

 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 28 April 2021
	Report from Adopt London West and Brent's Looked After Children and Permanency Service
Brent Adoption Report 6-monthly report: 1 st October 2020 to 31 st March 2021	

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
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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 2020 – 31st March 2021;
- the progress and activity of Adopt London West;
- how good outcomes are being achieved for children.

Information and child level data contained in sections 5 and 6 of this report was provided by Brent; the content from section 7 onwards was provided by Adopt London West.

1.2 This is the third 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 provides 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. 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 August 2020, covering the 3-year period 2016-2019.

Adoption Scorecards (published [here](#))

- 5.1.1** The non-published data for the period under review demonstrates that performance against one of the most significant indicators has continued to strengthen (see below A2) in comparison to the published national and statistical neighbour averages whereas there has been a decrease in average time taken for a child entering care to being placed for adoption (A1):

- **A1** (The average time taken for a child entering care to being placed for adoption): 450 days. This is a 7% increase on the previous reporting period (420 days) and compares less well against the 2016-19 national average of 376 days and the statistical neighbour average of 370. The reason for the increase was due to 5 children's cases that were contested and appealed by parents, drawing out the court proceedings and delaying the Placement Order applications.
- **A2** (The average time taken from the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and a match being approved): 169 days. This is a 4% decrease on the previous reporting period (176 days) which is less than the 2016-19 national average of 178 days and compares favourably to the statistical neighbour average of 203.

6.0 Child related data

- 6.1** In the second six months of this reporting year (1st October 2020 – 31st March 2021) there were no Adoption Orders granted.
- 6.2** As at 31st March 2021 there are two adoption applications in progress; applications are likely to be made for the three other children placed for adoption within the next quarter.

- 6.3** As at 31st March 2021 there were six children with an adoption plan who had not yet been adopted. The details of these children's cases are as follows:
- Five are placed for adoption;
 - One child remains subject to ongoing care proceedings, likely to conclude towards the end of 2021.

7.0 Adopter Recruitment

- 7.1** ALW approved 8 Adopter households in the period 1st October 2020 – 31st March 2021 and a total of 20 households in the full reporting year April 2020 – March 2021. 45% of Adopters approved are from BAME communities and 25% identify as LGBTQ.
- 7.2** As at 31st March 2021, ALW have 35 approved adoptive families: 15 of whom already have a child placed with them, 15 are still in the active family finding stage, 1 family is formally matched with a child and 2 others are linked to children. 2 families are on hold due to personal circumstances.
- 7.3** During this reporting period (Oct 20-Mar 21) the service received 189 general enquiries about adoption. During the full reporting year 421 families have been invited to attend 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, during 2020/21 only 40% of assessments were completed within expected timescales. This was largely due to the effects of the pandemic - some families have faced financial and employment uncertainty and have needed to pause their assessments, in addition several families have suffered bereavements.
- 7.6** As at 31st March 2021, there are 19 families in the formal stages of assessment, 10 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 run by voluntary adoption agency PACT that provides training and resources to adopters. 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 a year. The group is co-facilitated by an Educational Psychologist and an ALW Social worker, 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.

The subject of the most recent support group in March 2021 was "Adolescence: How the brain changes and impacts behaviour in school". It was attended by 19 Adopters, 8 of whom were from Brent. Below is feedback from one of the families:

"I found the session on adolescence last week REALLY helpful as our two adopted boys (from Brent) are now 12 and 13 and therefore getting into adolescence. I particularly liked the format where it was a mix of educating by you and the educational psychologist on different aspects, and interactive periods to help us reflect and share with the group about own experience of adolescence. I appreciated being able to ask questions relevant to one of our sons at the end too. Our 12-year-old has been having increasing periods of frustration/anger outbursts, although not at school so far, and hearing your advice then as well as tonight will help us shape up what support we can get and who to contact. It is a relief to know that in itself. Thank you once again for these extremely useful sessions".

- 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 Adopt London's partnership with We are Family (WAF) an Adopter led peer support organisation; a series of evening webinars have been delivered:

- **6/10/20:** Personal experience of Transracial Adoption.
- **20/10/20:** Helping Children manage contact with their birth family and make sense of their Adoption – Julie Young, Senior Researcher, University of East Anglia.
- **12/11/20:** Introduction to NVR, the non-violent resistance parenting approach – Rachel Braverman.
- **24/11/20:** The Why, what, and how guide to understanding the effects of trauma on our children – Helen Oakwater.
- **5/1/21:** Executive functioning – what is that? How to support our children in a school system that doesn't understand them – Seth Perler.
- **12/1/21:** Therapeutic Parenting, why it is critical for our children's wellbeing – Zach Gomm.
- **26/1/21:** The importance of maintaining self-care and resilience for Family Wellbeing – Randhiraj Bilan.
- **9/2/21:** Managing difficult sibling relationships for children who have shared a traumatic history – Sarah Naish & Rosie Jeffries.
- **23/2/21:** Attachment – Graham Music.
- **March:** weekly Webinars with each Adopt London region, "Adoption Support What you can expect" facilitated by ALW on 30/3/20.

All webinars are recorded and form an online library of resources available to WAF members.

8.6 Special Guardianship Support

ALW remains the only Adopt London region that has Special Guardianship support as part of the core offer. London's Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board is committed to improving support services to Special Guardians across London as a key priority for 21/22.

The Special Guardianship Support group in ALW is now co-facilitated with a Brent Special Guardian, who has already taken proactive steps to reach out to the community of Special Guardians in Brent and across the West London partnership to increase engagement and membership of the group. In addition, this person has been invited to join a national working group convened by the Chair of the national ASGLB who is also determined to improve the quality of service offered to Special Guardians across the country.

The National organisation "Kinship" (formerly Grandparents Plus), provides advocacy, peer support and expert advice and information to Special Guardians. ALW were able to commission services from Grandparents Plus funded by the Emergency ASF Covid fund.

It is widely recognised that many children who cease being looked after by the Local Authority to live within their extended family or kinship network benefit from improved outcomes. Therefore it is essential that the Special Guardians who care for them are offered comprehensive, appropriate support that is often different to that needed by Adopters.

ALW partner LAs are working together to agree a funding proposal to continue to offer some support to Special Guardians from “Kinship”. Feedback from Brent Special Guardians:

“The service is good, and I would use them again if I needed to.”

“Grandparents Plus would call me every week without fail and when things were really bad, they would call me on a daily basis to check if I was ok which was really supportive to me.”

“Grandparents Plus has been brilliant for me and my boys and I feel that although contact has been reduced as things have been a little better it is a service; I will always wish to have access to.”

“Kinship Care has been a fantastic organisation of support”

“Through this engagement I have been able to link up with other Special Guardians within Brent which has really helped as I am now able to gain support from others who are in the exact same position as myself.”

“The service overall is fantastic, and I really recommend that all Special Guardians use this service.”

9.0 Adopter and Special Guardians feedback

9.1 Some examples of recent feedback received from Brent children and families receiving a service from ALW, who were involved due to an assessment, intervention, an access to records request or because they have taken part in any online/virtual resources:

“N and I would both like to say a huge Thankyou to you all, for your help and support with A's high school application. We were touched by your communication and quick response on the matter.”

November 2020

Foundations for Attachment October/November 2020 for Adopters

“Thanks to you and Jane for hosting the course. We both got an enormous amount out of it, as well as really enjoying the sessions and we were sad to see it all come to an end.”

Foundations for Attachment February/March 2021 for Special Guardians

The course was delivered on Microsoft Teams twice a week (10am to 12pm) for 9 weeks.

"it was good and helpful"

"I thoroughly enjoyed this course. It has given so much more insight to care for my 3 little cousins"

"well organized, the leaders well prepared and empathetic!"

"helpful, understanding, thought it was amazing"

"Really enjoyed session"

From a 13-year-old young person who has been receiving support from an ALW Social Worker, whilst waiting for ASF funded therapy to begin:

"even if mum doesn't listen to me or read my notes you have helped me to talk about how I feel and get things off my chest....I'm not used to adults listening to me in the way that you do"...

From a grandmother caring for her granddaughter thanking the ALW support worker:

"we wanted to let you know how lovely, responsive and helpful x has been and how much we have appreciated her help. Most notably when she took over the contact with M's maternal birth mother, and literally helped get her present to M in just 24 hours around Christmas time! We had one very happy little girl and Nanna! 🤗"

Finally, supporting families to make sense of their Adoption story at any stage of their life is an important service provided by ALW. Below is a message of thanks from a family whose father was Adopted 100 years ago.

"I want to write to you to say how much we appreciated M's assistance. We are very grateful she was proactive in following up a message left on my father's file and made inquiries to see if it had been acted upon. My father died after many years of searching for understanding regarding his adoption. In the process he was loaned a file of adoption correspondence and I remember his joy and sadness surrounding the pieces of discovery. The handwritten notes from his birth mother and an adoption agent describing her indecision and underlying torment at giving him up. Her subsequent requests for information about him. All of which gave my father some peace to know she had not abandoned him so easily. He wanted to copy the letters before returning them but because of the expense at the time just did a select few at a copy shop and we still have these.

I found these copies while sorting out his paperwork and started to wonder about the others that my father couldn't copy. I rang Bernardo's and was told that as his adoption was in the 1920s it was possible they would be destroyed given that 100

years was about to pass. Every request I made was fairly received but it was always explained to me how difficult it would be.

Almost two years passed and I had given up hope, when out of the blue I received an email from M, she said she was new to the post and had found my application and did I want to pursue it. I was amazed at her proactivity. She could have easily ignored or overlooked my old request. I am sure anyone else would have taken this easier course. When I replied that I did want to continue trying, M found a solution and explained what she could do.

My sister and I are so grateful to have someone take an interest and help us get access to this file. It is so much more than just a bundle of correspondence and M seems to understand this.

Thank you!"

Received from the Daughter of an adopted Adult seeking access to Records – Feb 2021

10.0 Casework

- 10.1** Currently ALW is supporting 47 Brent families - 24 are receiving a Social Work service and 23 are currently receiving an ASF therapeutic service that is under review.
- 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 49 requests for access to records in relation to Brent records, out of a total number of 115 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. 29 applications have been made to the ASF on behalf of Brent families in this review period.
- 11.2** 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; 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/activities for Adopt London in the next six months include:

12.3.1 Birth Parents Counselling

ALS host, Southwark Council, is leading on the commissioning of a new counselling service for birth families. 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.

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.

A “Families for London Children” working group of Adopt London Heads of Service and Voluntary Adoption Agency colleagues has been established to specifically look at the sufficiency of Adopters for London and consider creative family finding initiatives. A conference has been arranged by the group on 16th June for Adopt London Social Workers. The keynote speech will be from the “America’s Kids Belong” project in the US, an organisation that has had particular success in Adoption for older children. It will be an opportunity to consider an alternative practice model and to see if there are lessons to be learned for London.

12.3.3 Further Development of the partnership with WAF (We are Family)

The popular and successful Webinar programme of online training and support to Adopters will continue and a series of new Podcasts will be launched in May/June 2021. The partnership with WAF enables Adopt London to hear directly from Adopters what services are helpful to them, and to explore with them the most useful mediums to offer online/virtual support which has proven to be much more accessible to Adopters than more traditional face to face services.

12.3.4 Trauma Informed Schools

A working group has been established for London to coordinate and further develop a network of Trauma Informed schools; this includes Virtual School Heads and VAA partners. ALW is hosting a Trauma Informed Schools training event on 28th May 2021 (10 places will be available to Brent).

12.3.5 Website development

Continuous improvement and development of the Adopt London website is an ongoing priority. Plans now include:

- Increasing the frequency and quality of informative and supportive blogs for all affected by or interested in Adoption.
- Increasing the functionality to support self-guided information, help, resources and learning.
- 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.

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

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

12.3.6 Adopt London Choir

An Adopt London Choir was established in the summer of 2020 to provide Adopters with the opportunity to have fun, establish connections with other Adopters and as a means of support during the pandemic. The choir has proved to be hugely popular and a network of Adopters across London who have never met in person has been established. Due to its popularity it has been agreed that Adopt London will continue to fund the project. The most recent video of the Choir performing can be viewed using the link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hA5neFhHTqY&list=PLXqYv3251hsfg6dK4xLkDDqOiHSmOeRI-&index=1>

13.0 National and Regional Recruitment

13.1 #YouCanAdopt National Recruitment Campaign

The government allocated £1m to fund the first nationwide adoption recruitment campaign. #YouCanAdopt launched on 16th September 2020 and ran until 8th December 2020. This phase of the campaign has now concluded. The next phase due to launch in May/June is aimed at adoptive parents who may consider adopting older children, sibling groups and those with complex health needs or a disability.

13.2 An evaluation of the first phase has concluded and Government are indicating that further funding may be allocated to continue a National campaign approach.

13.3 Adopt London continues to regularly feature campaigns and targeted posts on social media, specifically Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Recent posts have included the need for more adopters for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQ +, Black History Month, #YouCanAdopt national campaign, support services including WAF Talks, the Adopt London Choir's new video and song 'Colour my World', Safer Internet Day, Mother's Day, International Women's Day and other Adopt London various events.

Many of the social media posts link to a blog on the Adopt London website or to external resources where more information can be found.

14.0 Adoption Support Fund Covid-19 Emergency Fund

14.1 The DfE welcomed the approach to joint commissioning of services taken by Adopt London and praised the innovative services it jointly commissioned. Funding has now ceased and apart from some subscription services which continue until May 2021, all services have now ended.

14.3 Impact of and response to Covid 19 Emergency ASF funding

The positive impact of this support has been reported by families as being primarily that they received immediate help and advice, including therapy on request without the need for an assessment. All service providers reported measurable improvements experienced by families because of interventions.

- 14.4** An independent evaluation of Adopt London's use of the ASF Covid funding has been completed and the report shared with the Executive Board and with the 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 it to the ALW adoption team colleagues and panel members for their consideration.

Prior to each panel meeting, 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, and 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 8 adoptive families. A total of 20 households were approved in the full year. 4 Brent looked after children were matched during this time and a total of 6 children have been matched in the full year.

15.5 Annual training for panel members is a regulatory requirement, and joint training with ALW Social workers is planned for 21st and 25th May 2021. The topic is Transracial Adoption and will be delivered by the Inter Country Adoption Centre, a voluntary Adoption Agency and experts in this area.

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