



Adoption Service Report

1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

Report for Sandwell Children's Trust

Date of report 8 June 2023

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Service Adoption@Heart

Appendix 1a

1. **Introduction and Purpose of the Report:**

This report fulfils the obligations in the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002, to report to the "executive side" of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in this report.

The report covers the full year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, Appendix 1a will cover the overall work within Adoption@Heart and the progress with adopter recruitment and Appendix 1b will be service specific for each of the four partner agencies.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2023.

Adoption@Heart is a Regional Adoption Agency, providing adoption services on behalf of Sandwell Children's Trust, City of Wolverhampton Council, Dudley Council and Walsall Council. The service is hosted by City of Wolverhampton Council and became operational on 1 April 2019. The service is now four years old.

2. Aims and Objectives:

The overarching aim of Adoption@Heart is to provide secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families through their lifelong adoption journey. Adoption@Heart offers child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team.

Adoption@Heart supports the ethos that children and young people are best able to develop close and enduring relationships within a family setting. Adoption@Heart aims to ensure that all children whom it places within adoptive families will experience stability, security, and quality of care throughout their childhood and into their adulthood.

The objectives of Adoption@Heart are to:

- Meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, associated standards, regulations, and guidance.
- Ensure the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process, as outlined in the Welfare Checklist (Adoption & Children Act 2002).
- Support the process of timely decision making for children in relation to permanence options, including the use of Early Permanence Placements.
- Recruit, assess and approve a range of adoptive families in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of our LA and Children's Trust partners children for whom adoption is the plan, including children who wait longer, sibling groups and those children who require an early permanence placement.
- Promote best practice in adoption through the provision of advice and support to our LA and Children's Trust partners with the care planning process.
- Ensure the assessment and preparation of adoptive families is comprehensive and robust, in order that adopters are aware of and prepared to meet the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan.
- Provide a child centred, needs led matching, transition, and placement process for children.
- Provide a comprehensive adoption support service for adopted children and young people and their parents, adopted adults and birth family members.
- Ensure all staff involved in the work of Adoption@Heart have the appropriate level of skill, knowledge, and experience to deliver an effective service.
- Regularly review and evaluate services provided to ensure services delivered are of the highest possible standard and continue to meet the needs of our LA and Children's Trust partners and the children and families in receipt of our services.

3. National Context:

Whilst representing a small part of the total children's social work sector, adoption continues to have a high profile politically. The programme of regionalisation which commenced in 2016

is now almost complete, with 29 Regional Adoption Agencies covering virtually all Local Authorities in England. There continues to be some areas, such as Birmingham, where they have formed as a Voluntary Adoption Agency, due to the nature and size of their individual organisations and Children's Trust status.

The government launched their [Adoption Strategy: Achieving Excellence Everywhere](#) in July 2021, setting out its vision to further improve the adoption system across England, with the provision of sector-led support to create national models of best-practice.

The National RAA Leaders Group is working to deliver against key areas of the strategy in line with the 3 key priority areas identified in their plan for 2021-2023:

1. Adoption Recruitment
2. The Child's Journey
3. Adoption Support

The National RAA leaders group meets monthly and there are working groups in place to address these three priority areas. Adoption@Heart is not currently represented on the working groups due to a change in Head of Service role in November 2022. The group receives updates directly from the Department for Education, the Children's Minister, and Ofsted.

In February of this year, Ofsted announced its intention to roll out an inspection framework for Regional Adoption Agencies. It is likely this will mirror the VAA inspection framework. However, given the variation in RAA set-up, to clearly define the parameters for an inspection, Ofsted will be selecting 6 pilot inspection sites in the summer of this year, with a plan to roll out the learning from these pilot inspections in Winter 2023. The new inspection framework and evaluation criteria is likely to be published early 2024.

4. Regional Context:

Adoption@Heart continues to be an active member of the Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC). The shared aim of the MTC partnership is to work together to enhance placement choice at the earliest possible opportunity for children and to ensure effective arrangements and protocols are in place for providing longer term adoption support. There are 18 Local Authority members and two Voluntary Adoption Agency members. There are five Regional Adoption Agencies represented.

The key aims are to:

- Reduce the placement waiting times for children.
- Increase the number of children placed regionally.
- Enhance adopter involvement in placement identification.
- Improve the co-ordination and access to adoption support services and to take advantage of opportunities to develop best practice across the region, to improve opportunities and services for children to be adopted and adoptive families.

Whilst all RAA's are working to ensure sufficiency for approval of adopters to meet the needs of children with an adoption plan, Adoption@Heart still uses a relatively high number of inter-agency placements, securing regional links is preferable to placing children at a distance.

The placement figures for the MTC region for 2022-23 are as follows:

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- There were 145 interagency placements made for 206 children.
- 12 placements were secured with RAA's in the region for 13 children (8.3%).
- 41 placements were made with our VAA partners for 60 children, representing 28.3% of all placements made.

The focus this year has been the launch of the MTC Early Permanence Good Practice Guide. This follows the launch of the National Early Permanence Standards. This is in recognition of the need to ensure we consider early permanence for all children with a likely plan of adoption. Since the launch of the Good Practice Guide in February and March 2023, referrals for Fostering to Adopt (FFA) placements have increased. The challenge for Adoption@Heart and other RAA's is recruiting enough adopters to meet the increase in demand.

5. Recruitment of Adopters:

5.1 New Enquiries

For the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, the Adoption@Heart Recruitment Team received 541 new enquiries.

This is in comparison to 609 enquiries received last year.

5.2 Information Events

21 virtual information events took place with 169 households attending and six phone consultations (mix of single and joint applicants). Therefore, 32% of people who made an enquiry went onto receive information.

6. Marketing Overview:

Marketing figures for this period are:

- 541 enquiries.
- Six phone consultations and 169 households attended information events.
- Between 1st April 2022 and 31 March 2023, we had a total of 18,611 website visits – made up of 13,491 unique visits.
- 482 Twitter followers.
- 2,180 Facebook likes.
- 340 Instagram Followers.

6.1 Marketing brief

In late spring, a national campaign was launched by 'You Can Adopt' which focused on the children that wait longer (i.e., older children, siblings, children with additional needs and children from ethnic minorities). Adoption@Heart supported the campaign with local PR (which resulted in two radio interviews), social media posts (both organic and paid for adverts) and Google Ads campaign.

In September and October, Adoption@Heart launched its own recruitment campaign, which ran alongside National Adoption Week. The campaign aimed to increase awareness of Adoption@Heart and encourage anyone thinking about adoption to contact their Regional Adoption Agency – Adoption@Heart. Artwork and messaging focused on the brand and the

strength of the three Local Authority and Children's Trust brand. Imagery focused on a single parent and toddler, both of Black heritage. The advert recorded for the radio campaign featured the voice of a Black female actor, with the message focused on the Adoption@Heart brand, myth busting and information about the children that wait longer.

The campaign included targeted Google Ads, PR to regional media, digital 'page takeover' on the Express & Star website, billboard advertising, a radio campaign with Free Radio, the launch of a 'mega rear' bus back advert which travels daily around the Black Country for 12 months, plus a schedule of co-ordinated social media posts (including paid for social media adverts) across Adoption@Heart and partner social media channels.

Adoption@Heart also shared the national 'You Can Adopt' campaign, which focused on the memories and keepsakes of adopted young people and adults throughout their journey. This campaign was supported via social media posts, emails to residents and the Adoption@Heart website.

In December, Adoption@Heart shared a story of two adopted brothers that wanted to donate their Christmas presents to children that go without during the festive period. The gifts were donated to a local Family Hub. Adoption@Heart helped coordinate the donation and shared the story with local press and via social media channels.

In January, Adoption@Heart launched a campaign focusing on people motivated by the new year and their new goals. Building on from the campaign that took place in October, adverts focused on the Adoption@Heart brand for anyone considering adoption, a reminder that Adoption@Heart is the Regional Adoption Agency for the Black Country. A radio ad focused on emphasising the brand and dispelling myths by using the voice of a single 'adopter' who talks about the different people that can adopt and which children are currently waiting the longest. Imagery of a single adopter from a Black ethnic minority background was used across all artworks and the voice of a female from a Black ethnic minority group was used for the radio advert. The Facebook advert used multiple images including a single female, single male, range of ethnic minority backgrounds, a same sex couple and a person with a disability.

The campaign included a Facebook/Instagram advert, radio advert (digital and Black Country transmitter), Google adverts, PR (which resulted in two local radio interviews), a sponsored article and social media post with Birmingham Live, plus promotion around the first face to face information event held since before the pandemic.

LGBTQ+ Adoption and Fostering week took place in March 2023, which saw the launch of the '1, 2, 3 or more' campaign, a recruitment campaign to encourage those from the LGBTQ+ community who are considering adoption or would like more information to come forward and to also consider whether they could adopt siblings. Adoption@Heart had support from LGBTQ+ adopters to share their stories across multiple platforms including video, social media, blog posts and at virtual information events. A month-long digital radio campaign also took place with an advert targeting LGBTQ+ adopters to come forward. Towards the end of the campaign a general adoption sponsored post was shared via Birmingham Live.

Adoption@Heart has continued to offer virtual information events for prospective adopters using Microsoft Teams but has now added face to face events back into the schedule. Virtual events have continued to work well and were attended by an average of nine people per event across the year. Events are hosted by Social Workers, the Marketing Executive, and an adopter, where possible. The format of video, a presentation, plus a Q&A session, continues to provide an interactive and engaging session.

The face-to-face events are held in different community venues within the Black Country, ensuring that locations rotate around the region. The event format is similar, but with the opportunity to speak to the team at the end of the event over refreshments. This also allows attendees to complete an expression of interest (EOI) form on the spot which increases the conversion from attendance to EOI from levels achieved at a virtual event. It is planned to continue to offer a mixture of virtual and face to face events to meet differing preferences of enquirers.

Regular meetings continue to take place with the Communications Leads across the three Local Authorities and the Trust. The meetings are used to discuss both national and regional marketing campaigns and activities, the marketing and communications support given to Adoption@Heart by the other comms leads (utilising the knowledge of their areas and resources) and what future support is needed and how the partnership can work going forward. Ongoing plans include joint working between fostering and adoption at community events across the Black Country.

This year will see the launch of a further national 'You Can Adopt' campaign, aimed at increasing awareness of support available to adopters. The new campaign is due to launch in late June 2023. Adoption@Heart has been improving the website with the aim to switch over to a new look website in the next few months. The new website features improved navigation, user experience and additional content including videos and articles. The improved website will work hand in hand with refreshed Google Ad campaigns. Having relaunched Instagram, Adoption@Heart now aims to increase content creation and improve its social media channels to increase reach and impact.

7. Adopter recruitment statistics:

Adoption@Heart approved 40 adopter households in 2022/23.

- 15 (37.5%) were approved within the six months statutory timescale.
- 25 (62.5%) were not approved with the six-month statutory timescale.
- This year we approved 17 less adopter households, compared to last year's figure of 57.
- There has been some decline in timeliness for completion of assessments. The average number of days across the 40 approvals in stage two is 141. The fewest number of days was 79 and the longest 465.
- 43 households completed stage one throughout 2022/23. The average number of days in stage one was 160. The fewest number of days was 26 and the longest 559 days.

Nationally, there has been an overall decline in the number of adopters being approved and a decline in the number of adopters starting the adoption process. Whilst there are no nationally defined reasons for the decline in adopter numbers, the RAA leaders' group has begun to gather intelligence on the impact of the current cost of living crisis. It is clear that prospective adopters are making different decisions regarding family size and delay in pursuing adoption. There is a clear North/South divide with adopter enquiry numbers holding steady in some Southern areas whereas the Midlands and the North of the country are being adversely affected with overall decline in enquiries and approvals.

In addition to this, In November 2022, Adoption UK published survey results of over 300 adopter households in different stages of the adoption process on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. They found:

- 7% delayed beginning their adoption approvals process.
- 5% paused the process after it had begun.
- 41% said they were considering adopting fewer children than previously

The survey also found adopters were concerned about the expense of setting up a home for a child, buying essential equipment, being able to afford to take off their full adoption leave entitlement and having enough finance to enable them as a family to enjoy family experiences, such as days out and activities. These pressures were more acute for self-employed applicants, single applicants, and low-income households.

Adoption@Heart is focused on ensuring recruitment activity is robust and visible and is clear in its messaging that finance is not a barrier to adoption. However, for those who were in assessment during 2021-22, it is clear finance was an issue for many families with some deciding to withdraw from the process and others having to take a break to address their debt.

In addition to finance issues, during the year, we have seen a high number of complex assessments with some adopters having to take a considerable amount of time to come to terms with their personal histories including, loss and grief, poor mental health, and adverse childhood experiences. This has also adversely impacted on the completion of adoption assessments within six months.

On a positive note, during Q4 Adoption@Heart were beginning to see an increase in adopter enquiries.

At the end of March 2023 there were 40 families in stage two:

- Including three cases on hold.
- 10 (25%) have been in stage two for over a year.
5 (12.5%) have been in stage two for between 8 and 12 months
- 4 (10%) between 4 and 8 months
- 21 (52.5%) for under 4 months.

Whilst this does show there are still some complex families in assessment, the total number in stage two at the end of March 2023, is higher than the figure for the same time last year which was 27.

At the end of March 2023 there were 58 families in stage one:

- Including five families on hold.
- 19 (32.8%) have been in stage One for two months or less.
- 39 (67.2%) families have been in stage one for over two months.

The total number of families in stage one at the end of March 2023 is higher than last year's figure of 39.

At the end of March 2023, there were 21 families approved and waiting compared to 43 families approved and waiting at the end of March 2022. Of these:

- Five of these are early permanence placements waiting to be formally matched.
- Six are families of South Asian origin, who have been waiting for a considerable amount of time for a child who matches their cultural and religious heritage.

- Four have specific matching criteria and are considering children.
- The remainder are in the early stages of matching or are newly approved and now considering children.

The average days waiting for a placement was 322, (10 months). One family had been waiting 1401 (46 months). (a child has been linked in April 2023) The shortest amount of time was less than a month for a family that had been approved in March 2023. At this point in time, adopter approvals are looking much more positive, since the beginning of April 2023 there have been 13 approvals:

- Two foster carer approvals.
- 11 mainstream adopter approvals comprising of four South Asian couples, two single White British Females, one Black Caribbean female, one mixed heritage couple and the remaining three White British couples.

The high number of adopters in stage one and stage two is positive and should overall increase the number of adopter approvals for 2023-24. However, we do anticipate to still see the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the final number of approved and available families.

To provide strategic oversight on the progress of adopter assessments, the Head of Service for Adoption@Heart is undertaking monthly tracking. This enables any delays to be closely monitored and issues such as delays in the completion of statutory checks to be escalated.

8. Complaints:

There were four formal complaints about the service during the twelve-month period, one complaint was about Sandwell Children's Trust and incorporated a complaint about Adoption@Heart about not feeling supported during the transition period with communication. A further complaint was about their approval/assessment journey and Keep in Touch, formerly called letterbox contact. Additionally, there was a complaint about a worker's breach of confidentiality and finally a complaint about the communication style of an Adoption@Heart worker. Learning from complaints is a key feature of the service, management and team meetings are used to explore learning and the business plan and team plans are used to implement learning from complaints.

9. Staffing:

The service employs 31 qualified Social Workers on a permanent basis, along with one agency Social Worker, who is providing additional capacity due to the number of cases in the Adoption Support Team. There is one Social Worker currently going through pre-employment checks, who is likely to start in June. There are also a number of unqualified posts such as family support workers and business support colleagues.

There is a Service Manager and three Team Managers, with one covering each of the thematic service areas. The Business Support Team have a Business Support Manager, Senior

Business Support Officer and five Business Support Officers. The Panel Team have two Panel Advisors along with a Panel Co-ordinator and three Panel Administrators.

The recruitment vacancy rates continue to remain low since the service went live.

10. Panels:

During the year 2022-2023 adoption panels continued to be virtual. Consideration has been given to panels using a hybrid approach by consulting with members and seeking feedback from adopters. Feedback continues to show that applicants feel more relaxed joining panels virtually via Microsoft Teams from their home. Social Workers report that working in this way allows them to work effectively and efficiently, whilst managing their workloads, it is also time and cost efficient.

In addition to the work undertaken in Adoption@Heart, the University of Worcester in partnership with Adoption Central England (ACE) RAA, conducted a piece of research which concluded that there are as many advantages to online panels as there are disadvantages. The disadvantages can be mitigated to some extent. There is a balance to be struck between the formality and quality assurance purpose of the panel meeting and the comfort of those participating.

The research made the following recommendations:

- To consider those circumstances where an in-person panel would support those attending.
- Social Workers being in the same room as their adopters when attending panel.
- Technical support to panel chairs, members and applicants when using Teams.
- Regular in-person events for panel members.

These recommendations are currently being considered by the Adoption Panel Team.

Panel activity approvals and matches per month 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
	Approvals	Approvals	Approvals	Matches	Matches	Matches
April	5	5	4	7	10	7
May	4	4	7	16	10	13
June	5	8	3	11	13	6
July	7	7	0	8	8	8
August	8	3	5	12	5	3
September	7	7	0	19	6	4
October	5	3	5	20	11	5
November	7	5	5	7	12	9
December	4	3	5	6	3	6
January	6	3	1	6	5	14
February	3	10	1	8	6	7
March	6	7	2	11	14	13
Total	67	65	38	131	103	95

10.1 Panel membership

The Panel continues to function with the support of the Panel Team including the Panel Advisors, Panel Co-ordinator, and Panel Administrators. There are currently 35 Panel Members on the central list. It is made up of Independent Panel Members and Social Work Panel Member representatives. There are four Independent Panel Chairs, six Medical Advisors for the three Local Authorities and the Children's Trust.

The central list offers a good representation of members who have either been adopted or have adopted and this is seen as very positive in terms of the different perspectives they bring. There has been a change in the membership and activity to recruit new members with the aim of increasing the diversity and representation at panel in terms of gender, race, disability and lived experiences. However, it is acknowledged that more needs to be done to recruit males, same sex couples and single adopters. Work in this area is therefore ongoing.

Figures provided for an Ofsted Inspection in December 2022 show the diversity of panel from the start of the RAA 1st April 2019 to December 2022.

(*Data was not available for 2020/2021 but will be collected and monitored annually from 2023)

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Panel Members	37	*	*	47
Gender	7 Male members			6 Male members
	1 Medical Advisor 6 Independent members			1 Chair 1 Medical Advisor 2 Independent members 2 Social Workers members
Ethnicity	8 Asian members			11 Asian members
	5 Medical Advisors 1 Independent member 2 Social worker members			5 Medical Advisors 1 Independent member 5 Social Worker members
	1 Black Caribbean member			6 Black African or Caribbean members
	1 Social Worker member			5 Social Workers members 1 Independent Social Worker
	2 Mixed Ethnicity members			3 Mixed Ethnicity members
	1 Medical Advisor 1 Social Worker member			1 Medical Advisor 2 Social Workers members

10.2 Panel training

In the period 2022-2023 Panel Members have had the opportunity to attend the following training events:

Adoption@Heart Panel Development Day 29/03/2023, with the agenda items including Adoption@Heart Performance, Legal Updates, Diversity in Approvals and Matches presented at panel, Good Examples of Matching, Recruitment and Assessment, Mental Health, and the adoption process.

Thematic training has also been offered to Panel Members to develop their effectiveness on panel following themes and topic areas identified in their annual appraisals. These are as follows: Thematic Training on Questioning at Panel – Questioning Techniques 18/11/2022, Attachment in Adults & Attachment in Children 09/12/2022. In addition to this all four Panel Chairs attended Cultural Humility Training on various dates.

10.3 Panel business

Panel met on 45 occasions during 2022-2023, there are 50 panels a year for adoption matters to be heard. There is also flexibility within the panel system allowing for extra and special panels to be arranged to enable additional cases and emergency matters to be heard, as and when directed by the courts. This means that children do not wait, and matters are dealt with in a timely manner.

The Agency Decision Makers (ADM) from City of Wolverhampton Council made all the decisions regarding the suitability for approval of all prospective adopters from April to December 2022. From January 2023 this responsibility changed, and the Adoption@Heart Head of Service now undertakes these decisions as ADM.

Should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA) decisions remain in the three Local Authorities and the Trust, except in the case of Consensual Adoptions, previously known as relinquishments, which remain with Adoption@Heart. Agency Decision Makers are very flexible regarding early decisions in relation to both approvals and matches, to enable transitions that work best for the child/ren.

10.4 Approvals

Adoption@Heart is welcoming of adopters from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, those in same sex relationships, single applicants, those with disabilities and where English is not the first language. In some circumstances an interpreter has been used or made available to support the applicants.

40 adopters were approved in this reporting period. There was one deferral, which was subsequently approved. There were two Consensual Adoption cases presented for an adoption recommendation.

10.5 Feedback from Adopters and Social Workers about their experience at panel:

Feedback from Applicants for approvals and Prospective Adopters for matches is sought after every panel.

Feedback has been largely positive and where this has not been the case, it has been addressed through several ways, for example learning reviews, changes in practice, change in policies or processes at varying levels.

Quotes from adopters include:

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- *“Panel Members were all welcoming and friendly – calmed our nerves.”*
“We were treated well at panel and were kept informed of everything that was happening and would like to thank everyone involved.”
- *“I was a lot more relaxed than I thought I would have been, and I think that was because of how warm and friendly the panel were.”*
- *“We found panel to be a positive experience. We were made to feel welcome and had time to express our feelings.”*
“Very well organised, friendly, and made to feel at ease when questions were asked.
- *Notifications and calls before panel, e-mails when panel had commenced and links to join panel were all done professionally and efficiently.”*
- *“I was informed before the meeting ended how the decision would be made and the time frame. I understand everything and was happy with what was said to me.”*
- *“Very good conversation with all members in the panel,”*

Quotes from Social Workers include:

- *“The reason was clear for the recommendation. Panel listed the couples strengths; they recognised it had not been an easy journey for them and heard the emotion of the applicants that they have a strong affiliation and commitment to this child. The evidence was before us as the young person attended with the prospective adopters. Their attendance was due to childcare (grandparents had covid). Nevertheless, the couple’s ability to engage in the panel process whilst continuing to be attentive to the child was evident.”*
- *“The panel showed careful consideration of the needs of the child and provided a very positive recommendation which was pleasing to hear.”*
- *“The chair clearly explained the recommendations to the adopters/professionals.”*
- *“I just wanted to thank panel for the positive praise which was acknowledged by all panel members in this case.”*
- *“Recommendations were clear and fair.”*
- *“I wish to thank the panel advisor for ahead of panel she was supportive in ensuring the quality of the PAR, noting there were spelling and grammar errors and ensuring these were amended. It had been QA’d, but certain sections needed re-working after. I know the wider discussions within the LA and waiting on outcomes from meetings regarding the siblings, at some level impacted the quality of the PAR.”*
- *“Panel asked relevant questions and showed a great deal of empathy to my adopters. I found today’s experience useful myself with clear recommendations and advice and also support to go forward with this case.”*
- *“Panel members were welcoming and asked clear and concise questions. It was nice to be invited back into panel to receive the recommendation”*

11. Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM):

There has been one referral to the IRM in the period. The Social Worker and the manager attended the IRM panel on 20th September 2022. The recommendation was received by the agency on 29th September 2022; and the full set of minutes was sent to Adoption@Heart on 4th October 2022. The IRM upheld the decision of Adoption@Heart.

12. Disruptions:

There was one placement disruption during the period for a sibling group of two girls. The girls were placed in June 2022 and returned to a foster parent placement in September 2022. The disruption meeting identified that the girls had lived in five households before their move to adoption. Their level of and exposure to trauma may not have been fully explored during the decision-making stages of care planning, the foster carer was also not clear about her experience of providing care, as such the adopters were unprepared for the behaviours one of the girls was exhibiting. The adoptive parents were used to offering care to children who were receptive and trusting, this very quickly escalated into a 'blocked care' situation where the adopters were unable to move beyond the presenting behaviour. The female adopter became fearful and anxious, and the adopters made the decision to end the placement.

The learning identified was as follows:

- CAMHS involvement had ended too quickly and should have supported the girls in their transition plan recognising their level of trauma.
- The focus became the relationship between the sisters and not how to support the adopters to understand the basis for the behaviour.
- There was a lack of oversight from the IRO who had followed the girls' journey and would have had an invaluable insight.
- The adopters were not prepared for the extent of the children's needs, they were unable to see beyond the behaviour to understand the girls were testing out the relationship.
- The Matching Panel made recommendations that greater thought needed to be given to the support plan, this advice was not reviewed and therefore not embedded. Consideration should be given to sharing advice from panel, not only with the children's Social Workers and their managers but also the IRO.

In addition to this disruption, there was also a case where introductions for a child ended prior to placement. The child had four pre-meets and the adopter appeared unable to respond to the needs of the child, the house was unprepared, and the foster carer was privy to personal information about the adopter, which impacted on their development of a relationship. A learning review was undertaken on this case and the learning identified was as follows:

- Workers underestimated the readiness of the adopter to respond to the child's holistic needs.
- There were some signs in the assessment that the adopter was not prepared for the arrival of a child or had enough transferable skills.
- The pre-meets need to be conducted by one consistent person, so the feedback loop is consistent.
- PARs are not to be shared with foster parents, this information belongs to the adopter and the agency, the same way that a Form F is personal to a foster parent.

Learning from both has been fed back into the service and where needed, changes have been implemented.

13. Inspections:

One Local Authority (Dudley) and the Children's Trust (Sandwell) in the Adoption@Heart partnership were inspected in the year, Dudley within the ILACS framework and Sandwell initially under the ILACS framework and later as a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) inspection.

Dudley received an overall Requires Improvement judgement, whilst Sandwell received an overall inspection outcome of Requires Improvement for the ILACS inspection and Good for VAA adoption inspection. Positive feedback was received in all inspections. However, the Sandwell VAA inspection presented several challenges from a VAA perspective, as most activity was based on Adoption@Heart activity but had to be looked at through a Sandwell Children's Trust lens. There were recommendations in both Ofsted reports for Adoption@Heart to follow through on, these are contained in the business plan.

14. Accountability:

Management board

The service has continued to have in place two key layers of governance with a Management Board attended by Assistant Directors and a Strategic Commissioning Board attended by Directors of Children's Services.

The Strategic Commissioning Board has continued to meet quarterly, supported by the commissioning lead from Dudley. The chairing of this board has remained with Dudley during the year 2022-23.

An Operations Group was established in the previous year, with a view to increasing engagement, oversight, and operational involvement of Heads of Service and other Managers from each partner service. This group has continued to meet six-weekly, chaired by the Head of Service for Adoption@Heart. The Management Board meets quarterly.

The Management Board is chaired by the Deputy Director for Children's Social Care in Wolverhampton, as host Local Authority for Adoption@Heart.

With effect from Autumn 2023, it has been agreed that the governance arrangements will change with the establishment of a new board which will be titled the Strategic Partnership Board (SPB). This will replace both Management Board and Strategic Commissioning Board and representation will be from Assistant Directors, with a Director of Children's Services chairing. This decision to streamline the governance arrangements has been made considering the continued positive progress of the service in becoming an effective and high performing Regional Adoption Agency for the region. The legal agreement and related documents supporting the current governance arrangements are being reviewed to reflect this change.

15. Service Development

Whilst there has been significant focus on Ofsted activity, the management team have also focused on the re-write of key policies and procedures and the formulation of an overarching business plan which identifies key service development priorities.

For the coming year, 2023-24, the business plan identifies the following as areas for ongoing development:

- Embed early permanence from both a child and adopter perspective
- Focus recruitment activity on recruiting adopters for children who wait the longest
- Improve on timeliness of adoption assessments and matching
- Improve on adopter and child voice
- Reinstating some activities that were suspended during Covid such as coffee mornings, adopter picnics and social gatherings for adoptive families which will extend our adoption support offer
- There is a need to embed a quality assurance framework within the service, which includes the need for regular themed audit activity across all aspects of the service and the collation of service user experience across all parts of the adoption journey

Appendix 1b

Child level Information for City of Wolverhampton Council children:**16. Number, type and age of children waiting for adoption and length of time waiting:**

On 31st of March 2023:

There were 31 children subject to placement orders, but not yet placed for adoption. 7 of these are linked but not yet formally matched and 7 are awaiting their placement order to be revoked to pursue a different care plan. The remaining 17 have an active family finding plan.

The timescales for the 31 children waiting since the granting of their Placement Orders is as follows:

Less than 2 months:	1
Between 2 and 4 months:	5
Between 4 and 6 months:	7
Between 6 and 12 months:	4
Children waiting over 1 years:	13

The 31 children comprise of 6 sibling groups of two children and 2 sibling groups of three, the remainder are single children. As indicated above, 7 of these children require a change of care plan.

17. Children Made Subject to Placement Orders:

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
5	4	12	3	24

This is the total number of children where the court has agreed with the Local Authority care plan of adoption and have granted a placement order. This enables the Local Authority to progress the adoption plan for the child.

15. Children Subject to Should be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decisions as of 31 March 2023 (without Placement Order):

There are twelve children who have a SHOBPA decision in place but not a placement order, this is because the care proceedings for these children have not yet concluded, or they are a consensual adoption case.

18. Number of Children who had a SHOPBA during the period:

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total

5	9	15	7	36
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This is the total number of children across the year who had a decision made that they should be placed for adoption (SHOPBA)

19. The Numbers of Children with PO who had a Change of Plan (away from adoption) in the Period:

11

This will be those children where the decision has been made that adoption is no longer viable and will have resulted in a change in care plan.

20. Number of Children Placed for Adoption during the period:

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
6	6	4	9	25

For those children placed, 18 were two years or younger, 5 were aged five and under and 2 were aged six plus.

There were 12 boys and 13 girls placed. 13 children were White British, 2 White European, 01 Asian Pakistani, 1 Black Caribbean and the remainder were mixed ethnicity White British/Asian, White British African or Caribbean.

Children Placed in Previous Years

Financial Year:	19/20	20/21	20/22
Children Placed	39	35	31

21. Number of Children Adopted:

The number of children legally adopted by their adoptive parents in the 12-month period to 31 March 2023 was 34.

Number of children adopted in the three previous years is below:

Financial Year:	19/20	20/21	21/22
Children Adopted	31	35	34

22. Adoption timeliness:

The national 3-year average scorecard indicators for timeliness of achieving adoption have not been published since 2020. These have been replaced by the ASGLB data that is published quarterly. End of year 2022-23 is not yet available. For comparison purposes, I will refer to 2021-22 timeliness and 2022-23 Q3 timeliness.

For the end of **2021-22**, ASGLB indicators were:

- A2 time from placement order to matching decision **199 days**
- A10 time from entry to care to placement for adoption **460 days**

For the end of **Q3 2022-23**, ASGLB indicators were:

- A2 time from placement order to matching decision **199 days**
- A10 time from entry to care to placement for adoption **478 days**

Sandwell's current timeliness for **2022-23** indicators are as follows:

- A2 time from placement order to matching decision **195 days**
- A10 time from entry to care to placement for adoption **465 days**

A2 indicator for Sandwell is in line with national benchmarking data and current in-year data for children adopted is showing significant improvement on Sandwell's 3-year rolling average of 231 days.

A10 is also in line with the national benchmarking data and again current in-year data is showing a significant improvement on Sandwell's rolling average of 519 days.

However, there are some early indications that A10 may see a dip when those placed for adoption currently are finally adopted. It will be important to understand the rationale behind this cohort to understand if they are children who wait the longest for example sibling groups.

It is also worth noting that the numbers of children leaving care nationally via adoption has reduced continuously since 2017. Sandwell's numbers have remained consistent, this means that where adoption is considered as part of a child's care plan, robust and focused activity is undertaken to progress the adoption plan where it is clear this is the most appropriate plan, this is also supported by the current improvements in A10 and A2 scorecard indicators.

23. Early Permanency:

There were six Sandwell children placed in early permanence placements via Foster for Adopt, four with internal adopters and six with voluntary adoption agency families.

24. Children's Family Finding Activity:

The tables below contain the total numbers of children placed by the service during the year 2022/23.

Children placed 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

LA/Trust	Inhouse	Interagency	Total Placed
Dudley	15	1	16
Sandwell	18	7	25
Walsall	20	21	41
Wolverhampton	7	2	9
Total	60	31	91

Inter-agency usage for full year is 34%, thus 66% of children were placed in house.

Whilst this is positive, the lower number of adopter approvals has meant there were less adopters available for placements in Q4 and more inter-agency placements were made in Q4 than any other quarter. To try and reduce the use of inter-agency placements, we are exploring potential matches for children waiting with families in assessment. However, the current trajectory is for there to be an increase in the use of inter-agency placements for 2023-24 to ensure that we can continue to place children in a timely way with approved adopters.

The agreement to inter-agency placement searches is monitored and reviewed monthly by the management team, the meetings are chaired by the Head of Service. Should there be a need to expedite a search sooner than this, the Adoption@Heart Head of Service can agree. The increase in demand for FFA placements because of the launch of the MTC Early Permanence Best Practice Guide is meaning that we are not able to keep up with current demand and therefore seeking inter-agency FFA placements alongside other placements. The likely increased cost of this is also being monitored and reported to the Operations Group and Management Board.

Children Placed Foster for Adopt

LA/Trust	FFA Inhouse	FFA Interagency	Total
Dudley	4	0	4
Sandwell	4	2	6
Walsall	9	2	11
Wolverhampton	3	0	3
Total	20	4	24

Analysis – Children Placed

The number of children matched and placed with adoptive families in the full year is 91. This is less than the number placed in the previous year (103).

34% of children placed by 31 March 2023 were placed inter-agency and this represents a slight improvement on the end of the previous year performance (38%).

The spread of children placed/matched across the four partners is significantly different this year, with Walsall placing the most children and Wolverhampton significantly less, this is the opposite to last year when Wolverhampton placed the most and Walsall the least. Dudley and Sandwell both saw a drop in numbers.

It is positive that 24 children have been placed via Foster for Adoption (32 in previous year) and that 80% of these were placed with in house adopters. Early Permanence practice is becoming become more embedded, despite this year's drop in numbers.

Like the tracking of adoption assessments, the Head of Service also has strategic oversight of case tracking for family finding. This activity commenced only recently and sits alongside the tracking of inter-agency spend. Family finding audits are now also embedded so that key themes, from both a strengths-based perspective and an improvement perspective can be identified and fed back into the service and partner agencies.

25. Adoption Support:

The team continues to provide all aspects of pre and post order adoption support on behalf of each of the three Local Authorities and Children's Trust and supports families pre and post order. The team commissions therapeutic services via applications to the Adoption Support Fund, Keep in Touch arrangements, access to records and birth parent support.

It is recognised that early life adversity impacts children developmentally, emotionally, cognitively, and socially and requires therapeutic support for children to thrive. Adoption@Heart operates a graduated approach, offering universal access to an adoption training programme and support groups delivered by staff; enhanced support includes an assessment of need and parenting support, individually or in groups, and targeted support includes commissioning of specialist therapeutic intervention. We utilise the service of an Adoption Support Therapist employed by Adoption@Heart, as well as commissioning private and independent therapeutic services.

The starting point for accessing the Adoption Support Service is an Assessment of Need. The team undertook the following number of these in the twelve-month period. This is an overall increase in the number of assessments of need, this is becoming a growing demand and continues to evidence the lifelong nature and complexity of adoption.

Dudley	79
Sandwell	45
Walsall	63
Wolverhampton	60
Total	247

The Adoption Support Fund was established in 2015 by the Government to help adoptive families access support and settle into their new lives following adoption. The Government committed ongoing funding for the 2022-23 financial year in advance of the spending review settlement. There has been a marginal increase in the number of ASF applications which again evidences the need for on-going support within the adoption arena.

ASF Applications completed in the year

Sandwell	35
Walsall	54
Dudley	70
Wolverhampton	75
Total	234

Access to Records

The provision of birth records counselling and access to information is of vital importance in enabling adopted adults to understand the circumstances of their adoption and enhance their sense of identity. The team supported the numbers of requests below within each area.

Dudley	19
Sandwell	12
Walsall	16
Wolverhampton	17

Total	64
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Birth Parent Support

The team also provides support to birth parents affected by adoption and the following numbers were supported by the service in the twelve-month period.

Dudley	2
Sandwell	9
Walsall	10
Wolverhampton	3
Total	24

Keep in Touch

Adoption@Heart is responsible for Keep in Touch arrangements on behalf of City of Wolverhampton Council. There are three full-time Family Support Workers who are responsible for administering the service. They offer support to adoptive parents and birth relatives. There have been some considerable staff absences this year which has impacted on some aspects of service delivery. Due to staff absence within the team over the course of the past year, a breakdown of Keep in Touch exchanges by Local Authority/Children's Trust is not available. This will be rectified for the next annual report.