 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 15 July 2020
	Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People
Brent Adoption Report 6-monthly report: 1st October 2019 to 31st March 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 Regional Adoption Agency Perceval House, 14-16 Uxbridge Road, London W5 2HL Tel: 0208 825 8815 Email: gabrield@ealing.gov.uk Onder Beter, Head of Service, LAC and Permanency. Brent Civic Centre, Engineers Way, Wembley, Middlesex HA9 0FJ Tel: 020 8937 1228 Email: onder.beter@brent.gov.uk

	<p>Nigel Chapman</p> <p>Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes</p> <p>Brent Civic Centre, Engineers Way, Wembley, Middlesex HA9 0FJ</p> <p>Email: Nigel.Chapman@brent.gov.uk</p>
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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 October 2019 – 31st March 2020, the progress and activity of Adopt London West; and how good outcomes are being achieved for children. Information and child level data presented in Section 5 and 6 of this report were provided by Brent; the rest of this report includes the progress and activity of Adopt London West.
- 1.2** This is the first 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, the service includes 3 staff who TUPE transferred from LB Brent and an additional social worker from Brent who joined the service later. In addition, 3 social workers transferred to ALW from LB Hounslow.
- 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** ALW staff have received a comprehensive induction to the service and completed core training. Partnership working across the 4 LAs is generally progressing well with regular meetings between Heads of Service, Team Managers and Social Workers.
- 3.4** 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.
- 3.5** It is acknowledged from evidence gained from the first cohort of national RAAs to become operational, that the first 12 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](#))

- 5.1.1** 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): 392 days. This is a 1.4% increase against the previous reporting period (387) 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): 192 days. This is a 6% increase against the previous reporting period (181 days) but 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 second six months of this reporting year (1st Oct 2019– 31st March 2020) Adoption Orders were granted for three children.
- 6.2** As at the 31st March 2020 there were five adoption applications that have been submitted to the Court. Of the five adoption applications submitted, three are being contested by parents or extended family members therefore an element of uncertainty regarding these children's permanency plans remains until the court process has concluded.
- 6.3** As at 31st March 2020, there were nine children with an adoption plan who had not yet been adopted. The details of these children's cases are as follows:
- Eight children are placed for adoption;
 - One child remains subject to ongoing care proceedings further assessments being agreed.

7.0 Adopter Recruitment

- 7.1** In the period October 19 – March 2020, 10 adoptive households were approved, compared to 4 households in the period April – September prior to ALW taking over responsibility for services.

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
Total Cumulative	10	4	4	2

- 7.2** As at 31st March 2020, ALW had 20 approved adoptive families, 10 of whom are still in the active family finding stage, 5 families are linked to a child/ren or formally matched with a child and 5 families are on hold. Of the 5 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 (Oct 19-March 20) the service received 136 general enquiries about domestic adoption with 70 prospective adopters attending 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 will 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 31st March 2020, there were 21 families in the formal stages of assessment, 12 in Stage 1 and 9 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, recent subjects that have been covered are:

- SEN support and EHCP for Adopted Children
- Life Story webinar
- Supporting your child with school transitions

9.0 Adopter and Special Guardians feedback

9.1 The following quotes are from adopters and special guardians who have attended the Foundations for Attachment training mentioned above:

- *"The training has changed both the way I am and the way I think."*
- *"I think it helps you be a better parent and have a better relationship with your children."*
- *"I arrived feeling quite low at most sessions and came out feeling a different parent."*
- *"It was good to hear about everyone's experiences and to appreciate how the child's behaviour may have been caused by early years trauma."*
- *"This training was very useful in learning how to care for the children, I would recommend this course to all carers."*
- *"This training was very helpful, it changed my perspective of the behaviour in the child, and it was really useful. I have already recommended this course to others."*
- *"It highlighted the difference of bringing up one's own children and being put in a position to read children who may have gone through harrowing experiences at a very young age. It also made me realise errors I may have made in parenting my own children. It allowed me to step aside, hold a mirror and look at the actions of my children so that I can best respond to them in a given situation".*
- *"Very knowledgeable, understanding and supportive staff"*
- *"ALW are real professionals – they make our learning easy, with many clear explanations and a kind approach"*

10. Casework

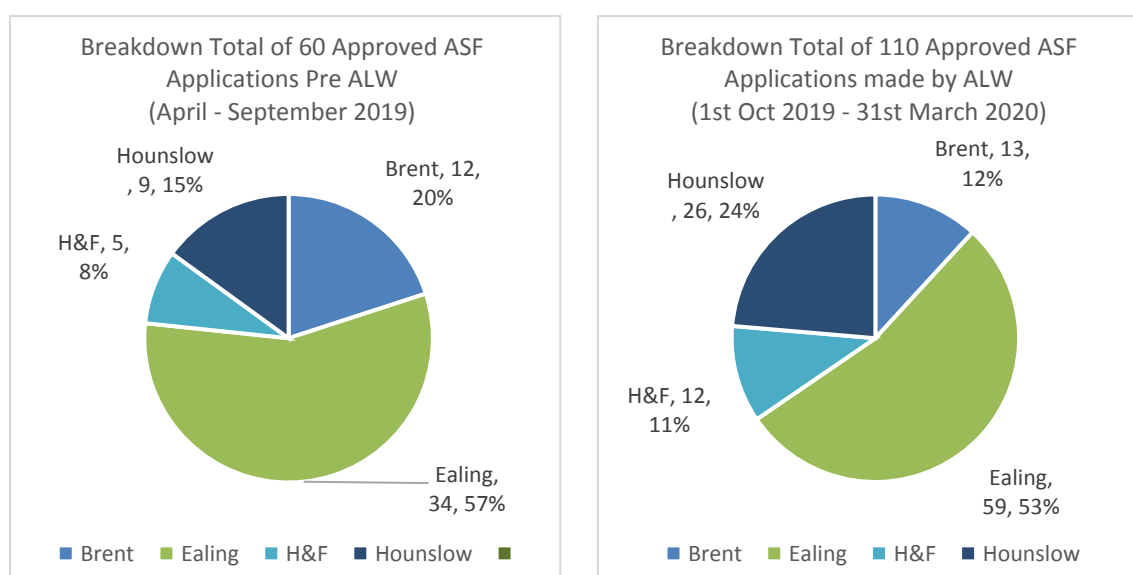
10.1 In the period 1st October 2019 – 31st March 2020, ALW has offered post-order support services to 66 Brent families, 48 adoptive families and 18 special guardians.

10.2 There are 76 contact cases open relating to Brent families: 13 direct contact arrangements and 63 active letterbox exchanges.

10.3 There have been 48 requests for access to records in relation to Brent records out of a total number of 80 requests received by ALW during this period.

11.0 Adoption Support Fund

- 11.1** Families who require specialist therapeutic support will be 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** The charts below show applications from each partner LA for the period April 2019 – September 2019 prior to ALW beginning and from October 2019 to March 2020 when ALW took responsibility for the service.
- 11.3** Since ALW commenced in October 2019, 110 applications have been made to the ASF and £110,000 in funding for therapeutic services has been received. The number of ASF applications for Brent families increased only marginally in the period reported in comparison but there were no Brent families that didn't receive a service.
- 11.4** The Committee members will note in the next report (Q1 and Q2, 2020-21) 22 applications were made, a 69% increase on the previous figure in just a 3 month period compared to a 6 month period. Overall there has been an increase in applications which reflects a more consistent use of the fund on behalf of families living in all partner LA's. There are currently no families waiting for an application to the ASF; all assessments for support are allocated.



12.0 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
- **Adopt London West** – a partnership between Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Hounslow, hosted by Ealing.

12.2 A joint Adopt London staff and media launch event took place in early March 2020, supported and attended by senior DfE officials:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAQZVIRFlm0>

12.3 In order to ensure the best possible services for children and families across London, Adopt London West will collaborate closely with the 3 Adopt London regions. A key priority for Adopt London in its first year of operation is to maximize the opportunities and efficiencies across shared priority areas.

12.4 The development of the Adopt London website, as well as coordination and collaboration between the marketing leads in each RAA to establish a recognised and consistent Adopt London brand across the 23 LAs has been a key early benefit of the partnership and demonstrates the potential value of what can be achieved in the future.

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



13.0 National and Regional Recruitment

13.1 The government has allocated approximately £1 million for a national adopter recruitment campaign with an advertising agency appointed to design the concept and campaign strategy. The planned March 2020 launch was postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic with it rescheduled for September. ALW and the other 3 Adopt London regions have combined marketing resources to create a team of marketing leads, each working 2 days

per week on Adopt London marketing projects. The team will support the national campaign with regional activity across London. Recruiting additional adopters from BAME communities is a priority for the national campaign and regional activity.

14.0 Adoption Support Fund Covid-19 Emergency Fund

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

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 LA for Adopt London East, agreed to manage the financial and commissioning arrangements on behalf of Adopt London.

- Annual membership of 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 LAs
- 7 NVR 'Child to Parent' Violence Training courses for adopters and special guardians
- Counselling helpline service from PAC UK/Family Action charity offering evening and weekend support services
- 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**, applications have been approved for the provision of 2 courses of “The Great Behaviour Breakdown” training available to both adopters and special guardians.

14.5 Applications have also been approved for 3 virtual direct work services for children to be delivered by Body and Soul, an Arts-based organisation specialising in services to children who are adopted or the subject of Special Guardianship Orders.

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

15.0 ALW Adoption Panel

15.1 Each of the 4 partner LAs held their final Adoption Panels in September 2019. Adopt London West held their first panel in October 2019. The comprehensive preparation work of the RAA project management team and managers involved in the creation of ALW meant that moving from a LA-run adoption panel to an ALW adoption panel was seamless.

15.2 The appointment of the Chair took place in advance of ALW’s start as did the appointment of 12 independent panel members, all with diverse backgrounds and experience. Panel induction training took place prior to the first panel meeting. Members are all part of a central panel list and everyone has now sat on at least one panel. While all members are skilled and professional, having a different panel composition each time does mean that there are challenges in terms of the panel members working effectively together and reaching a consistent approach. Therefore, in response to the Covid-19 restrictions, the Chair and Adviser (in consultation with ALW’s HoS) took the decision to have a core membership during the virtual panel functioning and this has allowed for more challenge and transparency within the group. Quarterly meetings will continue to ensure a continuous, reflective learning and development culture.

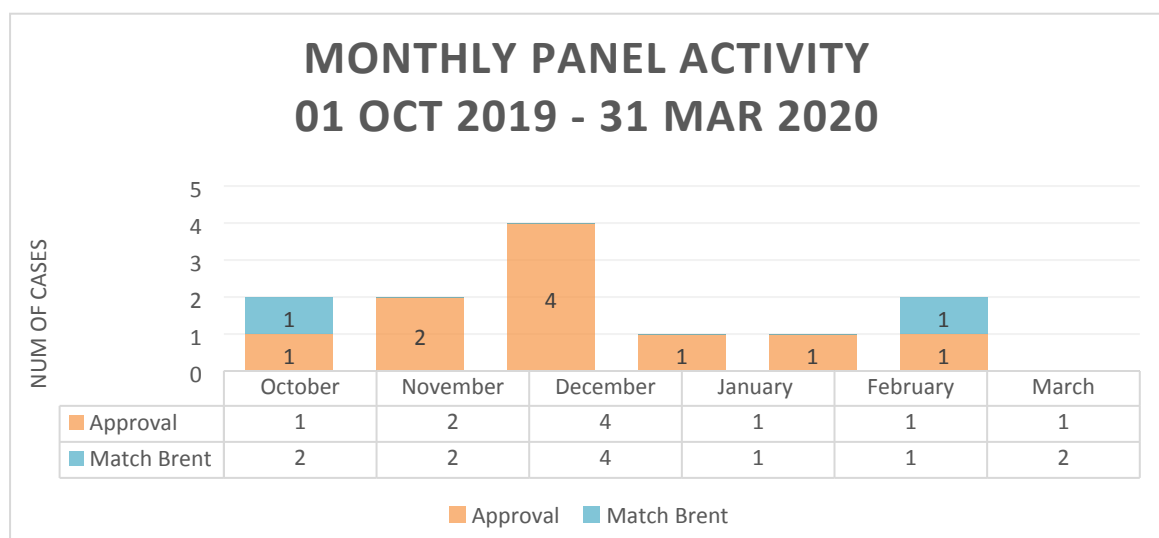
15.3 The role of ALW’s panel is as follows:

- 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 the 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 will be 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.

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

15.5 During the period under review, 6 adoption panels were held in ALW resulting in the successful approval of 10 adoptive families.



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

- *"It was very clear and it was lovely to hear the couple's strengths and all reasons for the positive recommendations".*
- *"I liked the fact that panel members each gave their reasons for the recommendation. I thought that this was really affirming for the families".*
- *"The process was very clear. Each member was invited by the Chair to explain their decision, which was really good for us".*

- *“There was a helpful checking in meeting. It was positive to have the questions before panel and having the time to discuss these with the applicants and preparing responses”.*
- *“I appreciated the transparency of panel members sharing their reasons for the recommendations in front of the applicants, the reasons were thoughtful and it was apparent the report had been carefully read. The preparations were well executed and must have taken careful planning. All the panel members were warm and professional. It is challenging to have a remote panel but it went well. The applicants found it helpful and a good start in their further journey. They have said that they hope to return to panel for a match, rather than have to deal with an external agency”.*
- *“That each member had taken the time to read the PAR and comment on what their reasons for agreeing the status was extremely endearing. We believe that we will make great parents to a child but here those words being spoken back is a real testament to the work we alongside our SW and all the other various people along this journey have helped us to get to”.*
- *“It was good having contact with the four people the week before (panel adviser, coordinator, SW and her manager). This gave us an idea of what feelings would be on the surface on the actual day, the reason I highlight this is that we had no idea having a chat about what would happen on the day would make us nervous, we had a brief conversation and both felt fine about talking through what would happen, it did not dawn on us that it would feel like a test run of what was to come, it helped us prepare for the real thing”.*
- *“This was very clear, we found it very positive to hear the individual panel members’ reasons for making their decision. Under the current circumstances (during the COVID19), the video panel was done in a very professional manner”.*
- *“We would just like to thank everyone on the panel for making this day even more special for us through the environment they created. Although we had a few nerves beforehand, everyone was so supportive and empathetic it made us feel at complete ease. It was so clear that everyone had spent the time reading our PAR and learning about us as a couple, picking up on details that could only be applicable to us. Feedback was extremely clear and very individualised for us as a couple. It was given with professionalism but also with empathy. We were grateful for the range of reasons given as well, each member searching to add a different point to make the recommendation an even more special moment for us”.*

Contact Officers

Debbie Gabriel, Head of Service, Adopt London West Regional Adoption Agency
Perceval House, 14-16 Uxbridge Road, London W5 2HL

Tel: 0208 825 8815

Email: gabrield@ealing.gov.uk

Onder Beter, Head of Service, LAC and Permanency.
Brent Civic Centre, Engineers Way, Wembley, Middlesex HA9 OFJ

Tel: 020 8937 1228

Email: onder.beter@brent.gov.uk