

## ASSEMBLY

24<sup>th</sup> November 2021

<b>Title:</b> Adoption Annual Report	
<b>Report of the Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health Integration</b>	
<b>Open Report</b>	<b>For Information</b>
<b>Wards Affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> No
<b>Report Author:</b> Valerie Tomlinson, Lead Commissioner for Children's Care and Support. Services	<b>Contact Details:</b> Tel: 02082273549 E-mail: <a href="mailto:valerie.tomlinson@lbbd.gov.uk">valerie.tomlinson@lbbd.gov.uk</a>
<b>Accountable Director:</b> April Bald; Operational Director Children's Care and Support	
<b>Accountable Strategic Leadership Director:</b> Elaine Allegretti; Director of People and Resilience	
<b>Summary</b> <p>The adoption functions of Tower Hamlets, Newham and Barking and Dagenham were delegated on the 1st October 2019 to the London Borough of Havering within terms drawn up in a detailed partnership agreement. Adopt London East (ALE) formally commenced operational activity on this date.</p> <p>An Adoption Service review in LBBB was undertaken in August 2020 and found that there were no established contract monitoring specific meetings or set performance metrics.</p> <p>This report verifies the processes that are in place to ensure formal assessment against targets holding ALE to account on overarching contract performance.</p>	
<b>Recommendation(s)</b> <p>The Assembly is recommended to note the contents of the annual report on adoption.</p>	
<b>Reason(s)</b> <p>The Council is required to produce an Adoption Annual Report, and present it to elected members in their capacity as corporate parents.</p>	

### 1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 The Council is committed to placing children in suitable sustainable adoption placements. In 2015 The Department for Education (DfE) paper, Regionalizing Adoption proposed the move to Regional Adoption Agencies [RAA] in order to:
- Speed up matching;
  - Improve adopter recruitment and adoption support;
  - Reduce costs; and

- Improve the life chances of vulnerable children.
- 1.2 It was proposed that all Local Authorities must join a Regional Adoption Agency by April 2020.
  - 1.3 The adoption functions of Tower Hamlets, Newham and Barking and Dagenham were delegated on the 1st October 2019 to the London Borough of Havering within terms drawn up in a detailed partnership agreement. Adopt London East (ALE) formally commenced operational activity on this date and became fully operational on 1st October 2020.
  - 1.4 An Adoption Service review in LBBD was undertaken in August 2020. The findings were as follows:
  - 1.5 LBBD had not established any contract monitoring specific meetings or set performance metrics / 'Key Performance Indicators' (KPIs) to scrutinise and review ALE's performance beyond the two timeframe KPIs:
    - A1 – monitors the time between the child being in care to the Adoption Order going through; and
    - A2 – monitors the time between the Placement Order and moving into the adoptive family home.
  - 1.6 It was understood that quarterly ALE Board meetings were held, and Heads of Service discussions took place, however these did not focus on the contractual performance targets and KPIs relating to LBBD. It was agreed at the time of finalising the 2020/21 Internal Audit report for Adoption Services review, that internal audit would follow up and verify that processes were in place to ensure formal assessment against targets holding ALE to account on overarching contract performance

## **2. Current Context**

- 2.1 Feedback from Regional Adoption Agencies in operation for a year or more is positive. Adopters report improved services and staff on improved job satisfaction.
- 2.2 The government have noted significant progress being made in reducing the time children wait to be placed with their adoptive parents which contributes to a positive outcome for children. However, both the number of registrations of interest and approved adopters nationally, regionally and locally within East London have fallen in recent years.

### Adopter Voice

- 2.3 Adopters in East London contribute to service development through the Adopt London commissioning arrangements with 'We are Family', a London wide peer-led organisation delivering support to adopters.
- 2.4 The voice of our adopted children was captured through a partnership with 'Body and Soul'. ALE plan to re-commission this service in 2021/22

## Governance

- 2.5 All service functions and relationships are detailed within the partnership agreement. The ALE Partnership board has met on 4 occasions in 2020/21.
- 2.6 The partnership board comprises of ADCS or their representatives with delegation of authority. These members have responsibility for all partnership decisions.  
Service delivery
- 2.7 The central ALE panel was developed in phase 2 of go-live. In-house panels have been in operation since the end of May 2020. Two panel chairs ensure panels are able to meet every 2 weeks in order to support timeliness. The panel makes recommendations in respect of both adopter approval and child matches. Decisions in respect of child matches continue to be made by the Agency Decision Maker in the LA with responsibility for the child. The ALE HOS acts as ADM for decisions in respect of approval of adopters.
- 2.8 The panel has met virtually since commencement of operation. This has provided some benefits for panel members and adopters alike in terms of ease of attendance. All but one prospective couple responded positively about the virtual experience. Decisions regarding continuation of virtual or direct panels will be made in line with easement of regulations and consideration of the costs and benefits.

## Impact of Covid – Staffing

- 2.9 All staff have responded positively to the challenge of working from home during Covid restrictions. A lot was learned during this period of enforced remote working and ALE will continue to undertake many functions remotely where it is efficient to do so without detriment to the quality of service provided.
- 2.10 Work was undertaken with the senior leadership team, the management team and with all staff to establish the vision and values of Adopt London East. ALE have worked to maintain this whilst working remotely.
- 2.11 Weekly remote team meetings and fortnightly service meetings have ensured that ALE maintain a clear service focus and provide mutual support. Space is provided for informal conversations, mirroring 'coffee break' spaces as far as possible.

## Adoption Panel

- 2.12 Adopt London East panels became operational on 27th May 2020.
- 2.13 Two highly experienced panel chairs have been recruited together with a central list of panel members. Panel member expertise includes adoption experienced social workers, adopters, care leavers and professionals from a range of backgrounds. Two panels operate per month with additional panels where necessary. Panels are currently held virtually. Panel papers are sent securely through egress.
- 2.14 Medical advisors provide advice to panel on their own children either in writing or directly to panel.

2.15 Legal advice to panel is provided by the Havering legal team though legal advice in respect of an individual child's care plan remains with the Local Authority.

#### Partnership work

2.16 ALE have commissioned Cornerstone, an adopter led organisation to provide a specialist virtual reality tool to assist in one-to-one support and training for our adopters.

2.17 ALE have also commissioned PAC-UK to provide a helpline and one to one counselling. This service is also available to birth families. We plan to re-commission the birth family support service as a pan London service in 2021/22.

2.18 All Intercountry adoption assessments are undertaken by 'Inter Country Adoption'. This commissioned service provides specific expertise and value for money in provision of a highly complex area of adoption work. Some post assessment work remains in-house.

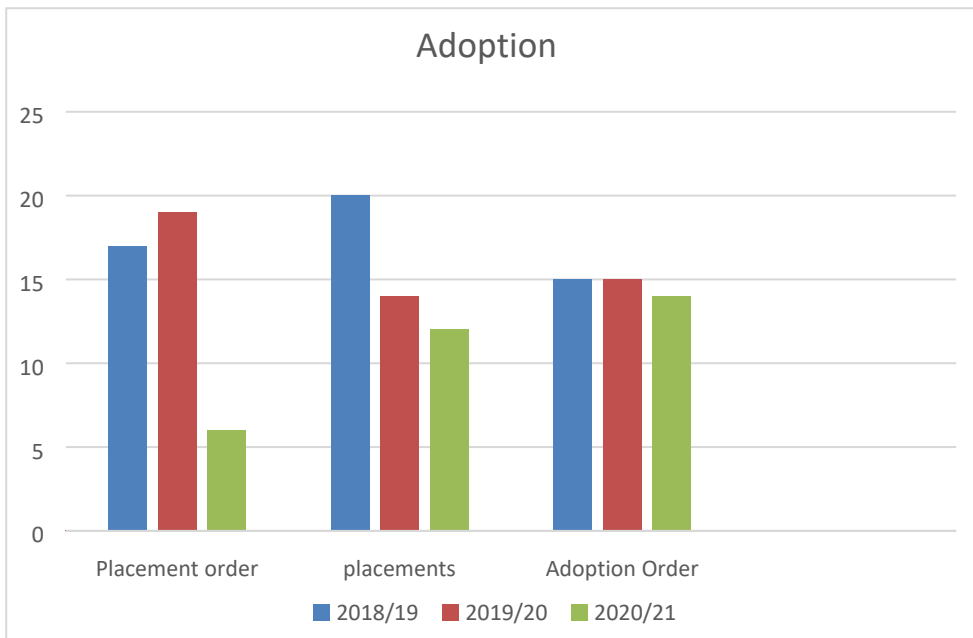
2.19 ALE work closely with We are Family, an adopter led support group providing support to families across London. We are Family have adapted to Covid requirements through development of an online webinar and podcast-based service. Adopt London has partially funded these highly successful initiatives. ALE also work in partnership with New Family Social who support LGBTQ adopters.

2.20 Adopt London HOS meet with the Voluntary sector stakeholder group on a quarterly basis. ALE also purchase bespoke therapeutic provision through use of the Adoption Support Fund. This work is commissioned from a range of registered adoption support providers.

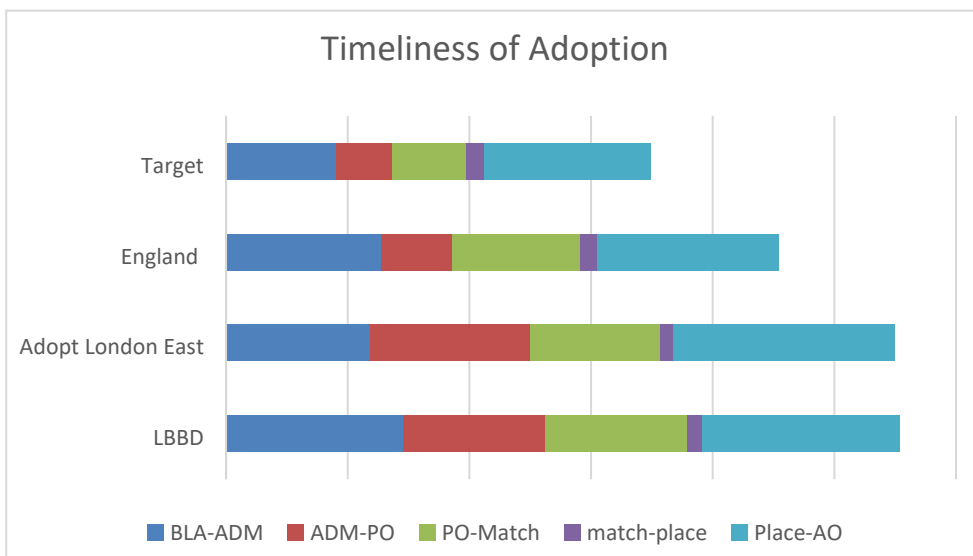
#### **Performance information 2020/21**

2.21 A placement order is made by court when a decision is made that adoption is in the best interest of the child. This allows the Local Authority to place for adoption. The table below, illustrates how the number of placement orders decreased from a high of 19 in 2019/20 to 6 in 2020/21. This is reflected in a subsequent decrease in placements in 2020/21. The higher number of placements made than placement orders granted reflects placement of some children who were granted a placement order in 2019/20.

2.22 Children cannot be adopted until at least 16 weeks after placement. In practice adoption usually takes longer as court processes must be followed. The number of children adopted in 2020/21 reflects adoptions of children placed in both 2019/20 and 2020/21



### Timeliness of Adoption



2.23 Adoption timeliness is subject to DfE set targets for timeliness. These are measured from when a child becomes looked after through a series of stages as described below:

- becomes looked after (BLA);
- The date a decision is made by the agency that adoption is in the child’s best interest (ADM);
- The date a placement order is made (PO);
- The date a child is matched to prospective adopters (Match);
- The date a child is placed with the adopters (Place); and
- The date an adoption order is granted (AO) .

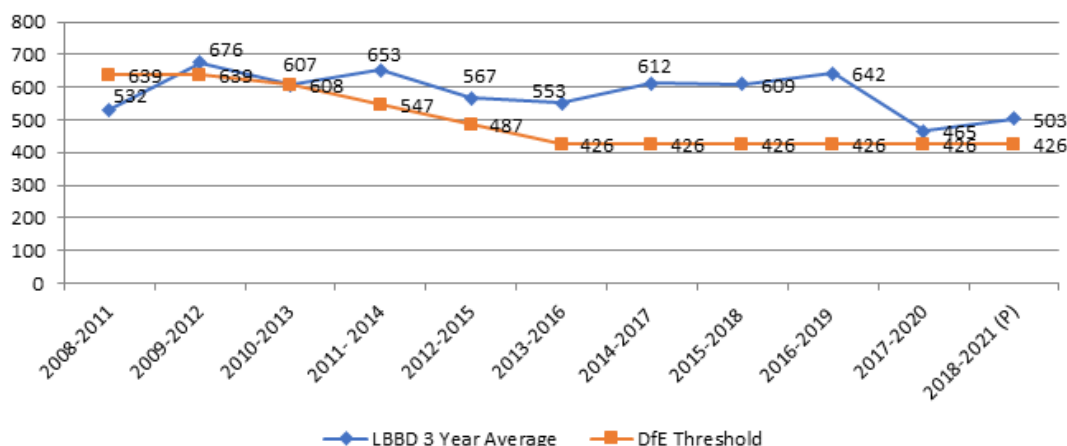
2.24 The above targets set are not usually met by RAA’s and Local Authorities, England averages are considerably higher than targets set.

- 2.25 LBBB performance is roughly in line with Adopt London East average performance in BLA to ADM decision and ADM to PO, though higher than England averages and the target. These reflect early-stage social work and court processes. Although LBBB has lengthier timescales in the earlier stages, this is reflective of the greater complexity of the needs of children and complex court cases.
- 2.26 Timeliness from match to place is roughly in line with Adopt London East and England averages. Children with greater complexity of need are harder to place and may wait significantly longer for a placement. Timeliness on a par with England averages is therefore a positive indication of good partnership working between social work teams in LBBB and Adopt London East. Timeliness from match to place is lower than the target and England averages, this is reflective of efficient processes. Once placed LBBB children wait longer than both the target and England average times to be formally adopted. This reflects lengthier court times in East London which have been addressed by joint work with the courts. Some cases have also had ongoing complexity.
- 2.27 Overall timeliness must be considered in the context of the challenging needs of children in LBBB. In England 32% of children are deemed to have no characteristics of a hard to place child. These children are usually placed more quickly. Only 9% of children in LBBB are categorised as easy to place. LBBB has unusually high rates of sibling groups and children with complex needs for whom adoption is in their best interest. The policy to never to give up on a child who would benefit from adoption will increase the time taken to identify a positive match.

A10 (formerly A1): Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster carer adoptions, for children who have been adopted (days)

- 2.28 The three-month rolling average for A10 has decreased from **642 days in 2016-19 to 465 days for 2017-20**. This puts us 39 days above the DfE threshold of 426 days. Despite the big decrease, we remain above other comparators – London 364 days, National 367 days and similar areas 381 days. Our performance for 2018-21 - will mean when published next year, our performance will increase to **503 days** (77 days above DfE threshold).

**A10 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (days)**



2.29 For A10, our individual in year performance was:

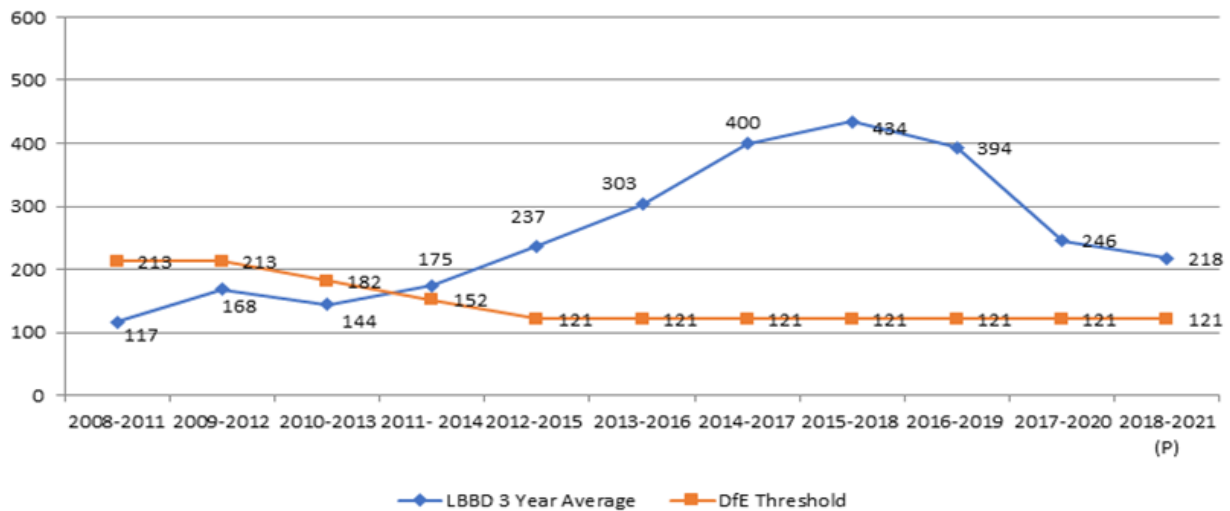
- 2017/18 360 days
- 2018/19 578 days
- 2019/20 437 days
- 2020/21 435 days

2.30 In year performance has remained similar in 20/21 when compared to 19/20 (decline of 2 days)

A2: Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days).

2.31 The three-month rolling average for A2 has decreased from **394 days in 2016-19 to 246 days for 2017-20**. Performance has been improving on this indicator year on year since 2018, when performance was 434 days. This puts us 125 days above the DfE threshold of 121 days, and we remain above all comparators - The National average (175 days) and London average (205 days) and similar areas (232 days). When published next year, our performance for 2018-21 will decrease further to **218 days**. (97 days above DfE threshold)

**A2 -Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days)**



2.32 For A2, individual in year performance was:

- 2017/18 262 days
- 2018/19 223 days
- 2019/20 255 days
- 2020/21 166 days

2.33 In year performance has decreased by 89 days between 19/20 and 20/21.

**Summary of current achievements**

2.34 Adopt London East has been operational for 18 months. 12 of these months have been in Covid related lockdown. Despite this much has been achieved:

- The highest rate of children placed in all London RAA's;
- Adopter approval in line with or higher than all London RAA's;
- A large increase in the percentage of black and LGBT adopters;
- A new adopter support offer both locally and pan London;
- A Covid support offer independently evaluated as outstanding and praised by the DfE;
- Rapid response to Covid including quick development of online training and support
- A productive partnership with We are Family delivering webinars and podcasts as well as direct support; and
- A clear and positive website showcasing our work.

**Future challenges**

2.35 The service is still new and has primarily operated within Covid related restrictions. These restrictions have affected the service, partners and our adoptive families.



### Infrastructure development

2.36 Certain aspects of infrastructure development have been delayed and a primary focus in 2021/22 will be in this field. Development areas include:

- A Liquidlogic based software tool for use across the service
- An ASF supplier accreditation tool
- Digital read only access to LA files to ensure easy transfer of information
- Improved financial reporting systems through separation of cost centres
- Pan London commissioning of a birth parent service
- Improvements to the website including a readiness tool for prospective adopters and adopter led access to services
- Consolidation of new ways of working post Covid restrictions

### Adopter approval

2.37 Due to the long lead in time and the impact of Covid restrictions: adopter approval has taken longer to turn the curve than other sectors. Approvals have begun to increase and 21/22 will see increased numbers of adopters improved. Development areas include:

- Higher ratio of adopter applications from target groups such as black adopters
- Increase in applications from adopters able to care for more hard to place children
- Increase in the number of adopters willing to consider early permanence
- Improvement in timeliness in all aspects of the approval process

### Family finding

2.38 Family finding continued throughout restrictions and the number of children placed increased. Development areas include:

- Production of further tools to assist LA social workers to understand adoption and adoption processes
- Streamlining processes to ensure each LA has the same offer and best practice is shared
- Further embedding the Beth Neil approach to introductions
- Increase in the use of in-house adopters

### Adopter support

2.39 Prior to the development of ALE the adoption support offer was underdeveloped. Many adopters were not aware of the offer available. The support offer is now much more readily available and demand for services is high. The offer has been streamlined with an immediate duty offer triaging into a social work allocated offer. Development areas include:

- Improved management of the ASF offer through dedicated administrative support
- Improved management of direct contact through review of contracts and safe transition to adopter led contacts where safe to do so
- Further development of the partnership with We are Family and other local peer led adopter support groups

- Improved adopted adult and birth family support through re-negotiated contracts and focussed support

### **3. Financial Implications**

Implications completed by: Florence Fadahunsi, Finance Business Partner

- 3.1 The Council joined the Adopt London East along with the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Havering and Newham in October 2019. The formation of the agency is designed to be cost neutral. This report provides an update on the progress and performance of the new agency. There are no financial implications arising.

### **4. Legal Implications**

Implications completed by: Lindsey Marks Deputy Head of Law

- 4.1 The Education and Adoption Act 2016 amends the Adoption and Children Act 2002, so that local authorities are no longer required to maintain an adoption service within their area but may secure provision with other local authorities or registered adoption societies. The Secretary of State may direct one or more local authorities to make arrangements for all or any of their adoption functions to be carried out on their behalf by another local authority or adoption agency, through the formation of regional or sub-Regional Adoption Agencies . The Department for Education's intention with Regional Adoption Agencies is to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services and create 25-30 Regional Adoption Agencies to pool resources resulting in targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters, speedier matching with a larger, more diverse pool of adopters, and an improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance. In the longer term it is hoped that the with local authorities joining Regional Adoption Agencies such arrangements will achieve better outcomes for children and adopters, reduce practice and performance inconsistencies, be a more effective strategic management of the service delivering efficiency savings, and develop a culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the Voluntary Adoption Agency sector.
- 4.2 As Barking and Dagenham's adoption functions with those of Tower Hamlets, and Newham were delegated to the London Borough of Havering within terms drawn up in a detailed partnership agreement and Adopt London East has become fully operational , Barking and Dagenham has followed the Department for Education's intention in respect of Regional Adoption Agencies.

#### **Public Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:**

- None

#### **List of appendices:**

- Appendix 1 - Adopt London East Annual Report