

Continuous Improvement Plan 2021 - 2023  
The Road to Excellence



# Leicestershire Adoption Service Annual Report 2022-2023



# Content

	Page
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Our service – roles and responsibilities</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3. Performance</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>4. Statement by the Agency Decision Maker</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>5. Statement by the Adoption Panel Chair</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>6. Developments</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>7. Complaints</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>8. Achievements</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>9. Recommendations</b>	<b>29</b>



## Executive Summary

The Annual Report for the Adoption Service sets out the performance for the service in 2022/23 and identifies our priorities for the forthcoming year 2023/24.

**Key messages within this report are:**

Achieving permanence for children

Regionalisation

Timeliness of adopter assessments

The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a 3 year trend and 1 year trend. The three main key performance indicators are:

- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
- A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child

Against all three key performance indicators the 3-year trend data remains relatively stable. We do not yet have figures from our statistical neighbours for comparison.

Against all of three indicators, the 1-year trend data for 2022/23 is highlighting a decrease in the number of days in comparison to the previous year and therefore an increase in the timeliness to achieve permanence. Detailed consideration of information regarding individual children is routinely completed by managers.

Adoption Score Card	2021-22	2022-23	Statistical Neighbours
A10 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family	827.78 days	742.63 days (Reduction of 85.5 days)	TBC from scorecard
A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family	357.6 days	264.88 days (reduction of 92.2 days)	
A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child	480 days	457.19 days (reduction of 22.81 days)	

### Regional Arrangements

Leicestershire County Council is part of the Family Adoption Links (FAL), a regional partnership of Adoption Services. The government's agenda for adoption was set out in a paper, "Regionalising Adoption", published by the Department of Education (DfE) in June 2015 setting out arrangements for the formation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's) by 2020.

This partnership comprises of Lincolnshire County Council (who provide adoption services for Rutland Council), Leicestershire County Council, Leicester City Council, North Lincolnshire Council. Northampton Children's Trust joined the partnership in January 2022. Lincolnshire County Council remains acting as host for the arrangement.

There are 4 workstreams comprising of members of staff from each partner , these workstreams meet monthly and focus on:-

Assessment and Approval

Family Finding

Post Adoption Support

Early Permanence

During 2022/23 77% of the region's children were placed within Family Adoption Links.

### **Timeliness of Adopter Assessments**

There has been significant improvement in the stage 1 and stage 2 processes. It should be noted that there were still several external assessments being completed by Carter Brown during the first half of 2022-23. The quality of the reports were often poor with a significant amount of rework required which was often completed by in house assessors which impacted on the ability to allocate new assessments. Our backlog of applicants in stage one has reduced significantly, and a more robust management oversight is in place regarding those applicants coming through the process and their suitability to adopt. More detailed information is contained within this report.

## **1. Introduction**

### **OUR VISION Leicestershire is the best place for all children, young people, and their families**

This means that we will describe the outcomes we want to achieve for children, young people and their families and identify measures that can tell us how well we are achieving against them. We will aim to be the best performing local authority in the country against these measures, and where we are not yet there, we will set stretching targets for annual improvement.

### **OUR MISSION**

Children and young people in Leicestershire are safe and living in families where they can achieve their potential and have their health, wellbeing and life chances improved within thriving communities.

Under the 2011 National Minimum Standards 25.6, all Adoption Agencies are required to provide one six month and one annual report to the Executive regarding the activity and work of the Adoption Agency and Adoption Panel. To meet this standard the Adoption Service submits a monthly report to the Lead Member and Director and an annual report to the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

### **1.1 Our Service**

Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Adoption Agency. It undertakes statutory and regulated responsibilities relating to adoption. The main roles of the Adoption and Permanence Service is to provide high quality adoptive placements, a range of adoption and special guardianship support and other permanency options, including profiling for long term placements for children who are looked after by Leicestershire County Council and are unable to live with their birth families.

Adoption and Permanence Services are provided to:

- Children who are to be adopted
- Birth parents

- Prospective and approved adopters
- Children and adoptive parents who require adoption support services
- Children and Special Guardians who require therapeutic support and advice, where the child lives permanently in Leicestershire
- Adopted adults

The Adoption Service is led by the Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption, Children in Care and the Virtual School and managed through a Service Manager who has responsibility for the three teams that make up the adoption service, Assessment and Support, Permanence and Post-Order Support.

Name	Designation
Jane Moore	Director Children and Families Service
Sharon Cooke	Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Childrens Social Care
Nicci Collins	Deputy Assistant Director, Transformation
Kelda Claire	Head of Service
Michelle Robinson	Service Manager
Emma Bulgin	Agency Decision Maker
Gemma Barber	Manager, Post-Order Support Team
Julie Hall/ Emma Johnson	Managers, Permanence Team
Caramjit Supra/Ellie Taylor	Manager, Assessment and Support Team
Lisa Deakin/ Katie Bancroft	Senior Practitioner, Post Adoption and SGO Support
Rebecca Gibson	Senior Practitioner, Permanence
Lauren Nicholls	Senior Practitioner , Assessment and Support
Whitney Allen, Chloe Jordan Angela Saduera, Megan Bramley plus 1 vacancy	Permanence Team Social Workers
Katie Charter	Long-term Fostering Family Finding Social Worker
Michelle Smith	Life Story Worker

Sameerah Makda, Debbie Bevan, Bethany Fox, Leona Hubbard plus 1 vacancy	Adoption Assessment and Support Social workers
Scott Barrowcliffe, Stephanie Denham	Assessment support workers
Charlotte Fanshawe, Zeena Shepherd, Harriet Pearson Cole, Claire Nichols	Post Adoption and SGO Support Social Workers
Sarah Greaves	Birth Records Counsellors
Sheryl Peberdy, Robert Cotteril	Special Guardianship Support Workers
Naomi Day	Post Adoption Support Worker
Victoria Williams, Isabelle Coad	Permanence Support Workers
Yashma Koria	Permanence coordinator
Helen Daft	Interim Panel Advisor

In September 2019 Leicestershire`s Children and Family Service was inspected by Ofsted. Whilst the Adoption Service was not subject to its own inspection the feedback for the service was exceptional. The overall judgement for services for children in care, was **Good**.

This report should be read alongside the Departmental Plan CFS 2020-2023 and CFS Placement Market Position Statement 2021-2023. These are dynamic strategies, geared towards supporting the recruitment of a diverse and confident mix of adoptive families, ensure enduring relationships and high-quality adoption support services. They are integrally linked with other key strategic plans and strategies for the Council:

- Children and Family Departmental Plan 2021-25
- Children & Families Partnership Plan
- Continuous Improvement Plan – The Road to excellence 2021-25
- Adoption Service, Statement of Purpose

## 1.2 National/local Political Implications



Adoption has been a key part of the Government Agenda since 2012 and has seen significant change, including the publication of various key documents such as the 2013 *Statutory Guidance on Adoption*, the 2013 Amendments to the *Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005* and *Regionalising Adoption* in 2015.

In 2018 the Adoption Leadership Board became the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB), with a remit to cover previously looked after children subject to adoption or special guardianship orders. This reflects a recognition of the increasing numbers of children leaving care on Special Guardianship Orders, and the need for these children to be able to access support akin to that of their peers who are adopted. Leicestershire County Council Post-Order Support Team already contains provision for the support of families with children on SGOs, with dedicated support workers located in the team. There is a life long offer of support to Special Guardians which mirrors our offer to adopters. Our focus for the up coming year is to provide bespoke opportunities to the carers and their children with a focus on proactive support rather than reactive involvement. For example setting up a teenagers group and therapeutic parenting training.

The Department for Education (DfE) has been clear that all local authorities should form Regional Adoption Agencies by 2020. Leicestershire County Council has worked with Leicester City, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, and Rutland to form Family Adoption Links (FAL). The Regional Adoption Agency went 'live' in October 2020, with the Local Authorities agreeing to a partnership arrangement.

### 1.3 Progress against last year

<b>Recommendation from previous annual report</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Continue working and developing alongside our colleagues in the	The launch of the Regional Adoption Agency was achieved in October 2020.

<p>Regional Adoption Agency, with specific and effective action plans agreed by operational leads and overseen by the Board.</p>	<p>Family Adoption Links' is a partnership agreement between Leicestershire, Leicester City, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, and Rutland. Northamptonshire Children's Trust joined FAL in January 2022.</p> <p>The management team meet monthly and there are also monthly workstream meetings chaired by Service managers primarily focussing on training and assessment of prospective adopters, family finding and post adoption support. This has meant that adopters and children receive a more consistent approach across the region and our children have greater access to a wider range of adopters. 77% of our children were placed within FAL last year.</p>
<p>Focus on the key performance indicators related to the assessment and recruitment of adopters, identify barriers to improvement and learn from areas of good practice. We will measure stage one and stage 2 timeliness with an aim of achieving assessments to be completed within 6 months. This will be achieved by ensuring that recruitment is transparent and that we are clear at the beginning of the process about suitability of applicants to adopt. Robust management oversight will ensure that</p>	<p>New systems are in place to minimise drift and delay for prospective adopters and our assessments are completed 'in house' Relationships between assessors and applicants are good and our timeliness figures have improved. We track performance through monthly internal performance meetings which are also attended by the FAL data analyst Benjamin Richards. This has meant that our adopters are seeing quicker assessment times resulting in quicker matches for children.</p>

<p>delay is picked up quickly and addressed</p> <p>.</p>	
<p>Focus on timeliness for children by developing our understanding of children’s journey through care to point of Best Interest Decision; developing early linking and matching processes; increasing our use of Fostering for Adoption where appropriate to meet children’s needs.</p>	<p>Our collection of data is improving and is supported internally and externally via FAL. Permanence team managers have monthly meetings set up with locality managers to track and review children’s journeys and where new children who may be in need of a Best Interest Decision can be identified. Due to recruitment challenges the permanence team had to ‘close the door’ to new referrals in November 2022 , Despite this there is robust oversight of children coming through for a best interest decision and quarterly reports to SMT provide detailed analysis about children waiting.</p>
<p>Develop our panel, ensuring that the central list meets the needs of the service and panels continue to provide robust scrutiny of the agency.</p>	<p>We have continued to struggle to appoint a permanent panel advisor and currently rely on the support of an independent worker. The training day in January 2022 was successful with a focus on learning from disruptions as well as Equality, Diversity and Identity. Quarterly panel business meetings take place between the service and panel chairs. The service manager also attends panel quarterly to give service updates to panel members. We have benefitted from the robust QA that the panel advisor provides, seeing a</p>

	decrease in the number of deferrals from ADM after a positive recommendation.
Develop processes to strengthen feedback and how this influences change and development	This is an area that we continue to develop. We liaise with LAFs (a local support group for adopters and foster carers across Leicester City and Leicestershire) and attend their meetings. FAL is provided feedback from Adopter Hub. FAL also has Collabor8 which is young person's group. The aim of both groups is to work in collaboration to develop services and hear the voice of those directly impacted by our services. We embrace the Lundy Model and strive to ensure that we hear the views of both adopters, adopted children and adults and birth parents are heard and that those views are carefully considered within our approach.
Reinvigorate the service offered to birth parents/first family members	This area continues to be in the early stages of development. It is part of the role of the support workers who have started to look at the logistics of setting up a group. We continue to outsource support if required
Further consideration needs to be given to whether Leicestershire dually approves adopters as part of the Family Adoption Links arrangement to keep in line with our partners.	Leicestershire County Council does not currently have any plans to dually approve adopters i.e. to approve them as both prospective adopters and foster carers at the same time. This will be considered as part of the FAL workstream looking at Early Permanence.

## **2. Family Adoption Links**

2.1 The interagency agreement creating the partnership commenced on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020 and describes how FAL manages the provision of all core adoption functions on behalf of the local authority. Agency decision making for adults and children are maintained within the local authority in line with corporate parenting responsibilities.

Through working in partnership, we are starting to benefit from the regional sharing of best practice, pooling of resources and developing a strategic approach to the development of a range of services from the marketing of adoption across the region through to the commissioning of post adoption support services.

2.2 The vision of the RAA is that:

- Children have the widest range of adopters trained to meet the needs of children placed with them
- Matching delivers the best quality outcomes for all children
- Adopters receive a consistent, high quality and professional service at all stages of the process
- The same high standard of adoption support for all adoptive families across the region
- Family Adoption Links, local authorities and VAAs work together to promote and maximize choice for children and adopters

### **2.3 Governance and Management**

The RAA is accountable to the Family Adoption Links (FAL) Management Board which is aligned to the agreed vision and will enable partners to have a continuing demonstrable focus on achieving permanence through adoption for Looked After Children. The FAL Management Board is accountable for delivery of services within scope and will continue to provide strategic leadership as the service develops. The Board includes representatives of each partner and takes decision by consensus. The Board is chaired by a Director of Children's Services (on behalf of the respective Local Authorities) and includes Assistant Directors responsible for permanency. The FAL Management Board will ensure there are clear strategic plans in place to manage

future demand, develop quality services, deliver value for money, and achieve appropriate efficiencies and cost savings. The board has appointed a temporary Head of Service for the Regional Adoption Agency who oversees the work of the adoption service in each local authority. The Head of Service reports to the board and is responsible for the delivery of adoption services within each LA. Each partner LA retains its own adoption service manager who is the Registered Manager.

The FAL Management Board will keep members fully informed regarding the progress and performance of the RAA.

2.4 Since its launch FAL has held monthly management meetings where updates are provided from each of the three dedicated workstreams and the planning of continued and improved service delivery is decided. The dedicated workstreams are focussed on the following areas – Assessment and support of prospective adopters, Family finding and post adoption support. A further workstream, focussing on Early Permanence commenced earlier this year and is headed up by Tracy Morton from Northampton Children's Trust.

2.5 The Assessment and Approval workstream is led by Georgina Oreffo from Leicester City. This workstream's aims are for all those who approach and are assessed by the RAA to receive a consistent baseline experience with regards to their initial enquiry, assessment and training; and following approval there is a core offer of post approval training to ensure consistency of approach and preparation across the RAA. An agreed modular approach to both pre and post approval training is in place. The content, slides, notes and supporting materials of the Information Evenings and preparation courses have been agreed, with stylish and professional rebranding, and joint delivery across the partnership.

2.6 The Family Finding workstream is led jointly by Sharon Clarke from Lincolnshire and Michelle Robinson from Leicestershire. Tracey Morton from Northamptonshire Children's Trust has more recently become more involved as a twin approach to the Early Permanence Workstream. The ambition of the partnership is to provide a

consistent approach to family finding and ensure that the partnership can meet the needs of most children requiring adoption.

The workstream has continued to be creative in family finding for our children who have traditionally 'waited longer.' There have been two activity days where 9 children have been successfully linked and subsequently placed with their adoptive families. We also hold Discovery Events on a quarterly basis, where approved adopters have access to a secure video link where they can watch bespoke videos from social workers and foster carers about the children who are waiting.

Regional monthly family finding meetings are in place and all children without an identified link are discussed and tracked through to either a match being ratified by the Agency Decision Maker or the care plan being changed from one of adoption. This meeting is supported by Benjamin Richardson (Data Analyst) and Alex McGuire (Marketing Lead). The support of both is crucial in ensuring that data is up to date and validated and that children have good quality photos and videos on Linkmaker. Alex also organises specific social media campaigns, ensures that children have anonymised profiles on our website and is also manages the activity days and Discovery Events.

The approach of the family finding meetings has been hugely successful in ensuring that more children are placed within the region. 77% of our children were placed within Family Adoption Links last year. This means that we know our adopters and children well and that there has been a regional financial saving in the cost of using interagency placements.

2.7 Adoption support is another key workstream and is led by Karen Everatt from North Lincolnshire. It builds on the practice delivered within the aforementioned workstreams. All partners have a different post adoption support offer and that is likely to remain the case. The ambition is for all adopters at the point of initial contact to have information about the support available with the website signposting the local details. The group is developing a core offer which establishes a starting point for both prospective and registered adopters and is informed by shared practice expertise from across the region. As part of this work and in addition, the workgroup has focused on the following areas;

- Post order training with direct access to the training hub offering a range of relevant training courses
- Establishment of the Adopter Hub which has co production at its heart and ensures that FAL engages actively with adopters
- Development of Collabor8 an on line community for young people in place to offer, both support and ensure that the child's voice is central to our service direction.
- Provision of Thrive a regular newsletter for Adopters
- Working with Virtual schools across the partnership to develop and deliver the Education Passport

2.8 The Early Permanence workstream is headed up by Tracy Morton from Northampton Children's Trust.

As with adoption support, this is an area of practice that has considerable Government focus and is frequently a key line of enquiry of OFSTED inspections. For a partnership RAA it is complex given the different court jurisdictions and established local practices.

The partnership reflects these differences and there is a variation in how well embedded it's in child care planning. Apart from some geographically compact areas, national work on Early Permanence has concentrated on establishing good practice models and developing consistent forms, assessments, training and support to carers.

That approach sits well within the structure of FAL and reflects what has been achieved within other workstreams. For FAL, this is our most recent area of focus. The workstream has established the following objectives and will develop practice in 23/24 in line with learning from the National commissioned work that is underway:

- Develop EP best practice pack based on the approach of each partner.  
Identify referral pathway and best practice guidance
- Workshop for practitioners to be developed to raise awareness of EP and promote a consistent practice approach across FAL partner agencies – plan for workshops to be delivered to staff across adoption, fostering child care teams and IRO services



- Workshop for ADMs (with AEM)
- Exploration of engagement with Cafcass and judiciary
- Review applicant training materials to develop a single training offer across the region
- Develop support groups for EP carers and staff

2.9 Data management is overseen by Benjamin Richardson and has been invaluable in supporting local and regional information and provision of ASGLB data.

### **3. Our service – roles and responsibilities**

#### **3.2 Permanence Team**

The role of the Permanence Team is to work alongside colleagues in locality teams to progress plans for children where adoption may be required. Permanence team social workers also undertake all family finding activity for children who need permanence via adoption.

Permanence social workers are co-allocated to work with children where a decision has been made to twin- or triple-track their care plan, meaning that multiple options are being considered for the child, usually remaining with their birth parent(s), moving to live with a wider family member, or adoption if neither of the other options is possible. Permanence social workers complete Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) which draw together all the assessments that have been completed and provide a comprehensive assessment of the child's needs. These reports are presented to the Agency Decision Maker where the recommendation is that adoption is in the best interests of the child.

When children have a plan of adoption which is agreed in court by way of a Care Order and Placement Order, permanence team social workers become the allocated worker

for the child. They are responsible for statutory social work visits and reviews as well as all family finding and matching activity for the child or children.

Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker, a secure online platform, to create and upload bespoke profiles for children. Permanence team workers collaborate with colleagues using Linkmaker to search for potential adoptive matches, communicate with adopters locally and nationally and share information securely to progress placements for children. Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker for all our children, whether they are matched 'in-house', with adopters approved by LCC, 'regionally' with our partners in Family Adoption Links, or in 'interagency' matches with other Regional or Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

Permanence team social workers present identified matches to the Adoption Panel, prepare transition plans and support agreements to help the child move to their adoptive family, and support the placement until the point of Adoption Order.

The team's workforce additionally includes a dedicated Life Story Support Worker and a Family Finding social worker for long-term fostering placements. Our Life Story Support Worker provides extensive specialist work for children in their transition to adoption; this includes completing direct work with children, drafting Life Story books, and offering 'telling and explaining' sessions to adopters to prepare them for the ongoing life story work they will do with their children. The Family Finding social worker for long-term fostering works closely with other members of the team to track children who may need a permanent fostering placement and identify placements when this becomes required. The objective is to ensure that children with a plan of long-term fostering are able to access the same levels of life story work, transition planning and careful matching that is available to children moving to adoption.

In addition to day-to-day operations, the team continues to be committed to ongoing developmental projects such as the introduction of Life Appreciation Days, processes for the permanence planning of children in long-term foster care and, further embedding of the Signs of Safety methodology in our practice. Team members have participated in workshops to develop trauma-informed practice, offered training in Virtual Practice Forums, and offered training to foster carers.

*'Thank you so much for this. I actually cried when I read it, partly because of the story itself but also out of relief it has been done with so much thought and I know it will provide the children with much needed information when they're older. Thank you for all of the work you have put into it.'*

*'this is the most beautiful story – it made quite tearful to see the progress George has made, to know that the life story work will help him understand that he is understood'*

*I just wanted to say how impressed I was with the absolutely fantastic work that has been completed for the match between H and R with L, the level of preparation for the family was outstanding and panel members were very complimentary and cited it as one of the best matches they had seen and felt that it was, without doubt, an example of 'superb practice'*

### **3.3 Recruitment, assessment, and preparation of adopters**

The Adoption Service works closely with professional colleagues to provide a full recruitment, assessment, and preparation service to adopter applicants in Leicestershire.

People who are interested in adoption can find information on the Family Adoption Links website. Any enquiries about becoming an adopter are handled by the Recruitment and Marketing team initially, which is a shared resource with the Fostering Service. Potential adopters are then able to access adoption information events run by the Assessment and Support Team (AST) and, following this, request a social work visit before completing a formal Registration of Interest (ROI).

The AST complete all Initial Visits to help potential adopters begin their two-stage journey to becoming prospective adopters. Stage One of the process is managed by the AST, with support workers completing statutory checks. At this point social workers begin delivering preparation work directly to applicants, and this work continues throughout stage 2.

Our face to face preparation training is run in partnership with Leicester City and has been since Spring 2022. When adopters progress to Stage Two, a social worker from

AST is allocated to complete the home study and present their recommendations to the adoption panel in a Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). On some occasions, due to worker capacity, an independent social worker is commissioned to complete this on our behalf.

In 2022/23 37 Initial Visits were completed, 25 of which resulted in an ROI. During this period 19 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, 2 of which were deferred for further work 18 adopter households were approved in this period, compared to 25 the previous year. 19 applications have been presented to Adoption Panel for approval. One application presented to panel had different outcome – deferrals, requests for additional information from ADM and unsuccessful/withdrawn applications. Of the 19 adopter households who attended panel and were approved, this was made up of 17 couples. 2 of the couples were LGBTQ+. 17 out of the 19 households were white British. No adopters are recorded as having a registered disability, although one requested extra support due to dyslexia

After adopters are recommended for approval at panel and formally approved by the Agency Decision Maker, all case responsibility remains allocated to a social worker in the Assessment and Support Team who has assessed them. AST social workers go on to support prospective adopters through matching and placement, continuing to work alongside the family until the point of Adoption Order.

As with our children, Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker to support our adopters to identify potential matches. All of our adopters are encouraged to create a profile on Linkmaker. FAL is part of a nationwide group who are looking at improving the quality of Linkmaker in supporting matches between children and adopters.

*'Panel feedback - Very good PAR Assessment - C presented as the person Panel had read about. Leona had captured her well. It was thorough, yet concise. Panel liked the Ecomap and the useful updates at Panel. ADM/ PA – Leona links the narrative to analysis well – for example C's learning*

*from her father's experiences. Leona makes connections and anticipates lines of enquiry , proactively addressing them in the assessment'*

*'We wouldn't have got here if it wasn't for Leona's support and hard work and we will be forever grateful that she was so integral in helping us to become parents to gorgeous little H!! '*

*'Thanks Beth.*

*I just wanted to say a great big thank you to you, Sandra, and Lauren. I was nervous the night before the 1st day, and you all put me at ease straight away. You presented the topics in a clear manner, and it has helped me no end with any questions and worries I initially had.*

*Thank you once again'*

*'Just to say Sameerah was exceptionally supportive and kind during the process. I appreciated her honesty and transparency even when having very difficult conversations. She gave me excellent advice throughout.'*

*'Thank you so much for the best phone call I have ever had the pleasure to take..... Emotions got the better of me!!!! It has been such a long emotional journey and we just can believe we have finally got the decision we all wanted.*

*Thank you to everyone that has been involved along the way*

*Beth, Sophie, we look forward to catching up with you both at some point next week.*

*Have an amazing weekend everyone, I know we sure will.....'*

### **3.4 Adoption Panels**

Adoption panels are chaired by an Independent Chair in line with regulatory requirements, supported by a vice-chair, independent members, social work representatives and an agency adviser. Leicestershire has a stand-alone Agency Decision Maker who is responsible for ensuring that they have considered all the information presented to them before making a final decision.

Adoption panels make recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker regarding the suitability of prospective adopter applicants, adoption matching, and adoption plans for children who are relinquished for adoption. All matches for Leicestershire children are considered at this panel.

Leicestershire County Council hold adoption panels once or twice per month in response to service requirements. During the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 panel met on 16 occasions hearing a total number of 33 cases. This is a significant decrease on the previous year (1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022) when panel met on 19 occasions, hearing 54 cases.

This reduction in cases has been due to delays in obtaining Placement Orders for children and also due to a number of adopters either withdrawing or being counselled out of the process. We have also had a number of Leicestershire adopters who have been matched with a total of 17 children either Interagency or within FAL. This results in those matches being presented to the child's responsible Adoption Panel rather than Leicestershire.

### **3.5 Post Order support**

#### **Support Offer**

Pre and post adoption support is provided in several ways within Leicestershire. An adoption social worker offers support up to three years post adoption order, especially in cases where adoption breakdown or disruption is a threat. This is set out in legislation (Adoption and Children Act 2002/Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005) as all placing authorities are required to provide support to a child, they have placed for adoption for the first three years. We have a dedicated support worker who makes first contact with any adopter approved by Leicestershire at the point of 6 weeks post placement. This is the point when research suggests that post placement depression can become evident. During this visit the support worker will spend a significant amount of time discussing any concerns or issues, they will inform the adopters about our post adoption support offer and email a pack of useful contacts and information. During this financial year we have completed 41 Post Adoption

Support assessments, submitted 258 applications to ASF (of which 156 were top up applications) . We have continued to provide play therapy to 12 children who have received a total of 196 sessions between them.

**PLAY THERAPY FEEDBACK:**

*'LM was talking about you and asked how long she would see you. I told her that i had asked for her to carry on seeing you into Year 5 if possible. She was so excited and DELIGHTED and **said that will make changing classes so much easier***

*We were then chatting about people being unkind and why that might be, lead to talking about how she used to find school really tricky and would hurt people*

*She said that school is still tricky but she knows to be kind and if you can be anything be kind.....and that " **having sheryl really helps me with my BIG feelings, i don't really know why, she just helps she is so kind and somehow i know that cos i get to see her everything will be ok"***

The support worker is Theraplay (level 2) trained, if necessary, she can remain involved to support managing behaviour and completing direct work with children. She can also escalate any worries to the allocated social worker, who can then utilise the expertise of the post adoption service to inform their support package.

There are four Post Adoption Support social workers within the team with a variety of expertise, from DDP (level 2) to Person centred therapy. All are trauma and attachment trained and specialist training is provided as part of their continuous development. Once a case is allocated for Post Adoption Support the social worker completes a Post Adoption Assessment of Need, which enables a thorough assessment of support needs and recommendations for therapeutic and non-therapeutic interventions. Therapeutic provisions and specialist assessments are commissioned through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), providing that eligibility criteria is met.

The Post Order Support Team, which incorporates Post Adoption and Post SGO support have had access to an in-house Play Therapist who works individually with adopted children. She also created a support call model named 'Parent Support 6' as a result of the covid crisis. This was funded through the ASF and was used to support parents in acute stress over the phone. Its success has meant that we are continuing

this offer. PS6 has continued to provide valuable short-term intervention, usually whilst ASF funding is awaited for more specific therapy to commence.

*Hi Claire and Sheryl*

*I hope you are both well.*

*I'm just sending this email on behalf of T and I to say thank you for all your support, advice and guidance during the last few months.*

*You both totally understood that we were at breaking point and needed immediate support to enable us to take time out for our own self care and sanity. Without your understanding and help, I dread to think where we would be now as a family unit.*

*We are hoping to build up a better and stronger relationship with our son and with your continued support I know we will get there.*

*Thank you once again and please accept our sincere thanks and gratitude for recognising that we were struggling and needed action rather than words.*

*Kindest regards*

*Again Thankyou for being there for us. Without you we would not be where we are today. Thank you.*

*'From day one Harriet made us both fell relaxed and at ease, she was very helpful on giving us advice and putting us in different scenarios so we could understand how to understand what B was going through and how to manage her feelings. I found Harriet like a breath of fresh air, very understanding and helpful and felt B learnt a lot from her. Harriet did a great job with Brooke and her Book of life really helped her to understand things better, so if any other child gets to meet Harriet they would be lucky children'*

A quarterly newsletter from FAL for adopters and internally for SGO carers is distributed and receives a high level of positive feedback from adopters and professionals. The team also runs two activity events per year, in the summer and at Christmas. These are well attended and receive positive feedback.

*'Very friendly and sociable'*

*'Great activities, such friendly people'*

*'All of the activities were brilliant, the children loved the bingo too'*



*'(loved) the singing and happiness'*

Despite only being required by legislation to provide support for the first three years post granting of an Adoption Order, Leicestershire now offers lifelong support so after the three-year period, adopters can contact the team directly if they require specific adoption support. For those cases where there is a chance of a child being placed back into care or there are child protection concerns it remains that support is provided via First Response Children's Duty and fieldwork locality teams. The post support team will continue to work as part of a team around the family, offering support to the child and parents relating to the therapeutic needs of the adopted child.

Birth Parents are routinely offered support prior to the adoption of their children. This support is offered through a leaflet provided at the point of ADM ratifying a care plan of adoption. The Permanence Team has a protocol of any such request for support to birth parents who are facing the knowledge that the Local Authority is not supporting a return of their child to their care. being presented to Permanence Panel where an application for an independent person to undertake this service will be considered. The Authority are continuing to review how to facilitate this service so that the offer to Birth Parents is meaningful.

The Post Adoption Support Team liaises with the Virtual School and training is offered to schools particularly around attachment issues for adopted children and how to successfully manage these in the school setting. The training is highly valued by schools who report a change in staff behaviour and interaction with children which in turn impacts on the children's ability to engage in education. Collaborations with the Peer Adoption Support group LAFS is also valuable and enables a connection with the wider adopter network. A monthly CAMHS consultation is held for any adopted child where a clinical nurse can offer advice and services provided by CAMHS.

The demand for Post Adoption Support continues to grow in all areas. Leicestershire has a Therapeutic Support Budget that can be accessed to support children emotionally prior to adoption. Each child can have an initial payment of up to £450 with a further £450 being available if required. The Service Manager for Children in Care has a role in monitoring applications and the progress of any therapy commissioned.

## **Adoption Support Fund**

To 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, Leicestershire has drawn down £852,432 from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families in Leicestershire. This is a slight decrease in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year (£862,468.48) and represents support to 414 families, up from 335 in 2021/22. The total amount of drawn down also includes top up applications where therapy is assessed as being needed to be continued once the initial therapeutic period has ended. Leicestershire has successfully trained workers therapeutically to ensure a better provision of services. Any money accumulated from the ASF ensures that workers receive clinical supervision alongside regular supervision to ensure that their therapeutic practice is ethical and appropriate. Some of the most complex cases may be co-worked by the Locality Team with support from the Post Adoption Support Worker. In such cases an assessment will be conducted, and an application may be made for appropriate therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund.

## **Birth Records Counselling**

Birth Records Counselling is a service provided to adults who have been adopted and wish to access their records and understand their life story prior to being adopted. A social worker reads the records and provides a detailed account to the adoptee alongside therapeutic emotional support that enables the adult to process their journey. This service continues to be highly successful, and adoptees regularly provide positive feedback. 18 referrals were received for this service during 2022/23. This is a decrease from 36 during the previous year. To reflect the drop in demand Leicestershire has not replaced one of the part time workers who retired. Intermediary services where adult adoptees are supported to find and meet their birth parents is not carried out by Leicestershire. Some initial advice may be given but as with other Local Authorities we signpost adoptees who request this service to third sector agencies.

'I just wanted to thank you for everything you did. Its been the best decision I could have made tracing her and I feel very close to her – I can't call her mum but she understands that, she said you only have one mum and that's the one that brought you up – which is so lovely of her to say. We think my Birth Father has died, but we are still trying to build that tree – she has found a picture of him that she is going to show me on Friday.

S is sooo excited I've found them too – she knew about me from the age of 8 so is used to the fact that she has a 'sister'. The youngest brother didn't know about me, but he has taken it very well – they all say he is very laid back.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that everything is going really and to thank you again for everything.'

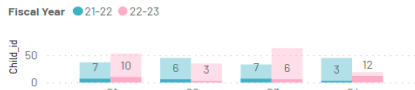
## **4 . Performance**

The overall performance shows an increase in the amount of Best Interest Decisions being made from 23 in 2021-22 to 31 in 2022-23, but a decrease in the amount of Placement Orders being granted ( 30 in 2021-22 to 21 in 2022-23). There appears to be more emphasis and drive by the Family Justice Board to maintain children within their birth families or for them to remain in long term foster care. Adoption staff are now more regularly challenged during proceedings about the possibility of successfully finding adopters and we are seeing an increase in the numbers of birth parents being given leave to apply to have a Placement Order revoked. There was a decrease in the amount of children placed last year - 29 children in 2021-22 and 16 in 2022-23, this is reflective of the amount of Placement Orders being granted. 21 Adoption Orders were granted last year compared to 34 the year previously. Current data suggests that there are already 28 children booked in for a Best Interest Decision before the end of Quarter 2 of 2023. 77% of the children within Family Adoption Links have been placed within the Region resulting in a financial saving for Leicestershire County Council in the use of Interagency placements.

In relation to the Adopter performance, it should be acknowledged that during 2021-22, there was a large backlog of prospective adopters being held in Stage one of the process. A more robust approach to accepting applicants and exploring the suitability of those already in Stage one has resulted in a dramatic reduction in complaints and a timelier assessment period for prospective adopters

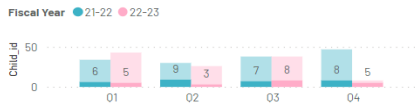


ADM decision child should be placed for adoption

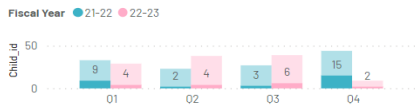


This dashboard reports on the key stages in the Child and Adopter journey and is a direct representation of the data we have submitted via our ASGLB returns.

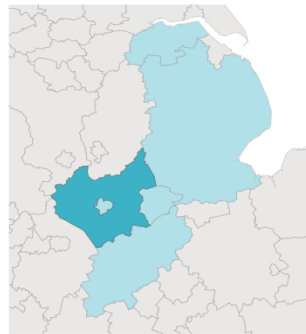
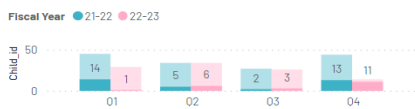
PO/s Granted



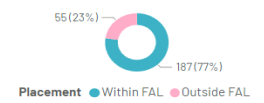
Children Placed



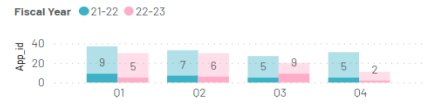
Adoption orders Granted



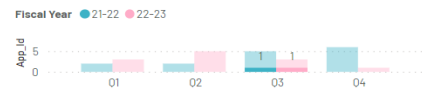
FAL Child Placements 21- Current



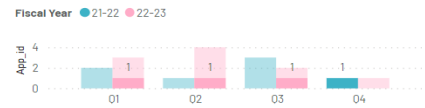
Number of Registrations



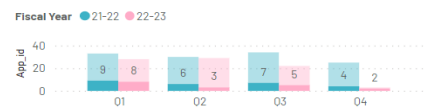
Number of Fast Tracked Registrations (2nd Time Adopters)



Foster Carer Approved Adopters



Number of Household Approvals



FAL Internal Child Placements Comparison

Fiscal Year 2021-22

Child Placements 21-22 Provision Type (fig i)

Provision Type	Children placed	% Placed	Fiscal Year
RAA	5	17.24%	21-22
RAA (Family Adoption Links)	19	65.52%	21-22
VAA	3	10.34%	21-22
VAA outside England	2	6.90%	21-22
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

Children Placed

Fiscal Year 21-22 22-23



This dashboard hones in on the Child Placements that or region has made (fig i), and where Children who have been placed within Family Adoption Links sit (fig ii). On the right hand side we have the view from Fiscal Year 2022-23, and on the left hand side we show the view from Fiscal Year 2021-22

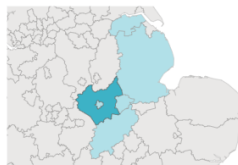
Fiscal Year 2022-23

Child Placements 22-23 Provision Type (fig i)

Provision Type	Children placed	% Placed	Fiscal Year
RAA	1	6.25%	22-23
RAA (Family Adoption Links)	15	93.75%	22-23
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

Family Adoption Links Regional placement detail 21-22 (fig ii)

Childs LA	Placement Agency	Children placed	%	Fiscal Year
Leicestershire	Leicestershire	18	94.74%	21-22
Leicestershire	North Lincolnshire	1	5.26%	21-22
<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	



Family Adoption Links Regional placement detail 22-23 (fig ii)

Childs LA	Placement Agency	Children placed	%	Fiscal Year
Leicestershire	Leicestershire	10	66.67%	22-23
Leicestershire	North Lincolnshire	4	26.67%	22-23
Leicestershire	Northamptonshire	1	8.67%	22-23
<b>Total</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

This data demonstrates the increased use of FAL placements. Leicestershire has only used one external RAA placement this financial year. 10 of our children have been placed with Leicestershire adopters, 4 with North Lincolnshire and 1 with Northamptonshire. During the fiscal year 2021-22, 10 external interagency placements were required. The cost of Voluntary Adoption Agency placements is higher than those from other Reginal Adoption Agencies, by not having to have the need to use such placements during last financial year has resulted in a significant saving of £169,335.

## Children waiting

- At the end of March 2023, there were a total of 30 children with a Placement Order who have not yet been placed with their adoptive families. This is broken down into 16 male children and 14 females. 9 of these children have links with prospective adopters, 5 children are having links explored with their foster carers (this includes a sibling group of 4 whose carer was approved in January 2023, but we have now been requested to reassess birth father) a further single child is due to be placed with his sibling and 1 further child is placed in Long term foster care and we are awaiting the revocation of the Placement Order. We currently have 16 children who we are actively family finding for, this includes 9 children are considered to be 'harder to place' as a result of their additional needs (health and arising from trauma experiences), which also includes 3 sibling groups one of three children and two of two children. All children waiting are discussed at local and regional family finding meetings, are profiled at Discovery and Exchange Events and have also been invited or attended the Regional Activity Day.

### FAL Adopter Distribution Comparison

Fiscal Year 2021-22

Adopter Placements 21-22 (fig i)

Child Provision Type	Adopters linked	%	Fiscal Year
VAA	1	5.56%	21-22
LA	18	100.00%	21-22
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	

This dashboard details the distribution of our adopters. Fig i details placements that were made with adopters from various sources, and Fig ii shows the line level detail behind fig i. On the right hand side we have the view from Fiscal Year 2022-23, and on the left hand side we show the view from Fiscal Year 2021-22.

Local\_Authority  
Leicestershire

Fiscal Year 2022-23

Adopter Placements 22-23 (fig i)

Child Provision Type	Adopters linked	%	Fiscal Year
LA outside England	1	4.55%	22-23
LA	21	95.45%	22-23
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	



Adopter Placement detail 21-22 (fig ii)

Adopter LA	Child LA	Households	Children Placed	Provision Type	%
Leicestershire	Derbyshire	1	2	LA	5.56%
Leicestershire	Leicestershire (FAL)	14	34	LA	77.78%
Leicestershire	Lincolnshire (FAL)	1	1	LA	5.56%
Leicestershire	Middlesbrough	1	4	LA	5.56%
Leicestershire	Parents and Children Together	1	2	VAA	5.56%
Leicestershire	Wolverhampton	1	2	LA	5.56%
<b>Total</b>		<b>18</b>	<b>45</b>		<b>100.00%</b>

Adoption Placement detail 22-23 (fig ii)

Adopter LA	Child LA	Provision Type	Households	Children Placed	%
Leicestershire	Bedford	LA	1	1	4.55%
Leicestershire	Leicester (FAL)	LA	3	4	13.64%
Leicestershire	Leicestershire (FAL)	LA	10	10	45.45%
Leicestershire	Lincolnshire (FAL)	LA	2	3	9.09%
Leicestershire	North Lincolnshire (FAL)	LA	1	1	4.55%
Leicestershire	Northamptonshire (FAL)	LA	3	5	13.64%
Leicestershire	Nottingham	LA	1	2	4.55%
Leicestershire	Wales	LA outside England	1	1	4.55%
<b>Total</b>			<b>22</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

This data gives information relating to Leicestershire Adopters who have had placements of children from both inside and outside of the Local Authority. Leicestershire adopters have provided placements for 10 Leicestershire children and 13 Family Adoption Links children.

## 22-23 Child placement timeliness:



Despite the challenges that the service faces in family finding, the above chart demonstrates that we are improving in timeliness in all areas, with significant improvement in the areas which we have more control over e.g. Placement Order to Match and Placement Order to being placed.

## Line Level Detail of the 22-23 Child Placements:

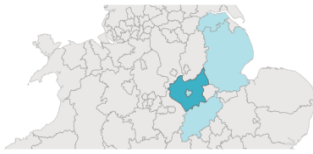
Aggregated total (All ages)													
Child ID	Count	Gender	Ethnicity	Sibling Group	Sibling Group Size	Entered Care	Average of Entered Care to PO	Placement Order	Average of A2, PO to Match	ADM Match	Average of PO to Placed	Placement	Average of A10, Entered care to Placed
837084	1	Male	White British	No		11/08/20	223	22/03/21	619	01/12/22	619	01/12/22	842
890796	1	Male	White British	No		03/06/20	301	31/03/21	541	23/09/22	541	23/09/22	842
830254	1	Male	White British	No		28/07/20	379	11/08/21	407	22/09/22	429	14/10/22	808
844717	1	Male	White British	No		21/05/20	407	02/07/21	280	08/04/22	348	15/06/22	755
889487	1	Female	White British	No		08/01/20	517	08/06/21	289	04/03/22	300	04/04/22	817
899214	1	Female	White British	No		13/08/20	454	10/11/21	268	05/08/22	307	13/09/22	761
918700	1	Female	White British	No		21/05/21	277	22/02/22	267	16/11/22	280	29/11/22	557
885589	1	Female	White British	No		18/03/20	532	01/09/21	260	19/05/22	271	30/05/22	803
859153	1	Male	White British	No		16/12/20	442	03/03/22	214	03/10/22	243	01/11/22	685
912884	1	Male	White British	No		19/04/21	322	07/03/22	212	05/10/22	241	03/11/22	563
911583	1	Female	White and Asian	No		23/07/21	145	15/12/21	208	11/07/22	223	26/07/22	368
832992	1	Female	White British	No		13/10/20	351	29/09/21	191	08/04/22	203	20/04/22	554
917734	1	Male	White British	No		18/10/21	310	24/08/22	162	02/02/23	175	15/02/23	485
907529	1	Male	White British	No		05/03/21	353	21/02/22	147	18/07/22	169	09/08/22	522
909217	1	Male	White British	No		05/10/21	224	17/05/22	143	07/10/22	168	01/11/22	392
777552	1	Female	White British	No		24/03/17	2078	01/12/22	50	20/01/23	50	20/01/23	2128
<b>16</b>						<b>457</b>		<b>265</b>		<b>285</b>		<b>743</b>	

This data gives a breakdown of the length of time the children who have been placed have been waiting. As can be seen there are some significant outliers.

- 5-year-old male, foster carer approved but this took longer than expected as further work was required by ADM.
- 2 year old male , foster carer approved with an increased amount of work required by ADM prior to approval. Child had been in placement since birth.
- 6-year-old male who required a lot of preparation work prior to and during transitions
- 5-year-old male
- 2 year female, some developmental delay – adoptive placement identified in August 2022, however birth mother moved into the same area as the adopters and a new search had to begin
- 13-year-old female in Long term foster care who requested that she be adopted by her carers.

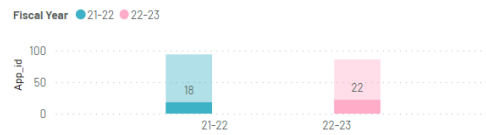


### Timeliness measures for FAL Adopters



This dashboard shows the timeliness measures for FAL Adopters through the various stages, and also shows Adopters who had children placed with them in 21-23, drilled down to show the timeliness of the internal vs external to FAL placements

### Adopters who had Children Placed with them



### Aggregated total of FAL Adopters

Fiscal Year	Count	Average of Enquiry to Stage 1 Started (Months)	Average of Stage 1 Started/Stage 1 Ended (Months)	Average of Stage 1 Ended/Stage 2 Started (Months)	Average of Stage 2 Started/Stage 2 Ended (Months)	Average of Stage 2 to Child(ren) Matched with Adopter (Months)	Average of Stage 2 to child(ren) placed with Adopter (Months)
21-22	18	4.78	8.14	1.45	8.24	9.70	10.73
22-23	22	4.70	7.43	0.73	7.26	10.28	11.05

This data demonstrates timeliness of our Adopter Journey. There has been significant improvement in the stage 1 and stage 2 processes. It should be noted that there were still several external assessments being completed by Carter Brown during the first half of 2022-23. The quality of the reports were often poor with a significant amount of rework required which was often completed by in house assessors which impacted on the ability to allocate new assessments. Our backlog of applicants in stage one has reduced significantly, and a more robust management oversight is in place regarding those applicants coming through the process and their suitability to adopt.

The 1-year trend data highlights a decrease across all three key performance indicators, meaning children are waiting less on average, to achieve permanence. It must be noted that the cohort of children who need adoption is small, and the average easily distorted by outlying data; a few children who wait significantly longer mean that the average is increased even while most children are achieving permanency in a timely way. Cases where the children have waited longer for permanency have been explored individually and we are satisfied that the delays for these children have been unavoidable. It can take longer to identify the right adoptive matches for children who have complex needs and who are in larger sibling groups; Leicestershire County Council nevertheless continues to pursue adoption for these children whilst it remains in their best interests.

The adoption service is keen to reduce the time taken to achieve permanence for children and a detailed action plan as well as a regional service delivery plan aim to address some of the key areas for development: increasing our use of Fostering for

Adoption placements, identifying adopters earlier from across the region to meet our children's needs and building on our achievements regarding quality assurance to enable efficient, thorough decision-making.

### **3.2 Adoption Plans**

Where the Local Authority proposes a plan of adoption for a child, this plan must be presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a decision that adoption is in their best interests. In this period 31 children were subject to Best Interest Decisions. 14 of those children are waiting for final court hearings where Placement Orders (PO) may be made to allow their placement with adoptive families.

There has been an increase in the average days from BID to PO which partly reflects the difficulty in progressing proceedings to final hearings. Children who have a BID, but no placement order are tracked by managers to understand delays. Such delays are most commonly attributable to court processes and to additional assessments being completed where family members come forward to be considered to care for the child/ren at a late stage in proceedings.

National minimum standards require Local Authorities to track the time between children coming into care and receiving a Best Interest Decision. National minimum standards also require tracking from the time the Local Authority proposes a plan of adoption to the point of a BID. Children wait longer than average in Leicestershire County Council from the point of coming into care to the point of BID and further work is needed to understand the reasons for this. However, BIDs are made in a timely way once the Local Authority has confirmed a plan of adoption.

Children are referred to the permanence team, as above, where a twin- or triple-tracking decision is made as part of childcare proceedings. Permanence Team managers meet regularly with colleagues in locality teams to track the progress of children who are in proceedings or who may shortly enter proceedings. The Children's Decision-Making panel continues to be chaired by the Head of Service for Fieldwork and is the forum where decisions for pre-proceedings and issuing of care proceedings is made. This provides senior management oversight of cases that may progress to a

permanence decision of adoption. These processes help the adoption service plan for children's expected needs and assist decision-making regarding the recruitment of adopters.

When children are relinquished for adoption by their birth parents, these plans must be presented to the Adoption Panel. In this period, two plans of adoption for relinquished children were presented, one of which was approved.

### **4.3 Children Waiting for Adoption**

At the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 there were 44 children with a best interest decision of adoption, of which 30 had Placement Orders granted by the court. Four children have an ethnicity other than White British. 20 children are female and 24 are male. 19 are part of sibling groups who require adoption ( 1 sibling group of 4, 1 sibling group of 3 and 6 sibling groups of 2) this does not include children who have siblings with different care plans.

Prior to the making of a Placement Order, Permanence Team social workers ensure they are familiar with the needs of the child or children and complete early scoping to identify any potential adoptive links for the child. Formal family finding work is then initiated at the point of Placement Order but can be paused if there are additional court proceedings required.

Early identification of potential links and matches is carried out in internal family finding meetings. Children may also have anonymous profiles created to facilitate early linking with Leicestershire adopters as well as adopters across the Regional Adoption Agency. Leicestershire County Council seek to place children with our own approved adopters initially, then consider adopters within our region before looking to other interagency placements including Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs). Children's profiles are uploaded to Linkmaker and shared securely with professionals and prospective adopters to allow potential links to be explored. Regional family finding activity is in process, with regular matching meetings taking place. This continues to be a positive area of practice and been successful in identifying matches for 10 Leicestershire children; the family finding work will continue to grow in the year ahead.

Leicestershire County Council has continued to attend exchange events during the course of the year and has also used other creative online marketing campaigns to support recruitment of specific adopters for some 'harder to place' children, categorised by the DfE as children in sibling groups, with disabilities or aged 5 and over.

No children were placed under Fostering for Adoption protocols during this period, although this continues to be tracked through attendance at CDM and is considered upon the referral being received.

#### **4.4 Children Placed and Adopted**

16 children have been placed with their adoptive families during the year, a decrease of 10 against the previous year, we have a small cohort of children who have been delayed in their formal matching as identified previously in this report. Leicestershire children, on average, wait longer than the national average between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

We have been successful in matching children with our own adopters – of the 16 children placed during the year, 15 were placed with adopters either approved by Leicestershire County Council or one of our FAL partners. One further child was placed within a VAA . 22 children are now in placement with their adoptive families but awaiting an Adoption Order.

20 Adoption Orders were finalised in the year 2022/23, a decrease from the previous year when 34 orders were made. This reflects the number of delays in achieving Placement Orders and alternative permanence plans being made.

#### **4.4 Adoption Approvals**

In 2022/23, 37 Initial Visits were completed, 26 of which resulted in a Registration of Interest (ROI). During this period 19 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, 2 of which were deferred for further work.

19 adopter households were approved in this period, compared to 25 the previous year. There were a further 16 households in assessment at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

19 applications have been presented to Adoption Panel for approval. One application presented to panel had different outcome – deferrals, requests for additional information from ADM and unsuccessful/withdrawn applications. Of the 19 adopter households who attended panel and were approved, 18 were couples of which 2 were same sex . 17 of the 19 households were white British. One adopters requested extra support due to dyslexia.

Timeliness in completing adopter assessments has improved during the last year, with adopters approved in this period waiting an average of 15.42 months (compared to 17.83 months in 21/22) between entering stage 1 and completing stage 2 – a process which is intended to take 6 months (~180 days) in total. Key performance measures and monthly performance meetings, and the appointment of an experienced adoption manager has meant that this area has resulted in this progress and will continue to be addressed.

Clear matching expectations and planning for adoptive families from the point of their approval to the point of their match will also improve the service we offer to families and, ultimately, to the children they can offer a home to. We are now collating further data to better understand the adopter journey from approval to match, with consideration of any adaptations we may need to make for adopters who have protected characteristics. We are continuing to align our practice in this area with our regional partners.

#### **4.5 Adoption Disruptions**

There have been no disruptions for Leicestershire children in this period

## **5. Developments**

### **4.1 Regional service delivery**

The Regional Adoption Agency, Family Adoption Links, was newly formed as a partnership agreement during the year 2020/21. Operational managers across the region have developed and revised a Service Delivery Plan with clearly defined workstreams in order to promote regional collaboration and create workable cross-authority protocols.

Staff who work for Family Adoption Links are continuing to build relationships with their counterparts across the region and information sharing events for the whole staff group are run throughout the year.

### **5.2 First family support**

The Local Authority has a duty to provide support for birth parents whose children are adopted. Previously Leicestershire adoption service ran a peer-support group as well as offering individual counselling sessions. This peer support group is in the process of being re-established.

During the last year, group work has not been possible, but parents continue to be offered individual sessions which have been commissioned through an independent counsellor. This counsellor offers a series of six counselling sessions to birth parents. In the year 2022/23, she received four such referrals for parents wishing to access this service; two of these parents have completed all six sessions so far.

Further work is in the process of reinvigorating this area of work and ensure we provide an excellent service to children's first families.

Birth family members and wider family members are currently offered an information sharing meeting with our life story support worker, which allows them to share positive and significant information about themselves for their children in later life. Informal feedback from this is extremely positive, with birth families members explaining that

they were grateful to have the opportunity to share memories and keepsakes and thanking the worker for kindness at a difficult point in their lives.

### **5.3 Feedback**

The adoption service gathers feedback from various people, including adult adoptees, adopters, foster carers, birth family members and other professionals. We continue to develop our work to ensure that:

- Children's voices are included in the feedback
- Feedback is sought routinely and sensitively at appropriate points in the process
- Feedback is used to develop and co-produce service improvement.

This will be a key area of development in the next year.

## **6. Complaints**

Ten complaints have been received during the year. Complaints are initially directed to the relevant team manager for a response and can be escalated where the individual remains unsatisfied. Adopters who receive negative decision about their suitability to adopt (a 'qualifying determination') are also able to appeal this decision by referral to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). In this year, no adopters have accessed the IRM to appeal a negative decision.

It is understandable that adopters are more likely to complain in situations where the Local Authority must make negative recommendations or requires time to complete additional assessments. When adopter applicants, prospective adopters and approved adopters raise issues with the service, both through formal complaints and informal discussion, these issues are always overseen by managers.

We are committed to being a learning organisation and ensure that we respond to queries as fully as possible. As a service we strive to be transparent and open with adopters and will always respond initially to any complaints by convening a meeting to try and address any concerns as quickly as possible. Any learning is discussed

reflectively within the team and if appropriate changes are made to processes. The 5 complaints in relation the assessment process were in relation to delay. We now have an extra worker to complete initial visits and management oversight if those adopters in both stages of the assessment process is now much more robust.

## **7. Achievements**

Leicestershire Adoption Agency continues to strive to deliver excellent services to our children. The permanence team now complete all Child Permanence Reports for Leicestershire children following the roll-out of this service due to the success of the pilot programme. Reports are of a consistently high quality and social workers collaborate well with colleagues across the children's service to progress plans for children.

The recruitment and assessment of adopters who are able to meet the needs of our children continues to be an area for development, but this reflects a national picture of the challenges in identifying adopters for children with complex needs. Nevertheless, the service is committed to improving the adopter journey and has developed a detailed action plan which will be enhanced by partnership working across the region.

The Post-Order team has developed its specialist work with a view to ensuring as many families as possible are able to access the help and resources they need. The team provide direct help and advice as well as facilitating access to therapeutic services via the Adoption Support Fund. The Post Order Team commenced its lifelong service for SGO carers in January 2022.

Social workers in the adoption service have access to specialist training and are supported to develop their skills. We are ambitious for our service, for our children and for our staff.



The Adoption Panel is adapting and developing, having recently recruited 16 new panel members and two panel chairs. The panel service is building on existing positive relationships and building stronger links with service leads.

## **8. Recommendations for 2023/2024**

- Continue working and developing alongside our colleagues in the Regional Adoption Agency, with specific and effective action plans agreed by operational leads and overseen by the Board.
- Focus on the key performance indicators related to the assessment and recruitment of adopters, identify barriers to improvement and learn from areas of good practice. We will measure stage one and stage 2 timeliness with an aim of achieving assessments to be completed within 6 months. This will be achieved by ensuring that recruitment is transparent and that we are clear at the beginning of the process about suitability of applicants to adopt. Robust management oversight will ensure that delay is picked up quickly and addressed
- Focus on timeliness for children by developing our understanding of children's journey through care to point of Best Interest Decision; developing early linking and matching processes; increasing our use of Fostering for Adoption where appropriate to meet children's needs. There will be a particular focus on those children who typically wait longer. We will utilise FAL activity days for are children who wait longer and ensure that these children are profiled on our FAL website. We are also driving forward the quality of our linkmaker profiles with support from the marketing officer.
- To continue to develop our panel, ensuring that that panel members are appropriately trained to continue to meet the needs of the service provide robust scrutiny of the agency.
- Develop a service-wide action plan to ensure that operational managers invest in mutually beneficial activity to improve outcomes for children and adopters.
- Continue to invest in developing processes to strengthen feedback and how this influences change and development

- Reinvigorate the service offered to birth parents/first family members, through the appointment of a support worker who will develop a service in consultation with first family and other members of FAL to ensure the needs of first family members are appropriately met.
- To provide bespoke training and support opportunities to our Special Guardians and the children that they care for.
- To consider the impact of the national drive on promoting direct contact for children after adoption

