

Contains Confidential or Exempt Information	NO
Title	Adopt London West, Adoption performance and update on progress of Regional Adoption Agency (ALW)
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Portfolio(s)	Cllr Kamaljit Kaur Nagpal, A Fairer Start
For Consideration By	Corporate Parent Committee
Date to be Considered	16 th June 2021
Implementation Date if Not Called In	n/a
Affected Wards	None
Keywords/Index	

Purpose of Report:

- To provide a summary of the activity of Adopt London West from 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021.
- Provide an update on the progress of the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt London West, a partnership between Ealing, Brent, Hammersmith & Fulham and Hounslow, hosted by Ealing, delivering Adoption Services on behalf of the four boroughs.

1. Recommendations

Members are invited to note this report and identify any additional information they would like to receive.

2. Reason for Decision and Options Considered

This report updates members on the activity and progress of Adopt London West, Regional Adoption Agency, hosted by Ealing.

3. Key Implications

Background – Adopt London West

- 3.1** Adopt London West (ALW) Regional Adoption Agency became operational on 1st September 2019 with a formal launch in October 2019.

- 3.2** A comprehensive partnership agreement forms the basis of the ongoing partnership arrangements. The partnership board Chaired by Judith Finlay will continue to provide the necessary oversight to ensure that the shared service is appropriately scrutinised and supported to deliver improved outcomes for children and adopters.
- 3.3** As part of the national RAA implementation and development programme a network of RAA leaders has been established and monthly meetings are facilitated by the DfE delivery partner Deloitte. Meetings are attended by senior DfE officials and provide an opportunity to learn from the early RAAs and also to consider wider sector collaboration and influence.
- 3.4** It is acknowledged from evidence gained from the first cohort of national RAAs to become operational, that the first 12 - 24 months after going live for an RAA is one of transition and transformation to a new delivery model. Performance has been noted to dip in the early stages of operation, therefore the Partnership Board and Heads of Service meetings are closely monitoring practice and performance as a new and developing service.

Responsibilities

- 3.5** As delegated in the partnership agreement between Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Hounslow, Ealing (as the host Local Authority for ALW) is responsible for ensuring that children whose permanence plan is adoption in all four partner Local Authorities are matched in a timely way with adopters who best meet the needs of those children. This involves featuring children in various profiling events, via national linking websites, supporting them in adoption activity days and networking events with other Regional Adoption Agencies in London and nationally. ALW is also responsible for the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters, supporting adopters with family finding following approval and the on-going post placement support to adopters and special guardians. ALW is also responsible for the provision of services to adopted adults and all those affected by adoption who request a specific service or an assessment of need.
- 3.6** ALW also provides a service to Ealing residents who wish to make a private application to adopt their partner's child, referred to as "step-parent" or non-agency adoption, or special guardians who may wish to adopt the child in their care. The team is also involved in completing adoption reports on children who may have travelled from and been adopted abroad; there is a legal requirement for these adoptions to be made lawful in the UK.
- 3.7** Inter-country adoption referrals continue to be referred to the Inter-Country Adoption Centre, a specialist Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA), with whom a service level agreement is in place.

Performance Data Children

- 3.8** 10 Adoption orders were granted for Ealing children in 2020/21 compared to 11 orders in 2019/20, delays in the Court process because of the pandemic have meant Adoption Order hearings have not been considered a Court priority and final orders delayed. There are currently 7 children placed with their adoptive families, awaiting final orders. It is anticipated that 13 Adoption Orders will be made in 2021/22, this includes the 7 children already placed, 5 children who are subject to Placement Orders (Court authority to place a child for Adoption) and 1 child for whom Ealing have made a decision that Adoption is the appropriate plan, but the Placement Order has not yet been granted, a family is already identified for this child.
- 3.9** National performance indicator A2 – Average time from a Placement Order to a match with an adoptive family is expected to be 121 days. The national average for 2020 was 207 days and for London 227 days, the Ealing average was 156 days, considerably stronger than the London average.

Adopter Recruitment

- 3.10** ALW approved a total of 20 households in 2020/21, 45% of Adopters approved are from minority ethnic communities and 25% identify as LGBTQ
- 3.11** On 31st March 2021, ALW had 35 approved adoptive families, 15 families already have a child placed with them, 15 are still in the active family finding stage, 1 family is formally matched with a child and 2 others are linked to a child/ren. 2 families are on hold due to personal circumstances.
- 3.12** During the full year 2020/21 the service received 528 general enquiries about adoption and 453 families have been invited to attend an Information session.
- 3.13** The adoption assessment process comprises 2 stages, Stage 1 assessments should take place within 2 months - this stage is described as “adopter led”, where adopters work through exercises and complete various tasks that contribute to a full and thorough assessment of their suitability.
- 3.14** The expected duration of a stage 2 assessment should be 4 months or 121 days, the comprehensive assessment to determine suitability needs to be both reflective and analytical. The average length of time of stage 2 assessments for ALW was 128 days, just outside of the timescale but well under the London average of 160 days.
- 3.15** There are currently 21 families in the formal stages of assessment, 12 in Stage 1 and 9 in Stage 2.

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support

- 3.16** Throughout the assessment and post approval process of searching for the right child to join their family, prospective adopters are informed about support services available to them and are encouraged and supported to attend a *Foundations for Attachment* training course, a course that offers adopters insight and strategies to meet the needs of children who are likely to have experienced developmental trauma. The course is jointly facilitated by ALW Social workers and a Clinical Psychologist
- 3.17** An internal mentoring scheme is in place to offer support to any new adopters, or those who may need some additional empathic support. ALW have a contract with **Adopter Hub** an online support forum and adopter community that provide training and resources to adopters run by PACT, a voluntary adoption agency. In addition, a peer support organisation **We are Family** organise frequent training events and social groups. ALW have a contract for services delivered by **PAC-UK** that offer sensitive and independent therapeutic support.
- 3.18** ALW has an 'education support group', which meets six times throughout the year. The group is facilitated by an Educational Psychologist jointly with an ALW Social worker and provides a forum for families to receive support and guidance on how to engage with their child's school and a range of education related issues.

The subject of the most recent support group on 23/3/21 was "Adolescence: How the brain changes and impacts behaviour in school" the session was attended by 19 Adopters, below is feedback from one of the families.

"I found the session on adolescence last week REALLY helpful as our two adopted boys are now 12 and 13 and therefore getting into adolescence. I particularly liked the format where it was a mix of educating by you/the educational psychologist on different aspect, and interactive periods to help us reflect and share with the group about own experience of adolescence etc. I appreciated being able to ask questions relevant to one of our sons at the end too. Our 12-year-old has been having increasing periods of frustration/anger outbursts, although not at school so far, and hearing your advice then as well as tonight will help us shape up what support we can get and who to contact. It is a relief to know that. Thank you once again for these extremely useful sessions"

- 3.19** In addition, adopters receive regular newsletters that outline relevant research, learning materials, advice, and tools to support parenting strategies as well as training opportunities, seminars and specialist support groups. There are also adoption related evening seminars that take place at least 4 times a year.
- 3.20** As part of Adopt London's partnership with We are Family (WAF) an Adopter led peer support organisation; a series of evening webinars have been delivered in the period October 20-March 21:
- **6/10/20** – Personal experience of Transracial Adoption
 - **20/10/20** – Helping Children manage contact with their birth family and make sense of their Adoption – Julie Young, Senior Researcher, University of East Anglia.

- **12/11/20** – Introduction to NVR the non-violent resistance parenting approach – Rachel Braverman
- **24/11/20** – The Why, what, and how guide to understanding the effects of trauma on our children – Helen Oakwater
- **5/1/21** – Executive functioning – what is that? How to support our children in a school system that doesn't understand them. – Seth Perler
- **12/1/21** – Therapeutic Parenting, why it is critical for our children's wellbeing – Zach Gomm
- **26/1/21** – The importance of maintaining self-care and resilience for Family Wellbeing – Randhiraj Bilan
- **9/2/21** - Managing difficult sibling relationships for children who have shared a traumatic history – Sarah Naish & Rosie Jeffries
- **23/2/21** – Attachment – Graham Music
- **March** – weekly Webinar's with each Adopt London region, "Adoption Support What you can expect" ALW facilitated on 30/3/20.

All webinars are recorded and form an online library of resources available to WAF members.

Special Guardianship Support

- 3.21** ALW remains the only Adopt London region that has Special Guardianship support as part of the core offer. London's Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board is committed to improving support services to Special Guardians across London as a key priority for 21/22.

The Special Guardianship Support group in ALW is now co-facilitated with a Special Guardian, she has already taken proactive steps to reach out to the community of special guardians across the West London partnership to increase engagement and membership of the group. In addition, this person has been invited to join a national working group convened by the Chair of the national ASGLB who is also determined to improve the equality of service offered to Special Guardians across the country.

The National organisation "Kinship" (formerly Grandparents Plus), provides, advocacy, peer support and expert advice and information to Special Guardians. ALW were able to commission services from Grandparents Plus initially funded by the Emergency ASF Covid fund.

It is widely recognised that many children who cease being looked after by the Local Authority to live within their extended family or kinship network benefit from improved outcomes. Therefore, it is essential that the Special Guardians who care for them are offered, comprehensive, appropriate support that is often different to that needed by Adopters.

The partnership board have agreed to commission an ongoing service from "Kinship" for 2021/22. Some feedback from Special Guardians below,

"The service is good, and I would use them again if I needed to."

“Grandparents Plus would call me every week without fail and when things were really bad, they would call me on a daily basis to check if I was ok which was really supportive to me”

“Grandparents Plus has been brilliant for me and my boys and I feel that although contact has been reduced as things have been a little better it is a service; I will always wish to have access to.”

“Kinship Care has been a fantastic organisation of support”

“Through this engagement I have been able to link up with other Special Guardians which has really helped as I am now able to gain support from others who are in the exact same position as myself.”

“The service overall is fantastic, and I really recommend that all Special Guardian’s use this service”

Adopter and Special Guardians feedback

3.22 Some examples of recent feedback received from children and families receiving a service from ALW, who were involved due to an assessment, intervention, an access to records or, because they have taken part in any online/virtual resources:

“N and I would both like to say a huge Thankyou to you all, for your help and support with A’s high school application. We were touched by your communication and quick response on the matter”.
November 2020

Foundations for Attachment October/November 2020 for Adopters

‘Thanks to you and Jane for hosting the course. We both got an enormous amount out of it, as well as really enjoying the sessions and we were sad to see it all come to an end.’

Foundations for Attachment February/March 2021 for Special Guardians

The course was run virtually using Microsoft Teams over 9 weeks, twice a week, from 10am to 12pm.

“it was good and helpful”.

“I thoroughly enjoyed this course. It has given so much more insight to care for my 3 little cousins”.

“well organized, the leaders well prepared and empathetic!”

“helpful, understanding, thought it was amazing”.

“Really enjoyed session”.

From a 13-year-old young person who has been receiving support from an ALW Social Worker, whilst waiting for ASF funded therapy to begin,

'even if mum doesn't listen to me or read my notes you have helped me to talk about how I feel and get things of my chest....I'm not used to adults listening to me in the way that you do'...

From a grandmother caring for her granddaughter thanking the ALW support worker,

"we wanted to let you know how lovely, responsive and helpful x has been and how much we have appreciated her help. Most notably when she took over the contact with M's maternal birth mother, and literally helped get her present to M in just 24 hours around Christmas time! We had one very happy little girl and Nanna! 😊"

Finally, supporting families to make sense of their Adoption story at any stage of their life is an important service provided by ALW, below is a message of thanks from a family whose father was Adopted 100 years ago.

"I want to write to you to say how much we appreciated M's assistance. We are very grateful she was proactive in following up a message left on my father's file and made inquiries to see if it had been acted upon. My father died after many years of searching for understanding regarding his adoption. In the process he was loaned a file of adoption correspondence and I remember his joy and sadness surrounding the pieces of discovery. The handwritten notes from his birth mother and an adoption agent describing her indecision and underlying torment at giving him up. Her subsequent requests for information about him. All of which gave my father some peace to know she had not abandoned him so easily. He wanted to copy the letters before returning them but because of the expense at the time just did a select few at a copy shop and we still have these.

I found these copies while sorting out his paperwork and started to wonder about the others that my father couldn't copy. I rang Bernanos and was told that as his adoption was in the 1920's it was possible they would be destroyed given that 100 years was about to pass. Every request I made was fairly received but it was always explained to me how difficult it would be. Almost two years passed, and I had given up hope, when out of the blue I received an email from M, she said she was new to the post and had found my application and did I want to pursue it. I was amazed at her proactivity. She could have easily ignored or overlooked my old request. I am sure anyone else would have taken this easier course. When I replied that I did want to continue trying, M found a solution and explained what she could do. My sister and I are so grateful to have someone take an interest and help us get access to this file. It is so much more than just a bundle of correspondence and M seems to understand this.

Thank you!"

Received from the Daughter of an adopted Adult seeking access to Records – Feb 2021

Casework

- 3.23** Currently ALW is supporting 75 Ealing families, 37 are receiving a Social Work service, 38 are currently receiving an ASF therapeutic service that is under review.
- 3.24** There are 170 contact cases open relating to Ealing families: 20 direct contact arrangements and 150 active letterbox exchanges.
- 3.25** There have been 15 requests for access to records in relation to Ealing records, out of a total number of 141 requests received by ALW in the full year.

Adoption Support Fund

- 3.26** Families who require specialist therapeutic support are assessed by a social worker and an application submitted to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) for funding to cover the costs of the therapeutic services. In 2020/21, 259 applications were made to the ASF on behalf of and a total of £762,942 of funding allocated, 104 of the applications were for Ealing families resulting in £256,700 of funding for services.
- 3.27** There are currently no families waiting for an application to the ASF; all assessments for support are allocated.

Adopt London

- 3.28** ALW is one of 4 Regional Adoption Agencies that make up “Adopt London” a wider collaboration of 23 boroughs that form Adopt London:
- **Adopt London North** - a partnership between Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey and Islington, hosted by Islington.
 - **Adopt London South** – a partnership between, Achieving for Children (Richmond and Kingston) Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Wandsworth, Southwark and Sutton, hosted by Southwark.
 - **Adopt London East** – a partnership between Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham and Tower Hamlets, hosted by Havering; and
 - **Adopt London West** – a partnership between Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Hounslow, hosted by Ealing.
- 3.29** In order to ensure the best possible services for children and families across London, Adopt London West collaborates closely with the other 3 Adopt London regions. A key priority for Adopt London will continue to be to maximize the opportunities and efficiencies across shared priority areas.

Key priorities/activities for Adopt London in the next six months include:

3.30 Birth Parents Counselling

ALS host LA Southwark are leading on the commissioning of a new counselling service for birth families, the draft service specification has been informed by conversations with PAUSE, Joanne Alper from Adoption Plus and Professor Beth Neil (UEA). The shared ambition is to commission an innovative service that will operate using an assertive outreach model; co-production with birth parents will be integral to the service design.

3.31 Family finding initiatives

Adopt London teams are working together to increase the number of virtual “Stay and Play” opportunities. Activity days and exchange days are offered across London as a way of facilitating more interactions between adopters and children to promote links with children waiting for an adoptive family. The benefits to this approach are widely recognised as they promote and encourage “softer” chemistry links that appear to be more successful for those children who are harder to place.

A “Families for London Children” working group of Adopt London Heads of Service and Voluntary Adoption Agency colleagues has been established to specifically look at the sufficiency of Adopters for London and consider creative family finding initiatives. A conference has been arranged by the group on 16th June, for Adopt London Social Workers. The keynote speech will be from the “America’s Kids Belong” project in the US, this organisation has particular success in Adoption for older children, it will be an opportunity to consider an alternative practice model and to see if there are lessons to be learnt for London.

3.32 Further Development of the partnership with WAF (We are Family)

The popular and successful Webinar programme of online training and support to Adopters will continue and a series of new Podcasts will be launched in May/June. The partnership with WAF enables Adopt London to hear directly from Adopters what services are helpful to them, and to explore with them the most useful mediums to offer online/virtual support which has proven to be much more accessible to Adopters than more traditional face to face services.

3.33 Trauma Informed Schools

A working group has been established for London to coordinate and further develop a network of Trauma Informed schools, this includes Virtual School Heads and VAA partners. ALW hosted a Trauma Informed Schools training event on 28th May 2021, attended by 130 participants.

3.34 Website development

Continuous improvement and development of the Adopt London website is an ongoing priority. Plans now include:

- Increasing the frequency and quality of informative and supportive blogs for all affected by or interested in Adoption.
- increasing the functionality to support self-guided information, help, resources and learning.

- An adoption readiness tool to support families to think about whether adoption is right for them is currently being developed
- adding a link to Family Action's website *Family Connects* for adopted adults to begin their search for adoption records.

Please see the link below for Adopt London's website.

<https://adoptlondon.org.uk/>

3.35 Adopt London Choir

An Adopt London Choir was established in the Summer of 2020, to provide Adopters with the opportunity to have fun, establish connections with other Adopters and as a means of support during the pandemic. The Choir has proved to be hugely popular and a network of Adopters across London who have never met in person has been established. Due to its popularity, it has been agreed that Adopt London will continue to fund the project. The most recent video of the Choir performing can be viewed using the link below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hA5neFhHTqY&list=PLXqYv3251hsfg6dK4xLkDDqOiHSmOeRI-&index=1>

National and Regional Recruitment

3.36 #YouCanAdopt National Recruitment Campaign

Government allocated £1 million to fund the first nationwide adoption recruitment campaign, #YouCanAdopt, launched on 16th September - 8th December. This phase of the campaign has now concluded, the next phase due to launch in May/June 21 is aimed at adoptive parents who may consider adopting older children, sibling groups and those with complex health needs or a disability.

3.37 An evaluation of the first phase has concluded and Government are indicating that further funding may be allocated to continue a National campaign approach.

3.38 Adopt London continues to regularly feature campaigns and targeted posts on social media, specifically Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Recent posts have included the need for more adopters from mixed ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQ +, Black History Month, #YouCanAdopt national campaign, support services including WAF Talks, the Adopt London Choir's new video and song 'Colour my World', Safer Internet Day, Mother's Day, International Women's Day and other Adopt London various events.

Many of the social media posts link to a blog on the Adopt London website or to external resources where more information can be found.

Adoption Support Fund Covid-19 Emergency Fund

3.39 Government announced an additional ASF Covid-19 Emergency fund in the early Spring of 2020. Adopt London were collectively allocated just under £1 million, a decision was taken by each Partnership Board to combine the majority of the allocation, retaining only a small amount for local services. DfE welcomed the approach to joint commissioning of services taken by Adopt London and praised the innovative services it jointly commissioned. Funding has now ceased and apart from some subscription services which continue until May 2021, all services have now ended.

3.40 Impact of and response to Covid 19 Emergency ASF funding

The positive impact of this support has been reported by families as being primarily that they received immediate help and advice, including therapy on request without the need for an assessment. All service providers reported measurable improvements experienced by families because of interventions.

3.41 An independent evaluation of Adopt London's use of the ASF Covid funding, has been completed and the report shared with the Executive Board and with the DfE at their request. A review of the ASF is currently in process.

ALW Adoption Panel

3.42 The role of ALW's panel is as follows:

- to consider the presentation of approvals, reviews and terminations of adopters' suitability to adopt, following which a recommendation is made by panel members and sent to ALW's Agency Decision Maker (Head of Service) for ratification/challenge.
- to consider whether a relinquished baby from any of the partner LA's should be placed for adoption, following which a recommendation is made by panel members but sent to the Agency Decision Maker of the relevant LA to make their decision.
- to consider adoption matches between children and their prospective adopters, following which a recommendation is made by panel members and sent to the relevant Agency Decision Maker to make their decision.

3.43 Feedback from ALW to each partner LA is considered by the Heads of Service quality assurance group and the Partnership Board and shared with relevant Heads of Service as necessary after each panel presentation in order to aid service development and quality assure the work of the RAA.

3.44 In response to the Covid-19 restricted movement phase, since 20th April 2020 the ALW Panel has taken place virtually via Microsoft Teams. This decision was taken to maximise business continuity and minimise delay for children being placed with adoptive families and the approval of adopters across the region. The Panel Adviser prepared guidance around this and circulated this to the ALW adoption team colleagues and panel members for their consideration.

Prior to the panel, the Adviser liaises with the applicants and external professionals to support them to access Microsoft Teams to reduce the risk of delay on the day, explain how the panel day will run and confirm that they are able to access the meeting confidentially. The Panel Adviser sets up a panel member check-in to join Microsoft Team to ensure that everyone can join securely, without delay and with ease. Panel members also complete and return a confidentiality self-declaration, attesting to this for the duration of the panel meeting.

3.45 During 2020/21, 14 adoption panels were held in ALW resulting in the successful approval of 20 adoptive families in the full year. 6 Ealing looked after children were matched with their adoptive families in the full year.

3.46 Annual training for panel members is a regulatory requirement, joint training with ALW Social workers took place on 21st and 25th May 2021, the topic was Transracial Adoption delivered by the Inter Country Adoption Centre, a voluntary Adoption Agency and experts in this area.

4. Financial

a) Financial impact on the budget (mandatory)

No financial implications.

5. Legal

The children Act 1989 sets out the general framework for supporting children in need and their families and the Local Authority duties to looked after children

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 provides the statutory framework for implementing plans for adoption.

The Care Standards Act 2000 sets out the national minimum standards for adoption.

There are associated Regulations and Statutory guidance provided under each Act principally The Statutory Guidance on Adoption and:

- The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, amended by The Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 (and others)
- The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, amended by The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, amended by The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 (as amended)
- The Independent Review of Determinations (Adoption and Fostering) Regulations 2009 (as amended)
- The Adoption (Recognition of Overseas Adoptions) Order 2013
- The Suitability of Adopters Regulations 2005
- The Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005
- The Adoptions with a Foreign Element Regulations 2005
- The Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005
- The Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005
- The Local Authority (Adoption) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2005 (as amended)
- The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003

6. Value For Money

Financial aspects are monitored within existing budgets and existing value for money assessments and reviews.

7. Sustainability Impact Appraisal

None.

8. Risk Management

None.

9. Community Safety

None.

10. Links to the 5 Priorities for the Borough

The work of the Children's Placements Service links to the Corporate Strategy. Targets to improve the number of adopters and improve the speed of placing children in permanent homes are set within the wider objective of creating a great place for every child and young person to grow up.

11. Equalities, Human Rights and Community Cohesion

Equality Impact is consistently reviewed and evaluated in terms of service delivery.

12. Staffing/Workforce and Accommodation implications:

To be determined.

13. Property and Assets

No property implications.

14. Any other implications:

To be determined.

15. Consultation

N/A.

16. Timetable for Implementation

17. Appendices

18. Background Information

Consultation (Mandatory)

Name of consultee	Post held	Date sent to consultee	Date response received	Comments appear in paragraph:
Internal				
Judith Finlay	Executive Director			
Cllr Nagpal				e.g. 5. Legal
				e.g. 4. Financial
External				

Report History

Decision type:	Urgency item?
For information	No
Report no.:	Report author and contact for queries: Debbie Gabriel, Head of Children’s Placements and Support
	First and surname, job title