

Adopt London West

Annual Report

1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023



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1. About Adopt London West

Introduction

Context and responsibilities

Legislation requiring local authorities to deliver adoption services through Regional Adoption Agencies was passed in 2016 in the Education & Adoption Act. London RAA's were launched in 2019, around the middle of the national RAA change programme.

Adopt London West (ALW) is a partnership between the four London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham and Hounslow.

The adoption and special guardianship support functions of the four boroughs were delegated to Adopt London West on 1st October 2019, hosted by the London borough of Ealing as the lead partner. The ALW Partnership Agreement covers the legal and financial terms of the arrangement. There is shared oversight of the RAA through a Partnership Board and Heads of Service Quality Assurance Group.

Adopt London West has responsibility for all adoption and special guardianship support services, delivering these on behalf of the local authorities. These include:

- *The recruitment of prospective adopters*
- *The assessment of prospective adopter's suitability to adopt a child*
- *An adoption panel to consider recommendations on applicants' suitability to adopt and the suitability of adopters to meet the needs of children with a plan of adoption, 'matches' of children.*
- *The provision of adoption and special guardianship support services to children, families and adopted adults living in the region, including.*
- *Independent support to birth parents*
- *Access to adoption records*

Responsibility for the child remains with the local authority, the following summarises the key responsibilities that are retained.

- *Corporate Parenting*
- *Agency Decision making responsibilities and all legal responsibilities for children looked after.*
- *Early permanence, care and adoption planning*
- *The provision of and review of financial allowances to adopters and special guardians*

In partnership with the RAA, each partner contributes to:

- Quality assurance and performance tracking
- Ensuring that accurate and timely data is held, collated, and reported to the DfE, ASGLB and any other body as necessary.

Governance arrangements

The ALW Partnership Board meets quarterly and has Director level representation from each of the four partner boroughs. This Board has responsibility for all partnership decisions that need to be made above Head of Service level, for monitoring the performance and budget of ALW.

The Heads of Service group meets monthly and has membership at Head of Service and / or Service Manager level from each partner borough. The purpose of this group is to monitor and improve partnership working across the boroughs and ALW, including making decisions and proposals about practice and procedures that relate to adoption work across the agencies. A focus of this group in 2022/23 has been to improve the preparation and support to Special Guardians and to recommend to the ALW Partnership Board that a shared contract with the national organisation 'Kinship' should be commissioned for 2023/24.

Ofsted Inspections

ALW support and participate in the adoption elements of any partner local authority inspection including 'inspecting local authority children's services' (ILACS) and focused inspections looking at permanency or children in care. In 2022/23 we were involved in the ILACS inspection that took place in Brent.



As adoption inspection regulations have not been updated to reflect the creation of RAAs and local authority inspections only look at some areas of adoption work, the Department of Education and Ofsted have announced plans to pilot direct inspections of Regional Adoption Agencies towards the end of 2023. Ofsted have not yet published an inspection framework, but we understand they intend to inspect six RAAs nationally as part of the pilot, and to publish one composite report which focuses on emerging themes rather than naming findings in relation to individual RAAs. When the pilot is complete Ofsted and the DfE will consider possible regulatory change to include RAA inspections within the national framework.

2. ALW Team Structure

Staffing

ALW operates as a shared service, there are currently 32 team members, who work across 4 specialist teams focussed on the different practice areas,

- a small recruitment and assessment team who are responsible for the recruitment, assessment preparation and training of adopters.
- a family finding team who are responsible for early identification of children, family finding and early permanence arrangements
- an adoption and special guardianship support team offer a comprehensive range of services to families, children and adopted adults and manage a large volume of applications to the Adoption Support Fund on behalf of families who require a therapeutic service.
- a business support team provides a range of services including, management of initial enquiries, data collection, reporting and analysis, financial systems and budget monitoring, co-ordination and administration of Adoption Panel, core administrative services, the business management of the adoption support fund process including a statutory annual assurance statement

All are employed by Ealing as the host Local Authority with the exception of the 2 Clinical Psychologists(1FTE) who are employed by West London NHS Trust. ALW is managed by a Head of Service, Team Managers and a Business and Performance Manager. In addition to the core team, sessional social workers undertake some assessments of adopters to provide additional capacity.

A part time marketing and communications lead is part of the Adopt London shared marketing & communications team.

The staff group is stable, all permanent social work posts are occupied, there are a couple of fixed term posts covering for a secondment and maternity cover.

3. Financial Arrangements

Partner LA Financial Contributions

The Partnership agreement set out the agreed financial contributions for the first 2/3 years of operation. The resources that transferred, both staff costs and non-staff budgets, were based on the existing resources that each borough had allocated to deliver its adoption functions prior to regionalisation.

The financial contribution formula was reviewed and agreed for a period of two years by all partners and implemented in April 2022, the revised formula reflects a demand based budget. A further review of the financial model will take place in late 2023.

LA	2022/23 Financial Contribution	Percentage Contribution
Brent	£400,844	20%
Ealing	£695,451	35%
Hammersmith & Fulham	£329,170	17%
Hounslow	£542,495	28%
TOTAL	£1,967,961	100%

The following paragraphs describe the key areas of financial activity.

Adoption Support Fund

Adopt London West manages all applications from families living in each partner LA to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) a Department for Education fund for the direct provision of therapeutic support to families. Applications to the fund are made following a Social Work assessment and identification of a therapeutic provider.

2022/23	Number of applications	Funding (Adoption)	Funding (SG)	Total
Brent	65 (+ 5%)	£131,975	£16,200	£148,175
Ealing	165 (+ 85%)	£256,882	£85,495	£342,377
H&F	93 (+ 60%)	£132,895	£84,812	£217,707
Hounslow	85 (+ 13%)	£182,822	£27,745	£210,567
TOTAL	408	£704,574	£214,252	£918,826

Interagency placements

Inter-agency placements are purchased when no adopters approved by Adopt London West are available or are not considered to be the most suitable match for a child. 18% of the children placed in 2022/23 were placed with ALW approved adopters, increasing this percentage is a target for improvement in 2023/24. The cost of Inter Agency placements was **£566,810**. Inter-agency income from ALW families matched with children from other regions was **£272,250**. Currently each partner local authority is responsible for the payment of inter-agency fees, a finance workshop is planned to explore funding models with the aim of reaching agreement on an approach that is mutually beneficial and equitable to all partners.

There is a shared commitment across the Adopt London partnership to place London children with London families, maximising the use of all potential families within the partnership provides the best outcome for children and adopters, placing children locally means that, when necessary, high quality, timely support can be arranged. Therefore, increasing the number of children placed with Adopt London adopters across each of the 4 regions is another priority.

Children placed - Interagency & ALW Placements 01 April 2022– 31 March 2023			
LA	ALW	Interagency	Total
Brent	0	4	4
Ealing	1	4	5
H&F	2	4	6
Hounslow	1	6	7
TOTAL	4	18	22

4. Performance

Children

Whilst the number of children being placed for Adoption nationally continues to be low, in London there has been a slight increase in the number of children placed in 2022/23 to 190 from 180 in 2021/22.

22 children were placed by ALW in their new families in 2022/23, 10 fewer than in 2021/22, the reduction reflects less children placed by Hounslow following an unusually high number placed last year.

The adoption performance targets set two main performance indicators; one directly relates to ALW performance.

- **A2** length of time between a Placement Order and match with an adoptive family, the expected timescale is 121 days.

- The average for ALW was 133 days, slightly outside the expected timescale but a significantly stronger performance than the national average of 197 days and the London average of 238 days.

Adoption Orders

Adoption Orders granted 2022-23	Brent	Ealing	H&F	Hounslow	Total
Total	7	3	7	6	23

Black children and children with additional needs wait considerably longer than other children to be placed, on average 7 months longer, children with a disability wait an additional 359 days compared to other children.

Of the 22 children placed, 32% are of Black Caribbean, African or Indian ethnicity and 18% are of mixed ethnicity and include 3 sibling groups of 2 aged between 3 – 7 years.

Of the 22 children placed, 7 were placed under Early Permanence arrangements, this means children were placed with adopters who are also approved as foster carers and often before Court proceedings have concluded, enabling the child to move in with their new family, sometimes months earlier than is usually possible.



Adopters

20 new adoptive families were approved in 2022/23 one household less than last year, as is reflected across London since the Covid-19 pandemic, assessments of families are now often more complex. This appears to be due to increased difficulty and challenge in family life – for example more applicants have experience of mental health difficulties, financial pressures, fertility treatment which has ended for financial reasons, recent bereavement, and redundancy/employment uncertainty. These complexities impact the assessment process in different ways but can mean that the assessment needs to be slower, that families might need to take a break or leave the process, or that professional counselling support may be needed before an assessment can progress. The target of approving 30 new households continues to be an improvement target for 2023/24.

25% of adopters approved in 22/23 are Black, Asian, or mixed ethnicity and 15% are from the LGBT+ community.

Performance indicators for the approval of adopters set the expected length of the assessment process,

- **Stage 1** – should be completed in 60 days, the average time in **ALW was 108 days**, notably lower than the London average of 130 days
- **Stage 2** – should be completed in 121 days, the average time in **ALW was 134 days**, significantly lower than the London average of 196 days.

Assessments take longer than expected for a variety of reasons, in Stage 1 delays are usually due to the completion of statutory checks, medicals and DBS (criminal records) are most likely to be subject to delay. The detailed assessment at Stage 2 can be affected due to the applicant's personal circumstances. National data confirms that all regions struggle to meet the expected timescales for either stage.

5. National Adoption Landscape and RAA Leaders Network

National RAA Leaders Group



The 32 Regional Adoption Agencies in England currently work together under the title of 'The National RAA Leaders Group', plans are progressing to establish the group and its work under the brand 'Adoption England', this is expected to take place in Autumn 2023. The

Leaders Group has a Strategic Lead and several project leads focused on developing particular areas of practice nationally and coordinating the work of RAAs.

The Leaders Group has been tasked by the Department of Education with developing the priorities it identified within the first national adoption strategy 'Achieving Excellence Everywhere' (2021) and provided with funding to progress this work. These priorities focus on developing national standards in recruitment, matching, and support; looking at alternative models of matching practice; increasing the use of early permanence placements; developing multi-disciplinary support; and considering models for national and pan-regional commissioning in adoption support.

An important priority for all RAA's in progressing the national agenda is one of modernising adoption to incorporate new principles and priorities, notably in relation to maintaining relationships for children with their first family and ensuring that children have a real understanding of their life story and ongoing support to maintain a positive sense of identity as an adopted child, young person and adult.

In addition, the Leaders Group is focused on raising the voices of those with different lived experiences of adoption, and on increasing representation of all forms of diversity within adoption services. Whilst much of this work is being progressed nationally, Adopt London have also been successful at accessing grant funding from the National RAA Leaders Group to progress priorities that align with the DfE strategy.

6. Adopt London Collaboration

An important principle at the planning and implementation stages for Regional Adoption Agencies in London was a strong desire to work collaboratively, this wider partnership became 'Adopt London' 24 London boroughs are part of this arrangement organised across 4 Adopt London regions, North, South, East and West.

The shared vision of the benefits of an Adopt London collaboration includes the belief that:

- ***Stronger leadership focusing on Adoption is achievable***
- ***There is the potential to achieve an improved offer to families through joint delivery of some services and ultimately joint commissioning***
- ***Improved relationships with voluntary adopt agencies and other provider services will benefit the whole adoption sector***
- ***Services across the partnerships can become more responsive, flexible, and resilient by sharing resources, knowledge and expertise***
- ***A shared commitment to continually improving practice for adopted children, adopters and all those affected by adoption will drive forward change, encourage innovation and contribute to establishing a model for joint working in other areas of children's services.***

Adopt London



The four Adopt London regions work closely together as 'Adopt London' covering the different geographic regions in London and providing services to 24 boroughs in total. Adopt London are

unique nationally in working in such a close partnership across a large number of local authorities.

Through this partnership, we aim to develop a London-wide profile for the recruitment of adoptive parents, improve services that benefit from economies of scale, and share and standardise best practice. The host boroughs for Adopt London are Islington, Southwark, Havering, and Ealing. Heads of Service, Service Managers, Team Managers, Panel Advisors, and Marketing & Communications leads all work closely with their peers across Adopt London to develop shared services and practice standards.

Heads of Service and the host borough Directors and Directors of Children's Services meet quarterly as the Adopt London Executive Advisory Board chaired by a non-host partner DCS. The Executive Advisory Board oversees the joint project work of Adopt London, supports with problem solving, and considers Adopt London issues that need the support of other senior leaders to resolve.

In 2021 the Executive Advisory Board wrote to all member boroughs to request agreement to work towards an Adopt London legal partnership agreement linked to local agreements. This agreement would formalise the responsibilities of the Executive Advisory Board and protect the ownership of the Adopt London shared brand and online resources. This work was paused in 2022/23 due to legal complexities and capacity, but it is hoped this will restart during 2023/24.

The Adopt London Heads of Service work towards a strategic work plan that is supported by the Executive Advisory Board. The plan covers; governance and commissioning arrangements, operational and practice development of priority areas including opportunities to access national funding, marketing and communications arrangements, and the voice of adopters, adopted children, adopted adults, and birth family members. A Pooled Budget is held to fund shared activity. These were some of our shared areas of work in 2022/23:

Matching Project: Adopt London have been awarded funds from the National RAA Leaders Group to test methods for improving shared practice for matching children in need of adoption with adoptive families. This has led to the creation of Adopt London Matching Manager and Matching Coordinator posts to lead the shared work.

Early Permanence: We have also been awarded funds to strengthen Early Permanence practice across London. In 2022/23 a research report was prepared looking at the barriers to Early Permanence placements in London, which included interviews with Family Court Judges, managers from CAFCASS, local authority Agency Decision Makers and legal advisors, and RAA practice leads.

Black Adoption Project: We completed the first phase of this large, long-term project to improve adoption for Black children and families and have started preparing to initiate and evaluate practice pilots.

Adopted Adults support: We are working with adopted adults to expand the availability of support groups in London. A new group specifically for transracially adopted adults was set up in this period in partnership with the Transracial Adult Adoptee Network (TAAN).

Agency Decision Maker workshops: Funded by the National RAA Leaders Group, Adopt London ran a development workshop for London Agency Decision Makers to reflect on case law, guidance, and best practice around Best Interests Decisions.

Adopt London choir: Founded during the 2020 pandemic, the choir is made up of London adoptive parents who meet weekly online to sing and network, and sometimes meet in person to perform at events. The choir has proven to be a strong source of support for many parents. You can watch some of their videos on the [Adopt London YouTube channel](#).

Marketing & Communications: Our marketing and communications leads pool their time and resources to provide a shared Adopt London public presence, including website and social media. A single public profile is particularly effective for the recruitment of prospective adoptive parents.

Adopt London staff event: We hosted our second annual in-person event for 150 Adopt London staff members to increase relationships and co-working across the Adopt London RAAs. The event focused on the importance of our use of language in our work.

We Are Family: We continue to have a strong partnership with adopter peer network charity We Are Family, which provides support groups across London, a specialist webinar programme, and podcast.

In addition to continuing work in these areas, our priorities for further shared work in 2023/34 are:

Adopter voice: We are developing a strong mechanism for gathering and responding to adoptive parent feedback, and for consulting with parents on service developments.


Adopted children and young people's groups: We are planning to expand social groups for adopted children and young people across the Adopt London area to provide social opportunities and invite participation.

Shared commissioning arrangements in adoption support: We have received funding from the National RAA Leaders Group to scope potential improvements to commissioning arrangements, particularly in relation to provision under the Adoption Support Fund. In the long term this work could increase the effectiveness of our arrangements whilst reducing administration.

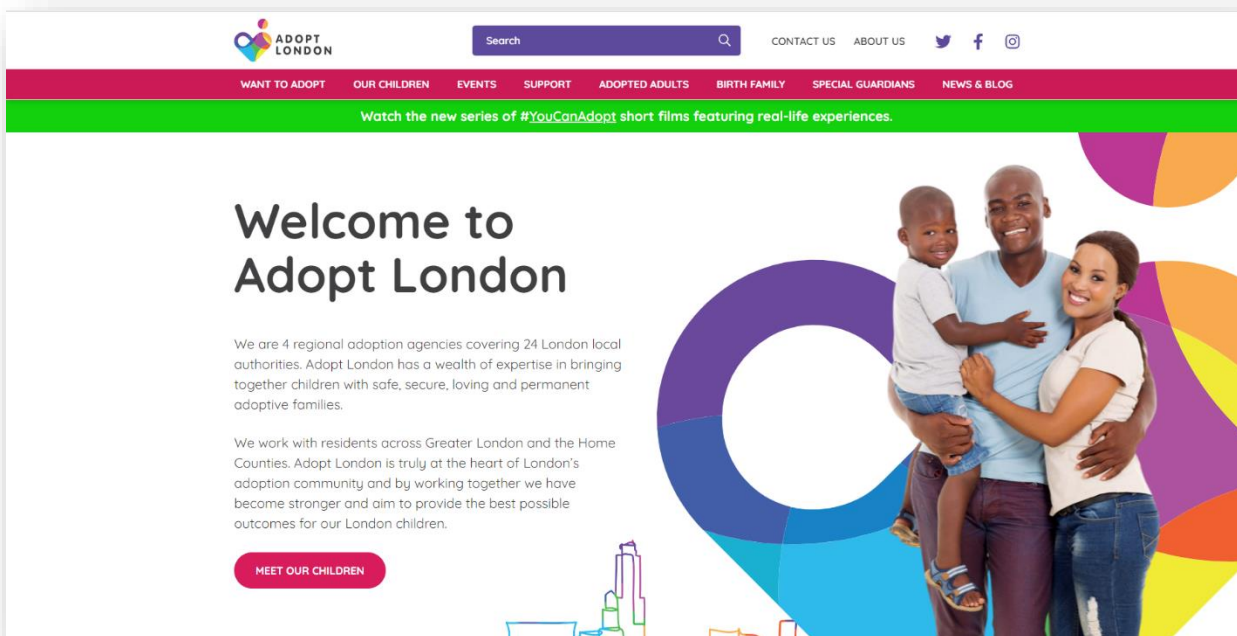
Adopt London brand

Our single Adopt London public face is successful at making Adopt London easy to find for anyone considering adoption in London and provides prospective adopters with a clear and transparent choice between agencies. Pooling communications resources means that Adopt London can spend less whilst still maintaining a professional, creative, and current online presence.

We have a shared recruitment and communications strategy. Through the Adopt London brand we aim to celebrate the diversity of London, to demonstrate that London children are central to our agencies, and to highlight a range of voices impacted by adoption.

 [The website](#) is at the heart of Adopt London's communication and usually the first contact point for people considering adoption. Articles, blogs, news, and up-to-date information is accessible on the website with several new pages and content reviews being introduced during the year. In 2022/23 we undertook significant development work in the systems side of the website to ensure it is compliant with local government standards and began a programme of work to improve accessibility.

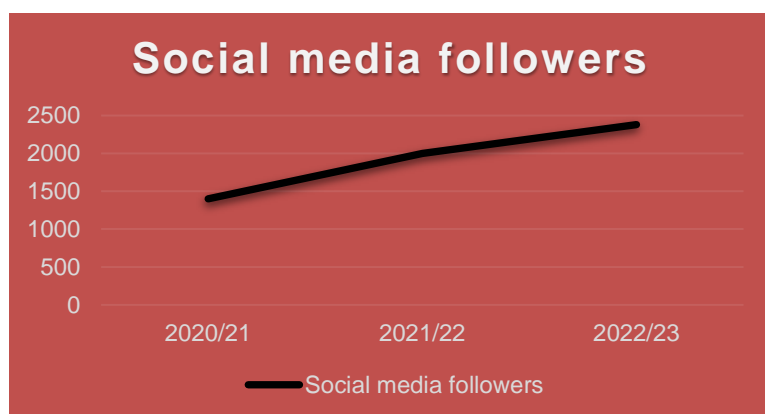
We are grateful to Hammersmith and Fulham's web manager and team who have provided advice, support and guidance on the move to a new website provider, accessibility requirements and compliance with expected standards required of Local Authorities, they will continue to act as critical friends to Adopt London.



The Adopt London social media channels post regularly to communicate and inform a range of audiences impacted by adoption. Our social media followers continue to organically increase and using these channels can be an effective way

to engage and support people in London who are considering adoption but not yet ready to begin an assessment.

Year	Social media followers
2020/21	1400
2021/22	2000
2022/23	2380



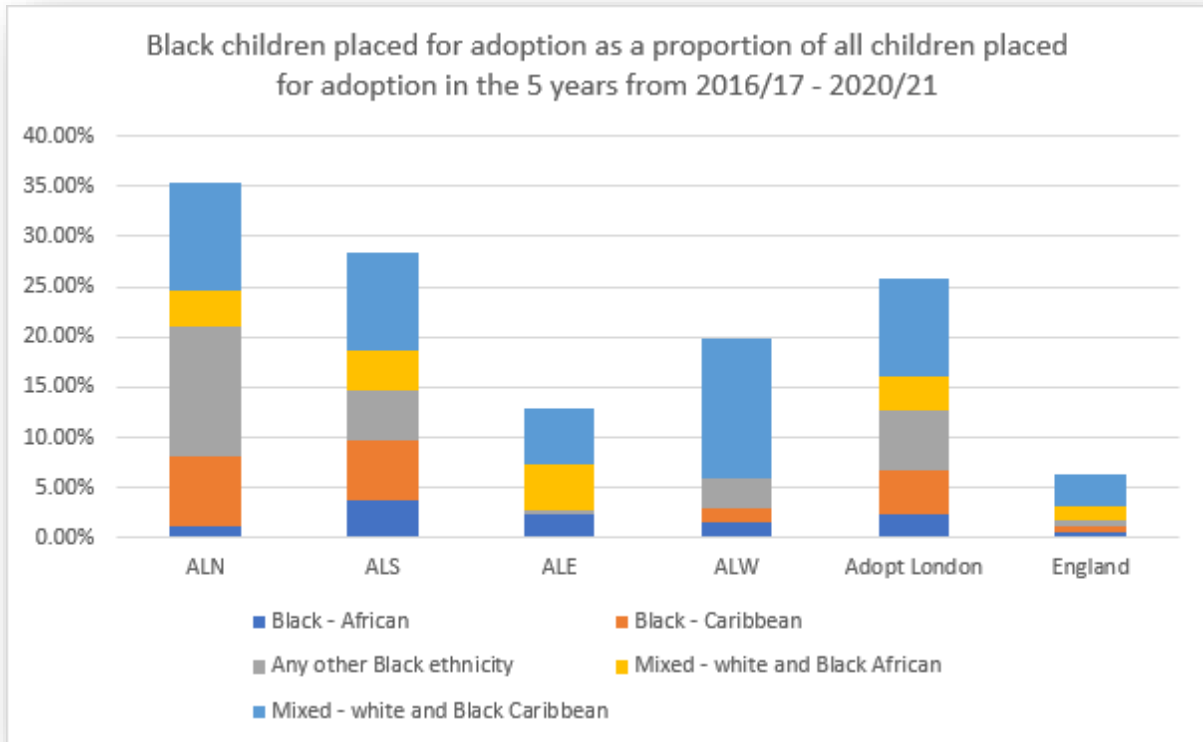
Black Adoption Project



The Black Adoption Project aims to improve adoption for Black children and families and is a partnership project between Adopt London and Laurelle Brown Training & Consultancy. We have now completed phase 1 of the Project and have a strong governance structure established with a wide range of representatives covering professional, community, and lived experience of Black adoption – including adult adoptees, care experienced adults, and adoptive parents.

Our initial research is detailed in our Phase 1 Report, which evidences the disparities for Black children in the adoption system and pinpoints where these disparities are occurring. It also looks at the experiences of Black prospective adoptive parents, and Black community perceptions of adoption. Some of our key findings are:

- Black children who have a plan of adoption agreed by the court are much less likely than other children to go on to be adopted, and this often seems to be because suitable adoptive parents could not be found.
- Black children who are adopted wait much longer to move into their adoptive family.
- Black prospective adopters are more likely to drop out during the assessment process and not go on to adopt a child.
- Some of the most significant barriers to adoption are financial factors, negative experiences or perceptions of the assessment process, the need for more support after adoption (including culturally informed support), and the impact of racism.



Across Adopt London on average 25.8% of children placed for adoption were of Black or mixed Black ethnicity backgrounds. We found that Black children with a Placement Order were 20% less likely to have been successfully placed for adoption than children of other ethnicities. Black Caribbean children particularly were 12 times more likely than other children to have ‘prospective adopters could not be found’ given as the reason for a change of care plan away from adoption. When other factors were held constant, Black children spent on average 6.5 - 8 months longer in the adoption process before moving in with their adoptive family, and the most substantial delays occurred during the family finding process – again suggesting that significant delay is caused by difficulties identifying suitable prospective adopters.

Within the research we also looked at the journey for Black prospective adoptive parents and found that Black-only households were 5-6 more likely than white-only households to leave the adoption process without adopting a child – indicating that there are difficulties during the assessment phase that need to be considered further.



Black adoption project goals

- *Levelled playing field for black families.*
- *Reimagined **system** for black children.*
- *Black **communities** understand and care about adoption.*
- *Black adopted **children** have the support they need.*
- *Confident, anti-racist and culturally competent **workforce**.*

During 2022/23 we organised workshops with a wide range of stakeholders including adopted young people, to develop a Theory of Change – a document which articulates the things that aren't working now, and the goals of the project. The research findings and Theory of Change process led directly to some options for creating change. The pilot proposals target different areas of practice including:

- Services to increase retention of Black prospective adopters both at the initial enquiry stage, and later during the assessment process.
- Exploring ways to reduce the economic barriers to adoption.
- Specialist learning and development programme for adoptive parents of Black children.
- Community-led approach to raise awareness of adoption and ultimately to recruit more Black adoptive parents.
- Research into the significance and availability of Black therapists providing support under the Adoption Support Fund.
- Social, participatory and educational groups for Black adopted young people.

In the next phase of work, we will be initiating a number of pilot projects across these different areas of practice, and evaluating the impact these changes have on Black children and families.

Alongside the research and practice change is activity focusing on the importance of workforce development and support for Black staff members. We have been running monthly 'Safe Space Sessions' for Black staff to reflect on their work within adoption and discuss experiences that impact and shape the workplace and practice. We have run whole-staff development training, and a series of workshops focused on learning from Black adoptees on their experiences of adoption. In the next phase of work, we will be developing programmes of support for staff to help create and embed change.

We are Family



2022/23 has been our third year working in formal partnership with We Are Family, a London adoptive parent peer support charity that provide a wide range of peer support to adoptive parents free-of-charge. Their overall membership has now grown to 1157 members, an increase from just over 1000 at the end of 2021/22. Through We Are Family our adoptive parents are connected to social networks of other adoptive parents from the earliest stages of adoption, providing parents with a place to seek advice, normalise parenting challenges, and reduce the potential for isolation.

There are currently seven locally based We Are Family groups running across London including one in West London, as well as a group for single adoptive parents and for prospective adopters still being assessed. The groups hold meetings both virtually and in-person, organise family gatherings, and have an annual celebration picnic. We Are Family also run a playgroup for adoptive parents with pre-school children and have recently begun to initiate some common interests' groups – such as for parents of teenagers.

We Are Family groups are run by adoptive parent volunteers, supported by a small salaried staff team. In 2022/23 We Are Family have started providing professional peer support training to their volunteers which assists with the sustainability and development of their voluntary roles.

"I was lucky that I found We Are Family early into our placement, my husband & I were struggling a great deal with the challenges with no family or support close by and being part of We Are Family changed that. I don't believe we would have the relationship with our children that we have now if it were not for the help, support and understanding that other WAF members gave to me."

We Are Family member and adoptive parent.

"I have gained so much from being a We Are Family volunteer. As well as making new contacts and meeting people from different walks of life, I get the chance to use my professional skills from my previous working life in education to run activities."

We Are Family volunteer and adoptive parent.

Adopters Training

Adopt London provide expert webinars to our adoptive parents twice per month through our partnership with We Are Family. Adoptive parents can choose whether to attend webinars live and have the opportunity to ask questions, or whether to watch on demand in the member hub for up to a year after the event. This way of offering learning, development, and support has been popular with adoptive parents who need flexibility to manage childcare demands. In 2022/23 we provided 23 expert webinars on a wide variety of topics. Over 400 adoptive parents attended webinars live this year, and since the programme started over 3100 webinars have been watched on demand.

- ❖ Child to parent violence
- ❖ Executive functioning
- ❖ Self-care for parents
- ❖ Adoption support available through Adopt London
- ❖ Special Educational Needs
- ❖ Supporting contact with birth families
- ❖ Non-violent resistance parenting strategies
- ❖ Adoptee experiences
- ❖ Life story work
- ❖ Birth parent experiences
- ❖ Sensory processing
- ❖ Childhood anxiety
- ❖ Parenting teenagers

"I found it tremendously valuable and interesting, thank you!"

Webinar on childhood anxiety

"Brilliant, insightful and helpful"

Webinar on life story work

"Fantastic. So knowledgeable. I know more from Eleanor's webinar than I've known for the entire year this has gone on for."

Webinar on Special Educational Needs

"Great presenter, very engaging, experienced with specific tangible techniques."

Webinar on non-violent resistance parenting strategies

"It all confirms my gut feeling about contact being so important going forward."

Webinar on supporting contact with birth families

In addition, for the second year we have produced an original podcast series 'Adoption Shared' in partnership with We Are Family, our adopter peer support partners. In 2022/23 we published the third season, with episodes focused on Black adoption from different perspectives. The podcast has been successful at providing another way for us to engage, support, develop, and build loyalty with those considering adoption who are not yet ready to begin an assessment. Episodes are also used in preparing and training prospective adopters and in building community for adoptive parents.

The first three seasons of Adoption Shared have now been downloaded 8,284 times. A fourth season is being prepared for release in 2023/24 focused on adoption experiences for children with additional support needs.

Partnerships with Voluntary adoption agencies and Adoption Support Agencies



PAC-UK



ALW commissions a service from PAC UK which includes:

- An advice line, supporting adopted adults and birth parents'
 - Counselling services for anyone affected by Adoption or Special Guardianship arrangements living in any of the 4 partner boroughs.



ALW commissions international assessment work from the Inter Country Adoption Centre, (IAC) this is mainly used by people wishing to adopt a child from their own country of origin or another overseas country.

Partnerships between Adopt London and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA's) operating across London are positive and productive, a quarterly meeting takes place to share practice and service developments.



A feature of this collaboration is an ongoing programme of Lunch and Learn sessions facilitated by PACT a Voluntary Adoption agency operating in London, funding is shared by the 5 London RAA's. Up to 100 adoption social workers have attended each

event on a range of adoption related subjects, this provides an opportunity for all adoption social workers from across the sector to come together, build networks and enhance their learning and development.

ALW Practice and support services

The social workers, managers, and all support workers in ALW strive to deliver a therapeutically informed, reflective, and respectful service to all children, families, prospective adopters, our partners and all who are affected by adoption and special guardianship arrangements. Social workers are trained in Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) which supports our practice model.

During 2022/23 we have continued to focus our efforts on welcoming new prospective adopters, family finding for children and offering a range of support services, some of which are summarised below.

Early permanence

All ALW adopters in assessment are encouraged to consider Early Permanence, additional training and support is offered to those who wish to proceed. Increasing the numbers of children placed in Early Permanence arrangements is a development priority regionally and nationally. An Early Permanence project for London as a region includes a research project looking at the barriers to Early Permanence in London, the report is expected in the summer.

Matching

As part of the collaboration with the other Adopt London regions a new matching project has commenced, funded from the national RAA programme. A matching manager has been appointed to drive forward innovative practice initiatives, provide additional capacity and enhance the number of children placed across the Adopt London partnership if no suitable matches within ALW are available.

Special Guardianship Support

Peer support services have developed further this year, a special guardian co-facilitates a monthly support group, in addition, a peer support initiative of informal meetings and “chill & chat” sessions are also coordinated and facilitated by the same special guardian. A special guardianship forum has met for the first time, this was attended by various guest speakers including a director of one of the partner LA’s. The forum will meet quarterly and is co-chaired by the special guardian and head of service, the purpose is to enable direct dialogue between special guardians and representatives of the service and to influence policy and practice.

Kinship



ALW has commissioned a service from Kinship, a national charity (formerly known as Grandparents Plus) the service offers membership to all families living in any of the 4 ALW partner authorities who are caring for a child in a kinship arrangement regardless of the legal status of the arrangement. In addition, a more specialist level of service is also included in the contract that offers direct more intense support to 40 families a year.

Team Managers from each partner LA meet regularly with ALW managers to ensure that the service is supporting the most vulnerable families.

Drama Workshop

October 2022 half term Drama workshop

As part of ALW’s support offer to families, during the Oct half-term break, 10 young people took part in a 4 day drama workshop facilitated by ALW Social Workers and an independent drama therapist, funded by the Adoption Support Fund. The workshop was open to 11-13 years old young people in both Special Guardianship and adoptive families.

The 10 young people, aged 11-13 years of age, started the week looking at setting the scene, building characters and roles, and creating stories, progressing to directing. The children

worked together, supporting each other to bring one of their stories to life, which was wonderful to see. It was impressive that all 10 children came on the first day and continued to come for each of the 4 days.

After just 4 days we could see that they all felt more comfortable in themselves, with each other, and with the staff, and their friendships were becoming more solid. From some parental feedback, we know that some of the young people want to stay in touch, which is an indicator of enjoying each other's company.

A celebration evening was held in November, all of the young people attended as did their parents and special guardians, the children enjoyed pizza's and watching the edited film of the workshop they each received certificates recognising their individual contributions and celebrating their talent.

Drama Therapist's feedback to the social workers who co-facilitated.

I think it was the most amazing week that the young people seemed to get so much from, and I really wanted to thank you for your incredible support.

From the conception of the idea a few months ago, to the ongoing organisation of the celebration follow up session, it has been an absolute pleasure to be involved in a project that has been run so smoothly, and with such enthusiasm. I am so grateful to you and your team for supporting the therapeutic work in such a solid and yet subtle and understated way. It makes such a huge difference.

All of the interactions I was witness to, were so astute, well timed and completely relevant to the situation. I am certain that the young people will hold these personal connections and newly formed relationships firmly and with real meaning feeling the benefit of them for many weeks/months to come.

As a result of the success of the workshop, another workshop took place in May half-term.

After first day of workshop S's Mum and she said she had a great day yesterday and was really keen to come back today. Mom said that S is amazing and is so proud of her.

(Families' feedback on the drama workshop)

Thank you all for your hard work for the drama workshop last week and for the regular feedback from ALW. R really enjoyed it and her confidence was definitely boosted. I know she has already exchanged messages with couple of the other attendees and will look forward to the 25th.

(Families' feedback on the drama workshop)

7. Clinical Psychology in ALW

The clinical psychology offer embeds two NHS employed clinical psychologists (equivalent to 1.0 WTE) alongside Adopt London West's social care services providing support to adoptive and special guardianship families in Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham and Hounslow.

This is a Tier 2 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS); the service offers a range of provision to both social work staff and adopted/special guardianship families.

Below includes an overview of the clinical psychology provision currently:

- *Psychology consultation with social workers*
- *Supporting transitions from foster-carer to adoptive families*
- *Reflective practice for the recruitment and family finding social work team*
- *Supporting the team manager/consultant practitioner to hold and maintain the structure for 'group supervision' for the support team*
- *Training and workshops for staff*
- *Preparations groups for prospective adopters*
- *The development of practice guides*
- *Direct work with children, young people, and families (funded via the Adoption Support Fund); this includes:*
 - I. Assessment and formulation model; a four-session clinical psychology assessment (with an additional review appointment after a written report has been provided to the family) for adopted and special guardian families.*
 - II. Foundations for attachment; a Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) informed programme, for those parenting children who have relationship difficulties, especially children who have experienced attachment difficulties, trauma, loss and/or early separation in their life. This is a nine-week programme and we approximately run four groups a year.*
 - iii. Other therapeutic interventions: the range of direct interventions include Dyadic Developmental Practice/ Parenting/ Psychotherapy (DDP); Narrative Therapy; Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT); mentalisation based approaches; Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) skills; Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR); Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT); and Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT). These interventions are funded through the Adoption Support Fund from the child/young person's intervention grant.*

Case Study example of Clinical Psychologists support to a family

D, aged three years, was referred to the Clinical Psychology service within Adopt London West following the adoptive parents sharing concerns with their social worker in relation to some of D's behaviours and requesting support in understanding and responding to them. Her parent's described their caring relationship to be 'intense'; D often struggled to play and explore independently and remained preoccupied with remaining close to them. D was also rejecting in her relationship with her adoptive father.

The clinical psychology assessment was four sessions and involved a comprehensive account of the family's strengths, presenting needs and parenting experiences. The parent's described strengths of family stability, commitment and D becoming more open to their attempts of physical comfort. They identified parenting challenges of intense connection seeking, control, and hypervigilance. Within the sessions together, there was an emphasis on co-developing a shared understanding of D's needs and the parenting challenges they were experiencing. We understood D's connection seeking as a communication of need, and in response to this the necessity to provide D with attachment experiences that address missed experiences and supports trust in her parent's availability, whilst also holding in mind the impact this has on them as parents.

Considering the needs identified and the shared understanding that was co-developed, therapeutic parenting values were discussed to further strengthen the parent-child relationship and D's experience of safety and security. Some of the recommendations included dedicated and planned attachment time with D, as well as offering preventative connection prior to key moments of separation. We also thought about embodying playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy within their way of being with D; and the value of naming and storying her emotions and experiences to support D in meaning-making her inner world. The recommendations also recognised the need for adults to be consciously aware of their non-verbal communication and provide storytelling of their emotional world to lessen any worries of rejection or the 'threat-lens in which D view's their interactions with her. Considerations were also given to her parent's noticing when there may be a wrestle for control within their relationship and how they may respond to this.

8. Adoption Panel

The ALW Adoption panel hears recommendations on.

- *Proposed matches of children with prospective adopters*
- *Adoption as a suitable care plan for children whose parent/s have consented to adoption (formerly referred to as relinquished babies)*
- *Suitability of prospective adopters to be approved*
- *Reviews of adopters and recommendations to rescind approval.*

There have been 16 ALW Panels from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023, running every 3 weeks, with due consideration to the need for additional panels, based on the demand by ALW in ensuring that decisions are made in a timely and effective manner.

ALW placed 22 children during this period, however, the Panel made positive matching recommendation on behalf of 26 children, which was the same compared to the previous year. Out of those 26 matches, 7 were made with ALW approved families and 19 with families approved by other RAAs/VAs. Early Permanence Placements – out of the 26 children, 11 were already in early permanence placements when the match was presented at Panel, some children will have been placed in 2021/22.

Adoption Plans -- The Panel also made a recommendation on the adoption plan for 1 child.

The Panel considered the suitability of 20 families to adopt, 4 of whom were dually approved as adopters and foster carers enabling them to offer early permanence placements, Of the families approved in 2022/23 - 25% are of Black, Asian or mixed ethnicity & 15% identify as LGBT+.

In addition to the above 20 approvals, the Panel was asked to consider **7 resignations**:

- 2 families due to being offered jobs abroad and relocating.
- 2 couples due to a breakdown in their relationship.
- 1 couple due to falling pregnant.
- 2 due to change of plans and personal circumstances.

All Prospective Adopter Reports (PARs) taken to panel have had a unanimous positive recommendation from panel and are deemed good to excellent reports and this evidences the excellent work that our recruitment team complete to ensure thorough and evidence-based assessments. Due to staffing capacity, ALW uses Independent Social workers to complete many of its assessments and although it is recognised this is not an ideal situation, all social workers that ALW uses are trusted and aligned with the values and working practices of ALW. Prior to panel, PARs are audited by the Team Manager before being sent to the Panel Advisor for a second audit to provide robust quality assurance.

In addition to those applicants that were successfully approved in 2022-2023, two further applications were supported to withdraw from stage 2 prior to panel and an additional 6 applications were withdrawn or ended during the stage 1 process or post stage 1 break. Again, this evidences the thorough work that the team complete to ensure that applicants are prepared, ready, and safe prior to attending panel.



Feedback to the Panel -- Following each panel meeting, the Adviser sends feedback forms to all those who attended the Panel meeting and the professionals involved. The overall feedback is very positive, with some comments about timings and processes taken into consideration to improve the Panel's practice:

"That was an incredibly positive experience, what lovely people"

"The chair was excellent in both their welcoming and explaining the process to the adopter, who stated to me that she found the experience very pleasant and affirming".

"Panel was a great experience, thank you to everyone involved who did everything they could to keep us relaxed as they could so we could enjoy the experience!"

"Although this was a big day for us and naturally, we were somewhat nervous, panel was a great experience. Everyone did their utmost to make us feel comfortable and relaxed, the panel questions were very clear and fair. We had the chance to say what we wanted to say, we were listened to, and given the chance to ask questions."

"Wonderful Panel Chair, an extremely good balance of being personable and professional."

"In my opinion there was nothing that needed to be improved. Panel was a great experience; my adopter was very happy with the feedback and comments. Panel members were welcoming, and the questions were relevant."

"The Panel was super engaged, welcoming, and clear in all language/communication. The whole experience was made super pleasant thanks to the Chair leading the panel in such an excellent way. I liked how everybody introduced themselves and I was pleasantly surprised everybody gave 2 reasons for their decision. It was an incredibly heart-warming experience which I had not expected. My deepest thanks to everybody part of the panel yesterday."

"All the members of the panel made us feel relaxed. We felt as we could talk about everything openly and we are happy we could share what we feel about S. You made the day that could be more stressful into quite pleasant experience. Thank you for that!"

"Definitely felt treated with respect."

"The questions were very clear and to the point, I felt it was positive that some questions were given before panel".

"I felt very comfortable and at ease to share my views within the panel."

The quality of reports presented to panel throughout the year has been deemed good to excellent, any issues or concerns that have arisen in the functioning of the Panel, or the adoption service have always been successfully resolved because of the effective working relationship that exists between the Panel and ALW.

Quarterly meetings take place between the Panel Chair, the Panel Vice Chair, the Panel Adviser, the Adoption Team Managers, and the ALW Head of Service are productive in progressing development, change and improvement in the work of an adoption agency.

Following each case, the Panel submits its feedback to the Head of Service and managers, any feedback to the panel is considered at the next Panel meeting to ensure that there is quality assurance both ways.

9. Priorities for 2023/24

- *increase the number of children placed with ALW adopters.*
- *further develop the Clinical Psychology offer to enable more clinical intervention services to be delivered in house.*
- *achieve DDP partner status to further support and embed our therapeutic practice model.*
- *increase the number of children living in special guardianship arrangements engaging in community activities through partnerships with Brentford and QPR football clubs.*
- *Implement a consistent and regular training offer to all 4 partner local authorities.*
- *launch shared Adopt London TriX procedures.*
- *implement an independent Adopter voice project across Adopt London.*
- *launch shared Adopt London TriX procedures.*



10. Feedback

<i>"Fantastic presentation - really helpful and loved Sharon sharing her story too. THANK YOU."</i>	Email received following Info Session
<i>"Firstly, I just wanted to say that I was so inspired by you and your colleagues for the work that you do to help children. Secondly, I thought the session was really well run and insightful and a good foundation for understanding the adoption process and the presentation looked great!"</i>	Email received following Info Session
<i>"Wanted to say thank you for organising and for sharing all your experiences. It's so encouraging to be in a room of lgbt adoptive parents and also see so many other lgbt+ prospective parents too. Thank you!"</i>	Feedback following Meet The Adopter LGBT event
<i>"Thank you very much Margaret and colleagues- this was my first session- Excellent Event! Well organised and good opportunities to network!"</i>	IAC
<i>"This was my first event and it was so helpful and informative, thank you!"</i>	PACT
<i>"Thank you so much. This is wonderful news to have come on my Birthday. I am so delighted by this decision. I appreciate all the hard work and support from your team. It has been such a positive experience, and I can't thank everyone enough for that. I am so looking forward to being matched with my child. Have a great day."</i>	Email following notification of Panel approval as an adopter
<i>"Many thanks for organising the funding for continued support. We're very grateful"</i>	Support
<i>"ALW has been incredibly supportive"</i>	Support
<i>"ALW have always provided superb support to us as a family even through the pandemic"</i>	Support
<i>"We are very grateful for the assistance we have received from ALW so far. It has been a great source of support to us, especially through the recent transition from primary to secondary school. I think we would have really struggled over the last 12 months without the help and support provided".</i>	Support
<i>"We just wanted to say a huge thank you for a very informative session. It was really useful and honest."</i>	email received following Info Session
<i>"We have really appreciated the ALW's support which has been invaluable in helping us provide therapy for our family"</i>	Support

<p><i>“Sarah has also been a pillar of support to the whole family. Without her intervention, things would not have progressed the way it has, so we are very much indebted to Sarah too.”</i></p>	Support
<p><i>“We have found ALW to be available and quick to respond to any help. ALW have continued to be supportive and help us access funding to help support our adopted child and us as a family.”</i></p>	Support
<p><i>“We have been very pleased with the support and care given to us. Without it, I doubt if we would have been able to continue family life in the way are doing.”</i></p>	Support
<p><i>“We chose ALW as we attended 3 other Information Sessions with other agencies earlier this year and felt most comfortable with ALW, who were the most helpful, friendly, knowledgeable, and approachable. In the other information sessions the social workers didn’t seem as enthusiastic or knowledgeable. ALW’s was definitely the best session – it was well organised, the presenters came across well, and they even went to the effort of having a previous adopter join the call, which none of the other agencies did at their information sessions.”</i></p>	Prospective Adopter
<p><i>“Sarah, thank you SO MUCH! You have been AMAZING!!!</i></p> <p><i>We really appreciate the help and support that you have given to our family.</i></p> <p><i>It is so incredible that, years after the adoptions, we have the continued to receive the same level of care that we had during both adoptions.”</i></p>	Support
<p><i>“I expected to be passed around and that it would be difficult to get help, but actually i was overwhelmed by how welcoming and supportive Vanessa was on that initial call.”</i></p>	Birth Parent
<p><i>S, an adopted adult phoned on Friday having received a call from someone stating she was relative of her birth mother and that her birth mother was dying and desperately wanted “forgiveness” for having had a child adopted. Munaza immediately advised S what she needed to do and the person at the GRO also pulled out the stops to get the paperwork sent and delivered to Ealing yesterday. S has been in contact yesterday with S and will be meeting virtually with her today as this is a legal requirement and help her to think through this unexpected situation</i></p> <p><i>“Thank you so much Munaza I am so impressed with your service and more importantly I am incredibly grateful with the speed, professionalism, and kindness with which you helped me today.</i></p>	Adopted Adult

Thank you for going the extra mile for me today.”

Debbie Gabriel
Head of Service
September 2023