

# Annual Report

April 2022 – March 2023



**ADOPT  
LONDON  
EAST**

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# About Adopt London East

## Context and responsibilities

In 2015 the Government set out its vision and commitment to deliver an adoption system where adoption agencies would come together regionally to deliver adoption services. In 2016 the Education & Adoption Act brought this into effect with Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's) arrangements being put into place. London RAA's were launched in 2019.

Adopt London East is a partnership between the London boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham and Tower Hamlets.

The adoption functions of the four boroughs officially became part of Adopt London East (ALE) on 1st October 2019, hosted by the London Borough of Havering as the lead partner. The ALE Partnership Agreement covers the legal and financial terms of the arrangement. There is shared oversight of the RAA through a Governance Board.

Adopt London East 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
- ADM advice for children's plans for adoption (SHOPA)

Responsibility for the child (including corporate parenting responsibilities) remain with the local authority. Each 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. The agreement includes:

- Governance
- Finances and budget setting
- Data sharing agreement
- Dispute resolution
- Termination of agreement

The Adopt London East Governance Board has Director level representation from each of the four partner boroughs and has responsibility for all partnership decisions that need to be made

**Barking &  
Dagenham**

 **Havering**  
LONDON BOROUGH

 **Newham London**

 **TOWER HAMLETS**

above Head of Service level, and for monitoring performance and the budget.

The Adopt London East Operational Board has membership of Heads of Service, Service Managers and Team Managers. The group monitors performance across the service and considers best practice innovations.

## Staffing

Adopt London East employs around 30 members of staff who work across the service in differing teams areas. The service is managed by the permanent Head of Service, with direct reports of 3 Team Managers and an Adoption Panel Advisor. Michelle Bakay the Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager applied for an opportunity within Adopt London to become the Matching Manager, she took this post up in January 2023. In May 2023 Luke Scillitoe started as the new Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager for Adopt London East. There were two temporary workers within the service, they both moved back to their substantive posts.

Recruitment took place and these posts were both appointed to and the new workers started this year.

The Business Support Review has continued to take place within the host Borough of Havering. Adopt London East will now be responsible for managing its own administration functions and staff. As part of a wider reorganisation recruitment is yet to take place as the grading of the posts is currently being reviewed. It is anticipated that recruitment will take place from October 2023. In addition to core staff there are a small pool of sessional social workers to increase casework capacity in a flexible way.

## Inspections

ALE 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 ALE were involved in the ILACS inspection that took place for Barking and Dagenham.



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 recently published an inspection framework, entitled Thematic Inspections of Regional Adoption Agencies. 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 East is focused on improving 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.

## 2021-22 Adopt London East Priorities

<b>Finding prospective adoptive parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase the percentage of children adopted from care</li> <li>Reduce the number of children for whom the permanence plan has changed from adoption</li> </ul>
<b>Preparing and approving adoptive parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve timescales for adopter assessments</li> <li>Ensuring fewer prospective adopter approvals are rescinded</li> <li>Increase more timely matching of approved adopters</li> </ul>
<b>Planning for children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving timescales for placing children with adoptive families</li> <li>Supporting more children placed in an early permanence placement</li> </ul>
<b>Placing children with adoptive parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring a higher conversion rate from enquiry to approval</li> </ul>
<b>Providing support to adoptive families and others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resulting in fewer adoption placement disruptions</li> </ul>

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# Financial spend 2022/23

The total financial spend for ALE in 2022/23 was £1.859m. This was fully funded by contributions from all the ALE partnership boroughs with some additional funding from securing local adopters for other LAs. The contributions from the partner agencies have remained the same since go live in October 2019. In light of this a review will be completed in 2023/24 to ensure that the RAA is adequately funded in an equitable way.



# National adoption landscape

## National RAA Leaders Group

The 32 Regional Adoption Agencies in England work together under the umbrella of '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 (DfE) with developing the priorities it identified within its adoption strategy 'Achieving Excellence Everywhere' (2021). The DfE have provided 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 tragic 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.
- Ensuring 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

The 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. The following 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 CAF/CASS, 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. 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 efficacy of current arrangements whilst reducing the currently extensive administration.

# The Black Adoption Project



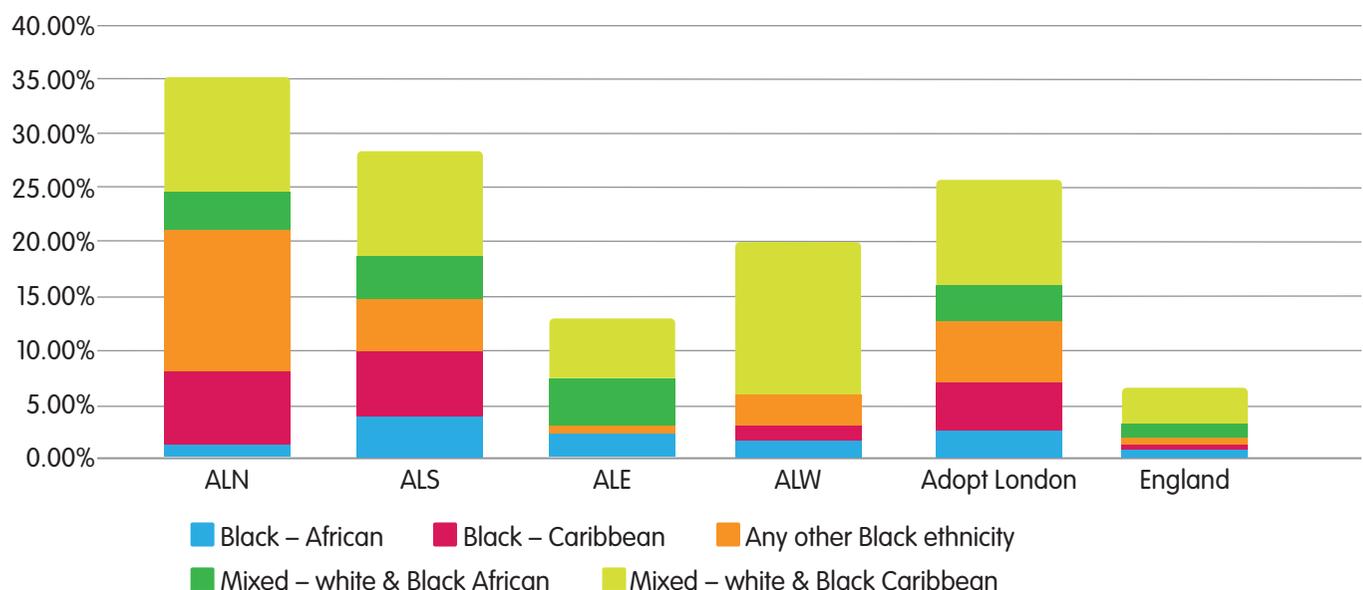
The Black Adoption Project aims to improve adoption for Black children and families and is a partnership project between Adopt London and Laurelle Brown Training & Consultancy. We have now completed phase 1 of the Project and have a strong governance structure established with a wide range of representatives 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.

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 East 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 (ADM) in ALE.

The ALE Panel meets twice per month, with capacity to run additional meetings if required. There are two independent Panel Chairs and central list membership to ensure consistency of decision making and robust oversight of the work of ALE. The independent Panel membership is diverse in terms of their experiences of adoption, their age, gender, relationship status, and ethnicity. The Panel have regular training and there is a programme of annual appraisals. The Panel provide quality assurance feedback to ALE and the relevant local authority for every case they consider.



# Training for local authority social workers

ALE continue to offer informal training and support particularly around the writing of CPRs and care planning for adoption.

ALE are currently planning to roll out group training programme around the preparation of CPRs and planning for a care plan for adoption across the partnership

“I found the session helpful, making me think around the purpose of the CPR.”

Havering ISS social worker



# Finding prospective adoptive parents

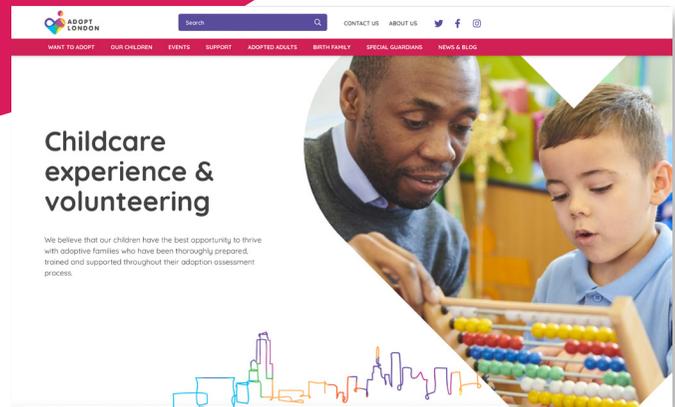
## Adopt London brand

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.

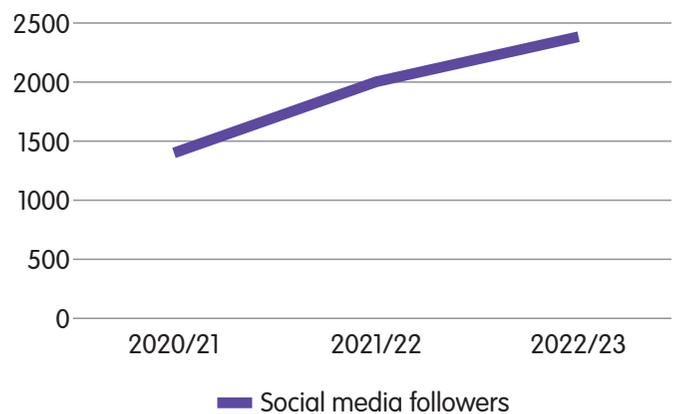
We have a shared recruitment and communications strategy. Through the Adopt London brand we aim to celebrate the diversity of London, to demonstrate that London children are central to our agencies, and to highlight a range of voices impacted by adoption.

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



## Social media followers



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'.

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.

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, throughout 2022 there was a lack of assessment capacity and high demand. To respond to this we reduced the number of Information Events and have a waiting list for assessment. ALE has planned recruitment activity to ensure that people have a smooth progress as possible between stage 1 and 2.

"...really informative, thank you very much for putting the event together, and Matt was amazing and very articulate to explain their journey to adoption."

"It was really great to have an Adopter give his experience. It gave a great insight of the process itself and explained some of the issues one should expect (and in some cases how to tackle them)."

"Myself and my husband are at the beginning of our adoption journey, this session was our first ever interaction with the adoption world. We're aware it may be a long road ahead but this session was very comforting, touching and useful, thank you."

ALE have continued to run Foundation Days at regular intervals, these are day long sessions to support prospective households make an informed choice as to whether they are in

position to progress to the adoption process. The training is co-delivered by social work staff and adoptive parent.

"I'd like to thank the training team for making the foundation day a positive experience and putting everyone at ease. I found it a draining day but an uplifting one and I'm excited to continue our journey with Adopt London East."

"It was great hearing about adoption of an older child and a successful adoption with full transparency and openness. I now have a better understanding of the process and likely timeline. A better understanding of the losses a child, adopter and birth family will face as well as the gains."

# Preparing and approving adoptive parents

After an increase in 2021/22, the number of approvals of new adoptive families has decreased 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

## Adoptive household approvals

2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
18	19	24	21

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 approval. At the end of March 2023, only 2 approved adoptive households not on hold were not matched with a child. ALE make a high number of placements between ALE adopters and children. This demonstrates that the adopters who are approved are usually suitable for the needs of our ALE children.

ALE has continued to receive 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). In 2021/22 there was 1 assessment of a foster carer. Foster carer assessments tend to be particularly complex and often encounter delays.

On behalf of the boroughs, ALE 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.

ALE 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.

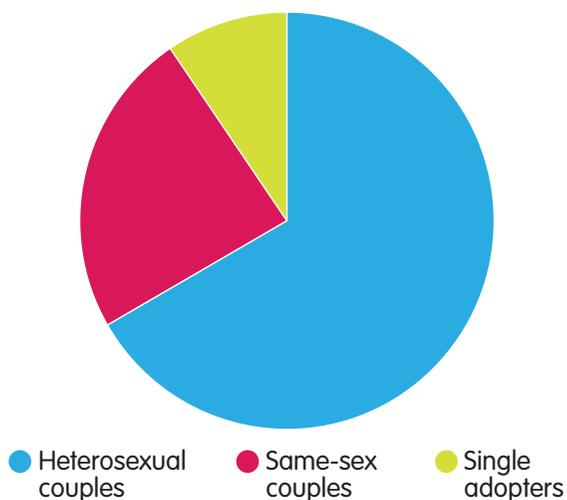
**New non-agency assessments started each year**

2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
0	1	1	5

## Characteristics of approved adopters

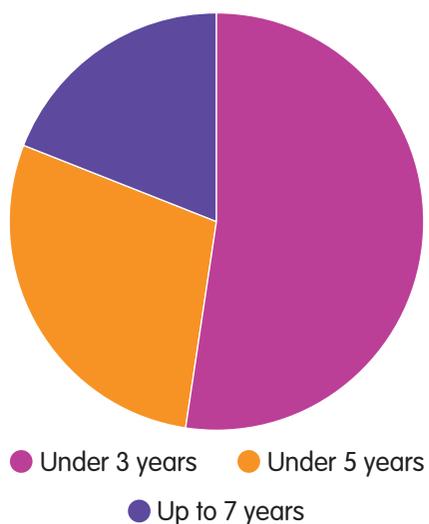
Approved adoptive households were diverse in terms of family structure, with 67% being heterosexual couples, 24% same-sex couples, and 9% single adopters.

Family structure

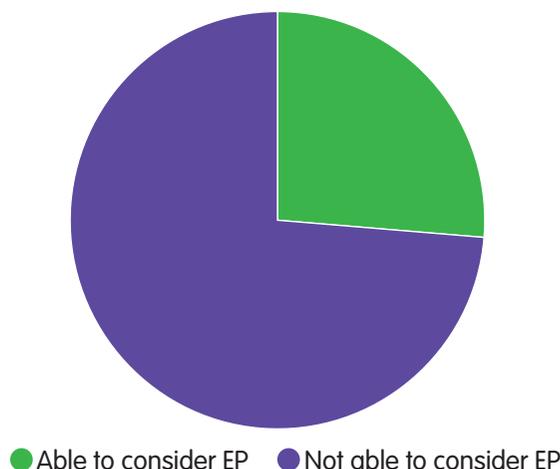


In total 52% of approved households wanted to consider children up to the age of 3 years, 28% up to the age of 5 years, and 20% up to the age of 7 years.

Approval criteria – age of children

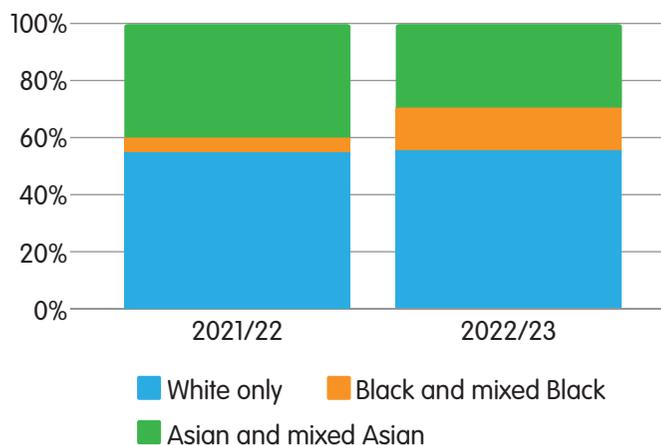


Approved adopters able to consider early permanence



This year 57% of households had adopters only of white British or other white ethnicities. Only 15% of households were from a Black Global majority with 28% from an Asian global majority. 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. Family Finding Social Workers from ALE offer consultation meetings and are able to attend planning meetings, to provide advice and guidance about adoption plans. Referrals for children are made to ALE 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.

## Children with a plan for adoption

After a reduction in 2021/22 in the number of adoption plans being formalised by the borough Agency Decision Makers (ADM), there has been an increase from 2022/23. Placement Orders have also increased although have not been as high as seen 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. 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. These figures suggest that the proportion of children within ALE 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 (Adoption Data Insights Data)

Agency	Total ADM Best Interests Decisions (BID)			% children taken into care before turning 5 with an ADM BID		
	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Adopt London East	43	42	43	31%	28%	24%
Newham	12	16	25	23%	34%	34%
Tower Hamlets	16	6	7	39%	38%	23%
Havering	9	8	5	38%	30%	26%
Barking & Dagenham	6	12	6	27%	38%	23%
England	3855	3397	3822	36%	33%	31%

### Placement Orders Granted (Adoption Data Insights Data)

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
B&D	19	7	3	7
Havering	2	7	0	3
Newham	12	8	9	14
Tower Hamlets	16	12	6	2
ALE	49	34	18	22

# 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 ALE 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 ALE 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 3½ 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 increasing a high proportion of in-house placements this year, 68%



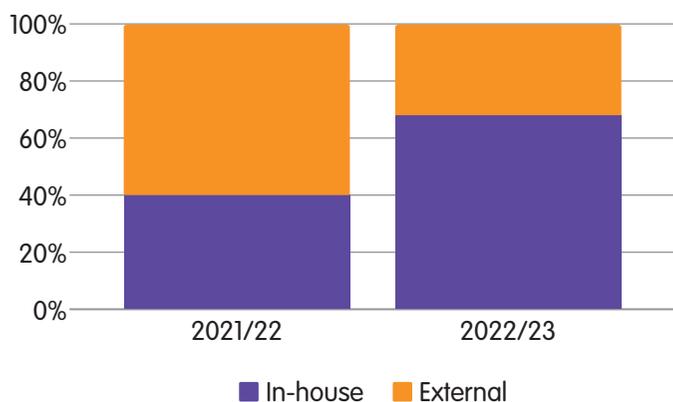
of children matched during 2022/23 went to live with an in-house family. This compares to 40% in 2021/22.

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.

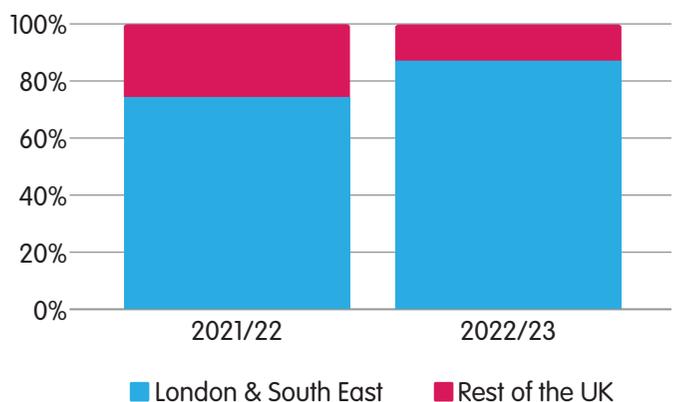
## Location of placements

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. This enables Adopt London 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 children by only considering local placements before looking at placements further afield. 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**



**Location of adoptive placements**

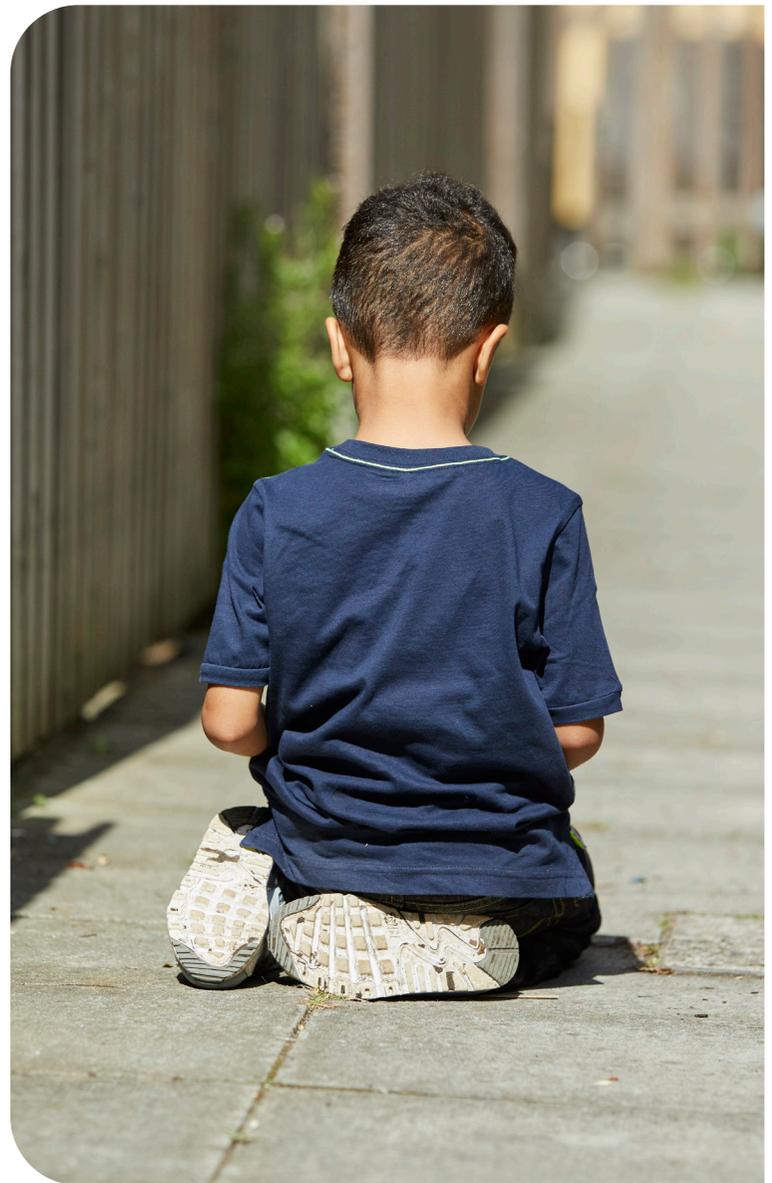


## Children waiting for an adoptive family

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. ALE are also invited to attend tracking meetings in the borough to provide information for senior managers who are monitoring permanency planning. ALE and borough senior managers speak regularly to escalate delays or concerns.

## Adoptive matches made

The number of children who went to live in an adoptive placement has reduced again this year. The 2022/23 reduction in matches was expected as there were only 18 Placement Orders made in 2021/22. The overall number of matches for ALE 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 22 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	47	29	44	35	25

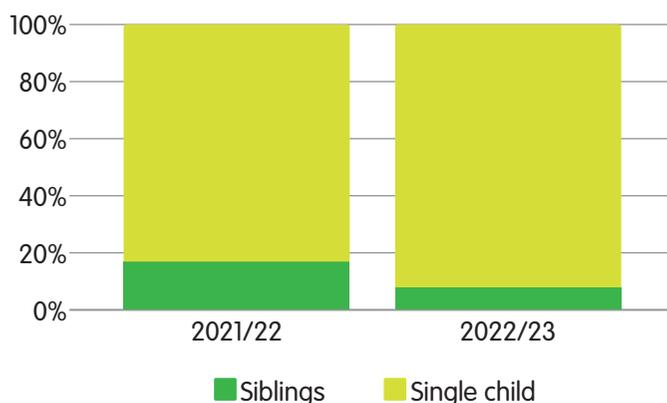
### Children placed by borough

Borough	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
LBN	5	10	14	12	9
LBTH	10	7	14	11	6
LBH	11	4	4	4	2
LBBD	21	8	13	8	8
Total	47	29	45	35	25

## 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 3 sibling groups in 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.

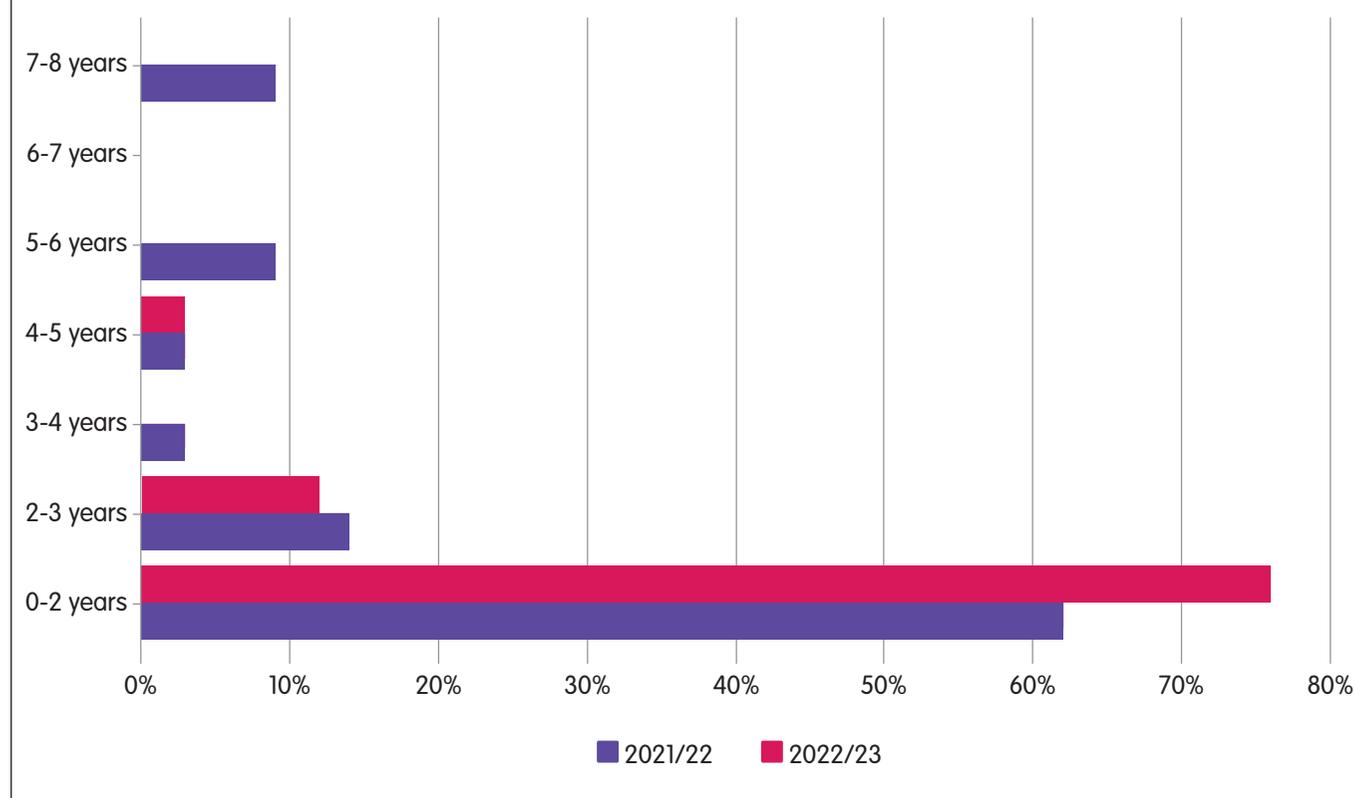
**Children matched for adoption in sibling groups**



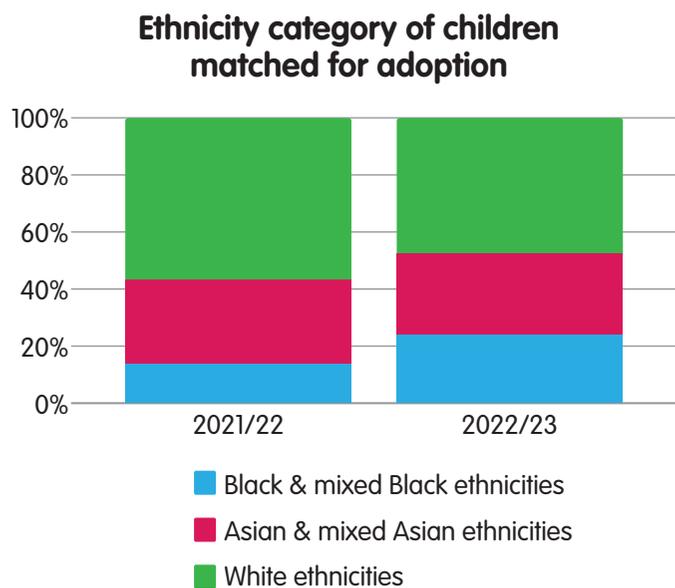
There are some changes this year in the ages of children matched for adoption, with an increase in the overall proportion of younger children. 76% of children matched fell within the 'under 2 years old' compared to 62% in 21/22. The oldest child to be matched was 5 years old, in 21/22 it was 7 years old. The majority of the children were placed under the age of 3 years old.

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

**Age of children placed**



be significantly reduced from previous years, however these children are more likely than children from White backgrounds to be waiting for an adoptive match.



## Early Permanence placements

There were 10 children placed for Early Permanence with prospective adoptive parents during 2022/23, 2 more than the previous year. There has been a significant increase in referrals for Early Permanence in early 2023-24. It is anticipated that these numbers will continue 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 adopted adults living within one of the 4 boroughs or who were in the care of one of the 4 boroughs if post commencement regulations apply. Access to adoption support is through the duty service who will carry out an initial assessment and are also able to offer short-term support such as referring for counselling from PAC-UK and access to specialist training delivered through the core offer. Families requiring longer-term or more complex social work support are allocated to a social worker for a comprehensive assessment of their needs and recommendations for support.

For a number of families requiring longer-term social work support there maybe safeguarding issues and the risk of family breakdown. Every attempt is made to assess families as soon as possible in order to provide support and prevent family breakdown. For the period 2022/23 239 referrals were received by the duty service which is an average of 4.6 new referrals per week.

The Family Connections Team facilitate and support maintaining relationships between adoptive families and birth families for all adopted children and young people that were previously in the care of one of the 4 boroughs. The number of direct contacts (family time) episodes is 150 with 68 being facilitated by Adopt London East and of those, 52 are supervised (6 by 2 Family Connections Coordinators).

The demand for Adoption Support Services remains high and we have seen a rise in the

complexity of need.

The Adoption Support Service has also extended its core offer to work directly with young adults up until the age of 26. This includes the Family Connections Team who now carry out a review when a young person reaches 17 to plan the transition to them for any ongoing relationship with their birth family. This is complex work with multiple risk factors but has highlighted the need for ongoing support post 18 years.

The number of referrals from adopted adults has increased to 162 for the year with 86 of these progressing for a comprehensive assessment. The waiting list for adopted adults (access to record requests) has proved challenging to reduce. However, progress has been made in reducing the waiting period through having a designated worker who with the team manager reviews all adopted adults waiting allocation on a monthly basis. Due to Post Commencement Regulations and the decision for Adopt London East to provide Adoption Support to young adults the complexity of the work has significantly increased.

Despite the pressures within the service, many families do value the support that they receive from the team and have increased confidence and the necessary skills in managing their individual family circumstances.



Examples:



**'Whilst I thanked you in person for all your help in obtaining my Court Records and discussing them with me I want to pass on my thanks in writing, your dedication and patience in helping me is much appreciated'**

(feedback from adopted adult)

**'I'd like to thank you for your patience and willingness to go the extra mile, it's very much appreciated'**

(feedback from birth relative)

**'Thanks for helping with the Letterbox over the last SIXTEEN years. We really appreciated it'**

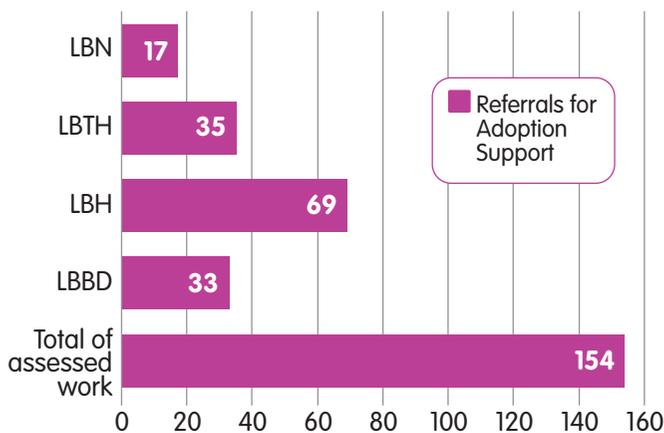
(feedback from adoptive parent).

The below graphs show the breakdown of work completed in Adoption Support:

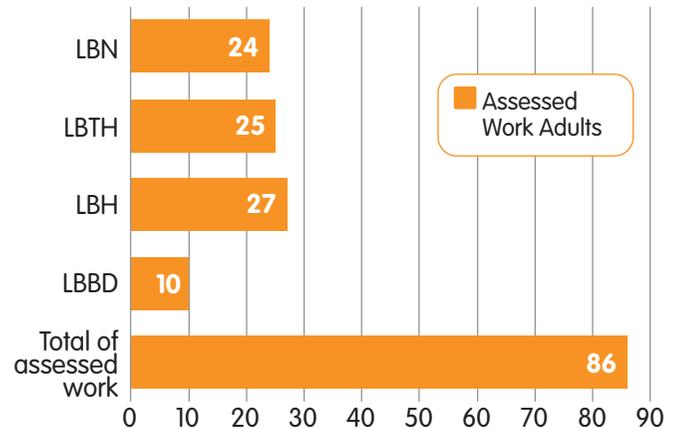
Unassessed work usually comes through to the Adoption Support Social Worker via duty. All cases are subjected to an Initial Assessment and the Team Manager then makes a decision as to the outcome of the assessment. At times advice and signposting is given whilst other cases will await further allocation for a comprehensive assessment, such cases are regularly reviewed by the Team Manager and if there are any urgent issues these are picked up by duty. Cases are allocated as soon as possible.

Once an Initial Assessment is completed by the Duty Social Worker adult cases needing a comprehensive assessment are placed on a waiting list to await allocation. However these are reviewed monthly by the team manager and a designated social worker.

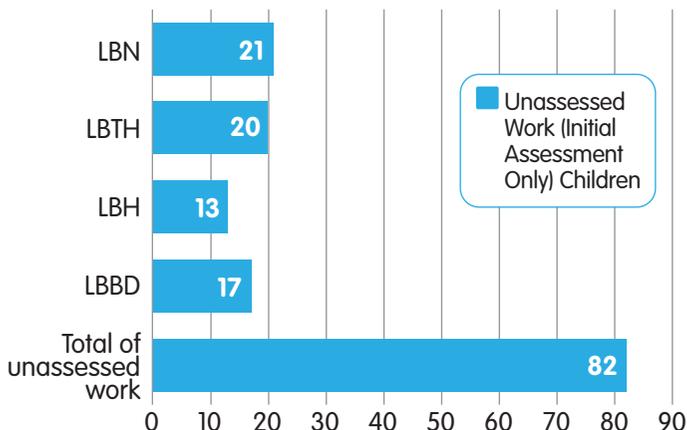
**Assessed Work Children 2022/23**



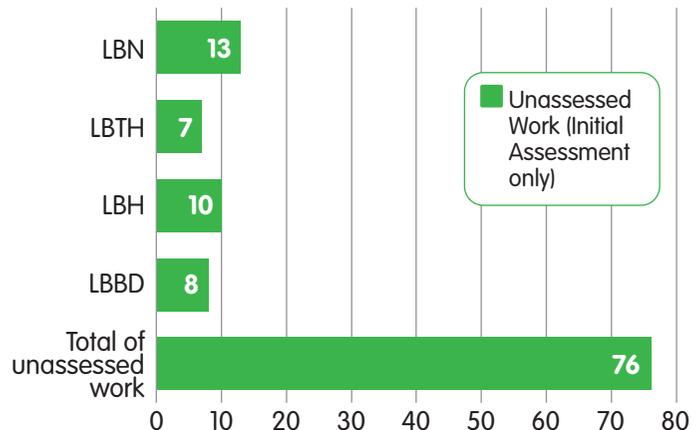
**Assessed Work Adults 2022/23**



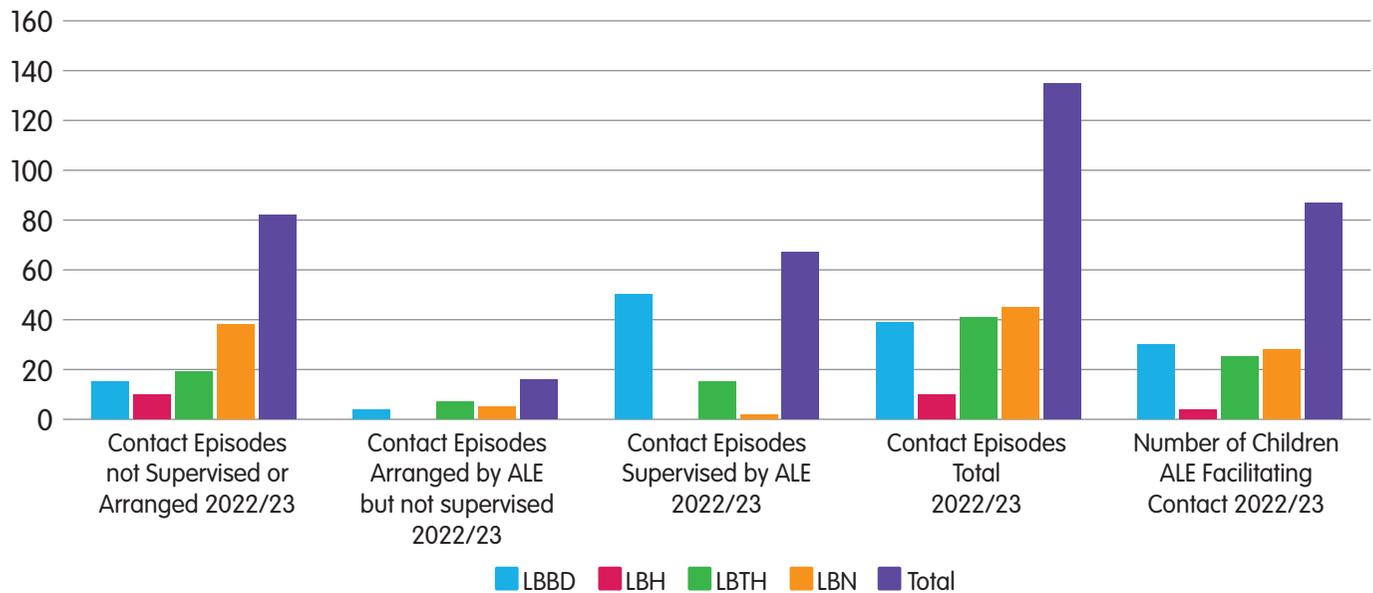
**Unassessed Work (Initial Assessment Only) Children 2022/23**



**Unassessed Work (Initial Assessment Only) Adults 2022/23**



## Direct Family Time Contact



The total number of episodes of Family Time has increased from 95 in 2021/22 to 135 in 2022/23 and children who are maintaining relationships with their birth family has increased from 70 to 87. One explanation for this is likely the service extending its service to a young adults 26th birthday. However we are aware these figures could be higher due to a number of children not being referred to the service. A new procedure has since been put in place to address this.

LBBD continue to have the most Family Time sessions facilitated by Adopt London East including 6 episodes which need to be supervised by 2 Family Connections Coordinators. All supervised family time is subject to an annual review, so that wherever possible the supervision is stepped down.

### Adoption Support Fund 2022/23

Number of Applications	Total Spend	Average Spend per Application
103	£281,047.50	£2,728.60

ASF applications have increased this year from 96 in 2021/22 to 103 in 2022/23 and the total spend from £246,377.14 to £281,047.50.

Alongside individual work, Adopt London East offer other group work programmes including Birth Mothers Group, Birth Father's Group, Adoptive Families Group and a Teenage Group. These groups are well attended and effective at offering support.

We continue to support adopters to access other support services such as those provided by 'We are Family' and PAC-UK in order to ring-fence support services for those families most in need. Our duty service and advice line provides an immediate source of support for our adoptive families prior to allocation.

Most families receiving direct support from Adopt London East have high levels of need. Adopt London East social workers work in partnership with workers from a range of organisations to support children on the edge of care and in need of safeguarding. In many cases Adopt London East social workers take a lead role in provision of direct support.

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# Recommendations

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## Review of 2022/23 recommendations

### Identifying, preparing and approving adoptive parents

1. Further develop 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. Re-design stage 1 of the Adoption process for adopters and review preparation training.  
There is now a clear process in place for stage 1, the prep group has been subject to ongoing review and it will be further extended in 2023-24 to ensure that adopters are well prepared.

### Planning for children

4. Implement recommendations from the Early Permanence in social work teams, to increase the use of EP for adoptive children.  
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

5. 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 increased this year. The proportion of children who go to live with adoptive families in London and the South East has increased also.

## Providing support to adoptive families and others

6. **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.
7. **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 12 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. This work is being completed across London.
8. **Launch the ALE Adoption Advice Line.**  
This has now been established and is working well.

## Working as part of Adopt London

9. **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.



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## 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.

### Preparing and approving adoptive parents

3. Through greater capacity in the assessment team, increase the number of approvals whilst maintaining high standard of assessments. There is a target of 25 approvals.

### Planning for children

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

### Placing children with adoptive parents

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

### Providing support to adoptive families and others

6. 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.
7. 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

8. 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.

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