

## LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM

**Report to:** Children & Education Policy and Accountability Committee

**Date:** 31/01/2022

**Subject:** Adopt London West – Assurance Report

**Report author:** Debbie Gabriel, Head of Service, Adopt London West

**Responsible Director:** Jacqui McShannon, Director of Children’s Service

---

### SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide a briefing to the Council’s Policy and Accountability Committee in relation to:

- The progress and activity of Adopt London West.
- Adoption performance data for 2020/21, including Q3 data for 2021/22
- How good outcomes are being achieved for children.

Cabinet previously gave approval for Hammersmith & Fulham Council to:

- a) join the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) *Adopt London West* consisting of the London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hounslow and Hammersmith and Fulham, hosted by Ealing for the provision of Adoption services and Special Guardianship Support; and
- b) delegate authority to the Director of Children’s Service in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children and Education to agree and enter into a Partnership Agreement with participating boroughs.

Adopt London West has been a “live” Regional Adoption Agency since October 2019, all Local Authority Adoption Agencies were required by Government to become part of a regional arrangement by April 2020.

---

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The 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 to promote good outcomes for children. This is in line with standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2014).

---

## **Background – Adopt London West**

Adopt London West (ALW) Regional Adoption Agency became operational on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019 with a formal launch in October 2019.

A comprehensive partnership agreement forms the basis of the ongoing partnership arrangements. The partnership board on which the Director of Children’s Service, Hammersmith and Fulham sits will continue to provide the necessary oversight to ensure that the shared service is appropriately scrutinised and supported to deliver improved outcomes for children and adopters.

As part of the national Regional Adoption Agency (hereafter referred to as RAA) implementation and development programme a network of RAA leaders has been established and Strategic Lead appointed to oversee the implementation of the National Adoption Strategy, published in July 2021. There are currently 31 operational RAA’s across the country. Monthly meetings are facilitated by the Department for Education (DfE) delivery partner Deloitte. Meetings are attended by senior DfE officials and provide an opportunity to agree shared priorities and progress wider sector collaboration and influence practice improvement.

## **Responsibilities**

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.
2. 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. Further, ALW is responsible for the provision of services to special guardians, adopted adults and all those affected by adoption and special guardianship arrangements who request a specific service or an assessment of need.
3. ALW also provides a service to Hammersmith & Fulham residents who wish to make a private application to adopt their partner’s child, often referred to as “step-parent” adoption, or special guardians who may wish to adopt the child in their care. The team is involved in completing adoption reports for 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

## Adopter Recruitment

4. The recruitment of adopters is now shared activity across the Adopt London partnership of the 4 RAA's, a marketing and communications strategy provides the framework for all public facing recruitment efforts. A strapline "the heart of adoption in London" encapsulates the partnership and communicates our vision of being the regional adoption agencies of choice for London residents, putting London children at the heart of everything we do.
5. We are committed to recruiting adopters who understand the needs of our children, our preparation and training of adopters encourages them to parent therapeutically. There is a particular focus on targeting prospective adopters who can meet the racial, religious, and cultural needs of our black children.



### Targeted work

- Black History Month – link to Black Adoption Project
- Downing street visit round table discussion with Adopt London Adopters
- Readiness tool launch & Our Children film
- Social media forward plan
- Adopt London Choir

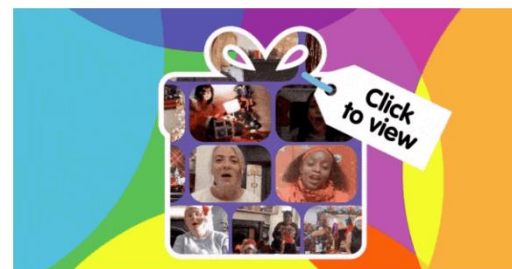


6. Our key messages represent our focus on children, the strength of the Adopt London partnership, the scope of our service provision and the inclusivity of our brand. These are incorporated in all our marketing activity, on our website, and printed materials, a comprehensive social media strategy ensures that content is posted each week that reflects the messages below.
  - Children are at the heart of what we do
  - Experts in adoption
  - Supporting you throughout your adoption journey
  - Everybody is welcome
  - Celebrating London's diverse adoption community.
7. The COVID pandemic has changed the way we recruit new adopters and support our approved adopters. The pandemic meant fewer opportunities for us to meet adopters in person, so we had to focus on how we could consistently reach adopters in new and innovative ways by pivoting to a digital approach.

8. Additional Adoption Support Fund (ASF) funding was made available to each RAA through the Covid Emergency ASF funds. Most of this funding for London was pooled and a range of additional support services were commissioned quickly and successfully, including an animated film “Closer and Stronger” highlighting the support available to adopters and special guardians.
9. We also started an [Adopt London virtual Choir](#) as a means of families keeping in touch and having some fun, this was initially a Covid response initiative but has been so successful in becoming a peer support community and we continue to fund the project.
10. Our understanding of using a digital approach and the “soft advertising” potential of promoting the Adopt London brand has been considerable, increasing traffic to the website, a growth in social media followers, and extending the content reach to our target audience enables us to reach more prospective adopters.
11. Using appropriate hashtags that target specific groups and using diverse images in content we post and publish, reflecting key adoption dates, national holidays and religious and cultural festivals ensures that our content is relevant, varied, and interesting.
12. We will continue to build on experience to deliver a marketing and communications approach that supports London’s diverse communities accessing the publicity and advertising via different marketing channels and to establish a strong reputation as a leading provider within the adoption services marketplace.

## Season's Greetings

from everyone at Adopt London



Follow us

On [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)  
@adoptlondonuk for the latest news and updates

[www.adoptlondon.org.uk](http://www.adoptlondon.org.uk)

*“We chose ALW as we attended a range of Information Sessions earlier this year and felt most comfortable with ALW, who were, friendly, knowledgeable, and approachable.*

*The social workers were enthusiastic and knowledgeable. ALW’s was a great 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.” Feedback received following the information session.*

13. ALW approved 13 Adopter households in the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021, a total of 20 households were approved in the full reporting year 2020/21. This year's performance will see an increase in approval numbers. Whilst this is positive, we are ambitious and this is not yet to the target level of 30 approvals, as a result of assessment capacity pressures. Therefore, the Partnership Board has agreed some additional temporary posts including a Practice Manager to provide additional oversight to recruitment activity, performance is expected to improve as a result.
14. 40% of families approved in 2020/21 were from Black or mixed ethnicity households and 25% identify as LGBTQ. Of the families recruited this year, the figures are 23% and 31% respectively.
15. There are currently 38 ALW approved adopters, 16 of whom already have a child placed with them, 10 are still in the active family finding stage, and five families are linked or matched to children. Seven families are on hold due to their personal circumstances, three of which are likely to resign as Adopters and withdraw from the process.

**The adoption assessment process comprises 2 stages.**

16. **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.
17. The National Adoption & Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) publishes national data on Adoption performance, data below provides comparative data with Adopt London partners, assessment timescales are outside of the expected timeframes but reflect national delays and are favourable compared to our Adopt London partners.

2020/21 – Stage 1 Assessment	Target – 60 days
England	112
Adopt London North (ALN)	153
Adopt London South (ALS)	53
Adopt London East (ALE)	194
Adopt London West (ALW)	134

18. Stage 1 performance for the families approved so far in 2021/22 has improved to an average of 99.7 days although no comparative data is yet available.
19. **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.

2020/21 Stage 2 Assessment	Target – 121 days
England	141
ALN	220
ALS	141
ALE	221
ALW	134

20. Stage 2 performance for the families approved so far this year has fallen to an average of 149 days. This is due to a combination of factors including the personal circumstances of applicants, needing to travel abroad to visit relatives and delays in medicals, both factors are pandemic related and to another family needing urgent and extensive building works.
21. There are currently 21 families in the formal stages of assessment, 9 in Stage 1 and 12 in Stage 2. It is expected that a total of 22 families will be approved by the end of March 2022.

## Children

22. Nationally the number of children adopted continues to fall, there has been an 18% decrease in Adoption Orders granted between March 2019 – March 2021, the percentage difference in London is higher with a decrease of 31% in the same period.

		2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	%
Adoption Orders	London	276	243	190	-31%
Placement Orders	London	264	242	195	-26%
Placements	London	266	198	207	-22%

## Hammersmith and Fulham Adoption Performance

23. Achieving early permanence through Adoption is extremely important for the small number of children who cannot safely live with their birth parents or connected people.
24. National Adoption Scorecard Indicators are a reference point when reviewing timeliness to permanence for these children. However, we need to be mindful to look beyond timescale indicators and consider the following factors as well; that Adoption is the right care plan for the child and that the adoptive match made is strong. The Adoption Scorecard is data published by the government which shows the length of time taken to place children in need of adoption. The two indicators referred to specifically are:

- **A1 Indicator** – date entered care to moving in with Adoptive family<sup>1</sup> = 426 days
- **A2 Indicator** – Placement order to match<sup>2</sup> =121 days

### **Adoption Scorecard Performance 2020/21**

25. During the year 2020/21 less than five children were placed for Adoption, and at the end of April 2021 less than five per cent of Hammersmith and Fulham Children Looked After were subject to Placement Orders (where the Court had granted permission to place these children with adopters).
26. Given this reflects a very small group of children, further detail about the circumstances of these children is not provided in this report in order to protect confidentiality. However, progress against their individual care plans is very carefully monitored and this includes thorough case work supervision, independent scrutiny from their Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), as well as Senior Leadership oversight through our internal tracking and escalation processes and forums. The relevant Senior Managers from ALW and the Local Authority social work teams meet monthly and review performance at an operational level and consider any strategic learning.
27. In 2020/21 the A1 indicator (as described in paragraph 24) was met for over half of the children placed and the A2 indicator (also described in paragraph 24) was exceeded for over half. The very small numbers in this cohort affect the statistical significance and therefore, the conclusions that can be drawn about practice. However, individual case reviews have been undertaken for each of these children and we have a good understanding about the factors impacting upon progress against their care plans.
28. We are reassured that there have been positive outcomes for all these children; strong matches and been made and they are all thriving in the care of their adopters. Any thematic learning arising from our tracking, monitoring and case reviews is shared across ALW, social work teams, Senior Leadership and relevant Local Authority partners including Health and the Family Courts.
29. Adoption will have a life changing impact for a child and so it is important that care planning is thoughtful and well informed. Regular reviews are undertaken of all the children currently subject to Placement Orders to look at timeliness of planning and decision making including whether any delay has purposeful in order to properly pursue opportunity for the children concerns to remain living in their own family. Recent reviews have reassured us that for the majority of children there has been timely decision making that Adoption is the right plan for those children. However, we have also seen the impact of Covid-19 on the duration of Care Proceedings in the Court arena and the Local

---

<sup>1</sup> Measuring the entire process

<sup>2</sup> A Placement Order is a specific order the Court can grant at the end of care proceedings when it is satisfied that all opportunities for this child to remain within their own family network have been exhausted. It gives the Local Authority permission to place the child with an adoptive family.

Authority has been escalating any concerns with the judiciary and utilise relationships within the Court Users group and with our link Judge.

30. A key element of the partnership between H&F and ALW is the shared commitment to practice improvement, preparing and moving children on to their adoption placements is a sensitive, complex process and practice is evolving in this area. ALW and partners have implemented the University of East Anglia (UEA) Moving to Adoption Transition Model developed by Professor Beth Neill.

31. A practice learning event took place in December facilitated by Dr Mel Jarvis, Clinical Psychologist and ALW's Team Manager and attended by practitioners from all 4 partner Local Authorities, this approach compliments and is supported by the systemic practice by clinicians and social workers in H&F

32. We also recognise the complex and difficult decisions that need to be made when planning for brothers and sisters together for adoption or making the difficult decision to separate the children if their individual needs require this. Specialist training was commissioned, "Siblings Together or Apart" and attended by social workers from across the partnership.

### **33. Our Learning and Interventions to improve timeliness of family finding**

- Those who have waited the longest have identified complex needs or developmental uncertainty. We are working with our Health colleagues regarding timeliness of health appointments and interventions for children and the medical advice provided to prospective adopters
- We have strengthened strategic oversight and challenge between Hammersmith and Fulham social work teams and ALW and this includes monthly Head of Service sessions to facilitate constructive
- A further strengthening of focussed Permanence Planning Meetings where timeframes for children are clearly set out and reviewed against progress-
- Additional ALW panels added, moves to frequency of 3 weekly from June 21 to ensure matches are not delayed and exceed A2 indicator
- ALW ensure that all appropriate steps are taken to identify families and continue the search for an adoptive family, this includes regional and national profiling events, facilitating virtual play activities, inviting potential adopters to observe the child joining in activities with an entertainer (with the child's foster carer present).

34. It is a strength that Hammersmith and Fulham remain committed to identifying a family for those children who have waited the longest continues despite the delay. As part of a new Adopt London, Black Adoption Project, further data analysis of the ASGLB data has shown that Black children in London are 12 times more likely to have their plan of Adoption changed due to Adopters not being identified.

### **Adoption and Special Guardianship Support**

35. A range of services are offered to families who require additional support to care for their children, a social worker may be allocated to provide targeted specific support to families. In addition, a comprehensive training offer is



available to families, through a partnership with We are Family (WAF) an adopter peer support organisation a webinar training programme has been developed offering adoptive families a minimum of 2 training webinars per month, a podcast series has also recently been added. A termly, education support group is offered that is co-facilitated by an Educational Psychologist.

36. ALW also offer a 6-week training course, Foundations for Attachment. The course provides parents and carers with additional insight into caring for children who have suffered developmental trauma. Some participants have described the course as transformational in their parenting approach. The course is offered 3 times per year for both adopters and special guardians
37. ALW remains the only Adopt London region that has Special Guardianship support as part of the core offer. 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 equality in terms of services offered to Special Guardians across the country.
38. Some families require more specialist therapeutic support, in these cases applications can be made to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to provide an individual therapeutic service.
39. In 2020/21 45 applications were made to the fund on behalf of H&F families and £99,632 was claimed for therapy services, to date in 2021/22, 33 applications have been made and £66,953 claimed.

## **Casework**

40. There are currently 151 H&F cases open to ALW:
  - family finding – 21
  - social work support – 14
  - reviews of ASF therapy – 27
  - letterbox contact arrangements – 61
  - direct contact arrangements – 21
  - access to records – 6
  - non-agency/inter-country adoption – 1
41. ALW continues to experience challenges in the allocation of workers to complete non-agency (private) adoption applications, there is currently a waiting list of 15 families of which three are H&F families. Families are offered advice and kept informed in relation to delays, cases are prioritised based on urgency. A voluntary adoption agency has been commissioned as a pilot arrangement to undertake some of the assessments.
42. A comprehensive action plan is in place for all areas of practice development in ALW.

## Adopt London

1. ALW is one of 4 Regional Adoption Agencies that make up “Adopt London” a wider partnership and collaboration of 23 boroughs that form Adopt London:
  - **Adopt London North (ALN):** a partnership between Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, and Islington, hosted by Islington.
  - **Adopt London South (ALS):** a partnership between, Achieving for Children (Richmond and Kingston) Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Wandsworth, Southwark, and Sutton, hosted by Southwark.
  - **Adopt London East (ALE):** a partnership between Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham, and Tower Hamlets, hosted by Havering; and
  - **Adopt London West (ALW):** a partnership between Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Hounslow, hosted by Ealing.

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.

43. Some of the current priorities for the Adopt London partnership are:
44. **Development of adoption readiness tool** - potential adopters will be able to complete an online guided tool to help them decide if Adoption is right for them. Adoption is an extremely sensitive and private consideration, enabling families to decide if they are ready to proceed with an enquiry privately will support families to be better prepared once they start the formal process.
45. **Continued improvement of website resources and social media campaign** - Adopt London’s website [www.adoptlondon.org.uk](http://www.adoptlondon.org.uk) provides, information and resources for people interested in and affected by adoption, an animated film has been developed to help potential adopters understand the needs of children who require an adoption placement. A comprehensive social media plan to promote blogs and engage with a more contemporary audience using popular platforms ensures the Adopt London brand remains current and influence prospective adopters to choose one of the Adopt London regions. A shared marketing and communications strategy sets out the objectives for this work.



### 46. Adopt London, Black Adoption Project

a long standing and persistent gap exists between the number of black adopters and the number of black children for whom an adoption plan is agreed. Adopt London recognises this inequality and will make every effort to remove obstacles and provide support to both adopters and children. A steering group will provide governance to the project and will be chaired by one of the Adopt London partner LA’s DCS. Understanding the experience of black adopters on their recruitment and assessment journey will inform and shape the work with Adopt London staff group, marketing strategy and will help us to genuinely understand the complex factors that impact on adopters’

progression or withdrawal from the process. Safe space sessions for black staff within the Adopt London partnership is another key element of the wider project objectives.

47. ALW in partnership with Hammersmith & Fulham will continue to work collaboratively to improve services to all those affected by Adoption and Special Guardianship arrangements. For children who require adoption, for their birth parents, adoptive parents and their sisters and brothers who may have a different care plan. The opportunities for innovation and development come from within the strong partnerships with each individual partner Local Authority and from the wider partnership of the 23 LA's who are part of the wider Adopt London partnership.