period, two plans of adoption for relinquished children were presented, one of which was approved.

3.3 Children Waiting for Adoption

At the 31st March 2021 there were 34 children with a best interest decision of adoption, of which 24 had Placement Orders granted by the court. Four children

have an ethnicity other than White British. 11 children are female and 23 are male. 10 are part of sibling groups who require adoption; this does not include children who have siblings with different care plans.

Prior to the making of a Placement Order, Permanence Team social workers ensure they are familiar with the needs of the child or children and complete early scoping to identify any potential adoptive links for the child. Formal family finding work is then initiated at the point of Placement Order but can be paused if there are additional court proceedings required.

Early identification of potential links and matches is carried out in internal family finding meetings. Children may also have anonymous profiles created to facilitate early linking with Leicestershire adopters as well as adopters across the Regional Adoption Agency. Leicestershire County Council seek to place children with our own approved adopters initially, then consider adopters within our region before looking to other interagency placements including Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs). Children's profiles are uploaded to Linkmaker and shared securely with professionals and prospective adopters to allow potential links to be explored. Regional family finding activity is in process, with regular matching meetings taking place. This is a developing area of practice but has already been successful in identifying matches for three Leicestershire children; the family finding work will continue to grow in the year ahead.

Family finding activity has been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic as adoption activity days and exchange events have not been possible to conduct in person. Leicestershire County Council has not used virtual exchange events during the course of the year but has used other creative online marketing campaigns to support recruitment of specific adopters for some 'harder to place' children, categorised by the DfE as children in sibling groups, with disabilities or aged 5 and over.

No children were placed under Fostering for Adoption protocols during this period, although this continues to be tracked through attendance at CDM and is considered upon the referral being received.

3.4 Children Placed and Adopted

26 children have been placed with their adoptive families during the year, a slight increase of one against the previous year, evidencing a continued drive to progress children's plans. Leicestershire children, on average, wait longer than the national average between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

We have been successful in matching children with our own adopters – of the 26 children placed during the year, 16 were placed with adopters approved by Leicestershire County Council. One further child was placed within the region. One child with an ethnicity other than White British was placed with adopters during 2021/22. 26 children are now in placement with their adoptive families but awaiting an Adoption Order.

34 Adoption Orders were finalised in the year 2021/22, an increase from the previous year when 15 orders were made. This reflects the reduction in challenges in court timetabling as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.4 Adoption Approvals

In 2021/22, 48 Initial Visits were completed, 25 of which resulted in a Registration of Interest (ROI). During this period 26 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, 3 of which were deferred for further work.

25 adopter households were approved in this period, compared to 23 the previous year. This includes 2 households who attended panel prior to this reporting period but received their agency decision of approval in the year 2021/22. There were a further 19 households in assessment at 31st March 2022.

26 applications have been presented to Adoption Panel for approval. One application presented to panel had different outcome – deferrals, requests for additional

information from ADM and unsuccessful/withdrawn applications. Of the 25 adopter households who attended panel and were approved, this was made up of 25 couples. 19 of the couples were heterosexual. 21 out of the 25 households were white British. No adopters are recorded as having a registered disability.

Timeliness in completing adopter assessments has continued to be a challenge for the service during the last year, with adopters approved in this period waiting an average of 499 days between entering stage 1 and completing stage 2 – a process which is intended to take 6 months (~180 days) in total. Key performance measures and monthly performance meetings, and the appointment of an experienced adoption manager has meant that this area is now being addressed and delays are reducing.

Clear matching expectations and planning for adoptive families from the point of their approval to the point of their match will also improve the service we offer to families and, ultimately, to the children they can offer a home to. We plan to collate further data to better understand the adopter journey from approval to match, with particular consideration of any adaptations we may need to make for adopters who have protected characteristics. We are in the process of aligning our practice in this area with our regional partners.

3.5 Adoption Disruptions

There have been no disruptions for Leicestershire children in this period

4. Developments

4.1 Regional service delivery

The Regional Adoption Agency, Family Adoption Links, was newly formed as a partnership agreement during the year 2020/21. Operational managers across the region have developed and revised a Service Delivery Plan with clearly defined workstreams in order to promote regional collaboration and create workable cross-authority protocols.

Staff who work for Family Adoption Links are beginning to build relationships with their counterparts across the region and a whole staff event is planned for November to support and enhance a regional identity.

4.2 First family support

The Local Authority has a duty to provide support for birth parents whose children are adopted. Previously Leicestershire adoption service ran a peer-support group as well as offering individual counselling sessions.

During the last year, group work has not been possible, but parents continue to be offered individual sessions which have been commissioned through an independent counsellor. This counsellor offers a series of six counselling sessions to birth parents. In the year 2020/21, she received four such referrals for parents wishing to access this service; two of these parents have completed all six sessions so far. The majority of these sessions have been provided remotely via Zoom.

Further work is now required to reinvigorate this area of work and ensure we provide an excellent service to children's first families. Consideration will be given to whether this is a commissioned service or is directly provided by LCC staff.

Birth family members and wider family members are currently offered an information sharing meeting with our life story support worker, which allows them to share

positive and significant information about themselves for their children in later life. Informal feedback from this is extremely positive, with birth families members explaining that they were grateful to have the opportunity to share memories and keepsakes and thanking the worker for kindness at a difficult point in their lives.

4.3 Feedback

The adoption service gathers feedback from various people, including adult adoptees, adopters, foster carers, birth family members and other professionals. We continue to develop our work to ensure that:

- Children's voices are included in the feedback
- Feedback is sought routinely and sensitively at appropriate points in the process
- Feedback is used to develop and co-produce service improvement.

This will be a key area of development in the next year.

5. Complaints

Nine complaints have been received during the year, 5 relating to the assessment process, 2 related to work carried out by other areas of CFS previously but were addressed by the Adoption Service; 1 related to the matching process and the last was in relation to post adoption. Complaints are initially directed to the relevant team manager for a response and can be escalated where the individual remains unsatisfied. Adopters who receive negative decision about their suitability to adopt (a 'qualifying determination') are also able to appeal this decision by referral to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). In this year, no adopters have accessed the IRM to appeal a negative decision.

It is understandable that adopters are more likely to complain in situations where the Local Authority must make negative recommendations or requires time to complete additional assessments. When adopter applicants, prospective adopters and approved adopters raise issues with the service, both through formal complaints and informal discussion, these issues are always overseen by managers.

We are committed to being a learning organisation and ensure that we respond to queries as fully as possible. As a service we strive to be transparent and open with adopters and will always respond initially to any complaints by convening a meeting to try and address any concerns as quickly as possible. Any learning is discussed reflectively within the team and if appropriate changes are made to processes. The 5 complaints in relation the assessment process were in relation to delay. We now have an extra worker to complete initial visits and management oversight if those adopters in both stages of the assessment process is now much more robust.

6. Achievements

Leicestershire Adoption Agency continues to strive to deliver excellent services to our children. The permanence team now complete all Child Permanence Reports for Leicestershire children following the roll-out of this service due to the success of the pilot programme. Reports are of a consistently high quality and social workers collaborate well with colleagues across the children's service to progress plans for children.

The recruitment and assessment of adopters who are able to meet the needs of our children continues to be an area for development, but this reflects a national picture of the challenges in identifying adopters for children with complex needs. Nevertheless, the service is committed to improving the adopter journey and has developed a detailed action plan which will be enhanced by partnership working across the region.

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, the adoption service has continued to support children and adopters, in the early stages of matching and moving in as well as later, when the families are able to access support from the Post-Order team.

The Post-Order team has developed its specialist work with a view to ensuring as many families as possible are able to access the help and resources they need. The team provide direct help and advice as well as facilitating access to therapeutic

services via the Adoption Support Fund. The Post Order Team commenced its lifelong service for SGO carers in January 2022.

Social workers in the adoption service have access to specialist training and are supported to develop their skills. We are ambitious for our service, for our children and for our staff.

The Adoption Panel is adapting and developing, having recently recruited 16 new panel members and two panel chairs. The panel service is building on existing positive relationships and building stronger links with service leads.

7. Recommendations for 2022/2023

- Continue working and developing alongside our colleagues in the Regional Adoption Agency, with specific and effective action plans agreed by operational leads and overseen by the Board.
- Focus on the key performance indicators related to the assessment and recruitment of adopters, identify barriers to improvement and learn from areas of good practice. We will measure stage one and stage 2 timeliness with an aim of achieving assessments to be completed within 6 months. This will be achieved by ensuring that recruitment is transparent and that we are clear at the beginning of the process about suitability of applicants to adopt. Robust management oversight will ensure that delay is picked up quickly and addressed
- Focus on timeliness for children by developing our understanding of children's journey through care to point of Best Interest Decision; developing early linking and matching processes; increasing our use of Fostering for Adoption where appropriate to meet children's needs. There will be a particular focus on those children who typically wait longer. We will utilise FAL activity days for are children who wait longer and ensure that these children are profiled on our FAL website. We are also driving forward the quality of our linkmaker profiles with support from the marketing officer.

- To continue to develop our panel, ensuring that that panel members are appropriately trained to continue to meet the needs of the service provide robust scrutiny of the agency.
- Develop a service-wide action plan to ensure that operational managers invest in mutually beneficial activity to improve outcomes for children and adopters.
- Continue to invest in developing processes to strengthen feedback and how this influences change and development
- Reinvigorate the service offered to birth parents/first family members, through the appointment of a support worker who will develop a service in consultation with first family and other members of FAL to ensure the needs of first family members are appropriately met.



