



Brent

Corporate Parenting Committee

21 October 2020

Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People

Brent Adoption Report

Six monthly report: 1st April to 30th September 2020

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
No. of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	Debbie Gabriel, Head of Service, Adopt London West Brent's Regional Adoption Agency Onder Beter, Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency Nigel Chapman Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes

1.0 Summary

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a briefing to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee in relation to:

- adoption performance data for the period 1st April 2020 – 30th September 2020;
- the progress and activity of Adopt London West; and
- how good outcomes are being achieved for children.

Information and commentary presented in paragraphs 5 and 6 of this report were provided by Brent; the rest of the report was completed by Adopt London West.

1.2 This is the second report presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee in this format as Cabinet gave approval in April 2019 for Brent council to:

- a) join the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) *Adopt London West* consisting of the London boroughs of Ealing, Hounslow and Hammersmith and Fulham for the provision of Adoption services and Special Guardianship Support; and
- b) delegate authority to the Strategic Director, Children and Young People, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care to agree and enter into a Partnership Agreement with participating boroughs.

1.3 The Key Decision was made on 2nd September 2019 and, following the TUPE of those Brent staff members who chose to move to Ealing, Adopt London West has been a 'live' RAA since October 2019.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review, comment on and question the contents of this report. This is to provide evidence that the management of the adoption service is being monitored and challenged in order to promote good outcomes for children. This is in line with standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2014).

3.0 Background – Adopt London West

- 3.1** Adopt London West (ALW) Regional Adoption Agency, became operational on 1st September 2019 with a formal launch in October 2019.
- 3.2** A comprehensive partnership agreement forms the basis of the ongoing partnership arrangements. The partnership board on which the Strategic Director, Brent CYP sits, will continue to provide the necessary oversight to ensure that the shared service is appropriately scrutinised and supported to deliver improved outcomes for children and adopters.
- 3.3** As part of the national RAA implementation and development programme a network of RAA leaders has been established and monthly meetings are facilitated by the DfE delivery partner Deloitte. Meetings are attended by senior DfE officials and provide an opportunity to learn from the early RAAs and also to consider wider sector collaboration and influence.
- 3.4** It is acknowledged from evidence gained from the first cohort of national RAAs to become operational, that the first 12 - 18 months after going live for an RAA is one of transition and transformation to a new delivery model. Performance has been noted to dip in the early stages of operation, therefore the Partnership Board and Heads of Service meetings are closely monitoring practice and performance as a new and developing service.

4.0 Responsibilities

- 4.1** As delegated in the partnership agreement between Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Hounslow, Ealing (as the host Local Authority for ALW) is responsible for ensuring that children whose permanence plan is adoption in all four partner Local Authorities are matched in a timely way with adopters who best meet the needs of those children. This involves featuring children in various profiling events, via national linking websites, supporting them in adoption activity days and networking events with other Regional Adoption Agencies in London and nationally. ALW is also responsible for the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters, supporting adopters with family finding following approval and the on-going post placement support to adopters and special guardians. ALW is also responsible for the provision of services to adopted adults and all those affected by adoption who request a specific service or an assessment of need.
- 4.2** ALW also provides a service to Brent residents who wish to make a private application to adopt their partner's child, referred to as step-parent adoption, or special guardians who may wish to adopt the child in their care. The team is also involved in completing adoption reports on children who may have

travelled from and been adopted abroad; there is a legal requirement for these adoptions to be made lawful in the UK.

- 4.3** Inter-country adoption referrals continue to be referred to the Inter-Country Adoption Centre, a specialist Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA), with whom a service level agreement is in place.
- 4.4** Statutory social work in relation to children needing adoptive placements remains the remit of Brent CYP. The care plans for children are formulated by the social work teams and agreed by Head of Service for LAC and Permanency. The Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes then considers and ratifies any adoption plans.

5.0 Performance Data

- 5.1** The most recent set of national adoption scorecards was published in March 2019, covering the 3-year period 2015-2018.

Adoption Scorecards (published [here](#))

- 5.2** The non-published data for the period under review demonstrates that performance against the two most significant indicators has continued to perform strongly in comparison to the published national and statistical neighbour averages:

- **A1** (The time taken from a child entering care to being placed for adoption): 420 days. This is a 7% increase against the previous reporting period (392) but still compares favourably against a national average of 486 days and the statistical neighbour average of 552.
- **A2** (The time taken from the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and a match being approved): 176 days. This is an 8% decrease against the previous reporting period (192 days) which is less than the national average of 201 days and compares favourably to the statistical neighbour average of 228.

6.0 Child related data

- 6.1** In the first six months of this reporting year (1st April – 30th Sept 2020) Adoption Orders were granted for six children.
- 6.2** As at 30th Sept 2020 there are no adoption applications in progress, although applications are likely to be made for the two children placed for adoption within the next quarter.

6.3 As at 30th Sept 2020, there were three children with an adoption plan who had not yet been adopted. The details of these children’s cases are as follows:

- Two are placed for adoption;
- One child remains subject to ongoing care proceedings, likely to conclude towards the end of 2020.

7.0 Adopter Recruitment

7.1 Since its inception in September 2019, ALW has approved 22 adoptive households, with 12 of these being in the current reporting period.

Adopters Approval per Month				
Month	Total Approvals	BAME	LGBTQ	Single Adopter
Oct-2019	1	1	1	0
Nov-2019	2	1	1	0
Dec-2019	4	1	1	1
Jan-2020	1	1	0	0
Feb-2020	1	0	0	1
Mar-2020	1	0	1	0
Apr-2020	2	2	2	0
May-2020	4	0	1	0
June-2020	1	0	0	0
July-2020	1	1	0	1
Aug-2020	2	0	0	1
Sep-2020	2	2	1	1
Total Cumulative	22	9 (40%)	8 (36%)	5 (22%)

7.2 As at 30th September 2020, ALW had 37 approved adoptive families, 14 of whom are still in the active family finding stage, 3 families are formally matched and 6 linked to a child/ren. 4 families are on hold. Of the 4 families on hold some are taking a break due to personal circumstances and others’ situations are under review following their disengagement from the process.

7.3 During this reporting period (Apr-Sept 2020) the service received 329 general enquiries about adoption, 299 of these related to domestic adoption. 151 prospective adopter households attended an information session.

7.4 The adoption assessment process comprises 2 stages, Stage 1 assessments should take place within 2 months - this stage is described as “adopter led”, where adopters work through exercises and complete various tasks that contribute to a full and thorough assessment of their suitability.

7.5 Stage 2 should take a maximum of 4 months and is a detailed assessment that is both reflective and analytical. In total, the comprehensive assessment process should be completed within 6 months. However, the average length of time for assessments in 2019/20 was 8 months. Delays were due to the transitioning of workers to the new service and, in some cases, changes in assessing social workers.

7.6 As at 30th September 2020, there were 19 families in the formal stages of assessment, 14 in Stage 1 and 5 in Stage 2.

8.0 Adoption and Special Guardianship Support

8.1 Throughout the assessment and post approval process of searching for the right child to join their family, prospective adopters are informed about support services available to them and are encouraged and supported to attend the *Foundations for Attachment* training course, a course that offers adopters insight and strategies to meet the needs of children who are likely to have experienced developmental trauma.

8.2 An internal mentoring scheme is in place to offer support to any new adopters, or those who may need some additional empathic support. ALW have a contract with **Adopter Hub** an online support forum and adopter community that provide training and resources to adopters run by PACT, a voluntary adoption agency. In addition, a peer support organisation **We are Family** organise frequent training events and social groups. ALW have a contract for services delivered by **PAC-UK** that offer sensitive and independent therapeutic support.

8.3 ALW has an 'education support group', which meets six times throughout the year. The group is facilitated by an Educational Psychologist and provides a forum for families to receive support and guidance on how to engage with their child's school and a range of education related issues.

8.4 In addition, adopters receive regular newsletters that outline relevant research, learning materials, advice and tools to support parenting strategies as well as training opportunities, seminars and specialist support groups. There are also adoption related evening seminars that take place at least 4 times a year.

8.5 As part of the new Adopt London partnership with We are Family (WAF) an Adopter led peer support organisation, a series of evening webinars have been delivered:

- 7th July – Attachment Sense: the sensory side of Attachment, facilitated by Caireen McGlashen;

- 14th July – The role of the Virtual School Head, facilitated by 3 VS Heads;
- 21st July – Therapeutic Parenting: 17 Tips for Survival and Thrive-al, facilitated by Sally Donovan;
- 8th and 15th August – Practical support for families that live with childhood violent and aggressive behaviour, facilitated by Al Coates;
- 13th August – Preparing and managing return to school – what parents and children can do, facilitated by Stuart Guest;
- 20th August – Five strategies for parents of children who have difficulty managing their aggression, facilitated by Tosha Schore;
- 8th September – Reflective Parenting – what makes me the Parent I am?, facilitated by Katherine Mauther; and
- 22nd September – The benefits of self-compassion which support us during our most challenging times, facilitated by Dr Clair Burley.

Further webinars are planned for October/November.

9.0 Adopter and Special Guardians feedback

9.1 Below is a selection of recent feedback from families receiving a service from ALW, such as an assessment, intervention or taking part in any online/virtual support session:

- *“the support has been immense and being able to access support online has been beneficial to get as much support as possible”;*
- *“a swift and flexible support which has been very valuable to us”;*
- *“The social worker’s input was really insightful, and we enjoyed the course she recommended. Thanks. Things are still calm at home and we are enjoying being a family”;*
- *“Many thanks for support and contributions. Also, for the effort in finding us a therapist the BEST suits us as a family and the recommendation for further training. Once again, THANK YOU for your continual support”.*

10. Casework

10.1 Currently ALW is supporting 31 Brent families.

10.2 There are 77 contact cases open relating to Brent families: 13 direct contact arrangements and 64 active letterbox exchanges.

10.3 There have been 26 requests for access to records in relation to Brent records, out of a total number of 62 requests received by ALW during this period.

11.0 Adoption Support Fund

- 11.1** Families who require specialist therapeutic support are assessed by a social worker and an application submitted to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) for funding to cover the costs of the therapeutic services.
- 11.2** Applications to the fund have declined during this period due to the availability of additional therapeutic services provided through the Emergency ASF Covid fund that families can access directly without the need for a social work assessment (see paragraph 14 below). However, any individual applications that have been requested have been actioned without delay. There are currently no families waiting for an application to the ASF; all assessments for support are allocated.

12 Adopt London

12.1 ALW is one of 4 Regional Adoption Agencies that make up “Adopt London” a wider collaboration of 23 boroughs that form Adopt London:

- **Adopt London North** - a partnership between Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey and Islington, hosted by Islington;
- **Adopt London South** – a partnership between, Achieving for Children (Richmond and Kingston) Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Wandsworth, Southwark and Sutton, hosted by Southwark;
- **Adopt London East** – a partnership between Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham and Tower Hamlets, hosted by Havering; and
- **Adopt London West** – a partnership between Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Hounslow, hosted by Ealing.

12.2 In order to ensure the best possible services for children and families across London, Adopt London West collaborates closely with the other 3 Adopt London regions. A key priority for Adopt London will continue to be to maximize the opportunities and efficiencies across shared priority areas.

12.3 Key priorities for the next six months include:

12.3.1 Birth Parents Counselling

To progress the plan to commission a new counselling service for birth families, a ‘meet the market’ event is planned for October 2020. The draft service specification has been informed by conversations with PAUSE, Joanne Alper from Adoption Plus and Professor Beth Neil (UEA). The shared ambition is to commission an innovative service that will operate using an assertive outreach model; co-production with birth parents will be integral to

the service design. ALS/Southwark have agreed to lead on Commissioning of the new service.

12.3.2 Family finding initiatives

Adopt London teams are working together to increase the number of virtual “Stay and Play” opportunities. Activity days and exchange days are offered across London as a way of facilitating more interactions between adopters and children to promote links with children waiting for an adoptive family. The benefits to this approach are widely recognised as they promote and encourage “softer” chemistry links that appear to be more successful for those children who are harder to place.

12.3.3 Adopt London team working

Further developing the network of working groups of social workers and managers across the Adopt London partnership to strengthen and harmonise practice and identify further areas for collaboration and service improvement.

12.3.4 Website development

Further development of the website is an ongoing priority. Plans now include:

- increasing the functionality to support self-guided information, help, resources and learning;
- adding an adoption readiness tool to support families to think about whether adoption is right for them;
- adding a link to Family Action’s website *Family Connects* for adopted adults to begin their search for adoption records; and
- devising specific resources aimed at special guardians with links to the *Kinship Connects* service offered by Grandparents Plus.

Please see the link below for Adopt London’s website.

<https://adoptlondon.org.uk/>

13.0 National and Regional Recruitment

13.1 #YouCanAdopt National Recruitment Campaign

The government allocated £1 million to fund the first nationwide adoption recruitment campaign, #YouCanAdopt, launched on 16th September, which will run until 8th December. One of the primary aims of this is to encourage potential adoptive parents to consider adopting older children, sibling groups and those with complex health needs or a disability.

13.2 A film has been released online and across social media for the duration of the campaign. The film seeks to dispel some key misconceptions about adoption using a recurrent theme – “you can adopt”.

13.3 An additional specialist element of the campaign targets potential parents from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. *Home for Good* are managing these enquiries, providing a triage service and information sessions to families before allocating the enquiries to 3 local RAA/VAs to follow up.

A new website has launched to enhance the campaign - <https://www.youcanadopt.co.uk/>

13.4 Adopt London are supporting the campaign with social media marketing

<https://adoptlondon.org.uk/>

<https://twitter.com/adoptlondonuk>

<https://www.facebook.com/adoptlondonuk>

<https://www.instagram.com/adoptlondonuk/>

13.5 Across Adopt London, weekly 'meet the adopter' events are being held in addition to the standard monthly information sessions.

13.6 Black History Month and Adoption Week take place during the campaign. The Adopt London Choir performance will be released on social media during this period alongside other articles and features of particular interest to support the campaign.

14.0 Adoption Support Fund Covid-19 Emergency Fund

14.1 The government allocated £8 million additional ASF funding to RAAs nationally to support adopters and special guardians during the pandemic. Adopt London was awarded as follows:

RAA	£ awarded
Adopt London South	350,109.00
Adopt London East	173,907.84
Adopt London North	280,651.27
Adopt London West	165,470.19
TOTAL	£970,138.30

14.2 A decision to commission the majority of services jointly as Adopt London was agreed by the ALW Partnership Board in recognition that a wider range of services could be provided by pooling the allocated grant funding. The DfE have welcomed this approach and praised Adopt London for the innovative services it has jointly commissioned.

14.3 The services listed below have all now been approved by the ASF and services have commenced, or training dates booked. LB Havering, the host local authority for Adopt London East, agreed to manage the financial and commissioning arrangements on behalf of Adopt London, including:

- annual membership of the National Association of Therapeutic Parents for 500 adopters and special guardians;
- annual membership of Adopter Hub for 500 adopters and special guardians operated by PACT, a voluntary adoption support agency;
- annual membership to Grandparents Plus for all special guardians across the 23 Adopt London local authorities;
- 7 Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) 'Child to Parent' Violence training courses for adopters and special guardians;
- provision of a counselling helpline service from PAC UK/Family Action charity offering evening and weekend support services; and
- a range of therapy services offering up to 6 sessions for families from Adoption Plus, a voluntary adoption support agency.

14.4 In addition, from the retained local grant allocation to ALW of **£32,984**, specialist courses were delivered for adopters and special guardians – two courses of “The Great Behaviour Breakdown” and a Non-Violent Resistance group dealing specifically with child to parent/carer violence.

14.5 Three virtual direct work groups have been secured for children and young people. Body and Soul, an arts-based organisation specialising in services to children who are adopted, or the subject of Special Guardianship Orders, will facilitate these.

14.6 The additional funding has provided the opportunity to deliver a wide range of services to families that are not usually funded through the ASF. Feedback from families on the quality and effectiveness of these services will enable the commission of more focused and targeted services in the future.

14.7 Impact of and response to Covid 19 Emergency ASF funding

The positive impact of this support has been reported by families as being that they received immediate help and advice, including therapy on request without the need for an assessment. Families have responded quickly to the additional offer of assistance created by this fund resulting in the following:

- very high demand for NVR (Child to Parent Violence) and Great Behaviour Breakdown training interventions, the response being that further courses are planned across the Adopt London partnership;

- high demand for DDP parent consultations and sensory integration therapy from Adoption Plus;
- the formation of a comprehensive webinar programme developed by We Are Family in partnership with Adopt London - WAF Talks – as previously mentioned; and
- the Kinship Response service from Grandparents Plus gaining momentum, with ALW actively promoting take up of this service.

Adopt London's Heads of Service monitor the contracts. Agreement about aligning the evaluations of each service is currently being finalised, with the report due in December. This will be shared with DfE at their request.

15.0 ALW Adoption Panel

15.1 The role of ALW's panel is as follows:

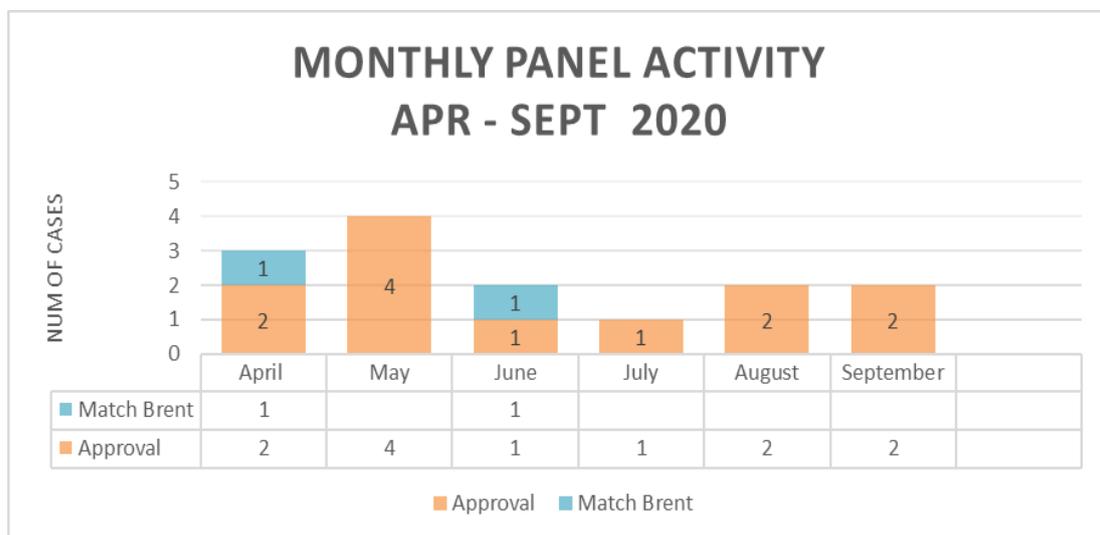
- to consider the presentation of approvals, reviews and terminations of adopters' suitability to adopt, following which a recommendation is made by panel members and sent to ALW's Agency Decision Maker (Head of Service) for ratification/challenge;
- to consider whether a relinquished baby from Brent should be placed for adoption, following which a recommendation is made by panel members but sent to Brent's Agency Decision Maker (Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, Children and Young People's Services) for ratification/challenge; and
- to consider adoption matches between Brent children and their prospective adopters, following which a recommendation is made by panel members and sent to Brent's Agency Decision Maker (Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, Children and Young People's Services) for ratification/challenge.

15.2 Feedback from ALW to Brent (and back) is considered by the Heads of Service quality assurance group and the Partnership Board and shared with Service Managers in Brent after each panel presentation in order to aid service development and quality assure the work of the RAA.

15.3 In response to the Covid-19 restricted movement phase, since 20th April 2020 the ALW Panel has taken place virtually via Microsoft Teams. This decision was taken to maximise business continuity and minimise delay for children being placed with adoptive families and the approval of adopters across the region. The Panel Adviser prepared guidance around this and circulated this to the ALW adoption team colleagues and panel members for their consideration.

Prior to the panel, the Adviser liaises with the applicants and external professionals to support them to access Microsoft Teams to reduce the risk of delay on the day, explain how the panel day will run and confirm that they are able to access the meeting confidentially. The Panel Adviser sets up a panel member check-in to join Microsoft Team to ensure that everyone is able to join securely, without delay and with ease. Panel members also complete and return a confidentiality self-declaration, attesting to this for the duration of the panel meeting.

15.4 During the period under review, 7 adoption panels were held in ALW resulting in the successful approval of 12 adoptive families. 2 Brent looked after children were matched during this time period.



15.5 Panel feedback from prospective and approved adopters and presenting social workers has been consistently good; some examples are listed below:

- *“I felt the work done by the team around the child was duly acknowledged and the fact that this case was presented in very good time scale highlighted by the chair”;*
- *“The adopters were made to feel very comfortable and able to contribute freely”;*
- *“[I] was made to feel very relaxed and was very grateful to hear the positive comments”;*
- *“My panel was done virtually so I am sure it is a very different experience than doing it in person. However, everyone on the panel was very nice and made me feel at ease. If this is how it is done in person then that’s brilliant”;*
- *“Compared to my previous approval as a foster carer, having done this panel from home felt more relaxing and easy. The pre-panel meet with the Panel Adviser was useful to set the scene and know what to expect”;* and
- *“The panel was virtual due to the Covid restrictions however, panel was punctual and seamless”.*

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