	<p align="center"><b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b> 14 October 2024</p>
	<p align="center"><b>Report from the Corporate Director of Children and Young People</b></p>
	<p align="center"><b>Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools - Cllr Gwen Grahl</b></p>
<p><b>Brent Adoption Report</b> <b>6-monthly report: 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024</b></p>	
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	N/A
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
<b>List of Appendices:</b>	N/A
<b>Background Papers:</b>	N/A
<b>Contact Officer(s):</b> <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	<p>Debbie Gabriel, Head of Service, Adopt London West Brent's Regional Adoption Agency <a href="mailto:GabrielD@ealing.gov.uk">GabrielD@ealing.gov.uk</a></p> <p>Kelli Eboji Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency <a href="mailto:Kelli.eboji@brent.gov.uk">Kelli.eboji@brent.gov.uk</a></p> <p>Palvinder Kudhail Director, Early Help and Social Care <a href="mailto:Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk">Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk</a></p>

## 1.0 Executive Summary

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

- adoption performance data for the period 1 April 2024– 30 September 2024
- the progress and activity of Adopt London West
- how good outcomes are being achieved for children.

Information and child level data presented in Section 5 of this report is provided by Brent CYP; the remainder of this report includes the progress and activity of Adopt London West.

- 1.2 This is the ninth 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 (ALW) 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 2 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 Recommendation(s)**

- 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 Detail**

### **3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context**

- 3.1.1 This report sets out the provision and management of the local authority’s adoption service and the developments that have taken place in the reporting period. The work of ALW contributes to the following borough priorities:

- **The Best Start in Life**
- **Prosperity and Stability**
- **A Healthier Brent**
- **Thriving Communities**

In order for care experienced young people to have the best start in life, prosperity and stability, safety, and good health they need safe, stable, permanent homes with primary carers who love them and who are able to meet their holistic needs throughout their minority. The work of ALW and the LAC and Permanency service contribute to these priorities by ensuring permanency is achieved for children and young people either via a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or Adoption. Providing safe, stable, permanent, loving placements for children and young people when they are unable to remain with their parent/s, means that they will have the best life chances.

### **3.2 Background - Adopt London West**

- 3.2.1 Adopt London West Regional Adoption Agency became operational on 1 September 2019 with a formal launch in October 2019.
- 3.2.2 A comprehensive partnership agreement forms the basis of the ongoing service arrangements. The Partnership Board on which the Strategic Director, Brent CYP is a member of continues to provide the necessary oversight to ensure that the shared service is appropriately scrutinised and supported to deliver improved outcomes for children and adopters.
- 3.2.3 As part of the national RAA implementation and development programme a network of RAA leaders has been established and a national strategic lead appointed. Government published a National Adoption Strategy in July 2021, that sets out ambitions to further improve the consistency of support offered to adopters and achieve innovation and change in various aspects of the adoption system. Monthly meetings take place attended by the Department for Education (DfE) who remain interested and engaged in the RAA delivery model.
- 3.2.4 National priorities have been agreed by the network of RAA leaders and several workstreams established to progress specific elements of the National Adoption Strategy. ALW's Partnership Board and Heads of Service meetings will continue to be informed of practice changes and developments and will closely monitor performance and practice to ensure standards of service to children and their families remain consistently high.

#### **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 provides a service to Brent residents who wish to make a private application to adopt their partner's child. These are non-agency adoptions and often 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 responsibility 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 Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes then considers and ratifies any adoption plans.

## **5.0 Performance Data**

- 5.1 Brent's 3-year performance for 2021-24 is not yet published, but our local data tells us:
- **A1** (The average time taken for a child entering care to being placed for adoption): 503 days (3-year average) (464 in the last 12 months) compared with 447 days in 2022-23.
  - **A2** (The average time taken from the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and a match being approved): 180 days (3-year average) (223 in the last 12 months) compared with 140 days in 2022-23.
  - **A20** (The average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child): 380 days (3-year average) (481 days in the last 12 months)

## **6.0 Child related data**

- 6.1 There have been 3 Adoption Orders granted between 01/04/2024 and 30/09/2024.
- 6.2 There have been 3 children placed for adoption in the first 6 months of this reporting year.
- 6.3 There have been 2 placement orders granted during this period.
- 6.4 There are currently 18 children with an adoption plan who have not yet been adopted. The details of these children's cases are as follows:
- Eight children are placed with their new families, five have been placed in this reporting period, 3 of those are placed with adopters approved by ALW
  - Nine children are subject to a Placement Order, it is expected that four of these children will be matched with their new families in the next 2 months and begin the process of introductions. All four of these children are to be placed with ALW approved adopters if plans progress as expected.
  - ALW and Brent are exploring potential families for the rest of the children who are subject to a Placement Order

- One child has a plan of Adoption agreed by Brent, but no Court order has yet been granted.

## 6.5 Early Permanence for Children

For some children it is appropriate to consider placing them with foster carers who are also approved adopters, this is referred to as an Early Permanence placement. This enables the child to be placed earlier than is usually possible and before Court proceedings have concluded. Three of the children placed this year have been placed in Early Permanence placements, allowing the children to spend less time in foster care and begin building attachments to their new families.

## 7.0 Adopter Recruitment

7.1 20 Adopter households have been approved in 2023/24.

The target for recruitment of adopters remains at 30, however, this is not achievable with the current resource of 2.5 assessment social workers. One additional social worker was agreed by the Partnership Board at the last meeting. It is hoped that this will increase assessment activity.

Only 5 Adopter households have been approved so far in this reporting period, this is lower than anticipated with some assessments delayed due to the applicants' personal circumstances. 80% are White British, 20% are Black Caribbean, 20% of these approved adopters identify as LGBTQ.

The profile of adopters recruited in this period does broadly match the needs of Brent children with the exception of Black Adopters. 3 out of 5 Brent children placed this year have been with ALW Adopters, and there are a further 4 Brent children linked with ALW adopters who will hopefully be successfully matched and placed within the next 2/3 months. The lack of Black adopters is well documented and the reason why the Black Adoption Project was established.

7.2 There are currently 35 ALW approved adopters: 22 of whom already have a child/children placed with them, 9 are in the active family finding stage, 6 of these families are already matched or linked with children 3 families are on hold due to their personal circumstances, 2 are likely to resign as adopters.

7.3 The adoption assessment process comprises 2 stages. Stage 1 assessments should take place within 2 months 60 days, 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. DfE Adoption and Special Guardianship data for 2023/24 shows the England average for Stage 1 was 134 days, the London average was 193 days, ALW average = 147 days.

- 7.4 Stage 2 should take a maximum of 4 months 182 days, this is a detailed assessment that is both reflective and analytical. In total, the comprehensive assessment process should be completed within 6 months. Adoption and Special Guardianship data for 2023/24 shows the England average for Stage 2 is 150 days, London average at 160 days and ALW average = 147 days.
- 7.5 There are 16 families in the formal stages of assessment. 9 are in Stage 1, and 7 in or about to commence Stage 2.

## **8.0 Casework**

- 8.1 ALW is currently offering a service to 269 Brent children, families or individuals who are accessing their adoption records – 23 children are allocated to a social worker for family finding, 26 are receiving a Social Work service, 42 are currently receiving an ASF therapeutic service that is under review. 30 people have received an Access to Records service so far in this reporting year.
- 8.2 There are 148 contact cases open relating to Brent families - 36 direct contact arrangements and 112 active letterbox exchanges.

## **9.0 Adoption Support Fund**

- 9.1 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. 26 applications have been made to the ASF on behalf of Brent families in this reporting year so far and a total of £67,747 of funding for therapeutic services received for these families.
- 9.2 There are currently no families waiting for an application to the ASF; all assessments for support are allocated.

## **10.0 ALW Adoption Panel**

- 10.1 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 a formal decision.
  - to consider whether a child whose parent/s are consenting to their adoption, (formerly referred to as 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 (Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, Children and Young People's Services) for ratification/challenge; and
  - to consider adoption matches between Brent's children and their prospective adopters, following which a recommendation is made by panel members and sent to Brent's Agency Decision Maker (Director,

Integration and Improved Outcomes, Children and Young People's Services) for ratification/challenge.

- 10.2 Feedback between ALW and Brent 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 to aid service development and quality assure the work of the RAA.
- 10.3 ALW Panel continues to take place virtually via Microsoft Teams. 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. Panel members and observers also complete and return a confidentiality self-declaration, attesting to this for the duration of the panel meeting.
- 10.4 During the period under review, 5 new Adopter households have been approved since April 2024 and 6 Brent children have been formerly matched with their new families by the Agency following positive recommendations from the Adoption panel. 3 children have been placed "in-house" with ALW adopters and 2 children have been placed with adopters from another adoption agency.
- 10.5 Annual training for panel members is a regulatory requirement, a series of practice development discussions have taken place throughout the year with panel members. Training for all Adopt London panel members is planned for November 2024 on a new practice model for considering transracial and trans cultural placements, AFDIT (Anti -racist framework for decision making and transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups into transracial adoptive families) Dr Tam Kane, University of Sussex.

## 11.0 Adoption practice updates

### National

Adoption England Strategy 2024-27 published



ALW development plan aligns to the 5 national outcomes set out below. Adopt London HOS group and ALW staff are involved across some of the working groups progressing culture change and practice development initiatives. Training to LA partners reflects national work and modernising of Adoption agenda, there is a particular emphasis on work for children to maintain relationships with their birth families.





# Outcomes for 2024-2027

In the next 3 years, 2024 -27, Adoption England will prioritise supporting the delivery of the following outcomes:

① Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and supported to meet children's needs.



② Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.



③

Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.



④ Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.



⑤ Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.

## Adopt London Black Adoption Project

# Black Adoption Project

## Funding

- Funding awarded by Adoption England - £250k over 18 months
- Support at funding workshop from Ann Graham as BAP 'ambassador' and stakeholders proved effective
- Employed F/T Programme Lead to launch pilots, develop stakeholder relationships, support comms and awareness-raising activities
- Funds allow for external support to evaluate pilots
- All learning to be shared nationally through RAA Leaders group as well as boroughs and public forums

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# Black Adoption Project

## Recruitment approach

### Used non-traditional approaches to Programme Lead recruitment:

- Information video available online
- Interview questions provided in advance
- 95% candidates from Global Majority
- High level of stakeholder involvement & decision making - 2 project members compared to 5 external stakeholders directly involved in interview panels (4 with lived experience of adoption)

Evaluation to be shared, webinar in October (please share)

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# Black Adoption Project

## Safer Spaces sessions

- Second phase of monthly 'Safer Spaces' session for Black staff
- Review identified need to use the term 'safer'
- Very well received by staff who attend with positive feedback
- Reasonably low attendance – main barrier is caseload and work pressures
- Identifying mechanisms for group to feedback themes or challenge to Heads of Service

"I've felt so supported by a group, every time I come and share. I haven't experienced this type of space in a workplace before and I just want to say how much I value this group."

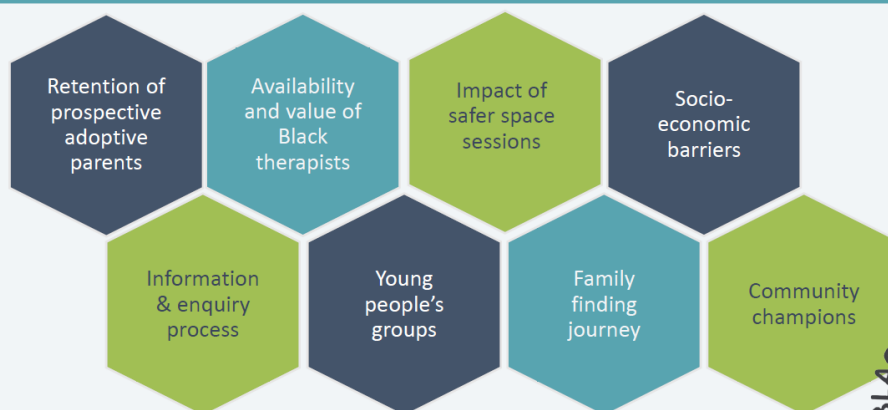
**Safe Space session attendee**

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# Black Adoption Project

## Pilot & research plan



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# Black Adoption Project

## Next steps

- **Potential visit from Janet Daby MP, Minister for Children & Families, in October**
- **Article in Children & Young People Now in October** (Community Care article in May linked below)
- **Increased dissemination of BAP newsletter so more borough staff are aware**
- **Looking at future funding** – further Adoption England funding uncertain until Gov spending review

### Adoption leaders bid to reform 'institutionally racist' system

Strategy aims to address significant delays for black children awaiting adoption, including by tackling 'multiple hurdles' facing black people wanting to adopt and lack of diversity among adoption workforce

by Mithran Samuel on May 30, 2024 in Children, Social work leaders, Workforce

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## 13.0 Adopt London Projects funded by Adoption England, DfE grant funding

### 13.1 Early Permanence

- Conference held 3/7/24 attended by Family Court Judges, Cafcass, IROs and LA Heads of Service
- Shared SW training programme delivered in various sites across London, further sessions in Autumn, including Brent.

### 13.2 Matching

- Adopt London Manager now part time role, Darla Steward ALW, project has been refreshed and new priorities set with Team Managers
- The addition of a Clinical Psychologist to the project has enabled more capacity to support Child Appreciation Days, attend and support Children's Activity Days to advise prospective adopters and lead on other trauma informed practice across the project.
- One of the themes emerging from the project is the needs of neurodivergent children in transitions. The psychologist has experience and expertise in this area and is working with Professor Beth Neil, University of East Anglia to develop practice guidance to support these children as they move to new families.

### 13.3 London Commissioning

- Funding allocated to undertake regional needs assessment, this was completed at the end of June (Commissioning lead from Achieving for Children) analysis of ASGSF spend and therapies used, focus groups with adopters and social workers.
- A successful innovation bid was submitted for £190k of funding to create a shared Adoption Support Service Manager role to develop a social work practice model across Adopt London. Also, the allocated funding will enable additional Clinical Psychology resource to further develop business case & funding model for in house psychology provision in all Adopt London regions.

## 14.0 Conversations for Change

An Adopt London, adopter consultation project was launched earlier in the summer with an adopter with experience of community engagement facilitating the consultation.

Over 100 responses were received, feedback from families aligned with messages heard in the focus groups that were held as part of the regional needs assessment. The plan is to continue the consultation project, including some at least one face to face focus group each year.



## 15.0 Adopt London West practice updates

### 15.1 Drama workshop

ALW's third drama workshop for young people took place in April, 3 young people from Brent attended, 2 adopted children and 1 child living in a special guardianship arrangement. The children attended every day, none knew each other beforehand, they all engaged in the workshop and enjoyed a celebration event on the last day, attended by their parents/carers.

One of the same children went on to attend a Free to Be, a residential summer camp, below is some feedback from the camp organisers on her participation.

*What a pleasure it was to have K! She is such a sweet, caring and thoughtful young person. She was so excited when she arrived, bracing herself for all the outdoor activities, in particular she LOVED horse riding. K was really able to spread her wings on this project. It was amazing seeing her confidence grow each day. She gained lots of new skills such as going canoeing and practicing her swimming. It was amazing seeing her come back from a night of camping under the stars, which we know must have been a little nerve racking. It's clear that she benefits from the 1:1 approach we take, spending time in the outdoors and adventure.*

### 15.2 Keeping in Touch arrangements

A focus of work in this period has been to further develop the keeping in touch arrangements for children, previously referred to as Contact. In line with the adoption transformation agenda,

As a result of this focus and reorganisation of resources there has been a significant increase in direct contact cases, focussed work to promote maintaining relationships for children has resulted in an increase from 56 open direct contact arrangements on 31/3/23 to 164 arrangements on 31/7/24, an increase of 192%

In addition to the regular cases, the team is currently supporting 7 Brent families where *additional* keeping in touch arrangements have been made with birth family members, beyond what was originally planned, which involves 17 children in total seeing/communicating with family members where they may not have done previously.

## 16.0 Feedback

A sample of feedback received following the drama group in April 2024:

*"I wanted to reach out and say a huge thank you to Suzanne, you and the team that facilitated last week's drama workshop. R, as you know, was reticent to join and yet he now has a new 'best friend' and appears far more confident and relaxed!"*

*He also felt able to disclose an incident of bullying that has been worrying and affecting him at school. I believe this is directly related to the level of trust, acceptance and empowerment he felt, and as the week progressed, he grew in confidence enough to be able to recognise and speak out about the hurt he has been experiencing. Thank you for inviting R to join the workshop and for providing him with an incredible experience and supportive environment, showing him, he can be who he is, and be proud of that ♥ this is such a fun community"*

- *"I was so nervous at first but now I like it here"*
- *"We are all on the same page"*
- *"It is really special being here"*
- *"It is nice to feel like you are not alone"*

*"The amazing work you have done with the children is greatly appreciated."*

## 17.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

17.1 There are currently no stakeholder and ward member consultation considerations arising from this report.

## 18.0 Financial Considerations

18.1 Brent Council's contribution to the cost of running the functions of ALW in 2023/24 was £0.411m.

18.2 The overall benefits of a shared service are also realised through the practice improvement and opportunities that are possible now that small individual services have become part of the wider Adopt London collaboration and the national RAA network. It was previously not possible for LA Adoption services

to offer the range of support and services that can now be delivered as a Regional Adoption Agency.

### **19.0 Legal Considerations**

19.1 There are currently no legal considerations arising from this report.

### **20.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations**

20.1 There are currently no Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) considerations arising from this report.

### **21.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations**

21.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.

### **22.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)**

22.1 There are no human resource or property considerations.

### **23.0 Communication Considerations**

23.1 At this stage there are not any communication considerations.

**Report sign off:**

***Nigel Chapman***

Corporate Director of Children and Young People