

Annual Report

April 2022 – March 2023



**ADOPT
LONDON
NORTH**

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Contents

About Adopt London North	3
Financial spend 2022/23	6
National adoption landscape	7
Adopt London	9
The Black Adoption Project	11
The Adoption Panel	13
Training for local authority social workers	15
Finding prospective adoptive parents	16
Preparing and approving adoptive parents	19
Planning for children	22
Placing children with adoptive parents	25
Providing support to adoptive families and others	30
Recommendations	36

About Adopt London North

Context and responsibilities

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

Adopt London North is a partnership between the six London boroughs of Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, and Islington. The boroughs previously worked together successfully for over a decade as the North London Adoption & Fostering Consortium.

The adoption functions of the six boroughs officially became part of Adopt London North on 1st October 2019, hosted by the London Borough of Islington as the lead partner. The ALN Partnership Agreement covers the legal and financial terms of the arrangement. There is shared oversight of the RAA through a Governance Board and Quality Assurance Board.

Adopt London North has responsibility for all adoption led services, delivering these on behalf of the local authorities. These include:

- Recruitment and assessment of adoptive parents

- Family finding for children in need of adoptive parents
- Adoption support to adoptive families, adopted adults, and others impacted by adoption

Responsibility for the child (including corporate parenting responsibilities) remain with the local authority. The borough is therefore responsible for the progress of the child's case through the court system and for decisions in respect of care and adoption planning.

Governance arrangements

All service functions and partnership arrangements are detailed within the Partnership Agreement. As a result of changes to the division of financial contributions from April 2023, the Agreement is being reviewed and updated during 2023/24.

The ALN Governance Board meets every 2 – 3 months and has Director level representation from each of the six partner boroughs. This Board has responsibility for all partnership decisions that need to be made above Head of Service level, and for monitoring the performance and budget of ALN.

A Quality Assurance Board (QA Board) meets monthly and has membership at Head of Service and / or Service Manager level from each partner borough. The QA Board has responsibility to monitor and improve partnership working across the boroughs and ALN, including making decisions and proposals about practice and procedures that relate to adoption work across the agencies. The QA Board also considers emerging information about differences in practice between the six boroughs, and where best practice can be implemented across all partners. During 2022/23 some of the areas of focus for the QA Board have been:

- Learning from a Cumbria Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review into the death of Leiland-James Corkill, who was murdered by his prospective adoptive parents.
- Effective information sharing processes.
- Developing an audit to understand more about the number of adopted children and young people who are open to local authority services or re-enter care due to difficulties after an Adoption Order.
- Introducing and monitoring the implementation of the ALN training programme for local authority social workers.
- Learning from legal advice and case law relating to Agency Decision Maker (ADM) processes.

- Managing enquiries during care proceedings from foster carers and connected people who want to adopt.

Staffing

ALN employs 38 members of staff who work across specialist teams focused on the different practice areas within the service. The service is managed by a Head of Service, Service Manager, and Adoption Business Manager. We have a stable staff group, with no one leaving the service during 2022/23. We do not carry any vacant permanent posts and find that there is a strong response when we do occasionally have permanent posts available to advertise. We only use agency staff to cover short or fixed term posts, and during 2022/23 had just one agency staff member in post as a Business Coordinator. In addition to our core staff, we manage a small pool of sessional social workers who increase our casework capacity in a flexible way.

Inspections

ALN support and participate in the adoption elements of any partner local authority inspection including ILACS and focused inspections looking at permanency or children in care. In 2022/23 we were involved in the ILACS inspections that took place for Camden and Haringey.



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

to individual RAAs. When the pilot is complete Ofsted and the DfE will consider possible regulatory change to normalise RAA inspections.

Outcomes

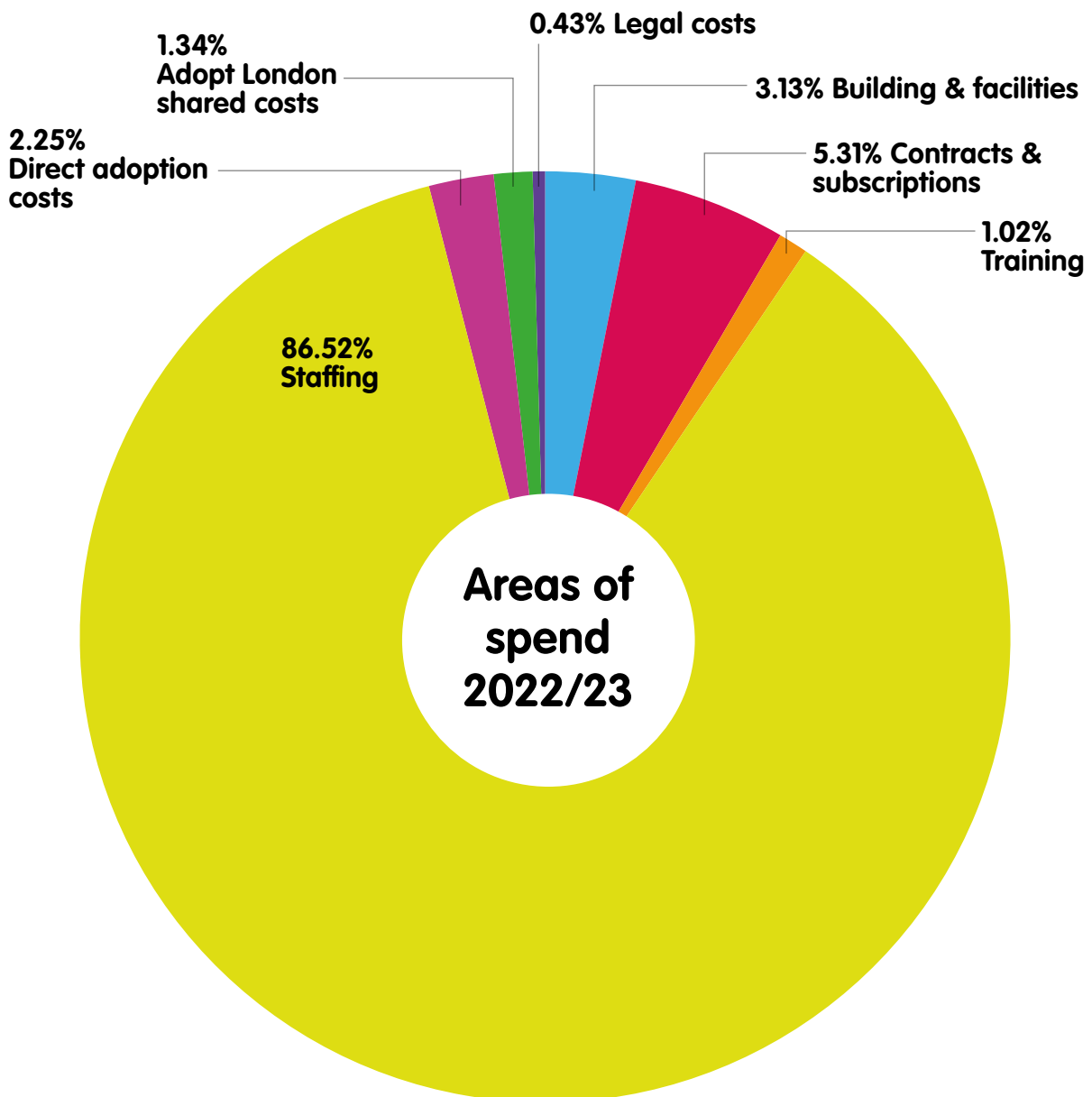
Adopt London North aims to improve outcomes for children who have a plan for adoption and those living in adoptive families in the following specific ways. The linked sections in this report provide more information about the work that is happening in these areas.

<p>Finding prospective adoptive parents</p>	<p>Increase the proportion of prospective adopters who are of Black and mixed Black ethnicity, in line with the needs of our Black and mixed Black ethnicity children in north London.</p>
<p>Preparing and approving adoptive parents</p>	<p>Improve timeliness and effectiveness in matching in-house approved adopters with children.</p> <p>Assess, prepare, and support prospective adopters to a high standard so that they are fully equipped to successfully parent an adoptive child.</p>
<p>Planning for children</p>	<p>Ensure all children who would benefit from adoption are identified appropriately during Permanency Planning processes.</p> <p>Ensure that children who would benefit from an Early Permanence placement are identified early and matched with adoptive parents who have been prepared for Early Permanence.</p>
<p>Placing children with adoptive parents</p>	<p>Ensure effective and time-sensitive family finding for children with a plan for adoption.</p> <p>Increase the proportion of in-house and local adoptive placements.</p>
<p>Providing support to adoptive families and others</p>	<p>Improve consistency and timeliness in providing support for adoptive families.</p> <p>Increase awareness and uptake of support services amongst adoptive families to build resilience and reduce the need for crisis support.</p> <p>Provide specialist and targeted support to adoptive families with the most acute needs to reduce family breakdown.</p>

Financial spend 2022/23

The total budget for ALN in 2022/23 was £2,807,245. Of this, 86.52% (£2,428,886) was spent on staffing costs – including permanent and agency staffing, sessional workers, Adoption Panel members, and maternity costs.

Financial contributions to ALN were renegotiated between the partner boroughs in 2022/23, with an equal split contribution model being agreed for implementation from 2023/24.



National adoption landscape

National RAA Leaders Group

The 32 Regional Adoption Agencies in England work together under the umbrella 'The National RAA Leaders Group', soon to be rebranded in Autumn 2023 to 'Adoption England'. The Leaders Group has a Strategic Lead and several project leads focused on developing particular areas of practice nationally and coordinating the work of RAAs. The Leaders Group has been tasked by the Department of Education with developing the priorities it identified within its adoption strategy 'Achieving Excellence Everywhere' (2021) and provided with funding to progress this work. These priorities focus on developing national standards in recruitment, matching, and support; looking at alternative models of matching practice; increasing the use of early permanence placements; developing multi-disciplinary support; and considering models for national and pan-regional commissioning in adoption support. In addition, the Leaders Group is focused on raising the voices of those with different lived experiences of adoption, and on increasing representation of all forms of diversity within adoption services. Whilst much of this work is being progressed nationally, Adopt London have also been successful at accessing grant funding from the National RAA Leaders Group to progress priorities that align with the DfE strategy.



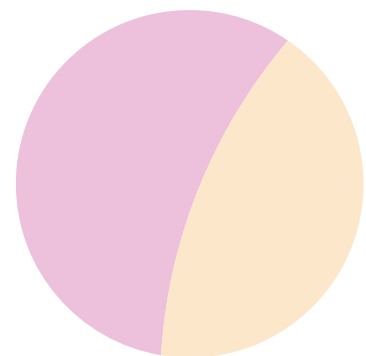
regional
adoption
agencies



Death of Leiland-James Corkill in Cumbria

Leiland-James was placed for adoption aged 7 months in August 2020. He had been removed from his birth family through care proceedings and placed with foster carers from the age of 2 months. In January 2021 Leiland-James died as a result of a catastrophic head injury at the hands of his prospective adoptive parents. In May 2022 the prospective adoptive mother was found guilty of murder. During the trial she was found to have lied about her alcohol use, mental health, physical health, family debts, and attitude to physical chastisement. In July 2022 Cumbria Safeguarding Children's Partnership published their report following a Child Safeguarding Practice Review, and recommendations for Regional Adoption Agencies have recently been published. There is significant learning from this horrifying case and RAAs are working collectively to implement changes to practice which will reduce the risk of a similar set of circumstances occurring in future. These changes include:

- Ensuring medical practitioners understand their safeguarding responsibilities in adoption cases, and that updating information is sought from medical records at different stages of the process.
- Providing opportunities to listen to the voice of the child at different stages of the adoption process (in this case the adoptive parents had a birth child who would have been old enough to speak with social workers and might have provided some insight).
- Letting personal referees know that they have a safeguarding responsibility and should make contact with the adoption agency if they have concerns.
- More strenuously seeking references from therapeutic providers with an emphasis on their role in safeguarding, as some providers refuse to provide a reference on the grounds of patient confidentiality.



Adopt London



Adopt London structure

Four RAAs work closely together under the Adopt London umbrella covering the different geographic regions in London, and providing services to 24 boroughs in total. Adopt London are unique nationally in working in such a close partnership across a large number of local authorities.

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

Heads of Service and the host borough Directors and Directors of Children's Services meet quarterly as the Adopt London Executive Advisory

Board chaired by a non-host partner DCS. The Executive Advisory Board oversees the joint project work of Adopt London, supports with problem solving, and considers Adopt London issues that need the support of other senior leaders to resolve.

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



Adopt London activity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Black Adoption Project



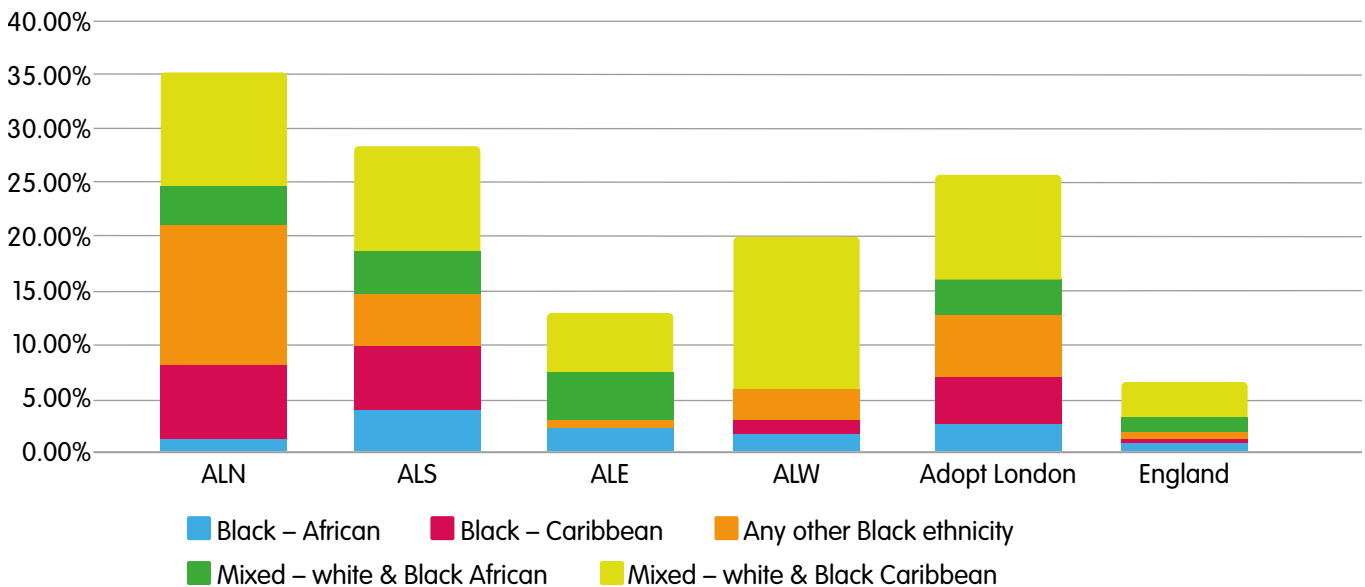
The Black Adoption Project aims to improve adoption for Black children and families and is a partnership project between Adopt London and Laurelle Brown Training & Consultancy. We have now completed phase 1 of the Project and have a strong governance structure established with a wide range of representatives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

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

perceptions of adoption. Some of our key findings are:

- Black children who have a plan of adoption agreed by the court are much less likely than other children to go on to be adopted, and this seems to be most often because suitable adoptive parents couldn't be identified.
- Black children who are adopted wait much longer to move into their adoptive family.
- Black prospective adopters are more likely to drop out during the assessment process and not go on to adopt a child.
- Some of the most significant barriers to adoption for Black prospective adopters are financial factors, negative experiences

Black children placed for adoption as a proportion of all children placed for adoption in the 5 years from 2016/17 - 2020/21



or perceptions of the assessment process, the need for more support after adoption (including culturally informed support), and the impact of racism.

In the five year period studied, Adopt London North placed the highest proportion of Black and mixed Black ethnicity children for adoption compared to other Adopt London RAAs. Across Adopt London on average 25.8% of children placed for adoption were of Black or mixed Black ethnicity backgrounds. We found that Black children with a Placement Order were 20% less likely to have been successfully placed for adoption than children of other ethnicities. Black Caribbean children particularly were 12 times more likely than other children to have 'prospective adopters could not be found' given as the reason for a change of care plan away from adoption. When other factors were held constant, Black children spent on average 6½-8 months longer in the adoption process before moving in with their adoptive family, and the most substantial delays occurred during the family finding process – again suggesting that significant delay is caused by difficulties identifying suitable prospective adopters.

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

During 2022/23 we organised workshops with a wide range of stakeholders, including adopted young people, to develop a Theory of Change – a document which articulates the things that aren't working currently, and the goals of the project. The research findings and Theory of

Change process led directly to some options for creating change. The pilot proposals target different areas of practice including:

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

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

Alongside the research and practice change is activity focusing on the importance of workforce development and support for Black staff members. We have been running monthly 'Safe Space Sessions' for Black staff to reflect on their work within adoption and discuss experiences that impact and shape the workplace and practice.

We have run whole-staff development training, and a series of workshops focused on learning from Black adoptees on their experiences of adoption. In the next phase of work we will be developing more ongoing programmes of support for staff to help create and embed change.

Black Adoption Project goals

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

The Adoption Panel

Structure of the Adoption Panel

Adopt London North run one central Adoption Panel which oversees all:

- Matching decisions relating to the choice of adoptive family for a child
- Best Interests Decisions for voluntary adoption (relinquished babies)
- Approval of prospective adoptive parents
- Review or rescindment of approval of prospective adoptive parents

Panel recommendations relating to individual children are presented to the Agency Decision Maker in the child's borough for a decision. Prospective adopter approval and review of

approval decisions are presented to the Agency Decision Maker in ALN.

The ALN Panel meets twice per month, with capacity to run additional meetings if required. There is one independent Panel Chair and central list membership to ensure consistency of decision making and robust oversight of the work of ALN. The independent Panel membership is diverse in terms of their experiences of adoption, their age, gender, relationship status, and ethnicity. Social workers from ALN and partner boroughs also sit on the Panel regularly however it has been harder to ensure gender and ethnic diversity in the social work representatives and this is something we hope to improve in future as those positions are rotated. The Panel have regular training and there is a programme of annual appraisals. The Panel provide quality assurance feedback to ALN and the relevant local authority for every case they consider.

Views of the independent Adoption Panel Chair

The Panel Chair, Josephine Scorer, provides a report of Panel business every six months. The report covers the activity of the Panel, a summary of quality assurance feedback, and areas for improvement and development. Recommendations arising from Panel Chair reports are reviewed in quarterly meetings between the Panel Chair and Head of Service. In her most recent report covering the period September 2022 – March 2023, she provided the following conclusion:



 The Adoption Panel is settled and stable, and the Panel membership is diverse and well balanced, containing broad and wide-ranging personal and professional expertise. Panel members are focused, collaborative, and mutually respectful, and clearly able to use critical thinking to robustly scrutinise cases being presented to the Panel, make safe recommendations, and feedback and appropriately challenge standards of practice.

Gaps in Panel membership have been identified and addressed, particularly in relation to increasing the number of social work members on the central list.

The working relationship between the Panel chair, Panel advisor and Panel coordinator, continues to be strong.

Virtual Panels continue to work well, with clear advantages; however, a review process is underway to look more closely

at the disadvantages, and to see where improvements can be made.

There is a clear training program for the Panel with future training dates already in place.

Annual reviews of Panel members are up to date, with no major concerns identified.

Panel business remains steady overall, and the quality assurance process is effective.

The strengths across Adopt London North are also clearly apparent. Standards of practice are very high, with robustly analysed assessments and strong, well evidenced matches being consistently presented to the Adoption Panel. Although CPRs in particular still need some work, the overall standard of reports is extremely high. The presentation from social workers is also consistently high, and social workers are well supported by team managers who attend every Panel."



Training for local authority social workers

In early 2023 ALN were able to launch the first in a number of planned training sessions designed to support local authority social workers and direct managers to develop confidence in adoption and permanency work.

The first training provided guidance in preparing a Child Permanency Report (CPR). The CPR is a crucial document which has multiple uses as evidence for court when a Placement Order application is made, for information-sharing with prospective adoptive parents during the family finding process, and as a crucial life-long record for the adoptee. The in-person training was attended by social workers and managers from

across the ALN partner boroughs and strong positive feedback was received and evaluated by the Quality Assurance Board. Many attendees reflected on the benefit of learning together with practitioners from other boroughs. As a result of the success of the training, the CPR training will run twice in 2023/24 and then on an ongoing basis as demand requires.

The second topic in the programme, 'Permanency Planning and the Legal Process', has now been prepared and will run for the first time in September 2023. Five other topics have been agreed and will be developed gradually to run alongside the existing topics.



"This was really important information, I think all social workers should do this training."

Social Worker, Child In Need, Hackney

"[The training had] open, reflective, and free-flowing conversations."

Senior Practitioner, Family Intervention, Camden

"[I will take away learning about] keeping the child in mind at all times when writing the CPR and being respectful."

Social Worker, Intervention & Planning, Barnet

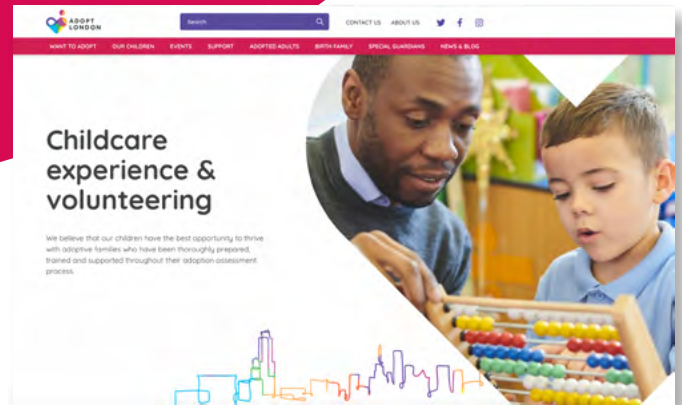
"The videos gave me an understanding of how important and how helpful the information we put on the CPR is to the child and the adoptive parent."

Social Worker, Looked After Children, Enfield

"Learning about how different [boroughs] work with families and how they would capture information..."

Social Worker, Children Looked After, Islington

Finding prospective adoptive parents



Adopt London brand

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

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

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

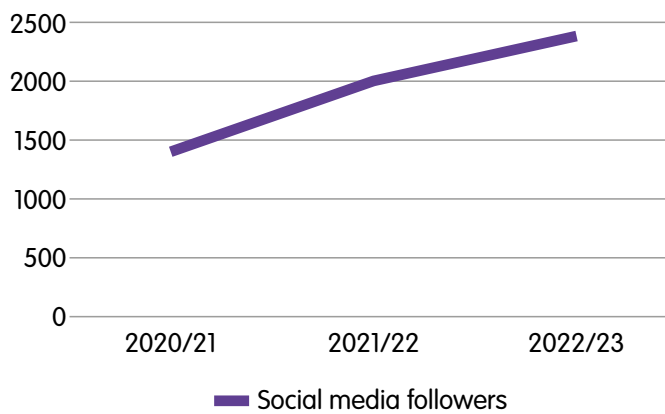
Visits to the website are most often initiated by an organic search online (50% of visits), people entering the address directly into the browser (27%) and through links from other websites (20%). In total there were 46,647 website sessions during the year, a decrease from 58,696 in

2021/22. Other website engagement measures such as number of new users and page views were also reduced this year. This may be due to our focus on systems development this year with deliberately less promotion of new articles and features on the site as we have tried to manage high demand in our Recruitment & Assessment Team; but also may in part reflect wider patterns in adoption recruitment driven by the 'cost of living crisis'. From those who provided feedback after attendance at an Information Session this year, 49% said they chose to attend an ALN session because they live in one of the partner boroughs, and 39% said they made the decision after searching online – emphasising the importance of a strong website presence.

The Adopt London social media channels post regularly to communicate and inform a range of audiences impacted by adoption. Our social media followers continue to organically increase and using these channels can be an effective way to engage and support people in London who are considering adoption but not yet ready to begin an assessment.

In 2022/23 ALN ran workshops for our partner borough communications leads to increase their awareness of the work of ALN and the importance of recruiting adoptive parents. This has led to the development of a local communications plan for 2023/24 which will see ALN working closely with one borough at a

Social media followers



time in a chosen month to raise local knowledge of adoption through bespoke articles, adverts, and use of social media.

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



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

Enquiries and providing information

We have continued to run Information Sessions virtually this year due to the positive feedback we have received about these sessions being easier to access and effective at sharing a large amount of information. However, in Autumn 2022 we developed a waiting list of prospective adopters who had attended initial meetings and were ready to start their assessment. In the same period we had a temporary drop in our capacity within the Recruitment & Assessment team, and an increase in other areas of this team's work. We therefore did not run Information Sessions from November 2022 – March 2023 to ensure we could allocate and begin assessments for households who were already on our waiting list. For this reason, the numbers attending sessions is reduced significantly this year.

From those who attended and provided feedback after an Information Session, 100% rated the session as highly informative, and 98% would recommend the session to a family or friend who was interested in adoption.

“Really informative and friendly – beyond my expectations. Thank you!”

“Everything was really useful and well presented... [the speakers] clearly have a passion for adoption and a wealth of information, this came across throughout the session.”

“A great overall overview – felt like the start of a journey. And a solid one, a good dose of optimism and positivity mixed with realism too – good balance.”

“Being a critic, I felt the session was perfect to me.”

“...It was clear that this is a competent and experienced team.”

“We really enjoyed it and felt very strongly that ALN would be brilliant to work with.”

“It was overall exceptionally great and informative.”

We have also continued to deliver our popular monthly Meet the Adopter sessions virtually this year, with 201 households attending a session. The virtual delivery means that it is possible for us to have a wide range of diverse adoptive parents speaking about their experiences, as childcare demands would limit speakers if sessions were delivered in person. Our adoptive parent speakers have a wide range of experiences including those who have adopted younger and older children, had siblings placed at the same time and siblings who have joined the adoptive family separately; some have adopted through Early Permanence, as a single parent, or as a couple in a same-sex or heterosexual relationship, or as an older parent. Two or three speakers attend each session and questions are thrown open to those considering adoption. Due to the wide range of speakers, these sessions highlight to prospective adopters that there is not just one valid 'adopter experience' and provide a realistic and balanced view of the joys and challenges of adoption. Some of our prospective adopters have attended sessions regularly throughout their assessment and this has enriched their preparation.



"I was grateful for the event and that I can attend more of these sessions if I want to. It helped to alleviate any fears of judgement e.g., if a person wants to [adopt as] a single parent and so on."

"The adopters were amazing and really helpful because they were so honest."

"The session was fantastic and beyond my expectations... The environment (despite being on Zoom) felt a safe space to speak freely and honestly."

61% of Information Session attendees, and 65% of attendees at Meet The Adopter sessions live in one of the six ALN boroughs, whilst other households attending live in neighbouring London boroughs and bordering areas such as Essex and Hertfordshire.

Due to our pause in running Information Sessions and accepting applications during the second half of the year, there were many households who made an enquiry with us but were unable to take the process further. Overall enquiry numbers were higher than last year, which may reflect the difficulty some prospective adopters have experienced in finding an adoption agency in London who is actively recruiting new families. Of those who attended an Information Session, 35% went on to submit an Expression of Interest application compared to 39% in 2021/22 and 36% in 2020/21 – so the proportion of those attending a session who go on to submit an application has remained reasonably consistent, but the overall number has reduced as a result of pausing our sessions.

"Very well done session. It felt like a really relaxed session, no pressure, and good opportunity to hear from adopters and to hear questions from other prospective adopters."

"These sessions are so honest, they show the good the bad and the ugly but all your speakers come back to how adoption has changed their lives for the better and that they are capable of dealing with the situations as they arise."

Prospective adopter enquiries

Number of households who...	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Made an enquiry	714	827	873
Signed up to an information session	493	516	214
Attended an information session	351	349	143
Submitted an Expression of Interest application	128	136	50
Started Stage 1 assessment	26	18	14

Preparing and approving adoptive parents

After an increase in 2021/22, the number of approvals of new adoptive families has decreased again this year primarily due to capacity challenges within the Recruitment & Assessment Team, alongside increased demands from other areas of work. In addition there has continued to be a change, reflected nationally, in the average complexity of assessments since the Covid-19 pandemic. This appears to be due to increased difficulty and challenge in family life – for example more applicants have experience of mental health difficulties, disordered eating, fertility treatment

which has been cut short, recent bereavement, and redundancy. These complexities impact the assessment process in different ways but can mean that the assessment needs to be slower, that families might need to take a break or drop out of the process, or that professional counselling support may be needed before an assessment can progress.

Assessments have continued to be of a high standard as evidenced by the quality assurance feedback from our Adoption Panel, and most adoptive parents are matched soon after

Adoptive household approvals

2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
41	31	27	33	19	12	24	13



Referrals for foster carers & connected people to be assessed as adoptive parents

Borough	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Barnet	1	1	2	3
Camden	0	0	1	1
Enfield	0	3	4	3
Hackney	1	2	3	2
Haringey	0	0	2	2
Islington	0	0	5	6
Total	2	6	17	17

approval. At the end of March 2023, only 4 approved adoptive households not matched with a child had been waiting for over 12 months, and 3 of these households had had significant periods on hold since approval for different reasons, accounting for this delay. This shows that the adopters who are approved are usually suitable for the needs of our North London children, and where it is necessary for them to consider children from outside the ALN partnership, they are able to be successfully matched.

The ALN Governance Board have closely monitored and reviewed levels of approvals and capacity of the Recruitment & Assessment Team. Due to the high level of enquiries ALN continue to receive, the capacity of the team will be increased on a pilot basis through seconded social workers in 2023/24 to assess the impact on approval levels.

Referrals from boroughs for adoption assessments of foster carers and connected people (who wish to adopt children known to them or already in their care) have remained very high this year. A process for referral and joint decision making between the borough and ALN for foster carer assessments is being used well. Foster carer assessments tend to be particularly complex and often encounter delays.

On behalf of the boroughs, ALN are legally required to provide advice and assess any resident who wishes to privately apply for an Adoption Order for a child in their care (non-agency adoption). This can include adoption by a step-parent, by a same-sex partner where both partners were not registered as parents on the birth certificate, in surrogacy cases,

for Special Guardians who wish to convert to an Adoption Order, and in some family care arrangements. A high proportion of these cases involve international elements because an Adoption Order is often advised by solicitors as being a way to formalise the legal status of a family arrangement when resolving immigration difficulties. Many of these cases are extremely complex legally.

ALN offer meetings with those who enquire about non-agency adoption to advise on the suitability of an adoption application and in many cases to suggest alternative ways of gaining the legal security needed. Despite this, there are an increasing number of cases which do go on to require allocation for full assessment.

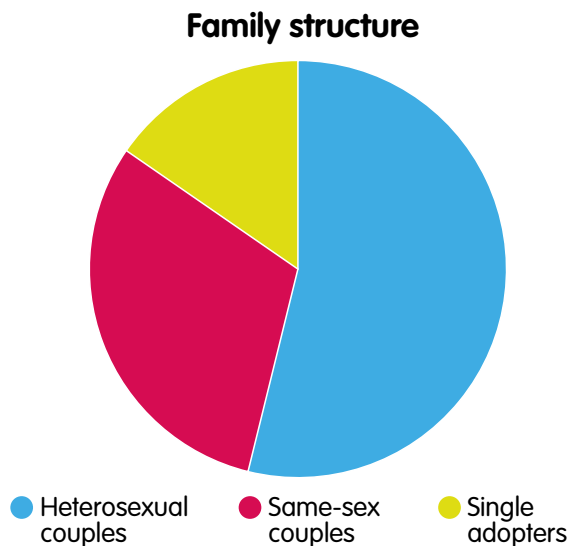
New non-agency assessments started each year

2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
4	4	6	8



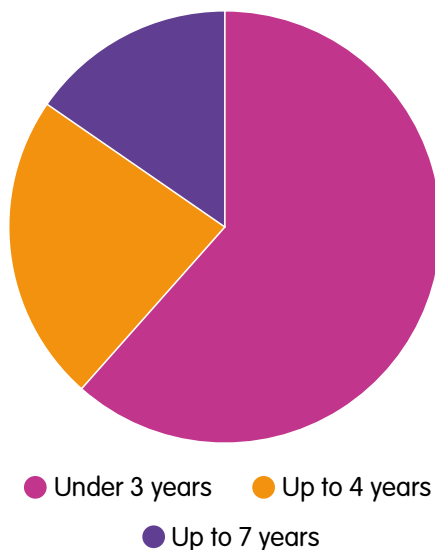
Characteristics of approved adopters

Approved adoptive households were diverse in terms of family structure, with 54% being heterosexual couples, 31% same-sex couples, and 15% single adopters.



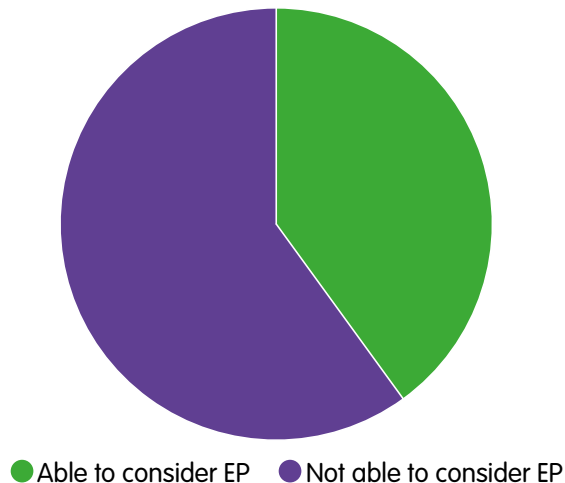
In total 62% of approved households wanted to consider children up to the age of 3 years, 23% up to the age of 4 years, and 15% up to the age of 7 years.

Approval criteria – age of children



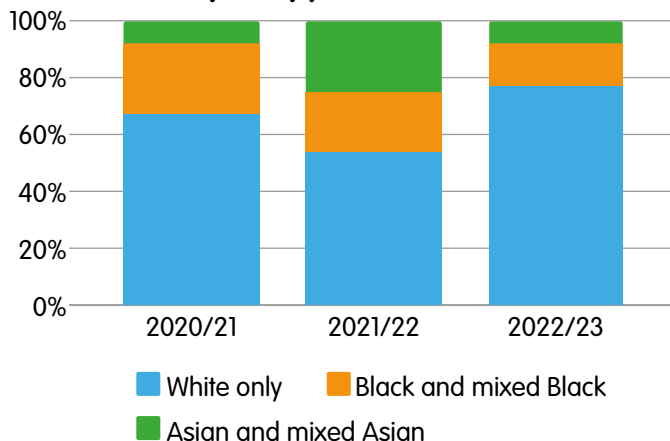
3 of the approved households were foster carers for the child they hoped to adopt. When these households are taken out of the figures, 40% of approved households were able to consider an early permanence placement.

Approved adopters able to consider early permanence



This year only 23% of approved households had at least one person of a global majority ethnicity and 77% of households had adopters only of white British or other white ethnicities. This is a decline from last year, when 46% of households had at least one person of a global majority ethnicity. There is no clear reason for this decline, although our research undertaken within the Black Adoption Project highlighted how Black individuals are statistically more likely to be unable to adopt due to socio-economic factors, which is of particular concern in the current 'cost of living crisis'. Whilst increasing overall numbers of approved adopters remains essential, it is critical that we use the learning and pilots from the Black Adoption Project to ensure the proportion of approved Black adopters increases significantly.

Ethnicity of approved households



Planning for children

Adoption permanency planning

Each partner borough is responsible for permanency planning and tracking of their children. A Family Finder from ALN attends planning meetings and is able to provide advice and guidance about adoption plans. Referrals for children are made to ALN when the plan is likely to be adoption and the case is allocated at the point that early Family Finding work can begin, usually around the time the Best Interests Decision is made by the borough Agency Decision Maker.

Many referrals do not result in a Placement Order and therefore a final adoption plan for the child, however referral levels can be indicative of increases and decreases in the amount of new family finding work that ALN will be undertaking. The table shows that after a dip in 2021/22, referrals were again higher in 2022/23 and the overall picture emerging over the 3 full years is of consistency when figures from all boroughs are

considered together. At an individual borough level there is more significant variation. It is worth noting with all placement figures that overall numbers for ALN provide a stronger indication of a trend in the data, as individual borough's figures alone are low and therefore do not indicate trends reliably.

When family finding referrals are compared to matches over a 3 year period, we can develop an estimate of how many referrals on average result in children being matched and placed for adoption. Across ALN, around 1 in every 4 referrals over the last 3 years has resulted in a match (27% of referrals), although there is wide variation by borough, likely the result of different permanency planning processes.

Children with a plan for adoption

After a 45% reduction in 2021/22 in the number of adoption plans being formalised by the borough

Family finding referrals into ALN

Borough	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Barnet	25	19	36
Camden	21	18	25
Enfield	26	24	21
Hackney	22	15	13
Haringey	49	19	32
Islington	12	30	17
Total	155	125	144

Agency Decision Makers (ADM), there has been a return to 2020/21 figures this year. Placement Orders have also increased although have not been as high as in 2020/21 – this could mean that a lower proportion of ADM Best Interests Decisions are resulting in Placement Orders, or that care proceedings with Decisions made in the second half of 2022/23 have not yet concluded. Numbers of children placed for adoption are lower than last year but significantly higher than 2020/21. In all cases some time lapses between the Best Interests Decision, the Placement Order being made, and the child being placed for

adoption; therefore it is possible that the high level of Best Interests Decisions is an indicator of increased Placement Orders and adoptive placements in 2023/23. Significant court delays have now been a feature particularly in adoption cases since 2020, and these delays complicate the picture that the data shows.

This year the ASG national adoption data collection have provided data showing the proportion of children taken into care before turning 5 who go on to have a Best Interests Decision made (this data is not yet available for 2022/23). These figures suggest that the

Number of referrals resulting in a match over a 3 year period 2020/21 – 2022/23

Borough	Referrals	Matches	% of referrals that result in a match
Barnet	80	16	20%
Camden	64	17	27%
Enfield	71	30	42%
Hackney	50	18	36%
Haringey	100	24	24%
Islington	59	9	15%
Total	424	114	27%



proportion of children within ALN who come into care under the age of 5 and go on to have a Best Interests Decision has been reducing annually, however given the increased Best Interests

Decisions in 2022/23, this figure may increase when data for the most recent year is available.

Best Interests Decisions – data provided by borough’s own ASG national returns

Borough	Total ADM Best Interests Decisions				% children taken into care before turning 5 with a Best Interests Decision			
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Barnet	27	13	5	14	47%	24%	24%	-
Camden	9	5	4	11	38%	12%	22%	-
Enfield	13	15	11	16	29%	23%	24%	-
Hackney	18	12	2	4	32%	12%	5%	-
Haringey	13	16	7	14	33%	44%	19%	-
Islington	5	4	7	9	26%	22%	23%	-
Total	85	65	36	68	34%	24%	20%	-

Placements and Placement Orders – data provided by borough’s own ASG national returns

Borough	Total adoptive placements				Total Placement Orders			
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Barnet	15	2	8	5	11	10	5	2
Camden	4	8	3	5	7	2	5	5
Enfield	7	3	12	14	11	9	11	10
Hackney	9	5	10	2	14	9	3	2
Haringey	9	8	10	5	9	17	8	15
Islington	6	3	3	5	2	1	2	3
Total	50	29	46	36	54	48	32	37

Placing children with adoptive parents

Family finding

Strong connections between the Recruitment & Assessment team and the Family Finding team mean that by the time a Placement Order is made we can establish whether there is a potential in-house adoptive family available. If an in-house family may be a good match for a child, they will be considered initially before the search is broadened to look for prospective adopters from other RAAs and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs).

Within the Adopt London matching project we are exploring ways to build stronger and quicker family finding links between the four RAAs – this includes regular networking meetings where practitioners can share profiles of children and adopters, Adopt London play sessions where prospective adopters can informally meet and play alongside children and their foster carers, and enhanced Adopt London profile booklets to ensure information about potential Adopt London adopters is readily available to family finders.

Regular family finding review meetings are held between the family finder and the borough social work team after a Placement Order is granted to monitor and progress family finding decisions.

In-house placements

There are a number of reasons why it is a priority for ALN to place as many children with our own adoptive parents as possible. Firstly, we can be confident that in-house adopters have been assessed, trained, and approved to a

high standard. We cannot guarantee the same standards when considering external adopters and in many cases we find there have been significant gaps in their preparation. Secondly, we understand the strengths, weakness and vulnerabilities of our own adopters. This means we can carefully link children and adopters with a greater level of understanding than is often possible with external adopters. Thirdly, it is easier to problem-solve and escalate issues when concerns arise about a child being placed with in-house adopters. We have strong relationships between supervising social workers and family finders which enable difficulties to be identified and supported. Fourthly, it is easier and quicker to provide support to in-house adopters when this is needed in the early placement stage. Where our own adopters have experienced difficulties, we have been able to identify the need and provide support quickly and effectively, preventing the escalation of concerns. For all these reasons, in-house placements are more stable and less likely to experience early disruption. All the disruptions that have occurred in ALN prior to an Adoption Order have been for children placed externally. None of our adoptive parents have been involved in a disrupted placement. Over a period of 3 ½ years across Adopt London's 24 boroughs, only 1 adoptive placement out of 12 total disruptions was with in-house adopters. Finally, there is also a high financial cost to external placements, with the cost of VAA placements rising each year.

We have been successful in maintaining a high proportion of in-house placements this year,

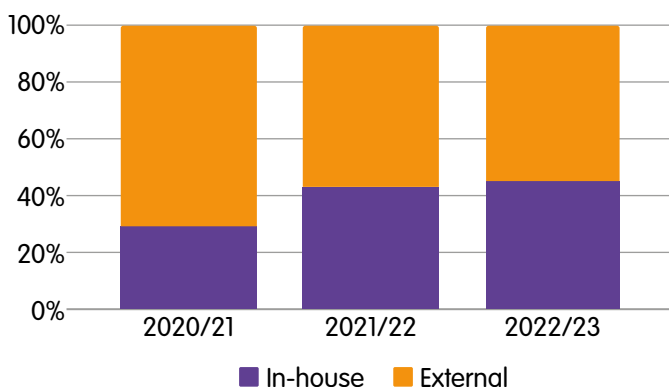
despite adopter approval levels being low. 45% of children matched during 2022/23 went to live with an in-house family. This compares to 43% in 2021/22 and 29% in 2020/21.

To increase in-house placements further we need to ensure we assess the adopters who are most likely to be matched with our children and talk to them from the earliest stages about the benefits of waiting for a link internally. We know that not every adopter will be matched in-house and we therefore support adopters who are ready to begin family finding on a wider basis, particularly where they have very specific matching requirements. However the majority of adopters appreciate the benefits of an in-house placement and are prepared to wait.



children by only considering local placements before looking at placements further afield, however we consider the location of a placement as an important factor when weighing up the strengths or vulnerabilities of potential adoptive families. This year 88% of children matched for adoption went to live with adoptive families in London and the South East.

Type of adoptive placement for children matched



Children waiting for an adoptive family

The family finding team and children’s social work team in the borough meet regularly for Family Finding review meetings for each child to closely monitor progress, provide updates, and to ensure the plan for adoption remains right for the child. ALN are also invited to attend tracking meetings in the borough to provide information for senior managers who are monitoring permanency planning. ALN and borough senior managers speak regularly to escalate delays or concerns.

Location of placements

Regardless of whether an in-house placement is possible, we aim to place as many children as we can within London and the South East as this enables ALN and the child’s social workers in the borough to provide the best possible support and to quickly pick up any difficulties that arise post-placement. We do not create delay for

In 2021/22 there were a particularly high number of matches alongside low Placement Order numbers, which meant that only 9 children with a Placement Order had active family finding taking place at the end of March 2022. This year Placement Orders are slightly higher and matches lower, which means there are a higher number of children waiting with active family finding at the end of March 2023. These figures exclude children who are already linked, whose foster carers are being assessed as adoptive parents, and whose plan for adoption has been changed or put on hold).

Location of adoptive placements



Children with a Placement Order where there is active family finding taking place on 31 March

Borough	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Barnet	2	1	1
Camden	4	1	2
Enfield	8	0	4
Hackney	11	1	1
Haringey	11	6	10
Islington	1	0	1
Total	37	9	19

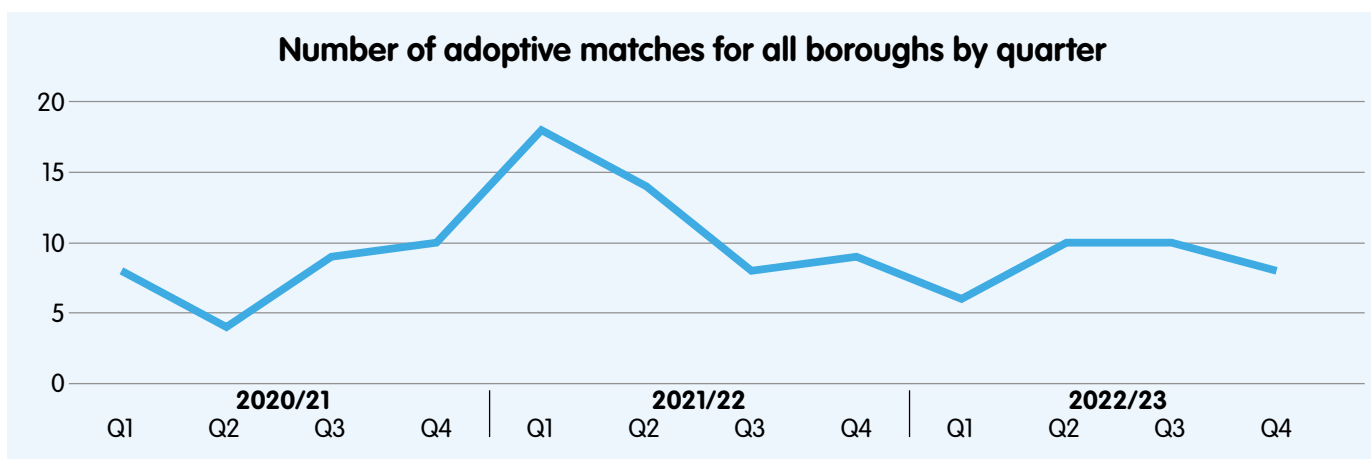
Adoptive matches made

After a peak in matches in the first half of 2021/22, the number of matches this year has been lower but in line with 2020/21 figures. The 2022/23 reduction in matches was expected as there were only 32 Placement Orders made in 2021/22. The overall number of matches for ALN

provides a better indication of placement trends than the number of matches in each borough, which can seem volatile due to small numbers when viewed for a single year. As there were 37 Placement Orders made in 2022/23 and an increase in Best Interests Decisions, it is possible that adoptive matches may increase slightly in 2023/24.

Number of adoptive matches for all boroughs

2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
55	50	29	31	49	34



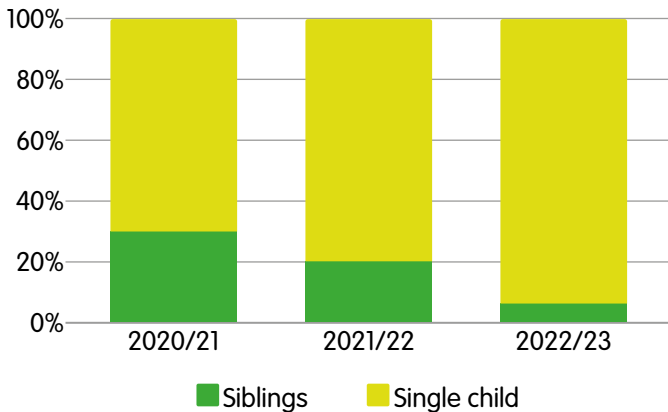
Number of adoptive matches

Borough	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Barnet	2	10	4
Camden	7	4	6
Enfield	4	12	14
Hackney	8	8	2
Haringey	6	13	5
Islington	4	2	3
Total	31	49	34

Characteristics of children matched for adoption

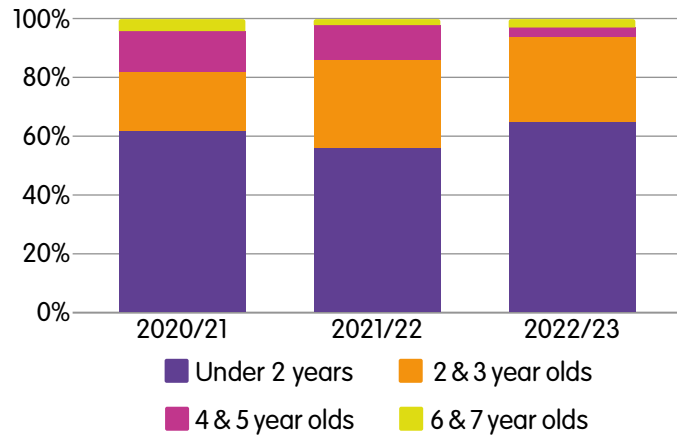
There has been a significant drop in the proportion of children who were matched for adoption with a sibling in 2022/23 compared to previous years, with only 1 sibling group being matched for adoption compared to 5 sibling groups in 2020/21 and 2021/22. These figures do not include children who were matched with the adoptive parents of a sibling who had already been earlier placed for adoption. It is unclear why this number has reduced however there are not a high number of sibling groups waiting for a match; of all the children waiting with a Placement Order at the end of March 2023, there was one sibling group of 3 children with significant complexities and another of 4 children who had only just received a Placement Order. It therefore appears that there have been fewer sibling groups receiving a Placement Order rather than specific difficulties in matching sibling groups with adopters. ALN will monitor and consider this further during 2023/24 to understand whether this is an anomaly or pattern.

Children matched for adoption in sibling groups



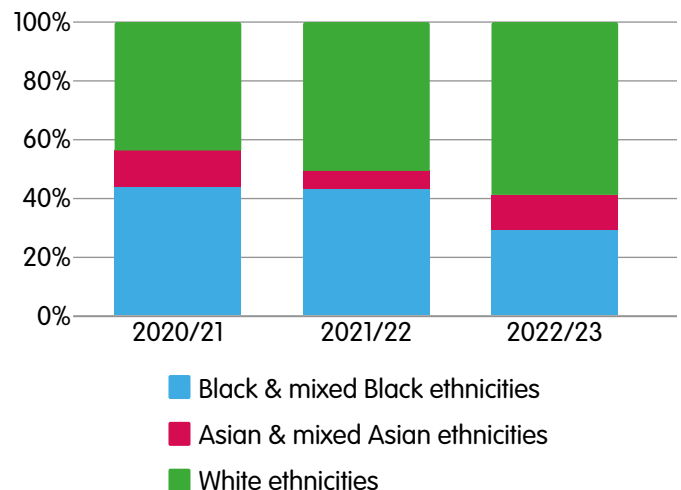
There are some minor changes this year in the ages of children matched for adoption, with an increase in the overall proportion of younger children. 94% of children matched fell within the 'under 2 years old' and '2 & 3 years old' categories compared to 86% in 2021/22 and 82% in 2020/21. The oldest child to be matched for adoption was aged 7 years, slightly older than in previous years (6 years old).

Ages of children matched for adoption



In this data children's ethnicities have been grouped into broader categories to illustrate the types of adoptive placements that are needed for us to be able to consider placements for children that are not fully trans-racial. There has been a reduction this year in the number of children of Black and mixed Black ethnicity matched for adoption and an increase in children from white ethnic backgrounds, however these remain the most prominent ethnicities with Asian and mixed Asian ethnicity children making up a small proportion. When we look at the ethnicities of the children waiting for a match with a Placement Order, 42% of these children are from white backgrounds, 42% are from Black and mixed Black backgrounds, and 16% are from Asian and mixed Asian backgrounds – this suggests that the proportion of Black children may not be significantly reduced from previous years, however these children are more likely than children from White backgrounds to be waiting for an adoptive match.

Ethnicity category of children matched for adoption



Early Permanence placements

There were 7 children placed for Early Permanence with prospective adoptive parents during 2022/23, 1 more than the previous year. There has been a significant increase in referrals for Early Permanence in early 2023/23, with 5 Early Permanence placements made in the first part of the year, so we expect these figures to rise. All of the Early Permanence placements that have concluded their court processes have resulted in the children remaining with their Early Permanence carers for adoption. However all adoptive parents are trained and prepared for the possibility that the outcome of care proceedings may be for the child to return to live with birth parents or a connected person.

As part of the London Early Permanence project, research has been undertaken into the barriers to Early Permanence in London. The researchers carried out 41 interviews with those involved in Early Permanence decision-making in London, including Agency Decision Makers, Heads of Service, legal representatives, members of the judiciary, CAFCASS Guardians, and Regional and Voluntary Adoption Agencies. The research highlighted that London is consistently the region with the lowest use of both adoption and

Early Permanence in England, but also used Special Guardianship Orders below the national average – suggesting low levels of adoption are not directly related to high levels of Special Guardianship placements. Some of the key barriers to Early Permanence identified in the research were:

- Low levels of confidence in Early Permanence practice partially because adoptions themselves are so rare.
- Care proceedings delays which are acute in London increase the uncertainty and risk in Early Permanence placements.
- The strong emphasis on adoption as a last resort within London courts has an impact on both adoption and Early Permanence rates.
- Gaps in case tracking and Early Permanence planning can result in missed opportunities for the use of Early Permanence.
- A shortage of Early Permanence carers ready for placements, so not all referred children can be placed through this route.

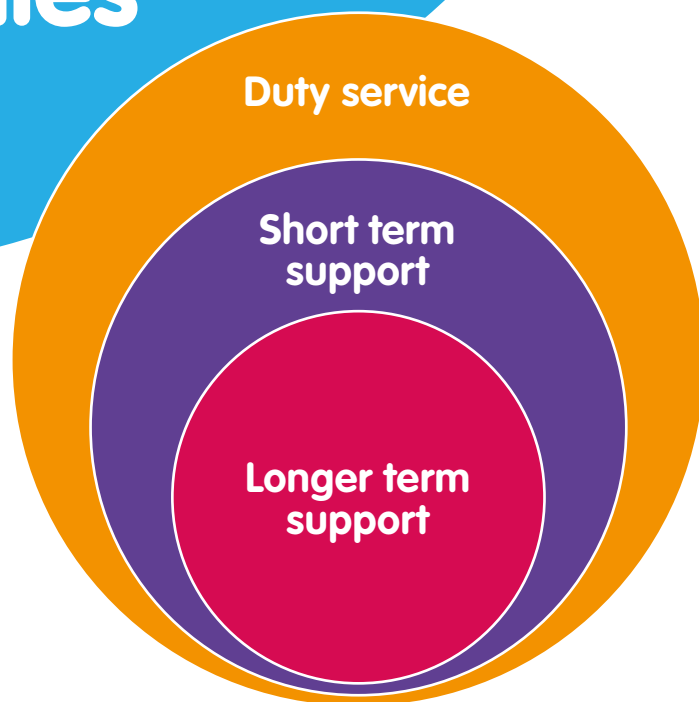
A number of recommendations have been made which will be taken forward in the next phase of the project, including workshops for borough staff and engagement with judiciary and Cafcass.



Providing support to adoptive families and others

The Adoption Support team provide support to adoptive families and adult adoptees living in our boroughs, and provide contact support between adoptive families and birth families for all adoptive children and young people that were previously placed by one of our boroughs. Access to support is through the duty service who are also able to offer short-term support such as standalone applications to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) and access to specialist training. Families requiring longer-term or more complex social work support are allocated to a social worker who completes an assessment of their needs and recommendations for support. Many of the situations requiring longer-term social work support and coordination are at risk of family breakdown.

Demand for support has been consistently high since the last national Covid-19 lockdown in early 2021, with an increasing level of need and complexity in adoptive family's lives. Families are also impacted by pressures on other specialist services such as CAMHS and specialist mental health support, which means that they are increasingly dependant on the support they can access through ALN and the Adoption Support Fund. As a result of the level of demand, there is a waiting time for families to have an assessment of need completed by a social worker (at the end of March 2023 this was approximately 3 months) and we have created waiting lists for non-urgent types of support including reviews of contact and access



to records for adult adoptees. Every attempt is made to prioritise responding to adoptive families with immediate support needs as quickly as possible to prevent family breakdown, which means that waiting lists for adult adoptees (access to records requests), and contact support are hard to reduce. Waiting lists and demand levels are closely monitored by the ALN Governance Board and we are undertaking work to consider other services that families may be able to access in addition to ALN support, and to reduce the need for cases to remain open over a long period of time.

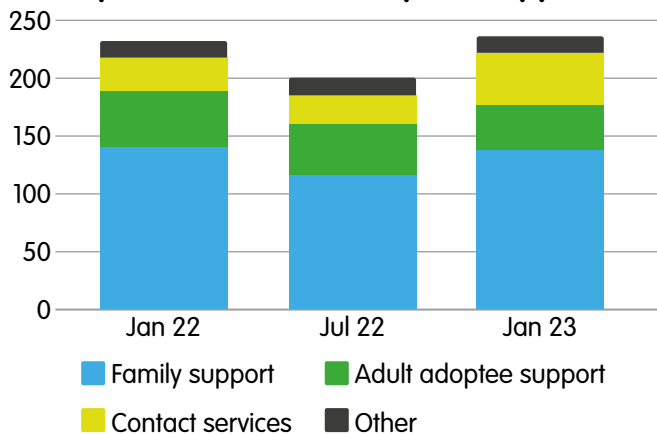
Despite pressures facing our Adoption Support Team many families value having an adoption-informed approach to support, and the team work hard to build supportive, trauma-informed relationships with families that increase their ability to manage the difficulties they face.

We have introduced a snapshot audit monitoring system to understand the level and types of adoption support casework in the service and this has provided us with greater insights into the types of need that are most prevalent. This system is now being piloted by other Adopt

London RAAs with the intention of developing a common dataset that we can use to consider adoption support demand across the partnership.



Open casework in adoption support



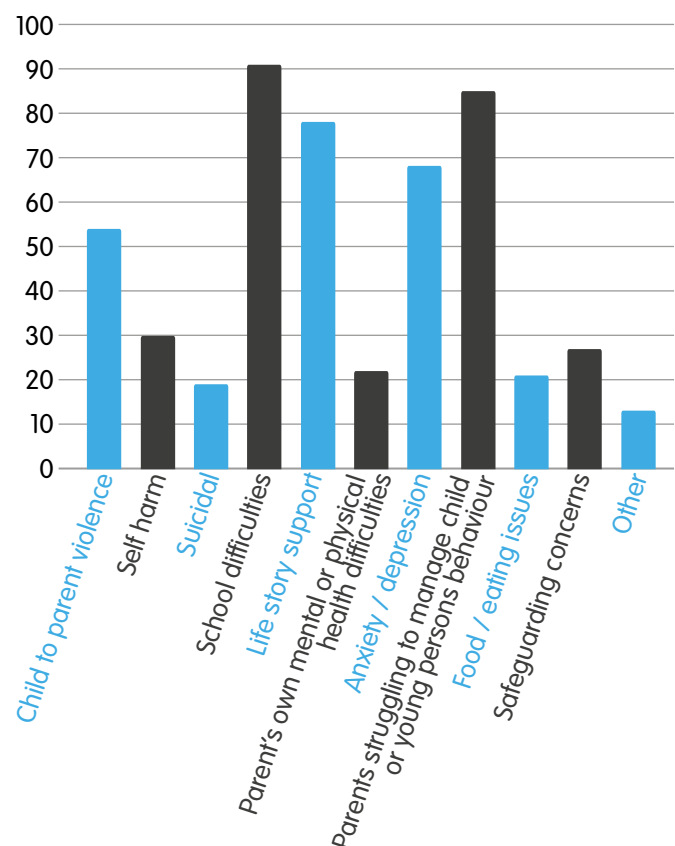
Open casework in adoption support

Type of support	January 2022	July 2022	January 2023
Family support	140	117	138
Adult adoptee support	49	44	39
Contact services	29	24	45
Other	15	16	15

At the time of the most recent audit in January 2023, 52% of family support cases required significant social work support in addition to ASF therapeutic provision and signposting – this proportion is slightly lower than in the last audit (60% in July 2022). 38 families had active CAMHS involvement (compared to 30 families in July 2022), and 18 families were open to the borough’s social work teams in addition to ALN (compared to 20 families in July). There were some notable changes in the proportion of open cases with some of the most significant difficulties – for example 54 open cases where child to parent violence is a factor, compared to 38 in July 2022; 68 cases where the child or young person’s anxiety or depression is a factor, compared to 41 cases in July 2022, and 27 cases where there are safeguarding concerns compared to 21 in July 2022. There are also significant increases in the number of cases where school difficulties or life story work needs are factors.

This data is now being used to consider how our services can be best targeted to meet the needs identified.

Main presenting factors in family support cases



Adoptive parent peer support

2022/23 has been our third year working in formal partnership with We Are Family, a London adoptive parent peer support charity who started as a single group in Hackney & Islington 10 years ago. We Are Family are adopter-led and provide a wide range of peer support to adoptive parents free-of-charge. Their overall membership has now grown to 1157 members, an increase from just over 1000 at the end of 2021/22. Through We Are Family our adoptive parents are connected to social networks of other adoptive parents from the earliest stages of adoption, providing parents with a place to seek advice, normalise parenting challenges, and reduce the potential for isolation.



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

We Are Family member and adoptive parent

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

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

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

We Are Family volunteer and adoptive parent



Adoptive parent training

We provide expert webinars to our adoptive parents twice per month through our partnership with We Are Family. Adoptive parents can choose whether to attend webinars live and have the opportunity to ask questions, or whether to watch on demand in the member hub for up to a year

after the event. This way of offering learning, development, and support has been popular with adoptive parents who need flexibility to manage childcare demands. In 2022/23 we provided 23 expert webinars on a wide variety of topics. Over 400 adoptive parents attended webinars live this year, and since the programme started over 3100 webinars have been watched on demand.

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



“I found it tremendously valuable and interesting, thank you!”

Webinar on childhood anxiety

“Brilliant, insightful and helpful”

Webinar on life story work

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

Webinar on Special Educational Needs

“Great presenter, very engaging, experienced with specific tangible techniques.”

Webinar on non-violent resistance parenting strategies

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

Webinar on supporting contact with birth families

Parents of adopted teenagers therapeutic group

This group was created in the North London Adoption Consortium around 13 years ago and continues to be run through ALN. The group supports adoptive parents with the impact of parenting teenagers who have experienced trauma. It provides an opportunity for parents to reflect and gain support from those with similar parenting experiences, and is co-facilitated by ALN social workers and an independent therapist. The group meets monthly on a Saturday for three hours and discussions follow themes agreed by the group. In the last year some of the topics covered in the group have been:

- How children moving towards adulthood impacts parents
- The emotional impact of your child’s life story
- Interplay of child and parent identities
- Experience of being in a family that is ‘different’
- The impact of adoption on couple relationships
- Emotional impact of contact with birth families
- Adoptive parents’ feelings about birth parents

The group has proven to be effective at helping families sustain relationships through some of the most complex adolescent challenges, and therefore reduce the likelihood of family

breakdown. As support is needed for a reasonably long-term period for many of the attendees, spaces within the group are not frequently available. A challenge for ALN is therefore how to ensure this support is available to more families in the future.

“The support of a group means that you have the emotional space to think and focus on really difficult issues. In that space, solutions often bubble up, or you find actually you are not doing as bad as you thought. The group is like a breath of fresh air, or a pause in busy, difficult, and challenging times that we often have with our children. It gives you perspective and space to think. This means that you go back for the next month feeling much more comfortable and confident about the challenges.”

“Lots of our children are at different ages and stages. This is really helpful because either you, or someone else, can give some thoughts or ideas to someone who has got a younger child than you, or you get positive support and ideas from people who have had experience of older children.”

“Our parent group is invaluable. There is no other place that I can go where I am amongst parents who fully appreciate and understand all of the issues of having an adopted child. Friends and family are great but a parent group is irreplaceable because we are all struggling and juggling with the same kind of issues. They are not identical so we learn different things from each other. The facilitators are absolutely amazing. They are sensitive and always helpful. They raise relevant and helpful ideas, always bringing really relevant topics and support for us to use and discuss as a group. We each have a short space to tell the group what we have been challenged by, or tackling lately. Often in that space ideas come to me or an understanding that simply wouldn't have happened outside the group environment.”

Adult adoptee peer support groups

ALN have a long-standing peer support group for adult adoptees that meets on alternate months in Islington. The group has long-term committed members but also regularly welcomes new attendees. Adoptees are different ages and have a wide range of experiences of adoption. Adoptees highly value having a space where they can meet with other adoptees and share experiences without judgement. The group is facilitated by an adoptee and supported by an ALN social worker who provides coordination and takes responsibility for supporting anyone in the group who is vulnerable or needs additional assistance outside the group meeting. Some meetings are left open for group reflection whilst others are led by a speaker of the group's choice. A number of the adoptees who attend the group sit on a steering committee with ALN to ensure the group continues to adapt and grow to the needs of the adoptees who attend.

In Spring 2022, Adopt London started a new adoptee group specifically for trans-racially adopted adults in partnership with TAAN

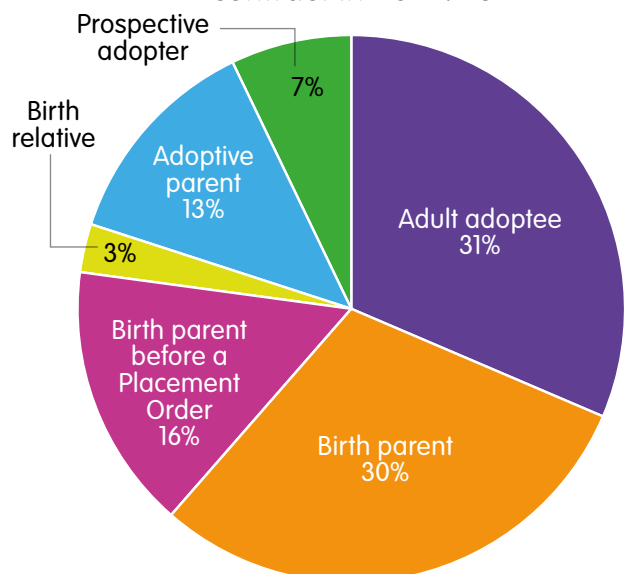
(Transracial Adult Adoptee Network), following a similar model to the original ALN group.

Working in partnership with adoptees, Adopt London hope to initiate new groups in different locations in London and on different days / times of the week so that all adult adoptees in London have a group that is accessible for them to attend.

Specialist counselling support for adult adoptees and birth family members

ALN have a long-standing contract with PAC-UK, a specialist adoption and permanency support agency, to provide an advice line and independent counselling on our behalf. This contract has been used to provide counselling services to adoptive parents, adult adoptees, and birth family members impacted by adoption. Due to a high level of demand which had created waiting times for support and an increase in requests for support from adult adoptees, management of the contract was reviewed for 2022/23 and a decision taken to prioritise use of the contract for adult adoptees and birth family members as these groups often have no other form of counselling support available. In most cases adoptive parents can have the same or similar support funded by the Adoption Support Fund through an ALN assessment of need and where this isn't possible ALN can still refer to PAC-UK for support to be provided under the contract. The contract is also used by ALN for prospective adopters to access some counselling during assessment, usually to focus on a particular

Clients referred to the PAC-UK counselling contract in 2022/23



issue which has become a barrier or cause for concern. The changes made to the contract have been successful at ensuring support to adult adoptees and birth family members can be met within the contract limits. The contract currently offers 6 sessions of counselling to an individual, although where there is a high level of need and a good use of counselling, ALN can agree to a second set of 6 sessions. Many clients find the counselling sessions supportive and helpful,

although some feel that the limited number of sessions is not adequate to meet their need. Effective use of the contract is reviewed quarterly by ALN and PAC-UK.

PAC-UK also runs two birth parent support groups, one virtually and one in person. Birth parents who access support from PAC-UK advice line or counselling service are invited to join one of the groups and this can become a more sustainable form of support for individuals.



“Initially I was experiencing overwhelming feelings regarding my experiences as an adopted person, it’s been building and causing me emotional distress. Contacting PAC-UK was my first step to seek support and I felt apprehensive... [The PAC-UK advice line therapist] really made me feel safe in these first steps and optimistic about engaging with the counselling. I have also handed in my notice at work and so will need to budget more than usual so the free counselling sessions are a blessing and means I don’t have to worry about the usual expense of therapy, I don’t have to delay until I’ve secured a new job, this is my window of opportunity and feeling ready and I don’t need to delay. I’m ready and PAC-UK funding for the free 6 counselling sessions is a light and blessing for me. I have tears in my eyes, just relieved, ready and so happy I don’t have to delay knowing that if I take my foot off the accelerator, I may lose this readiness and motivation and the shadow will return. I’m not looking for a magic bullet, just an opportunity to work through this, decades in the waiting. Thanks so much, honestly.”

“Through counselling I’ve changed my thought patterns and felt totally supported and assisted.”

“I found the PAC contract invaluable. There is very little even general support out there, and have [my PAC-UK therapist] who understood both adoption and cultural aspects of my life. I have not had access to any support from anyone that has specialist knowledge or experience of either before. Whilst I felt the time I had did help me to move forward in improving my mental health, and I was fortunate enough to have 12 sessions instead of 6, I do feel that I needed more sessions to get the most benefit from it.”

“Although my feelings about early separation and mistrust have not changed, having support through a difficult period was very nourishing and helped me get through my weeks and feel supported. So more positive things could come into my life.”

“PAC-UK has supported me through the most challenging and difficult time of my life after a reunion with my child. They have helped me to process and navigate a very complex emotional landscape providing me with the support needed to understand and develop coping strategies. Their ongoing support is invaluable.”

Review of 2022/23 recommendations

Finding prospective adoptive parents

- 1. Grow and further establish the Black Adoption Project to better understand the needs of Black and mixed Black ethnicity adopters, and to improve our services to them for the long term.**

The Black Adoption Project has grown and become further established in 2022/23 and is now ready to begin piloting and evaluating changes to our practice, which will include improving services to Black prospective adopters.
- 2. Build Adopt London reach and engagement on social media.**

Social media reach has increased this year, although due to the capacity issues in our assessment service we have used this to focus on raising awareness rather than increasing numbers of people making enquiries about adoption.
- 3. Work further with borough communications teams to improve our reach in our local communities.**

Workshops have been held with borough communications leads which has led to the development of local adoption communications plans for 2023/24.
- 4. Increase the rate at which those submitting an Expression of Interest go on to start an assessment.**

Due to the capacity difficulties in the assessment team we have not been able to start assessments for all those who have expressed an interest in adopting, therefore we have not made progress towards this recommendation this year.

Preparing and approving adoptive parents

- 5. Increase the number of approvals whilst maintaining high standard of assessments.**

Although the standard of assessments has been maintained, the number of approvals has dropped this year due to capacity difficulties in the assessment team. A pilot to increase capacity in the team is being implemented in 2023/24 so that the impact on approval levels can be assessed.

Planning for children

- 6. Increase awareness of Early Permanence in children's social work teams.**

Awareness has been increasing of Early Permanence, evidenced by an increase in referrals and an indication that Early Permanence placement levels are likely to be higher in 2023/24. Research into the barriers to Early Permanence in London will lead to further targeted work in this area in 2023/24.

Placing children with adoptive parents

- 7. Continue to focus on the number of children who move to in-house and local adoptive families.**

The proportion of children who move to live with in-house adopters has remained high this year, with the hope that this will increase further when approval levels increase. The proportion of children who go to live with adoptive families in London and the South East has increased.

Providing support to adoptive families and others

8. Increase access to support resources for everyone impacted by adoption through development of the Adopt London website.

Updates and improvements on all major sections of the site have been completed this year. Significant work on the systems side of the website has been completed to prepare the site for structural changes in 2023/24 that will assist us in making the site more user-friendly for all clients, not just prospective adopters.

9. Implement regular monitoring of adoption support work so that changes in demand can be reported.

A regular snapshot audit of adoption support casework has now been in place for 18 months and is providing us with useful monitoring data and insights into the needs within the service so that support can be designed to target the most significant areas.

Working as part of Adopt London

10. Strengthen arrangements through a legal partnership agreement for Adopt London.

The legal partnership agreement has stalled this year due to complexity and capacity in the legal department leading on this work. It is hoped this can be progressed further in 2023/24.



Recommendations for 2023/24

Finding prospective adoptive parents

1. Continue to progress the aims and objectives of the Black Adoption Project, including implementation of new pilot projects to improve services to Black prospective adopters.
2. Re-establish strong adopter information sessions and enquiry processes as the capacity in the assessment team increases.
3. Implement new local communications plans to test the impact on awareness of ALN and adoption in borough areas.

Preparing and approving adoptive parents

4. Through greater capacity in the assessment team, increase the number of approvals whilst maintaining high standard of assessments.

Planning for children

5. Implement recommendations from the Early Permanence research report into barriers to Early Permanence in London.

Placing children with adoptive parents

6. Continue to focus on the number of children who move to in-house and local adoptive families.

Providing support to adoptive families and others

7. Implement changes to the website which make it more accessible to all those accessing support, including adult adoptees, birth parents, and families with adopted children.
8. Begin to use audit data for Adopt London to compare and understand different levels of demand and models of adoption support to improve services across Adopt London.

Working as part of Adopt London

9. Strengthen arrangements through a legal partnership agreement for Adopt London.

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