



adoption 
a heart

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025

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Report for:

- City of Wolverhampton Council
- Dudley Council
- Sandwell Children's Trust
- Sandwell Council
- Walsall Council

Produced by: **Simon Green, Head of Service**

Dated: **19 June 2025**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2024/25 has been another high impact year for Adoption@Heart. Against the backdrop of national challenges in adopter recruitment and rising complexity in children's needs, we've achieved our highest number of adopter approvals to date, reduced assessment times, and delivered a stable financial outturn.

We have also made real progress in improving our adoption support offer, strengthening governance and improving our systems for tracking and planning.

These achievements reflect the collective effort and commitment of our staff, partner LA's/Trust and most importantly, the adoptive families and children at the heart of our service.

As we look ahead to 2025/26, our focus remains firmly on building sufficiency, reducing delay, amplifying the voices of adopted people and adopters, and delivering high-quality, responsive adoption support. With a clear set of priorities, tight budget management, and a shared sense of purpose, Adoption@Heart is well positioned to continue improving outcomes for children who need permanent, loving families via adoption.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

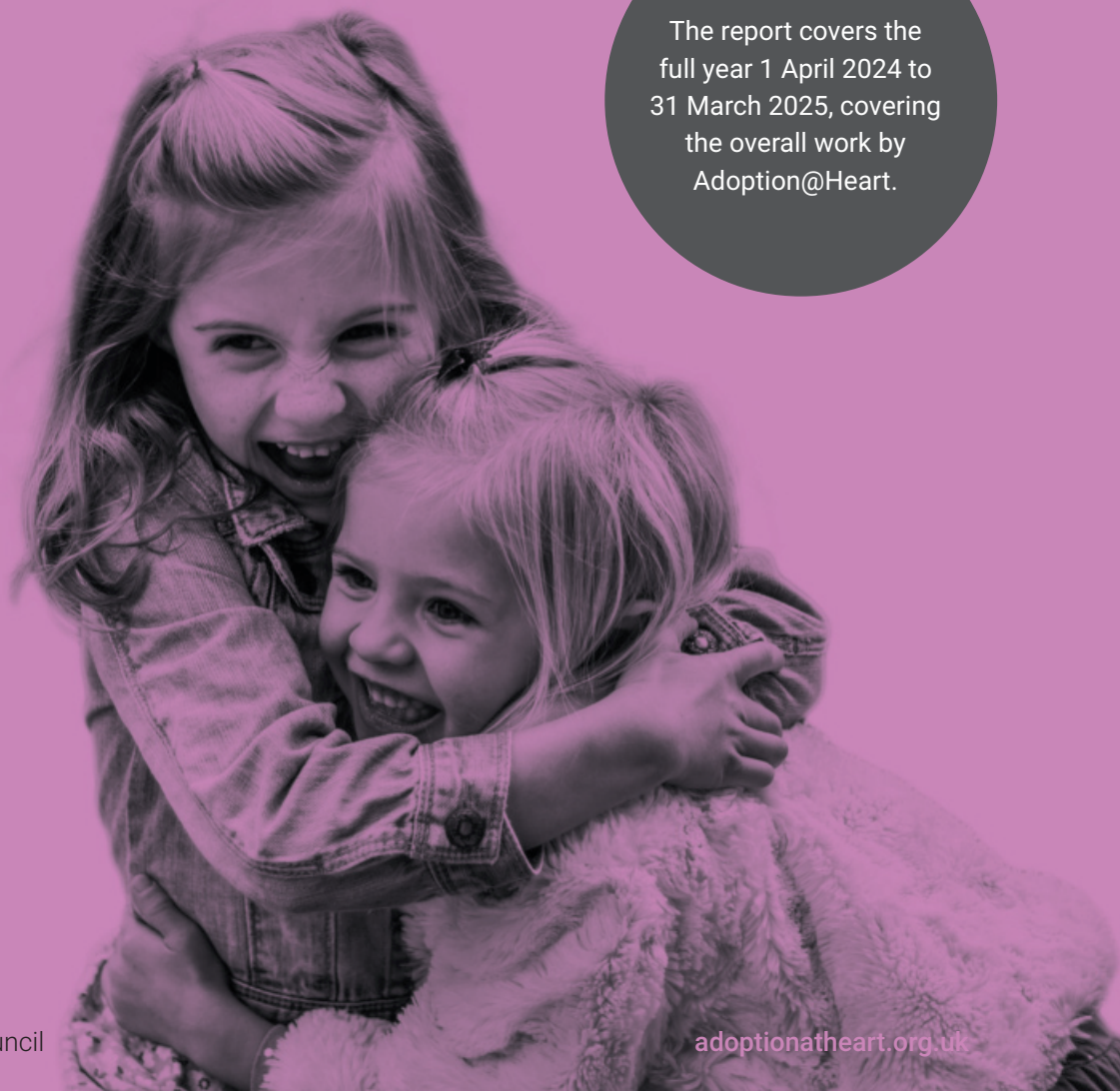
Adoption@Heart is a Regional Adoption Agency, providing adoption services on behalf of City of Wolverhampton Council, Sandwell Children's Trust, Sandwell Council, Dudley Council and Walsall Council. The service is hosted by City of Wolverhampton Council and became operational on 1 April 2019.

The service is now six years old. In 2015, the then government announced plans to regionalise adoption services to improve adopter recruitment and support, reduce costs, and speed up matching, to deliver the best outcome for children in care.

Regional Adoption Agencies bring together local services and expertise to streamline the adoption process and provide a child-centered approach to adoption in England.

There are currently 34 Regional Adoption Agencies in England. This report fulfils the obligations in the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002, to report to the "executive side" of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in this report.

The report covers the full year 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025, covering the overall work by Adoption@Heart.



HEAD OF SERVICE OVERVIEW

Last year, Adoption@Heart made significant progress and positive changes, achieving its priorities and setting a strong foundation for future improvements.

This year has been another remarkable year, by continuing to reverse the downward trend in adopter recruitment through improved marketing strategies and the hard work of our Recruitment and Assessment Service. We have successfully attracted more prospective adopters, ensuring a broader pool of in-house adopters for children in need.



Our Key Achievements and the Impact we have had:

Greater choice for Children: The increase in approved adopters has expanded the pool of available families, offering more options and improving the likelihood of successful placements.

Stronger matching: With more families available and improved assessment processes, matches are more carefully tailored to meet children's specific needs, leading to more stable and lasting placements.

Increased Permanency: A greater number of children have been able to exit care and achieve permanency through adoption.

Reduced Waiting: Reduced waiting times for some children from care entry to placement and from placement order to match, mean children experience less uncertainty and can settle into permanent homes more quickly, which is critical for their outcomes.

What else has been going on:

In 2024, two fundamental reviews were conducted, and the Head of Service also presented two additional reports, as requested by the governance board.

Review of the Structure of Adoption@Heart:

This review assessed our structure, to ensure it was optimally designed to meet our strategic goals and service delivery requirements. The outcome was that the structure of Adoption@Heart was sound, with resources in the right places. Adoption support was identified as a vulnerability, and further work should be undertaken during 2025/26 to ensure the service is sufficiently resourced to meet the increasing level of need.

Review of the Funding Formula: A thorough review of our funding formula helped ensure that the LA's/Trust financial resources were allocated most effectively to meet the needs of children and families.

The funding formula review confirmed that both the formula and each partner's contribution were appropriate and fair. It was agreed that this model should continue; however, the formula may be adapted slightly to reflect the adoption of younger children. This will be modelled as part of the budget-building proposal in October 2025.

Head of Service Budget Summary

It is fair to say that last year (2023/24), presented challenging moments in budget management, due to an increase in the use of inter-agency placements and significant overspend, which was highlighted at the end of the second and third quarters. Thanks to diligent recovery planning and robust financial management, we successfully mitigated these concerns and concluded the year on a positive note, avoiding the worst-case financial scenarios. In 2023/24, we did end that year with an overspend on our inter-agency budget, however this overspend was less severe than anticipated.

As we close the 2024/25 financial year, I am pleased to present a strong and positive outturn position for Adoption@Heart.

Our total expenditure for the year stood at £4.4 million, against a net budget of £5.1 million. Notably, our largest area of spend remains staffing, reflecting our continued investment in skilled professionals, to deliver the best outcomes for children and families. Through tight vacancy management and reduced reliance on agency staff, we achieved substantial staffing savings, whilst still delivering on service priorities.

Inter-agency activity remains a crucial part of our work. In 2024/25, we facilitated 31 placements at a total cost of £759,530, reflecting a diverse mix of single children and sibling groups, placed both through regional and voluntary adoption agencies. We also generated income from eight placements sold to other agencies, demonstrating the strength and value of our practice and profile nationally.

Elsewhere, prudent contract management has allowed us to make further savings on subscriptions and professional fees. The end of legacy arrangements with New Family Social and Adopt West Midlands, alongside tighter control of running costs, have all contributed to a leaner and more efficient financial footprint, without compromising the quality of the service.

As we look ahead to 2025/26, we do so with a stable and secure financial base, an agreed budget aligned to our strategic priorities, and an unwavering focus on delivering excellent outcomes for children needing adoptive families. Thanks go to all our partner LA's/Trust, our finance colleagues, and most importantly, to the staff across Adoption@Heart, whose commitment to the service is the cornerstone of our success.

The Management Board will have discussions regarding the appropriate level of reserves, further investment, and potential reduction in partner contributions. It will be important to remain prudent and cautious to ensure financial stability over the next three years. We should anticipate a potential increase in interagency placements as we work to reduce the number of children waiting and progress ambitious adoption plans, particularly for those children who typically wait longer.



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DEVELOPING ADOPTION@ HEART'S 2025/26 PRIORITIES

In developing Adoption@Heart's Action Plan for 2025/26, priorities were carefully evaluated and clearly defined. This requires both inward and outward reflection, assessing our internal strengths and areas for development, whilst also aligning our focus with the national picture and current government priorities.

The starting point for defining our shared priorities was the Minister's letter to the national strategic lead for adoption, which sets out the government's observations and vision for the sector. In response, a benchmarking exercise was conducted, which identified the key elements of the Minister's letter and evaluated our service in relation to those components. This exercise helped identify our core priorities for the year, which in turn informed the development of our Action Plan and quarterly delivery report. In doing so, we ensure that our work remains focused, strategic, and aligned with the national direction of travel.

Priority Areas:

Leadership

- Ensure strong financial management and value for money, with effective oversight of the interagency budget.
- Provide strong leadership within national and regional adoption agendas, including securing external funding and fostering closer collaboration with other regional adoption agencies.
- Ensure Adoption@Heart is inspection-ready and able to support partner agencies at all stages of the Ofsted inspection cycle.
- Promote innovation and the ongoing development of the service, by embracing new ways of working, supported by technology.

- Implement a permanent and stable senior leadership structure.
- Embed the voice and influence of adopters and adopted people at every stage of the adoption process, with clear systems in place to ensure their views shape the service.

Adopter Recruitment

- Recruit 80 new adopter households during 2025/26.
- Set specific targets to improve the recruitment of LGBT+ adopters and those best placed to meet the needs of children from global majority backgrounds.

Children's Plans

- Reduce the time children wait to be adopted, with a focus on improving performance against key indicators A2 and A10.

Adoption Support

- Reform adoption support services, to ensure assessments and interventions are timely, effective, and responsive to family needs.
- Play a key role in shaping pan-regional and local adoption support provision.
- Develop peer support, as a core component of all adoption support services.

MARKETING SUMMARY

The marketing performance analysis for 2024/2025 shows several notable trends.

Year	Number of enquiries	Number of information events	Number of event attendees	Next steps completed	ROIs submitted
2024/2025	495	26	523 <i>NB this is number of registrations - attendees to be confirmed.</i>	106	86
2023/2024	520	23	120		64
2022/2023	541	21	169 <i>households</i>	126	75
2021/2022	609	22	311 <i>(262 households)</i>	146	71

- 65 Adopter approvals were recorded throughout 2023/24 relating to 119 individuals; 53 (45%) males and 66 (55 %) females. 76 Adopter approvals were recorded during 2024/25 relating to 145 individuals; 71 (49%) males and 74 (51%) females.

- The proportion of LGBTQ+ adopter approvals during 2024/25 were 12 (8.3%). This is lower compared to 2023/24, where the total number of approved adopters being LGBTQ+ was 13 (10.9%).

- 11 (16.7%) Of adopter approvals in 2024/25 were to single applicants compared to 11 (9.24%) 2023/24. All other applicants were in a relationship (married, civil partnership, male/female partnership, or a same sex relationship).

- 8 (6%) Approved adopters highlighted that they have a disability, compared to 3 approved adopters in 2023/24, 0 in 2022/23 and 1 (1%) in 2021/22.



- 59 (42 %) Approved adopters identify as not having any religion, 58 (41%) identified as Christian, 6 (4%) identified as Muslim, 2 (1.4%) identified as Atheists, 1 (0.7%) identified as Jewish, 9 (6%) listed 'other' and 7 (5%) had no information available. 54 (44.6%) of approved adopters in 2023/24 identified as Christian, 5 (4.1%) identified as Muslim, 3 (2.5%) identified as Islam, 1 (0.8%) identified as Hindu, 45 (37.2%) identified as having no religion, 4 (3.3%) had no information available and 9 (7.44%) listed 'other'.



43% OF APPROVED ADOPTERS ARE AGED BETWEEN 41-50

- 7 (5%) Of approved adopters in 2024/25 were aged between 21-30, 58 (41%) were aged between 31-40, 61 (43%) were aged between 41-50, 13 (9%) were aged between 51-60 and 3 (2%) were aged between 61-65. Compared to, 1 (0.8%) of approved adopters in 2023/24 were aged between 21-30, 55 (45.5%) were aged 31-40, 41 (33.9%) were aged 41-50, 19 (15.7%) were aged 51-60 and 5 (4.2%) were over 60.
- In 2024/25 118 (81.3%) adopter approvals were white applicants, 5 were of Black descent (3.4%), 15 (10.3%) were of Asian descent 6 (4.1%) were of mixed heritage and 1 (0.6%) was Iranian. This compares to 2023/24 where 90 (74.4%) adopter approvals were white applicants, 9 were of Black descent (7.5%), 18 (14.9%) were of Asian descent and 4 (3.3%) were of mixed heritage. (NB the above points relate to individual adopters rather than households)








OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

The year-over-year analysis indicates overall growth in engagement metrics, like enquiries and social media presence, there are areas such as event attendance and website traffic that are either declining or stagnating.

RECRUITMENT FOCUS

The Recruitment and Assessment Service continued to provide all aspects of the adopter journey on behalf of the agency, ensuring a smooth and timely process for suitable applications to adopt. As noted elsewhere in this report, this service has performed particularly well, evidenced by the increased number of recruited and approved adopters.

The team has the following structure:

	1 Team Manager,
	2 Senior Social Workers
	9 Full-Time Adoption Support Social Workers
	4 Part-Time Adoption Support Social Worker
	2 Full-Time Agency Social Workers

The service has continued doing an excellent job by reversing a two-year declining trend in adopter recruitment and recruiting more adopters than ever before.

Their strategic efforts have reversed the decline and initiated positive growth in attracting new









adopters. There is also every indication that this will continue into the coming year, with ambitious recruitment targets set. The achievement of these targets is facilitated by a comprehensive plan encompassing enhanced recruitment strategies, improved support for prospective adopters, and innovative marketing campaigns designed to maintain the current momentum.

Number of new approvals	76
New early permanence approvals	21
New approvals 0-2	26
New approvals 2-5	9
New approvals 5-+	0
Siblings	7
New LGBTQ approvals	11
New global majority approvals	46%
*Geography info	Majority of families are from are four Local Authorities, four Telford families, one London, one Ipswich, seven Birmingham, one Shrewsbury and one Wakefield
Non agency adoptions	10
Foster carers adoptions	13

MATCHING AND FAMILY FINDING FOCUS

The Family Finding Team continued to deliver all services related to the journey of the child with a plan for adoption. The service receives referrals from each of the four partner local authorities from the point at which adoption is first considered, through to overseeing the linking and matching process, and ultimately to the granting of the adoption order.

The team has the following structure:

	1 Team Manager
	1 Senior Social Worker
	8 Full-Time Adoption Support Social Workers
	1 Part-Time Adoption Support Social Worker
	3 Full-Time Family Support Workers
	2 Part-Time Family Support Workers

Commentary and Analysis: Adoption Timeliness 2024/25

	2024/25			
	Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton
Children in Care Number (end of March 2025)	574	812	665	502
	2024/25			
	Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton
Best Interest Decisions	30	31	30	40
Placement Orders	28	26	30	32
Matches	28	20	31	36
Placements	28	23	30	32
Adoption Orders	29	29	44	24

The adoption timeliness data for 2024/25 (Q1–Q4), reflects a mixed picture across the four LA's/Trust, with timescales in some areas exceeding national averages. However, when viewed in context, there are several positive and child-centred reasons that help explain why some delays may occur, particularly where decisions are made in the best interests of achieving enduring and well-matched placements.

	2024/25					
	Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton	WM avg	Eng avg
A2 (number of days)	282	367	351	298	227	205
A10 (number of days)	612	628	489	360	497	474

Scorecard A10

Days from entering care to moving in with adoptive family

While all areas exceed the national average, this can be partly attributed to more ambitious family finding approaches. For example, teams have prioritised keeping siblings together, even if this means waiting longer for the right family. Additionally, there has been a conscious focus on placing children with more complex needs, where identifying a suitable match may naturally take more time. These delays, while outside the preferred timescale, reflect a commitment to achieving the right match, not just the fastest match, which ultimately supports placement stability and long-term outcomes.

Scorecard A2

Days from court authority to matching decision

Wolverhampton is performing well, coming in slightly under the national average. Other LA's/Trust have taken slightly longer, but this again reflects an intentional effort to broaden the range of families being considered, including exploration of early permanence and foster carer adoptions, which require careful coordination. In some cases, additional time has been spent supporting prospective adopters to be fully prepared and confident before progressing to match, a strength when viewed through the lens of long-term placement security.



Scorecard A20

Days from entering care to court authority

England average: 350 days

Local figures:

Dudley: 314 days

Sandwell: 536 days

Walsall: 550 days

Wolverhampton: 323 days

Dudley and Wolverhampton are performing well on this measure, indicating effective early planning and progression of care proceedings. In Sandwell and Walsall, timescales are longer, but often due to deliberate efforts to assess wider family networks or support rehabilitation efforts before progressing to adoption. While this can extend timelines, it ensures that all potential options are explored in line with the child's best interests and the principles of the Children Act.

Conclusion:

Although some LA's/Trust exceed national timeliness benchmarks, these figures should be viewed in light of quality-focused practice. Delays are not necessarily indicative of inefficiency but often stem from a desire to secure the right placement, with the right family, at the right time. A strong commitment to keeping siblings together, placing children with additional needs, and supporting stability through careful matching, reflects a child-centred approach. Continued investment in early permanence planning and targeted adopter recruitment, will help reduce delays without compromising on quality.

Note on Comparability:

It is important to avoid oversimplified comparisons between the four LA's/Trust. Each area operates within a distinct context, for example, Sandwell and Walsall typically have higher numbers of children entering care, including a larger proportion of children from complex family backgrounds, or with additional needs. Dudley has a comparatively smaller cohort, but has experienced recent structural changes, affecting care planning, whilst Wolverhampton often benefits from more stable caseloads and earlier legal planning. These structural and demographic differences influence timescales and must be considered when interpreting the data.

Year-on-Year Comparison - Q4 2024/25 vs Previous Years:

While the dataset doesn't include direct historic values, based on regional trends and earlier benchmarking exercises, we can note that:

Volumes have remained high or increased slightly, particularly in Wolverhampton and Walsall, suggesting a consistent or rising demand for adoption placements.

Timeliness has dipped slightly overall, particularly the average number of days from Placement Order to match. This is likely due to:





- Higher complexity of children's needs.
- An increase in sibling group planning.
- Strategic decisions to wait longer, for more suitable families, rather than progressing to early matches.

In previous years (e.g. 2022–24), many LA's/Trust were reporting average PO-to-match times between 180–250 days, while Q4 2024/25 shows averages in the 250–400+ day range in some areas. Whilst this might initially appear like slippage, it is better understood as a shift toward more child-centred matching.

ADOPTION SUPPORT FOCUS

The Adoption Support team continues to provide all aspects of pre and post order adoption support on behalf of each of the four LA's/Trust and supports families pre and post order. The team undertakes Assessment of Need and identifies suitable therapeutic intervention, by commissioning A@H Senior Adoption Support therapist and commissioning external therapeutic providers funded via applications to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, Keep in Touch arrangements, Access to Records, Birth Parent Support, and delivery of pre- and post-order training.

The team has the following structure:

	1 Team Manager
	1 Senior Social Worker
	1 Senior Social Worker (12-month secondment)
	1 Senior Therapist

Adoption Support:

7 Full-Time Adoption Support Social Workers
(6 permanent, 1 agency = 1 x 12-month secondment
1 x 6-month secondment)

Adult Adoptee/Birth Parent Support:

1 Part-Time Access to Records/Birth Parent Support Social Worker (15 hours per week)

1 Full-Time Access to Records/Birth Parent Support Social Worker
(33 hours per week – currently working within the Keep in Touch Team).



Keep in Touch Team:

3 Full-Time Family Support Workers, one team member is on extended maternity leave, so her role is being backfilled by the Access to Records/Birth Parent Family Support Worker. One team member is on long-term sickness absence, so her role is being backfilled by a full-time Agency Family Support Worker.

Assessments of Need:

It is recognised that early life adversity impacts children developmentally, emotionally, cognitively, and socially and requires therapeutic support for children to thrive. Adoption@Heart operates a graduated approach, offering universal access to an adoption training programme and support groups delivered by staff, enhanced support includes an Assessment of Need and parenting support, individually or in groups, and targeted support includes commissioning of specialist therapeutic intervention. We utilise the service of a Senior Adoption Support Therapist employed by Adoption@Heart, as well as commissioning private and independent therapeutic services.

The starting point for accessing the Adoption Support Service is an Assessment of Need. The team worked with the following numbers of children in the twelve-month period. This is an overall increase (27 additional children) in the number of assessments of need, this is becoming a growing demand and continues to evidence the lifelong nature and complexity of adoption. The waiting list for allocation has decreased due to temporary additional capacity within the team.

Dudley	129
Sandwell	83
Walsall	95
Wolverhampton	86
Total	393

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund was established in 2015 by the Government to help adoptive families access support and settle into their new lives following adoption. The Government committed ongoing funding for the 2024-2025 financial year. There has been a significant increase in the number of ASGSF applications (compared to 339 in 23-24) which again evidences the need for on-going support within the adoption arena.

ASGSF Applications completed in the year.

Dudley	145
Sandwell	89
Walsall	110
Wolverhampton	76
Total	420

Access to Records:

The provision of birth records counselling and access to information, is of vital importance in enabling adopted adults to understand the circumstances of their adoption and enhance their sense of identity. Unfortunately, there has been a decrease in the number of requests that we have been able to support in the twelve-month period, due to ongoing capacity challenges. The figures for referrals allocated to be supported are below ("Unknown LA" relates to referrals where we are required to check whether any information is held, but the Appropriate Adoption Agency is not named on the referral):

Dudley	21
Sandwell	10
Walsall	8
Wolverhampton	14
Unknown	4
Total	57

Birth Parent Support:

The team also provides support to birth parents affected by adoption and the following numbers were supported by the service in the twelve-month period, the number of requests that could be supported remains low due to capacity challenges:

Dudley	4
Sandwell	6
Walsall	9
Wolverhampton	11
Total	30

Keep in Touch:

Adoption@Heart is responsible for Keep in Touch arrangements on behalf of City of Wolverhampton Council, Walsall Council, Dudley Council and Sandwell Children's Trust. There are three full-time Family Support Workers who are responsible for administering the service. They offer support to adoptive parents and birth relatives. There is a consistently high workload within the team which has impacted on some aspects of service delivery and a full breakdown of Keep in Touch exchanges by LA's/Trust is therefore not available.

10,012

From January - December 2024, the team managed a total of 10,012 communications, through facilitation of the following:

- Exchange of **1,633 letters**
- Exchange of **770 photos/videos**
- Exchange of **282 cards/drawings**
- Exchange of **138 gifts**
- Processing of **324 contact agreements**
- Processing of **6,865 duty enquiries**

PANEL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE





Adoption Panels

During the year 2024-2025, all adoption panels have continued to be conducted virtually.

	Approvals	Matches
2020/21	67	131
2021/22	65	103
2022/23	38	95
2023/24	66	95
2024/25	79	100

Panel membership

The Panel continues to function with the support of the Panel Team:

	2 Full-time Panel Advisors
	1 Part-time Panel Co-ordinator
	1 Full-time Panel Administrators
	1 Part-time Panel Administrator

43 Panel Members

Made up of 16 Independent Panel Members and 17 Social Work Panel Member representatives.

There are four Independent Panel Chairs, 6 Medical Advisors for the four LA's/Trust.

The central list offers a good representation of members who have either been adopted or have adopted and this is seen as very positive in terms of the different perspectives they bring. There has been a change in the membership and activity to recruit new members with the aim of increasing the diversity and representation at panel in terms of gender, race, disability and lived experiences. However, it is acknowledged that more needs to be done to recruit males, same sex couples, members of LGBTQ community and single adopters.

Panel training

In the period 2024-2025 Panel Members have had the opportunity to attend the following training events:

Adoption@Heart Panel Development Day which took place on 16/10/2024. This is an annual event which looked at the following areas, A@H Performance & Reflections, Legal Update Keeping in Touch, Post Adoption Depression, Recruitment & Assessment, Family Finding and Adoption Support team updates.

Panel Developments

Panel development which has taken place to help prevent delay to children includes the introduction of Approvals of Foster Carers being presented at panel and then followed by the Match of the child/ren they have in placement at the same panel. Although this practice is not new and took place prior to the RAA being set up it is evident that Adoption@Heart is at a point in its development where this can now take place effectively with the relevant processes in place. Further developments continue to take place to introduce a similar process with second time adopters.

Panel Business

Panel met on 53 occasions during 2024-2025. This included extra and additional panels, which were arranged to hear the additional cases. This meant that children do not wait, and matters are dealt with in a timely manner. In July 2024 there were matches which needed progressing and an extra panel was scheduled to hear these items. In December 2024, two additional panels took place to hear approvals which had been completed and waiting to be presented to panel. This was to ensure families were approved and ready to be considered for children needing adoptive families. A further additional panel was then scheduled for March 2025 again to hear approvals.

The Adoption@Heart Head of Service undertakes all approval decisions as ADM. The SHOBPA decisions remain in the four LA's/Trust, except in the case of Consensual Adoptions, previously known as relinquishment for adoption, which remain with Adoption@Heart. Agency Decision Makers are very flexible regarding early decisions, in relation to both approvals and matches, to enable transitions that work best for the children.

There are quarterly meetings for the Independent Panel Chairs to meet with each other, Panel Advisors, Panel Coordinator, Service Manager and Head of Service. There are also bi-annual Panel Chair and ADM meetings. This supports the communication between the partner agencies and strengthens the working relationships between the four LA's/Trust.

Consensual Adoptions:

There were three Consensual Adoptions heard at panel during the period, all Sandwell children.



Approvals

79 approvals were considered at Panel.

77 adopters were approved in this reporting period. There were two approvals which were deferred at panel, one came back within the same period and was approved, it is hoped the other item will be approved in 2025/2026.

Feedback from Adopters about their experience at panel

Feedback from applicants for approvals and prospective adopters for matches, is sought after every panel.

Quotes from adopters include:

- Thank you for listening to our journey and showing the sensitivity you did
- Thank you for the comprehensive feedback and fair process
- We really enjoyed our experience
- Found everyone friendly and put you at ease, especially those that were adopters
- Chair phoned before meeting which was good to put us at ease.

Disruptions

Breakdown between match and placement:

Introductions	Number	In-house	External	Age of child	Sibling group Y/N	meeting held Y/N
Wolverhampton	1	Y		1	N	Y
Walsall						
Dudley						
Sandwell	1		Y	2	N	N
Total	2					

Breakdown between placement and AO:

Introductions	Number	In-house	External	Age of child	Sibling group Y/N	meeting held Y/N
Wolverhampton						
Walsall	2	Y		0	N	Y - draft Minutes
			Y	8	Y	N - being arranged
Dudley						
Sandwell						
Total	2					

Breakdown after AO:

Introductions	Number	In-house	External	Age of child	Sibling group Y/N	meeting held Y/N
Wolverhampton	2	Y FFC		16/15	Y	N
Walsall						
Dudley						
Sandwell						
Total	2					



When a child is adopted, there are several stages that must be successfully negotiated before legal permanence is achieved. A crucial period involves the transition from being cared for by the foster carer within the foster care home, to that of moving to the intended permanent home with the adopter(s). This period involves introductions, visits and the placement of the child and adjustment to family life before the application for the Adoption Order is made and legal permanence as a family granted. In England, there have been around 3000 children adopted annually since 2021, but some placements disrupt before the Adoption Order is applied for, a rate estimated to be at around 2.5% since 2019. Whilst not a high rate, this represents a figure of 479 children and the corresponding families who experience the emotional aftermath when an adoption placement fails. Locally, our disruption rate is below the national average. This reflects careful matching, sound social work assessments, and the provision of appropriate support.

Whilst there is statistical data available as to the characteristics of the placement pre-order disruption in England, less is known or understood as to how and why pre-order disruptions happen and how they are experienced by the people involved. A study published by the University of East Anglia April 2025 - Pre-Adoption Order Disruptions in England: Learning from disruption reports 2017-2024 makes the following recommendation which Adoption@Heart will take forward.

Recommendation 1: Approach assessments for children as dynamic pieces of work that should be regularly reflected upon and evidenced.

Recommendation 2: Approach the assessment of adopters as fluid in which assumptions are regularly tested and evidenced.

Recommendation 3: There is a need for more consistent and robust early support through transition and into the placement.



Recommendation 4: Support the implementation of best practice guidance on managing transitions using the UEA Moving to Adoption Model.

Recommendation 5: Ensure support for adoptive parents when a placement disrupts.

Recommendation 6: Give greater consideration and support to the role of the foster carer.

Complaints

There were 10 formal complaints about the service during this period, a slight increase compared to the previous year's total of eight. However, fewer complaints or elements of complaints were upheld this year. Learning from complaints has fed directly into improved practice, policies, and procedures, and has also helped shape our improvement plan going forward.

Ofsted Inspection Summary:

At the time of writing this report, Walsall had just received an ILACS inspection. It is anticipated that the other three partners will also be inspected during 2025/26. In addition, Sandwell - as a children's trust - will receive an inspection specific to adoption, given its trust status.

The Department for Education has asked Ofsted to undertake a further series of thematic inspections of regional adoption agencies, which are also expected to take place during 2025/26.

Notably, adoption is now receiving more scrutiny as part of ILACS inspections, and this is a trend that is expected to continue.

Ofsted carried out a series of adoption specific thematic inspections between October and December 2023. Six RAA's across a variety of geography/model's/sizes were chosen, the focus was the effectiveness of the RAA's recruitment, assessment, family-finding and matching practice.

Themes from recent inspection reports:

Leadership of the RAAs was stable, which meant that leaders had a good understanding of their agencies' strengths and weaknesses. Partner local authorities relied heavily on self-reporting by RAAs to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the services provided on their behalf. A lack of partner audit or independent scrutiny meant that some were unaware of significant shortfalls in the experiences of adopters, children, adopted adults or birth parents. In addition, the collective views of those with lived experience of adoption, particularly children, had limited influence on service planning and development.

Recruitment, assessment, family-finding, and matching, when carried out by the RAA, were consistently strong. This was in line with our wider inspection findings on adoption services. Prospective adopters felt welcomed and supported through a detailed assessment process, with effective preparation training to prepare for adoption.

In some RAAs, regionalisation has contributed to an increase in local matches for some children and adopters. However, this was not

always the case. Some local authorities continued to experience an increase in the number of children placed through other adoption services.

There were not always enough staff to assess prospective adopters. This resulted in delays in assessment.

The profile of children who are more likely to wait longer than their peers to be linked with an adoptive family remained unchanged. This included siblings and children with more complex needs.

The availability of adoption support varied significantly across the RAAs visited. For some local authorities, regionalisation had increased and strengthened the services available. However, the need for adoption support often exceeded the available resources. This meant that some families waited a long time to receive the support that they needed. It left some families in an extended state of crisis, at times risking family breakdown.

Where families received the right adoption support for their family, they were positive about its impact.

As RAA arrangements are still relatively new, the lack of history with adopters has limited

RAAs' ability to predict future need and resources.

RAA leaders have been creative in developing services that make best use of resources with the widest reach.

Limitations in the way the ASGSF was applied sometimes prevented a holistic consideration of children's needs in complex situations. Funding is time-limited, which increased adopters' anxiety and was a barrier to setting up long-term approaches to supporting families.

The provision of the right adoption support at the right time was often powerful, helping families to remain living together.

However, this was not the experience of all families. Five RAAs reported challenges in providing adoption support services directly. Some had made more progress in addressing these than others. The issue of not having enough staff was also apparent in adoption support.

Some people seeking adoption support experienced extensive delays in obtaining an assessment of need, or any form of support. These families were often in crisis at the time they reached out, and the impact was highly detrimental. This was primarily a capacity issue within the RAAs. However, it was compounded for adopters by the complexities of changing geographical area and not understanding how to access support, or of being misinformed about their entitlements or the services available to them.



REGULATORY INFORMATION

Our Aims

The overarching aim of Adoption@Heart is to provide secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families through their lifelong adoption journey. Adoption@Heart offers child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team.

Adoption@Heart supports the ethos that children and young people are best able to develop close and enduring relationships within a family setting. Adoption@Heart aims to ensure that all children whom it places within adoptive families will experience stability, security, and quality of care throughout their childhood and into their adulthood.

Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided by Adoption@Heart.

We will work to develop opportunities for young people to meet and influence the development of support and services, develop opportunities for adopted adults and birth families to have an increased voice and influence within their RAA, and work with adopters to ensure they have an influence in the development of support and services.

Our objectives

Provide secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families through their lifelong adoption journey. Adoption@Heart offers child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team.

Meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, associated standards, regulations, and guidance.

Ensure the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process, as outlined in the Welfare Checklist (Adoption & Children Act 2002).

Adoption@Heart Provides:

A child centered approach to adoption

The well-being and best interests of the child whose plan is that of adoption, as well as those of adopted children and young people, are the primary focus of RAAs.

Collaborative model

RAAs operate on a collaborative model, working to pool expertise, resources, and knowledge to provide better support for both adoptive families and children with a plan for adoption.

Dedicated support

RAAs offer tailored and dedicated support to adoptive families and children, utilising years of experience to help both adopted children and prospective adoptive parents. This personalised approach helps create strong foundations for successful adoptions and ensures ongoing support for families throughout their journey.

Efficiency and consistency

The consolidation of more local adoption services into regional agencies enhances efficiency and consistency in the adoption process. By centralising resources, RAAs can standardise procedures and reduce delays in finding suitable homes for children.

Community and engagement

Regional Adoption Agencies actively engage with their local communities to promote awareness and understanding of adoption, while addressing any unique regional challenges.

BUDGET REPORT



2024-2025 Final Outturn

The net budget for 2024-25 is £5.1 million, the agreed contributions from each of the partners are shown below:

Partner Organisation	Contribution £
Dudley MBC	1,199,528
Sandwell Council	1,418,811
Walsall MBC	1,236,593
City of Wolverhampton Council	1,273,255
Total	5,128,187

A@H holds a reserve, which totals £338,000. This includes the agreed use of £88,000 reserves. As per the financial funding protocol, any underspends of up to 5% of the net budget (£250,000) will be transferred into the dedicated A@H reserve at year end and any underspend above this to be discussed.

Use of reserves 2024-2025	£0
Total Reserve at start of 2024-2025	338
Committed as part of original 24-25 budget	-78
Transfer to Reserves	933
Reserves remaining at the end of 2024-2025	1,193
Committed as part of original 2025-2026 budget	-128
Reserves Held	-250
Surplus reserves remaining	815

Final Outturn 2024-2025

The table below shows the current approved A@H budget for 2024-2025 and expenditure.

This is an underspend of £854,938 transferred to reserves.

Introductions	Budget 2024-25	Final Accounts 2024-25	Variance	Final Accounts 2023-24	Movement Q3 to Final Accounts
Staffing	3,572,171	3,076,552	(495,619)	3,083,431	(6,879)
Agency	0	271,992	271,992	224,521	47,471
DBS Checks	13,607	84	(13,523)	0	84
Training	10,404	3,324	(7,080)	19,273	(15,949)
Public Transport	10,200	5,430	(4,770)	3,732	1,698
Car Allowances	30,600	13,467	(17,133)	12,389	1,078
Furniture	5,100	0	(5,100)	0	0
Professional Fees	51,000	5,610	(45,390)	29,306	(23,696)
Postage	10,200	2,548	(7,652)	4,279	(1,731)
Subsistence, Stationery & General running costs	10,200	16,113	5,913	24,537	(8,424)
Conference expenses	5,100	0	(5,100)	55	(55)
Licences & Subscriptions	82,620	53,406	(29,214)	92,418	(39,012)
Accommodation Costs	13,260	6,611	(6,649)	14,245	(7,634)
Marketing	40,700	26,591	(14,109)	24,710	1,881
Computing – Equipment & Maintenance Agreement	18,360	18,916	556	18,000	916
Inter-Agency placement expenditure	1,222,156	673,716	(548,440)	1,686,941	(1,013,225)
Service Level Agreements	285,509	243,775	(41,734)	259,408	(15,633)
Total Expenditure	5,381,187	4,418,135	(963,052)	5,756,992	(1,079,110)
Adoption Support Fund	(75,000)	0	75,000	0	0
Inter-agency Placement Income	(100,000)	(144,886)	(44,886)	-54,000	(90,886)
Use of Reserves	(78,000)	854,938	932,938	(652,624)	1,507,562
Total before contributions	5,128,187	5,128,187	0	4,790,621	337,566
Partner Contributions	(5,128,187)	(5,128,187)	0	(4,790,621)	(337,566)
Total	0	0	0	0	0

As at year end, there were 31 actual placements to date costing £759,530. There are also 38 placements identified, not yet linked with a projected cost of £1,170,370, that will impact costs in 2025-26.

In addition to this £74,000 supervision fees have been paid.

There have been eight inter-agency placements 'sold' to other organisations for £144,886 income in 2024-2025 and £160,744 release of prior year accruals.

Other Costs

The table above includes £115,985 underspend, projected against budget for other costs of which £223,627 relates to staffing and agency underspends.

As previously reported, Licences and Subscriptions are also projected £30,000 below budget, predominately due to the end of the New family social subscription and Adopt West Midlands Membership through Shropshire Council.

The remaining subscriptions are.

Coram Baaf Adoption and Fostering Academy	£8,222
Intercountry Adoption Centre	£7,167
Link Maker Systems	£37,377
Ofsted	£2,471
PACT Parents & Children Together	£4,900



Approved Budget 2025-26 (for reference)

Budget Detail	24/25 Budget	25/26 Budget	Change	Change %
Staffing	3,572,171	3,684,400	112,230	3%
Agency	0	0	0	0%
DBS Checks	13,607	13,607	0	0%
Training	10,404	10,404	0	0%
Public Transport	10,200	10,200	0	0%
Car Allowances	30,600	30,600	0	0%
Furniture	5,100	5,100	0	0%
Professional Fees	51,000	51,000	0	0%
Postage	10,200	10,200	0	0%
Subsistence, Stationery & General running costs	10,200	10,200	0	0%
Conference expenses	5,100	5,100	0	0%
Licences & Subscriptions	82,620	82,620	0	0%
Accommodation Costs	13,260	13,260	0	0%
Marketing	40,700	40,700	0	0%
Computing – Equipment & Maintenance Agreement	18,360	18,360	0	0%
Inter-Agency placement expenditure	1,222,156	1,263,200	41,044	3%
Service Level Agreements	285,509	294,100	8,591	3%
Total Expenditure	5,381,187	5,543,051	161,865	
Adoption Support Fund	(75,000)	(75,000)	0	0%
Inter-agency Placement Income	(100,000)	(100,000)	0	0%
Use of Reserves	(78,000)	(127,635)	(49,635)	64%
Total Budget before contributions	5,128,187	5,240,416	112,230	

CHILD LEVEL DATA

All Four LA/Trust Partners Headline Data:

	2024/25			
	Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton
Best Interest Decisions	30	31	30	40
Placement Orders	28	28	30	32
Matches	28	20	31	36
Placements	28	23	30	32
Adoption Orders	29	28	44	24

There has been an overall reduction in the number of Best Interest Decisions in 2024/25 compared to the previous year, with the biggest reduction seen in Walsall (reduced from 55 to 30).

Collectively, the number of Placement Orders has remained consistent across all four partner areas, with the exception of Walsall that recorded a reduction from 48 to 30, this has been counteracted with an increase in Wolverhampton from 22 in 2023/24 to 32 in 2024/25.

Overall, there have been more matches in 2024/25 with three of the four areas recording an increase, while Sandwell reduced slightly to 20 from 22. This is also apparent in the number of matches recorded, with all four areas recording an increased number compared to 2023/24, resulting in a collective increase of 26 placement in the year (+29.9%).



This has resulted in an increased number of adoption orders in 2024/25, increasing by 59.5%, from 79 in 2023/24 to 126 in 2024/25 (collectively), with all four areas recording increases.

	2024/25			
	Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton
Children in Care Number (end of March 2025)	574	812	665	502

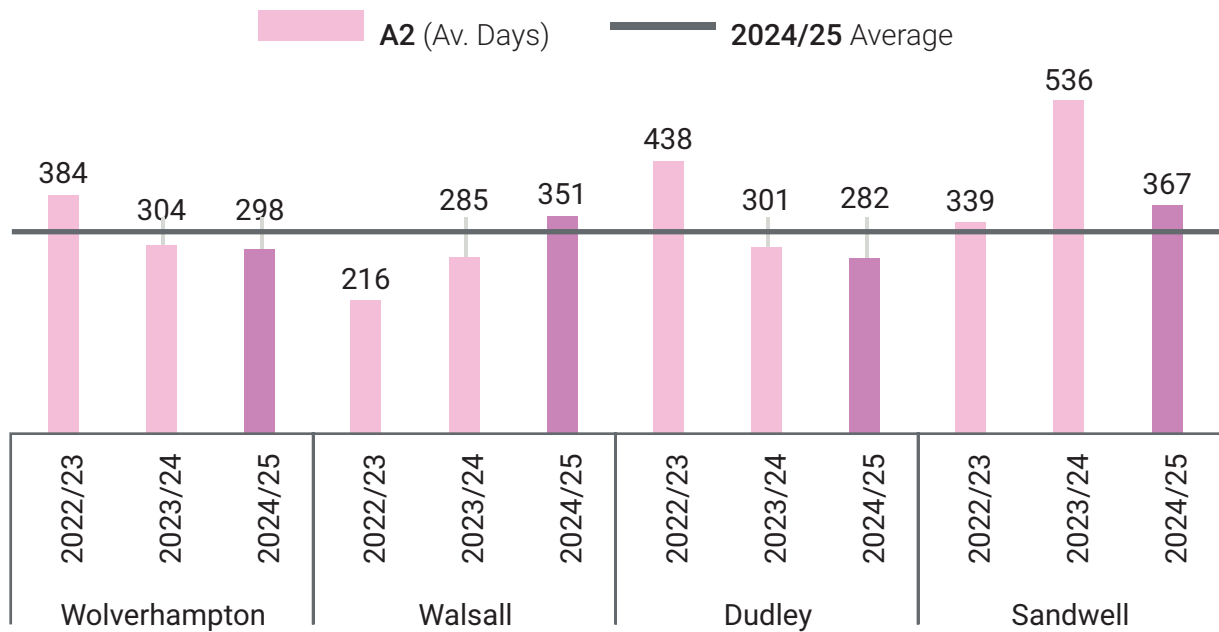
Overall, numbers of children in care have remained stable when compared to the previous year.

	2024/25					
	Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton	WM avg	Eng avg
A2 (number of days)	282	367	351	298	227	205
A10 (number of days)	612	628	489	360	497	474

Across all four areas the average number of days from ADM Decision to matching with adopters (A2) is 325, this is a reduction from 356 in 2023/24 and 344 days in 2022/23. All four areas remain higher than the regional and national averages in this measure.



Average Days (A2)



The average number of days from a child entering care to moving in with the adoptive family (A10) in 2024/25 was 502, this is a slight increase from 515 in 2023/24 but a reduction from 554 in 2022/23. Three of the four areas have a higher average number of days when compared to the national average of 474 days, Wolverhampton's average was below this in 2024/25 (360) and this has been a reducing picture over the past three years. Dudley have also seen reductions in the average number of days over the past three years but does remain higher than the regional and national averages while Walsall and Sandwell have seen the average number of days increase over the past two years.

It is important to avoid sampling comparing the data of the four partners with Adoption@Heart. Each of these LA's/Trust have different characteristics in their population, and they are not statistical neighbours.

Consequently, the profile of their children in care will be different, and specific to the needs of their own children.

There might also be historical trends or past policies within the local council, which have influenced the current situation. This can include past practices regarding family support services and thresholds for intervention.

Across the region, by Walsall, Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley there is strong performance in terms of children's plans, exiting care via adoption and timeliness.

Child Level Information for City of Wolverhampton Council

At the end of March 2024 there were 502 children in care.

Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision.

Throughout 2023/24, 34 children received an ADM BID decision.

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
17	4	10	9	40

At the end of March 2024 there were 35 children with an ADM BID waiting.

Children made subject of placement orders.

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 22 placement orders:

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
15	16	6	6	43



At the end of March there were 21 children with a placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 15 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since the placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- **18** (85.7%) are aged under 5 years.
- **12** (57.1%) are male.
- **3** (14.3%) are an ethnic minority group.
- **4** (19%) are disabled.
- **5** (23.8%) are part of a sibling group.
- **13** (61.9%) are harder to place.

The 21 children have been waiting an average of 543 days since becoming looked after.

Time since becoming looked after	Number of Children	Cohort %
Over 2 years	24	49
18 - 24 months	6	12
14 - 18 months	9	18
12 - 14 months	0	0
Less than 1 year	10	20

Child Level Information for Walsall Council

At the end of March 2024 there were 664 children in care at a rate of 97.3 per 10,000 children.

Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision.

Throughout 2023/24, 34 children received an ADM BID decision.

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
8	9	7	6	30

At the end of March 2024 there were 57 children with an ADM BID waiting.

Children made subject of placement orders.

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 48 placement orders:

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
7	10	7	6	30

At the end of March there were 48 children with a placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 37 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since the placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- **34** (70.8%) are aged under 5 years.
- **22** (45.8%) are male.
- **9** (18.8%) are an ethnic minority group.
- **0** are disabled.
- **34** (70.8%) are part of a sibling group.
- **35** (72.9%) are harder to place.

The 48 children have been waiting an average of 728 days since becoming looked after.

Time since becoming looked after	Number of Children	Cohort %
Over 2 years	8	24
18 - 24 months	10	29
14 - 18 months	5	15
12 - 14 months	4	12
Less than 1 year	7	21

Child Level Information for Sandwell Council

At the end of March 2024 there were 808 children in care at a rate of 94.1 per 10,000 children.

Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision.

Throughout 2023/24, 28 children received an ADM BID decision.

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
9	4	13	5	31

At the end of March 2024 there were 48 children with an ADM BID waiting.

Children made subject of placement orders.

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 24 placement orders:

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
8	6	10	4	28



At the end of March there were 31 children with a placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 27 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since the placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- **19** (61.3%) are aged under 5 years.
- **22** (71%) are male.
- **16** (51.6%) are an ethnic minority group.
- **2** (6.5%) are disabled.
- **16** (51.6%) are part of a sibling group.
- **23** (74.2%) are harder to place.

The 31 children have been waiting an average of 996 days since becoming looked after.

Time since becoming looked after	Number of Children	Cohort %
Over 2 years	8	32
18 - 24 months	5	20
14 - 18 months	3	12
12 - 14 months	4	16

Child Level Information for Dudley Council

At the end of March 2024 there were 571 children in care at a rate of 83.2 per 10,000 children.

Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision.

Throughout 2023/24, 34 children received an ADM BID decision.

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
1	9	13	7	30

At the end of March 2024 there were 39 children with an ADM BID waiting.

Children made subject of placement orders.

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 25 placement orders:

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2024/25 Total
8	6	10	4	28

At the end of March there were 26 children with a placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 20 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since the placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- **26** (100%) are aged under 5 years.
- **14** (53.8%) are male.
- **5** (19.2%) are an ethnic minority group.
- **0** are disabled.
- **14** (53.8%) are part of a sibling group.
- **17** (65.4%) are harder to place.

The 26 children have been waiting an average of 579 days since becoming looked after.

Time since becoming looked after	Number of Children	Cohort %
Over 2 years	8	31
18 - 24 months	5	19
14 - 18 months	4	15
12 - 14 months	1	4
Less than 1 year	8	31



“

JUST WANTED TO DROP A MESSAGE TO SAY
A HUGE THANK YOU TO YOURSELF AND YOUR TEAM FOR THE
SUPPORT AND WELCOME ON SATURDAY YOU ALL OFFERED.
WAS GREAT CHATTING WITH YOU ALL, AND YOU'RE ALL A CREDIT TO THE
COMPANY FOR MAKING A HARD EXPERIENCE; RELAXING,
WELCOMING AND BEING THERE. SO ONCE AGAIN THANK YOU ALL.

”

Adopter, May 2024





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