



Leicestershire Adoption Service

Annual Report

2023-24

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Executive Summary

The Annual Report for the Adoption Service sets out the performance for the service in 2023/24 and identifies our priorities for the forthcoming year 2024/25.

Key messages within this report are:



Achieving permanence for children



Regionalisation



Timeliness of adopter assessments and recruitment

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 of three indicators, the 1-year trend data for 2023/24 is highlighting an increase in the number of days in comparison to the previous year. Whilst most children have their permanence achieved in a timely manner, there have been a small number of children whose plans have been delayed. Detailed consideration of information regarding individual children is routinely completed by managers and the Service Manager.

Our improved data collection means that all children are tracked from the point of Pack A request and monthly Improvement Cycle Meetings ensure that any drift and delay is identified, challenged and rectified.

Adoption Score Card	2022-23	2023-24	Commentary
A10 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family	742.63 days	878.75 days (Increase of 136.12 days)	Some of this delay is due to court processes and timing. Leicestershire is working collaboratively with the Family Justice Board to ensure that the Public Law Outline timescales of 26 weeks are adhered to.
A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and	264.88 days	468.04 days (Increase of 203.16 days)	There is analysis provided within the body of the Annual report relating to this increase, however it should be noted that this figure includes a small number of children who have waited longer than

deciding on a match to an adoptive family	Leicestershire County Council would have hoped. These are a group of 10 children (including 3 sets of sibling groups of 2) and details are included in Section 4 of this report. We continue to make high quality matches and are aspirational for our children resulting in a very low disruption rate. This means that our children are living in families that are attuned to their needs and are well supported through bespoke packages of support.		
A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child	457.19 days	426.19 days (Reduction of 31 days)	We have seen an increase in the number of siblings being born to children either already in the Public Law Outline process or have recently concluded. For those younger children whose parental situation remains unchanged, we have been able to place in a timely manner and often within the same placement as their older brother or sister.

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.

Key areas of success this year include:-

- Positive feedback from the Pilot Ofsted Inspection of RAA's in November 2023.
- Strong collaborative working to ensure we are responding to the national drive in maintaining relationships for Children who have been adopted.
- Our Getting to Know You events are viewed by other RAAs as an example of good practice. We have been successful in creating links for children by enabling adopters to see children having fun in an informal environment.
- Continued development in gathering data means that we know our children and adopter cohort well.
- During 2023/24 80% of the region's children were placed within Family Adoption Links.

Areas for development for 2024/25 are identified as:-

- Continuing to develop our Keeping in Touch model.
- Increasing the amount of Early Permanence Placements available within the Region.
- Developing a Quality Assurance Framework.

- To consider and develop a 6 monthly Peer Review framework that will include all partners and board members.

Timeliness of Adopter Assessments

There has continued to be an improvement in the stage 1 and stage 2 processes. Prospective Adopters have benefitted from social who are able to complete robust assessments at the same time as building positive relationships that last through approval and family finding until the granting of an Adoption Order. Management oversight is strong and there is a clear narrative for any delays within the assessment process. Adopters value the support and guidance provided by their social worker.

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 quarterly 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 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	Strategic lead for Transformation, Change and Commissioning
Kelda Claire	Head of Service
Michelle Robinson	Service Manager
Emma Bulgin	Agency Decision Maker
Gemma Barber	Manager, Post-Order Support Team
Rebecca Gibson/Emma Johnson	Managers, Permanence Team
Caramjit Supra	Manager, Assessment and Support Team
Lisa Deakin/Claire Hurst	Senior Practitioner, Post Adoption and SGO Support
Chloe Flint	Senior Practitioner, Permanence
Lauren Nicholls	Senior Practitioner, Assessment and Support
Katie Charter, Ella Robinson-Gill, Lianne Halford-Graham, Neesha Devri, Angela Saduera, Megan Bramley + 1 vacancy	Permanence Team Social Workers
Michelle Smith	Life Story Worker
Cher Watkins, Grace Springthorpe, Debbie Bevan, Bethany Fox, Leona Hubbard	Adoption Assessment and Support Social workers
Scott Barrowcliffe, Stephanie Denham	Assessment Support Workers
Charlotte Fanshawe, Zeena Shepherd, Harriet Pearson Cole, Claire Nichols	Post Adoption and SGO Support Social Workers
Sarah Greaves	Birth Records Counsellor
Sheryl Peberdy, Sarah Short	Special Guardianship Support Workers
Naomi Day	Post Adoption Support Worker
Victoria Williams, Isabelle Coad	Permanence Support Workers
Yashma Korja	Permanence Co-ordinator
Harriet Powell	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 2021-25 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 – Achieving Excellence through purposeful Practice (2024- 2027)
- 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's Post-Order Support Team already contains provision for the support of families with children on SGOs, with dedicated support workers located in the team. There is a lifelong offer of support to Special Guardians which mirrors our offer to adopters. We are already delivering many components of The National Kinship Care Strategy – Championing Kinship Care and our focus for the upcoming year is to review our service delivery and ensure that our Kinship Carers receive the right support at the right time.

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.

1.3 Progress against last year

Recommendation from previous annual report	Progress
Continue working and developing alongside our colleagues in the Regional Adoption Agency, with specific and effective action plans	In November 2023, Family Adoption Links were part of a pilot inspection framework completed by Ofsted. Whilst the scope of FAL is limited due to its partnership modality, Ofsted were positive about our strategy, validating the model and highlighting the effective approach based on shared good practice

<p>agreed by operational leads and overseen by the Board.</p>	<p>and avoidance of duplication. Workstreams continue to develop practice in collaboration with Adopters and Adopted Young People. A Quality Assurance Framework is being drafted and monthly meetings are held with the Board to oversee action plans and performance.</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. 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</p>	<p>New systems are in place to minimise drift and delay for prospective adopters and our assessments are completed 'in house' Relationships between assessors and applicants are good and our timeliness figures have, in the main, continued to improve. We track performance through monthly Improvement Cycle Meetings which are also attended by the FAL data analyst. This has meant that our adopters are seeing quicker assessment times.</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. 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 Link Maker profiles with support from the marketing officer.</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. The development of a performance tracker that is refreshed daily gives the management team instant oversight of a child's journey. Delays can be identified quickly and, where appropriate, addressed. One FAL activity day was held in October 2023 – this resulted in 2 children being placed. Linkmaker profiles are reviewed both internally and through FAL and are now consistently of a high standard.</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>A permanent panel advisor was successfully appointed in January 2024. We have a consistent central list and panel members are enthusiastic and committed. A training day was held in on 7th November 2023, focusing on learning from adoption disruptions and case reviews, post adoption support and Fostering for Adoption. A session was also</p>

	delivered by an external facilitator, to support understanding and engagement with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Quarterly panel business meetings take place between the service and panel chairs. The service manager also attends panel quarterly to give service updates to panel members.
Develop processes to strengthen feedback and how this influences change and development	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 Hub. FAL also has Collabor8 which is young person's group. The aim of both groups is to work in collaboration to develop services and hear the voice of those directly impacted by our services. We embrace the Lundy Model and strive to ensure that we hear the views of both adopters, adopted children and adults and birth parents are heard and that those views are carefully considered within our approach. Feedback is sought after all events held and 6 monthly meetings are held with foster carers to gather their thoughts and experiences which are then used to inform practice.
Reinvigorate the service offered to birth parents/first family members	We have a bespoke first family support group, 'Ohana'. Unfortunately, attendance has been low, and we continue to look for more creative ways to reach out to first families. We have independent counsellors who offer up to 6 sessions of support to families. The service is currently invested in Adoption England's Modernising Adoption agenda which includes a focus on maintaining relationships between adopted children and their first families. This includes siblings and during 2023 Leicestershire took part in a pilot 'Sibling Event' that was hosted by Coram Baaf. We remain committed to promote direct and meaningful contact between first families and their children when this is safe and appropriate to do so.

2. Family Adoption Links

2.1 The Partnership

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.

2.2 Family Adoption Links Vision

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

2.3 Governance and Management

The RAA is 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.

2.4 Management Meetings

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 and Family finding, post adoption support, training, early Permanence and Keeping in Touch.

2.5 Assessment and Approval

The Assessment and Approval workstream has recently been amalgamated with the family finding work stream to ensure that we are recruiting adopters who can meet the demographic of our children.

2.6 Family Finding

The Family Finding workstream is led by Michelle Robinson, Service manager from Leicestershire. The ambition of the partnership is to provide a consistent approach to family finding and ensure that the partnership can meet the needs of most children requiring adoption.

A Regional Family Finding meeting is held on a monthly basis, and children are tracked from four weeks before a Placement Order is granted through to either ADM ratifying a match or a change of care plan. The support of Benjamin Richardson (data analyst) ensures that the children are appropriately tracked and informs our timeliness figures. Linkmaker profiles are reviewed to ensure that all children have 8 good quality photos and a video.

Examples of good practice are shared and those profiles requiring improvement are identified. Support is available from Alex McGuire (Marketing Officer) and Jemma Corcoran (Business Co-Ordinator) to ensure that profiles are up to the agreed standard. Marketing activities are discussed and implemented for specific children which includes specific social media campaigns, creating bespoke pages for the children on our website and including the children at our activity days and Discovery Events.

Adopters waiting are discussed as part of the monthly family finding meeting to ensure that all options have been considered for our children.

From our March activity day, we created links for 11 sets of children. From our October activity day, we placed a sibling group of 2. Another activity day was planned for April 2024; however, this was cancelled due to the lack of available adopter households.

We also hold Discovery Events on a quarterly basis, where approved adopters have access to a secure video link where they can watch bespoke videos from social workers and foster carers about the children who are waiting.

This, alongside increasing the data we collect about children in the earlier stages of their adoption journey, has supported us to improve our service. During the last fiscal year we increased our focus on adopters across the region, although during Quarter 3 and 4 we saw an increase in the numbers of children compared to a dramatic decrease in the number of adopter households waiting. We continue to aim to increase regional matches by ensuring a more thorough visibility of those applicants coming through the assessment process and approved adopters.

The approach of the family finding meetings has been hugely successful in ensuring that more children are placed within the region. 80% of our children were placed within Family Adoption Links last year. This means that we know our adopters and children well and that there has been a regional financial saving in the cost of using interagency placements.

2.7 Post Adoption Support

Adoption support is another key workstream and is led by Sharon Clarke (Service Lead) from Lincolnshire. It builds on the practice delivered within the aforementioned workstreams. All partners have a different post adoption support offer and that is likely to remain the case. The ambition is for all adopters at the point of initial contact to have information about the support available with the website signposting the local details. The group is developing a core offer which establishes a starting point for both prospective and registered adopters and is informed by shared practice expertise from across the region. As part of this work and in addition, the workgroup has focused on the following areas;

- Post order training with direct access to the training hub offering a range of relevant training courses
- Establishment of the Adopter Hub which has co production at its heart and ensures that FAL engages actively with adopters
- Development of Collabor8 an online community for young people in place to offer, both support and ensure that the child's voice is central to our service direction.
- Provision of Thrive a regular newsletter for Adopters
- Working with Virtual schools across the partnership to develop and deliver the Education Passport

2.8 Early Permanence

The Early Permanence workstream is headed up by Lorraine Tavener from Northampton Children's Trust.

As with adoption support, this is an area of practice that has considerable Government focus and is frequently a key line of enquiry of OFSTED inspections. For a partnership RAA it is complex given the different court jurisdictions and established local practices.

The partnership reflects these differences and there is a variation in how well embedded it's in child care planning. Apart from some geographically compact areas, national work on Early Permanence has concentrated on establishing good practice models and developing consistent forms, assessments, training and support to carers.

The workstream has composed a framework of workshop/training for adoption teams, fostering teams, especially for Supervising social workers and foster carers, also for the wider roles of professionals, including IRO's, Guardians etc, with a plan to widen these workshops out to i.e. Health visitors and the judiciary. The current EP journey was delivered at the FAL staff focus event in March 24. The work will continue in 24-25, to include the workstream group meeting virtually, to review the workshops and training undertaken, to review the training feedback, develop a new specific EP feedback form, create an agreed placement 'handbook guide' for adopters to gain a fuller understanding of the process of the EP journey.

2.9 Keeping in Touch

Considerable research has been undertaken into the positive impacts on identity for adopted children when they are able to maintain some level of ongoing interaction with birth family. Central to the success of this agenda is the role of each agency in modernising practice, supporting development of professional values, providing knowledge and promoting good practice within wider children's services. This will better ensure that adopters are well prepared to support birth family connections, and our children and birth families are well supported to be safe and enjoy those connections.

FAL have established a Keeping in Touch workstream group to consider key themes to develop regionally and this is led by Sarah Fletcher. This workstream meets bi-monthly, with clear Terms of Reference and pulls together a group of managers and practitioners who are committed to the modernisation of adoption and working in line with the national Maintaining Relationships agenda.

2.10 Data

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

3. Our service – Roles and Responsibilities

3.1 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 two support workers. 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 support workers are responsible for a wide range of activities, from ensuring Linkmaker is monitored regularly, completing children's profiles, running activities and events throughout the year to support our adopters, foster carers and children. They host Foster Tots where Foster Carers can attend a monthly stay and play session and access support from professionals and peers as they prepare to move their children on. After consultation with Foster Carers we heard that some carers struggled to take good quality photos for children's profiles. The support workers now hold 'Photo Shoot Days' during school holidays. These days involve a variety of toys, games and props that allow the children to enjoy themselves and photos taken are of relaxed children having fun. This has been positively received by foster carers and attendance is high. Little Lambs is a stay and play group for adopters who have recently had children placed with them

and the support workers also host Walk and Talk sessions in the summer and Coffee and Chat sessions in the winter so that adopters can continue to access professional and peer support.

The support workers also regularly receive praise and recognition from adopters, professionals and first families. Vicki was called '*inspiring*' by Professor Beth Neil after she delivered a presentation to the Adoption England Culture Change champions (60 people from different RAA/VAA's) sharing the good work we have done in Leicestershire to promote sibling relationships who have been separated by adoption.

Isabelle was featured in National Adoption Week and received a lot of praise for her inspirational story.

Ohana is a group for first families where they can meet for mutual support and help with writing letters to their children. One father said, "*I don't have anyone else to speak to apart from you*". Our aim is to increase attendance so more parents/first family members have a safe place to talk where they can be heard and understood. Our leaflet advertising the group goes out to birth parents at the point of a Best Interest Decision being made and then is resent when reminders about Letterbox contact are sent. We remain passionate about ensuring children and their First Families remain in meaningful contact.

In addition to day-to-day operations, the team continues to be committed to ongoing developmental projects such as the introduction of Sibling Events, Keeping in Touch aimed at promoting contact between children and their First Families after adoption, Family Network Meetings and, further embedding of the Trauma Informed methodology in our practice. Team members have participated in workshops to develop therapeutic practice and offered training to foster carers.



I want to offer some positive feedback to you both on the practice and panel paperwork for this match, which is completed to a high standard and is good balance between factual information and analysis. I got a strong sense of the family and how D has been matched with them and vice versa.



The direct work with H is really, really good and shows the relationship that has been developed with him over time and how his preparation has progressed over the adoption journey. This work should be used as best practice examples for the rest of the service.



Hi Vicki, Just wanted to say thank you so much for yesterday. The profiles for the children were ACE! and this was commented on by the other agencies. You put a lot of time and effort into doing this and it paid off yesterday as our stand was brilliant. Thank you.



Always grateful for E and for your support along the way especially during those crucial first few weeks



3.2 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 recruitment team and, following this, request an initial visit before completing a formal Registration of Interest (ROI).

The Assessment and Support Team (AST) support workers 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 training directly to applicants, and this work continues throughout stage 2.

Our face-to-face preparation training is run in partnership with Leicester City and regularly receives positive feedback. 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). The majority of the social workers are trained in Attachment Style Interviewing which informs future matching activity.

In 2023/24 44 Initial Visits were completed, 21 of which resulted in a Stage 1 start. During this period 14 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, compared to 19 during the previous fiscal year.

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. 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.



Panel reflected how at ease Cher feels with panel - she is always passionate about her applicants and adoption - her smiling presence and sense of humour is expected and most welcome



She clearly knows her applicants well and this comes across at panel; notably as their ASW for the first adoption. Professionally it must be satisfying for Leona to see how much C and L have grown as parents, as a couple and as a family and their learning and she has been instrumental in all of that and hopefully securing a sibling placement too. Great work!



Debbie always champions her applicants; she knows them well and supports ably.



3.3 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 2023 – 31st March 2024, panel met on 18 occasions hearing a total number of 49 cases (including de-registrations and withdrawal). This is an increase on the previous year (1st April 2023 – 31st March 2023) when panel met on 16 occasions, hearing 33 cases.

14 applications and 26 matches were presented to panel during this period.

In the previous year there were 19 applications (approvals) and 14 matches; therefore, the number of applications have decreased and matches have increased during this period.

The reduction in the number of applications is in line with the national picture where there is a decrease in the number of people coming forward to apply to adopt.

3.4 Post Order support

Support Offer

Pre and post adoption support is provided in several 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 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 completed 41 Post Adoption Support assessments, submitted 258 applications to ASF (of which 156 were top up applications). We have continued to provide play therapy to 9 children who have received a total of 147 sessions

between them. We have also provided Therapeutic Life Story work to 2 children and Parent support sessions for 8 families.



Just a little note to say thank you so much for everything you have done for L, she has emerged from your sessions, taller, braver, happier and so much more able to face the world. We so appreciate all that you have done. You have touched us all as family immensely and we cannot thank you enough



Sheryl was so helpful! She really helped me to understand and find ways to help my niece understand some tricky things that she has been through recently. She also was massively understanding and really listened to what I needed help with. Sheryl recommended a school that has made a massive positive change to E's life. Sheryl's words and pictures were also massively helpful to me and E



Sheryl was amazing. She is so good at her job and really knows her stuff! The resources and things she recommended and gave to me were incredibly helpful! She was so easy to talk to and really listened to me. I can't thank her enough!



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 PostAdoption 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 PostAdoption 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 PostAdoption and Post SGO support have had access to an in-house Play Therapist who works individually with adopted children. She also created 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. PS6 has continued to provide valuable short-term intervention, usually whilst ASF funding is awaited for more specific therapy to commence.

A quarterly newsletter from FAL for adopters and internally for SGO carers is distributed and receives a high level of positive feedback from adopters and professionals. The team also

runs two activity events per year, in the summer and at Christmas. These are well attended and receive positive feedback.



Very friendly and sociable



Great activities, such friendly people, loved the animals



Despite only being required by legislation to provide support for the first three years post granting of an Adoption Order, Leicestershire continues to offer 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. Birth parents are offered 6 sessions with an independent counsellor, we currently commission three such counsellors who are based in different areas around the county to support with accessibility. The Authority will continue to review this service to ensure 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 2024, Leicestershire has drawn down £1,651,340.16 from the Adoption, Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families in Leicestershire. This is an increase in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year (£852,432) and represents support to 505 families, up from 414 in 2022/23. 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. Leicestershire has successfully trained workers therapeutically to ensure a better provision of services. Any

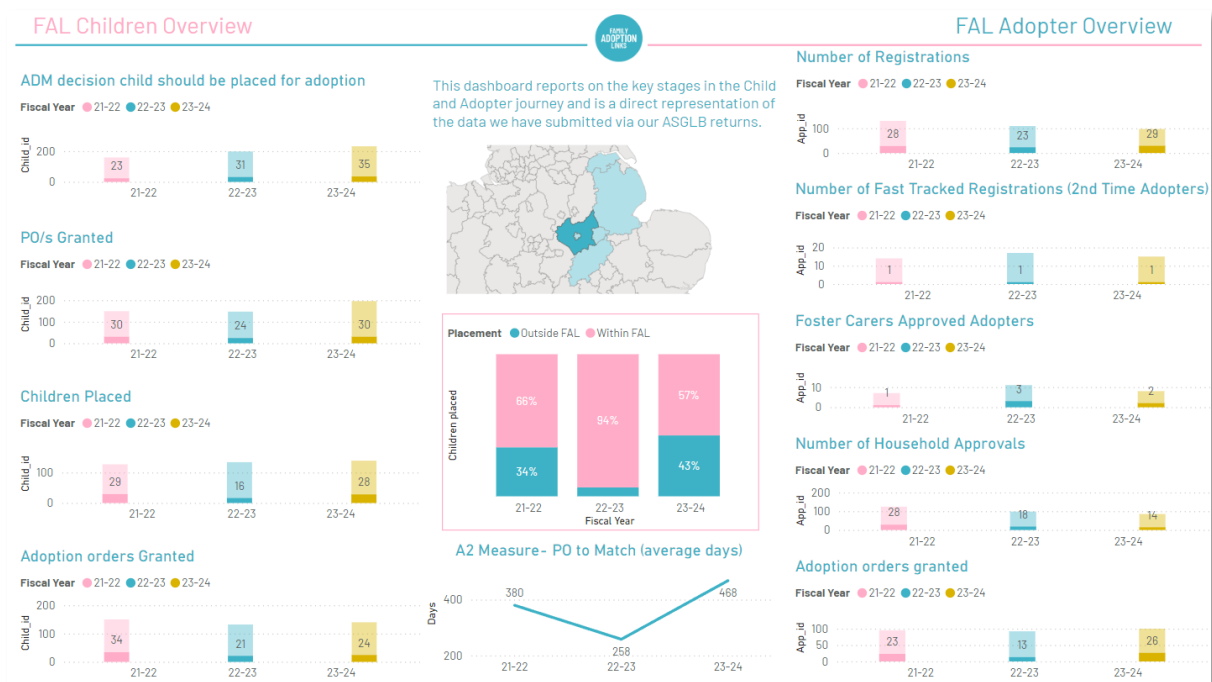
money accumulated from the ASGSF ensures that workers receive clinical supervision alongside regular supervision to ensure that their therapeutic practice is ethical and appropriate. Some of the most complex cases may be co-worked by the Locality Team with support from the Post Adoption Support Worker. In such cases an assessment will be conducted, and an application may be made for appropriate therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund.

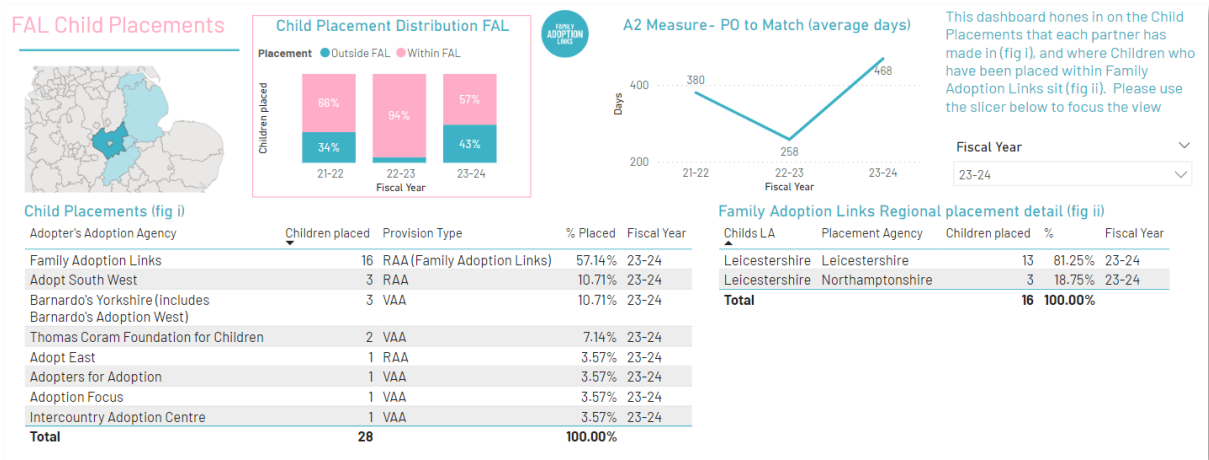
Birth Records Counselling

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. 28 referrals were received for this service during 2023/24. This is an increase from 18 during the previous year. 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.

4. Performance

The overall performance shows an increase in the amount of Best Interest Decisions being made from 31 in 2022-23 to 35 in 2023-24, with the amount of Placement Orders being granted remaining the same as last year (30 in total) Adoption staff are now more regularly challenged during proceedings about the possibility of successfully finding adopters and we are seeing an increase in the numbers of birth parents being given leave to apply to have a Placement Order revoked. There was an increase in the number of children placed last year - 16 children in 2022-23 and 28 in 2023-24, 24 Adoption Orders were granted last year compared to 21 the year previously. 57% of the children within Family Adoption Links have been placed within the Region, this is a decrease from the previous fiscal year (77%) and is reflective of the shortage of adopters nationally.

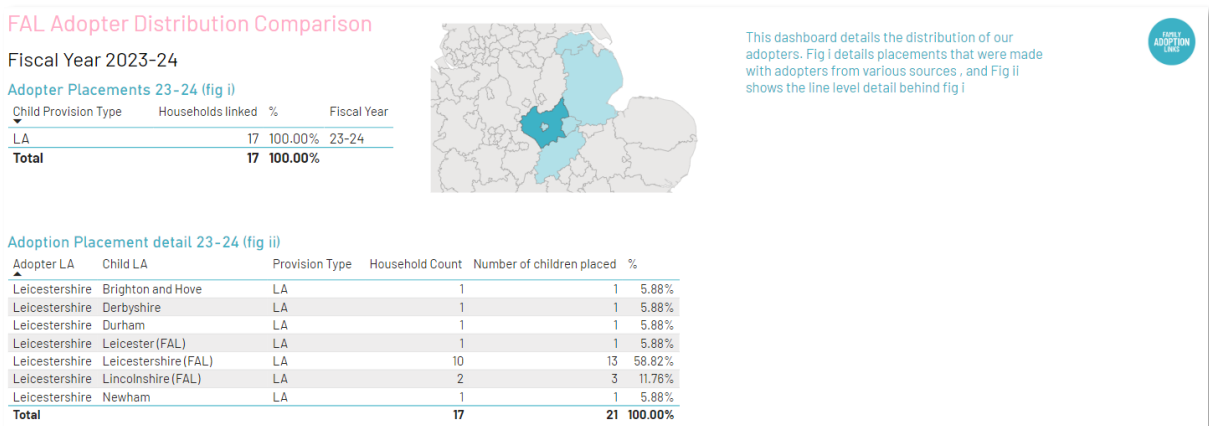




This data demonstrates the increased use of FAL placements. Leicestershire has seen an increase in the use of external RAA and VAAs this financial year. 13 of our children have been placed with Leicestershire adopters and 3 with Northamptonshire. 4 children have been placed with other RAAs with the remaining 8 children being placed with VAAs. During the fiscal year 2022/23 only 1 external interagency placement was required. This reflects the national position in that there is a shortage of adopters and placements are taking longer to find.

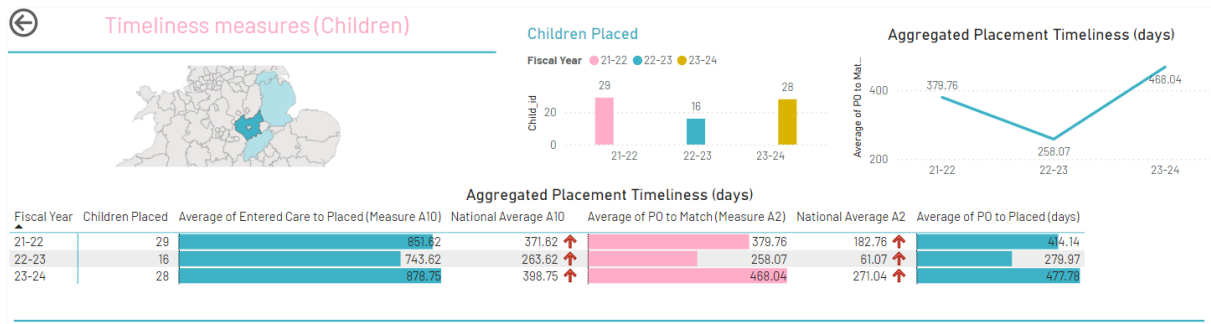
Children waiting

At the end of March 2023, there were a total of 27 children with a Placement Order who have not yet been placed with their adoptive families. This is broken down into 15 male children and 12 females. Within this there are 6 sibling groups of 2. 8 of these children have links with prospective adopters, 2 children are having links explored with their foster carers. We currently have 16 children who we are actively family finding for, this includes 9 children are considered to be 'harder to place' as a result of their additional needs (health and arising from trauma experiences), which also includes 5 sibling groups of 2 children. All children waiting are discussed at local and regional family finding meetings, are profiled at Discovery and Exchange Events and have also been invited or attended the Regional Activity Day.



This data gives information relating to Leicestershire Adopters who have had placements of children from both inside and outside of the Local Authority. Leicestershire adopters have provided placements for 10 Leicestershire children and 3 Family Adoption Links children.

2023- 2024 Child placement timeliness:

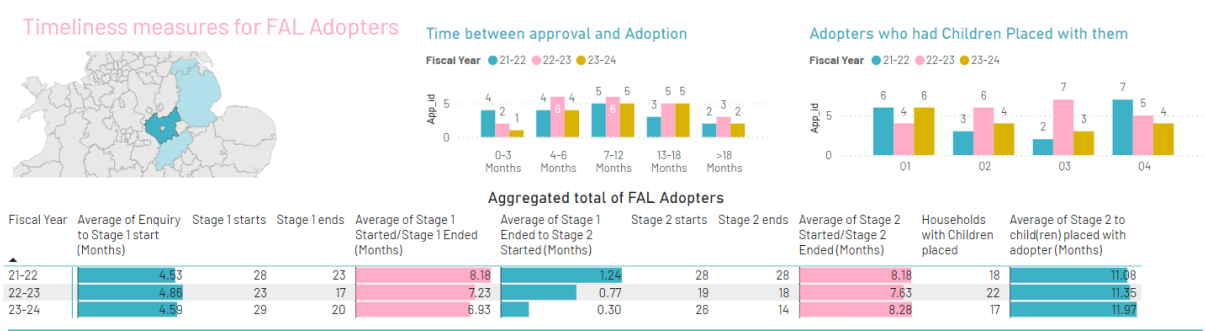


Due to the challenges that the service faces in family finding, the above chart demonstrates that there has been an increase in timeliness in all areas, with the significant area of delay being in children being placed. All children waiting are routinely discussed at least twice monthly, with Service Manager oversight of those children waiting longest.

Line Level Detail of the 23-24 Children waiting over 6 months:

Gender	Age	Date of Placement Order	Notes
Male	6 years	03.03.22	Experienced an adoption disruption
Male	2 years	02.09.22	Global developmental delay – assessing foster carers
Female	7 years	06.10.22	Significant trauma background and part of a sibling group
Male	6 years	06.10.22	Significant trauma background and part of a sibling group
Male	18 months	09.03.23	Placement moves. Assessing foster carer
Female	4 years	23.06.23	Significant trauma background and part of a sibling group
Male	2 years	23.06.23	Significant trauma background and part of a sibling group

Male	2 years	27.06.23	Health and development uncertainties
Female	3 years	27.09.23	Health uncertainties and part of a sibling group
Male	2 years	27.09.23	Health uncertainties and part of a sibling group



This data demonstrates timeliness of our Adopter Journey. There continues to be an improvement in most areas, with a slight increase in the length of stage 2. This is due to some delay in receiving required medical information for some applicants. the majority of prospective adopters experience a positive assessment experience that is timely and successful.

The 1-year trend data highlights an increase across all three key performance indicators, meaning children are waiting slightly 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 whilst 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 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.

4.1 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 35 children were subject to Best Interest Decisions. 8 of those children are waiting for final court hearings where Placement Orders (PO) may be made to allow their placement with adoptive families.

There has been a small increase in the average days from BID to PO which partly reflects the difficulty in progressing proceedings to final hearings. 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, one plan of adoption for a relinquished child was presented, of which was approved.

4.2 Children Waiting for Adoption

At the 31st March 2023 there were 35 children with a best interest decision of adoption, of which 27 had Placement Orders granted by the court. Ten children have an ethnicity other than White British. 17 children are female and 18 are male. 16 are part of sibling groups who require adoption (8 sibling groups of 2) 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 continues to be a positive area of practice and been successful in identifying matches for 10 Leicestershire children; the family finding work will continue to grow in the year ahead.

Leicestershire County Council has continued to attend exchange events during the course of the year and has also 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.

3 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.

4.3 Children Placed and Adopted

22 children have been placed with their adoptive families during the year, a decrease of 16 against the previous year, we have a small cohort of children who have been delayed in their formal matching as identified previously in this report. Leicestershire children, on average, wait longer than the national average between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. This is partly due to the shortage of adopters available but also that Leicestershire strives to make the 'best possible match' for our children.

24 Adoption Orders were finalised in the year 2023/24, an increase from the previous year when 20 orders were made.

4.4 Adoption Approvals

In 2023/24, 44 Initial Visits were completed, 21 of which resulted in a Stage 1 start.

14 adopter households were approved in this period, compared to 19 the previous year.

14 applications have been presented to Adoption Panel for approval. All adopter households who attended panel and were approved, 11 were couples of which 4 were same sex . 12 of the 14 households were white British.

Timeliness in completing adopter assessments has improved during the last year, with adopters approved in this period waiting an average of 15.21 months (compared to 15.42 months in 22/23) 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 continue to monitor this and explore reason for delay. In the majority of cases the delay has been caused in receiving information from outside agencies.

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

4.5 Adoption Disruptions

There has been one disruption this fiscal year. The child is currently in Local Authority care and receiving therapeutic support whilst we continue to family find.

5. Developments

5.1 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 continuing to build relationships with their counterparts across the region and information sharing events for the whole staff group are run throughout the year.

5.2 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. This peer support group is in the process of being re-established.

Parents continue to be offered individual sessions which have been commissioned through three independent counsellors. The counsellors are placed around the county to support easier access. Each offers a series of six counselling sessions to birth parents

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.

5.3 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.

6. Complaints

Seven complaints have been received during the year. 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.

7. Achievements

Leicestershire Adoption Agency continues to strive to deliver excellent services to our children. The permanence team complete all Child Permanence Reports for Leicestershire children. 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 continues to work closely in partnership with Family Adoption Links to improve recruitment figures.

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.

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.

8. Recommendations for 2024/2025

- 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.
- Continued 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 Link Maker 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, including continued contact, if appropriate, after adoption through the Keeping in Touch agenda.
- To provide bespoke training and support opportunities to our Special Guardians and the children that they care for.
- To consider the impact of the national drive on promoting direct contact for children after adoption.

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