



NORTHAMPTONSHIRE CHILDREN'S TRUST

VOLUNTARY ADOPTION AGENCY

ANNUAL REPORT

2022-2023



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1. Purpose of Report

The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 and National Minimum Standards 2011 require adoption agencies to provide a written report to their executive, i.e. the Children's Trust Board and the North and West Northamptonshire Councils respectively in relation to the activity of the Adoption Agency.

In order that they are able to satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration (Minimum Standards 25.6; Statutory Adoption Guidance 3.3, and 5.39). This report has been prepared to achieve this.

The report includes information about the activity and performance of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust Voluntary Adoption Agency (NCT VAA) for the period 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022.

2. Introduction

Northamptonshire Children's Trust Voluntary Adoption Agency was formed and registered with Ofsted in November 2020 to provide adoption services on behalf of Northamptonshire Children's Trust.

In January 2022 NCT VAA had its first Ofsted inspection as a Voluntary Adoption Agency since registration, the outcome of which was that the service was rated as GOOD by inspectors.

In addition, in October 2022 Northamptonshire Children's Trust was inspected within the ILACS framework and the work of the adoption service was considered within that process with the inspection report noting that -

'Strong adoption work means that children benefit from permanence at the earliest appropriate opportunity, sometimes with foster to adopt carers. Adopters benefit from the support of passionate, knowledgeable and skilled social workers. Adopters reported positively about their preparation and journey to becoming adoptive parents'.



The table below provides an overview of the progress made during this reporting period toward achieving the identified areas for development from the 2022/23 period.

Area for Development	Actions Achieved	Impact
<p>Family Finding and Transitions Model to be embedded in practice utilising research undertaken by the UEA to promote positive transitions for children to adoption and promote ongoing relationships with foster carers post placement.</p>	<p>Model launched in May 2022 and now is fully embedded into practice.</p>	<p>Family finders state that the model supports consistent, transparent, and evidenced based practice which is focused on the child's needs. They feel the model has supported collective decision making with improved management oversight.</p> <p>Adopters and foster carers are positive about the increased opportunities for them to meet and get to know each other prior to introductions commencing which supports all involved to feel positive and give the child 'permission' to move on with opportunities to maintain contact post transition focused on child's needs.</p>
<p>Training and support to adopters and prospective adopters will be enhanced by the launch of the FAL (RAA) core training and support group offer which will be complimented at a local level in response to local needs.</p>	<p>FAL training calendar launched and online booking system in place managed via the FAL central hub team.</p> <p>Twice monthly support groups are facilitated by NCT (1 day time and 1 evening group) for adopters – see report for details in addition there is FAL support group which NCT adopters are also able to access.</p>	<p>Adopter preparation Training has a stronger focus on therapeutic parenting and the lifelong impact of early experiences which provides a good foundation for adopters understanding of the needs of adopted children.</p> <p>Adopters are able to access a wider range of training via the FAL calendar.</p>

<p>Support Services for birth families to be reviewed to ensure services meet the needs of families and support them to maintain relationships with their children, as appropriate, following the granting of an adoption or SGO order</p>	<p>A 'Taking Stock' review of services has been completed considering supports offered and aspirations for future development.</p>	<p>The service has made links with the PAUSE project – the adoption service manager is now a member of the PAUSE strategic partnership board.</p> <p>The service has linked with PAUSE project workers to identify a group of birth mothers who would be willing to meet, to gain their views on what support services they feel would be beneficial in order to support a collaborative / co production approach to future developments.</p>
<p>Develop service user feedback mechanisms to enable the voice of children young people and their families to inform practice and policy developments.</p>	<p>Online service user feedback forms have been developed that can be completed and returned anonymously via MS forms.</p> <p>Feedback forms have been designed to capture feedback at key points across the adopter assessment and placement process as well as for families accessing post order support services.</p> <p>FAL have additionally developed similar online feedback mechanisms to capture adopter experiences of FAL share service activity</p>	<p>Forms will be launched for use from April 2023</p> <p>Feedback themes will be reviewed quarterly by the adoption service management team to inform practice and policy developments</p>
<p>Awareness raising activities and training in relation to the benefits and challenges of direct contact in adoption to be established for adopters, SW's and panel members.</p>	<p>General discussions are had with social workers individually and collectively within team meetings re the benefits and</p>	<p>The impact of this work is limited at present as the work is in its infancy.</p>

	<p>challenges of post adoption contact.</p> <p>Panel regularly feedback in relation to exploration of post order contact when considering matches for children and adopters.</p> <p>Plans for post adoption contact are routinely discussed in permanence planning meetings.</p> <p>Initial scoping discussion have been held with researchers who conducted the UEA contact after adoption study in relation to a staff training day on this topic which would include adoption service staff, panel members and wider NCT staff.</p>	<p>Issues relating to <i>safe uncertainty, risk assessment and management</i> need to be explored in conjunction with this work and will be progressed during the 2023/24 reporting period</p>
<p>Adoption Service Staff Training and Development plan to be launched in April 2022.</p>	<p>Training and Development Plan was launched in April 2022 as planned.</p> <p>Alongside generic training adoption specific training has been sourced and accessed for adoption social workers and managers in line with the plan as follows during this period-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the Secure Base Model in Adoption Assessments • Learning from Serious Case Reviews where children had been living with adopters, SGO carers or foster carers 	<p>Adoption staff report feeling valued by the provision of adoption specific training opportunities. Staff are particularly positive about the secure base training, and this is routinely utilized within prospective adopter reports to support analysis and evidenced based recommendations.</p> <p>Feedback from adoption panel chairs within their annual report acknowledged the <i>strong emphasis upon a learning culture within the agency.</i></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'We are Still Humans' supporting Birth Parents through the adoption process and contact • Assessing Prospective adopters considered for Sibling Groups • 'Blended Families' – Adoption from the perspective and experience of birth children <p>Alongside formal training the service hold monthly <i>learning lunches</i> which provide opportunities for workers from across the service to share areas of interest or expertise with each other to promote a culture of shared learning.</p>	
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3. Service Remit

The voluntary adoption agency was registered in November 2020. Prior to this, it operated as the adoption service for the local authority.

Co-location of adoption staff within the NCT office base supports collaborative working in relation to planning and placements of children for whom adoption is the plan and in relation to families in receipt of post order support services where there may be safeguarding concerns.

The Adoption Agency has the following remit:

- Recruitment, preparation, and assessment of adoptive parents.
- Family finding for children for whom Northamptonshire Children's Trust has a plan of adoption.
- Adoption Support to include provision of assessment and support to children and families both pre and post Adoption Order, services for adopted adults to access their birth records, support for



birth families affected by adoption, Letterbox contact exchange and support with direct contact post order.

- Support for children, young people and families for whom a Special Guardianship Order has been granted.

4. Family Adoption Links Regional Adoption Alliance

In January 2022 Northamptonshire formally became a partner of Family Adoption Links (FAL). This is a regional adoption partnership bringing together adoption services across Rutland, Leicestershire, Leicester City, North Lincolnshire and Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire. It aims to provide excellent, friendly inclusive services to those looking to adopt and families who have adopted.

As a partnership we are working together to improve outcomes for those children who enter care and are not able to return to their families of origin. We aim to ensure that *our* children achieve emotional, physical and legal permanence; growing up in loving homes with adults who provide them with a strong sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity.

FAL operates through a hub and spoke model enabling NCT to benefit from coordinating central functions whilst retaining direct service delivery functions within their own borders. This ensures the Partnership reflects the local context, adapted to meet the needs of local children and families, and maintains clear links to local Children & Families Services.

During the 2022-2023 reporting period the service has become a fully embedded partner within FAL with representation on all work stream and management groups. NCT have led the work to develop a FAL stage 1 pack for social workers supporting consistent practice across the partnership and are leading the Early Permanence work stream.

The FAL partnership supports NCT, and other agencies, to extend their support and training offer to adopters at all stages of their journey and work undertaken via the family finding work stream is supporting the tracking and placement of children from across the partner agencies with **82%** of partner agency children now being placed within the region with their families benefitting from the development of supports, training and consistent practice models delivered by the partnership.

In October 2022 the partnership launched the **Adopter Hub** and **Collabor8** groups, the purpose of which is to develop forums to support consultation and co-production of services going forward. The *Adopter Hub* group has representation from adopters from all partner agencies and similarly *Collabor8* is a group for adopted young people. The focus of discussions and topics is led by the groups and



supported by FAL staff – both groups have chosen to focus on education in the first instance and these discussions will be fed into work within the education work stream and development of the *education passport*.

5. Service Structure

The Registered Individual for the Voluntary Adoption Agency is Christina Skeel. Operational management of the service is provided by Tracy Morton as Adoption Service Manager supported by team managers responsible for two teams and an adoption panel service as outlined below.

Adoption Recruitment, Assessment and Family Finding Team
Team Manager x 1
Practice Manager x 2
Family Finding Social Worker x 2
Senior Social Worker x 1
Social Worker x 8
Administrator x2
Post Adoption and SGO Support Team
Team Manager x1
Practice Manager x 2
Post Adoption Counsellor x1
Post Adoption Adults Co-ordinator x1
Adoption Support Co-ordinator (Letterbox) x1
Family Support Worker x 1
Financial Allowances Officer x1
Administrator x 2
Adoption Panel
Panel Adviser x1
Panel Co-ordinator x1.5
Panel Administrator x1

All social work staff are registered with Social Work England. Workers within the service have a range of post qualifying experiences and are supported by NCT to add to their academic and professional qualifications to enhance their practice as appropriate.

Recruitment is carried out in line with the NCT's Equality and Diversity policies and recognises good employment practice. NCT and the Adoption Agency seek to recruit a diverse workforce that reflects the community that they serve. All staff having direct contact with children must undergo enhanced checks with the Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) to ensure that they are suitable to work with



children. In line with a recommendation made as part of the Ofsted inspection a safer recruitment checklist for the Voluntary Adoption Agency has been developed to sit alongside NCT's recruitment process which ensure that the safe recruitment of staff meet the required standards. ('Adoption: national minimum standards,' page 71, paragraph 24.1)

Social work staff have regular monthly supervision from their managers, and their professional competence is appraised annually in line with NCT's staff supervision and staff appraisal schemes.

In line with the requirement made as part of the Adoption Ofsted inspection in 2022 a standalone Adoption Service Training and Development programme has been developed and was launched in April 2022 to ensure compliance with The Voluntary Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, regulation 15(2)(a) this will be reviewed in April 2023 and updated as appropriate. In addition, the supervision record used by the adoption service was also amended to reflect compliance with regulations.

6. Adoption Panel

All Adoption Agencies, whether Local Authority or Voluntary Adoption Agency are required to have an Adoption Panel under Regulation 3(1) of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005. The Panel makes a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker in relation to:

- The suitability of prospective adopters to adopt
- The proposed placement of a child with a particular prospective adopter
- In the case of children whose birth parents are consenting to their adoption, a recommendation as to whether the child "*should be placed for adoption*"

The Agency Decision Maker then makes a decision on behalf of the agency, taking into account the recommendations of the panel and all relevant assessments and reports.

NCT VAA adoption panel is held weekly, as required, to support the timely approval of prospective adopters and progressions of matches for children. The panel adviser acts as the day-to-day link between the agency and the independent panel chairs and this is further supported by regular meetings and shared training opportunities between the agency, panel chairs and the agency decision maker. In November 2022 a panel training day was jointly facilitated by the panel chairs and the service and focussed on two key areas.



1. Learning from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review, undertaken by Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership, following the death of Leiland James Corkhill who was placed for adoption and whose adopted mother was convicted of his murder.
During the session the chairs presented an overview of the case and facilitated group discussions with panel members focussing on key areas of practice followed by a presentation from the adoption service manager of NCT VAA response and learning from the report.
2. Cultural Competence with a presentation of the experience of a family moving to the UK in the 1960's and the discrimination they faced and overcame then and now.

Feedback from panel members about the day was positive regarding opportunities for reflection, discussion, and learning.

It is recognised that there is a positive and respectful working relationship between the agency and the panel chairs with challenge being offered and considered by both sides appropriately. Regular liaison meetings support the ability to address themes from feedback quickly when necessary and as such there are no surprises in the 6 monthly or annual panel reports to the agency

During the 2022-2023 reporting period, the panel met on **41** occasions and considered the following number of cases on behalf NCT VAA

Adopter approvals	31
Matches for NCT children	37
Plans for Relinquished children	0

7. Adoption Service Performance

Adoption performance is measured and reported nationally via the completion of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership (ASGLB) return which forms the basis of the publication of the adoption scorecard.

At the time of completing this report the adoption scorecard for the 2022 – 2023 reporting period has not been published as information from Q4 returns is not due for submission until the end of April 2023 and data will be then require validation prior to publication.

What we know from locally held data is that of the children matched with adopters during the 2022-2023 reporting period 41.67% were matched within 4 months of a placement order being granted this equates to 15 children. Of the remaining 21 children 44.4% were placed within 4 to 8 months of the PO being granted which equates to 16 children and 13.9% which equates to 5 children were placed within 8-12 months of the Placement Order being granted within this cohort there were 2 sibling groups of 2 boys.

**37 children
presented to
panel for a
match**

- ❖ During the 2022/23 reporting period **37** Northamptonshire Children were matched and placed with adoptive families of which:
- ❖ **26** were placed with adoptive families recruited, assessed, and approved by Northamptonshire Children's Trust Voluntary Adoption Agency (NCT VAA)
- ❖ **11** were placed via inter agency placements (adopted families recruited, assessed, and approved by another agency)
- ❖ In addition, **6** children were placed by other Local Authorities with NCT VAA approved adopters.

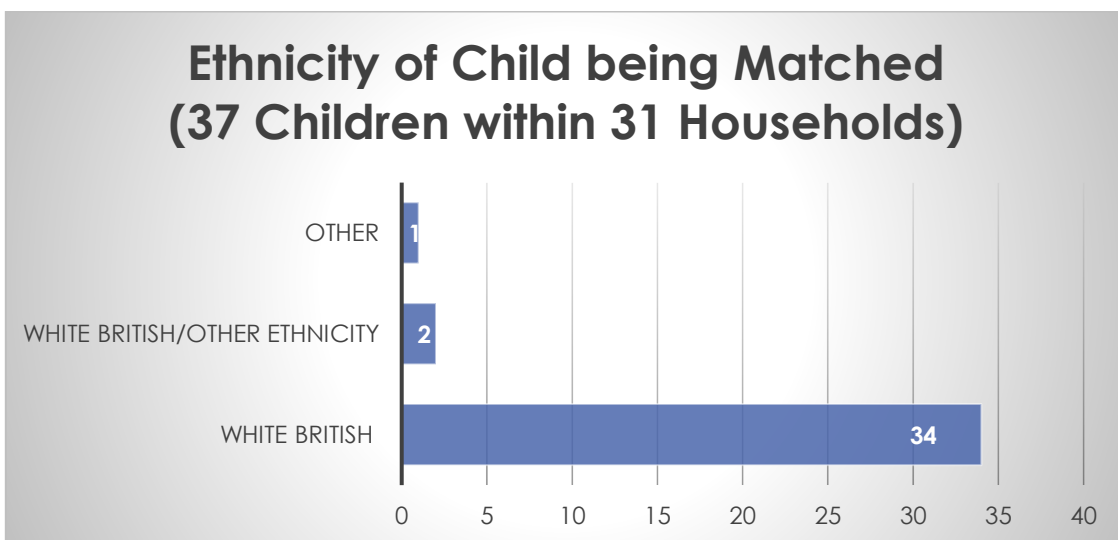
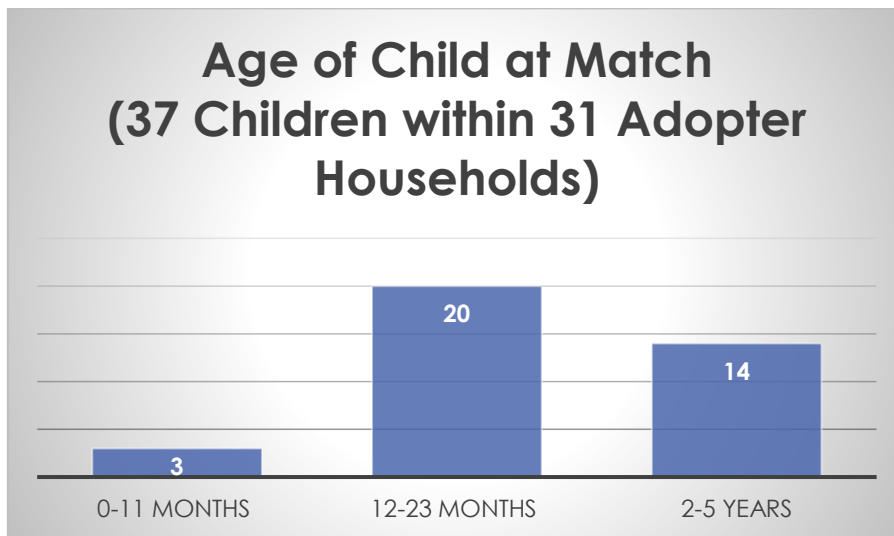
In relation to the 11 children placed via inter agency placements these were three sibling groups of 2 children and five individual children for whom placements with families who were considered as being able to meet their holistic needs and seen as the *best match*. Of these 11 children 5 were placed with FAL partner agency adopters.

In relation to the 6 children placed with NCT VAA adopters these consisted of 5 individual children and a sibling group of 2. Two of these children were placed from a FAL partner agency.



During the 2022 – 2023 reporting period **56** children for whom NCT were responsible had a plan of adoption agreed via the Agency Decision Maker compared to 41 during the 2021 -2022 reporting period. This number is still lower than during the 2019 – 2020 reporting period when 59 children had a plan of adoption but does indicate a steady return to pre pandemic activity levels.

The charts below provide an overview of the age and ethnicity of the children matched for adoption.





The data indicates that the majority of children matched for adoption are aged 12-23 months – given that within this cohort 13 of these children had benefitted from an early permanence placement which has allowed them to be placed with their prospective adopters, on average, 183 days sooner than would have been achieved via a traditional adoption placement route this will translate to a much higher percentage being placed in their permanent placement under 12 months of age which is beneficial for their longer term stability and attachment development. There is also a high proportion of children placed aged 2-5 years which reflects the agency's ambition and success in exploring adoption 'not just for babies' and in terms of keeping siblings together when it is assessed to be the right plan for them.

8. Family Finding

Family finding for NCT children for whom adoption is the plan is undertaken within the adoption service. There are two social workers whose role is dedicated to the family finding task and they are supervised by a practice manager who has oversight of all family finding activity.

The use of fortnightly tracking meetings for all children from the point that a parallel plan of adoption is made is supporting the service to identify at an early stage any emerging themes or needs in relation to the characteristics of children likely to require an adoptive family. In conjunction with this the introduction of **permanence planning meetings** led by the Family Finding workers is supporting the ability to have conversations at the earliest opportunity with childcare social workers in relation to children's needs, future contact plans, life story work and the identification of key family members who may either be able to offer permanence for the child or for whom an ongoing contact arrangement could be considered if the ultimate plan were adoption.

Family Finding social workers report that;

'PPMs are well and truly established and useful. They support Family finders and their practice managers to know the children. The meetings are useful for child care social workers, particularly those new to adoption & permanence planning.'

The adoption service manager is a member of the unborn baby tracking meeting which has supported the ability to identify at the earliest opportunity babies who may have a plan of adoption or where early permanence placements could be considered.

Alongside this fortnightly tracking meetings are held in relation to adopters which is supporting the ability to identify and consider links between adopters and children at an early opportunity and to identify if an external adopter resource may be needed.

In March 2023 the service introduced a monthly Adoption Tracking Panel the purpose of which is to;



- Monitor the progress of adoption plans for looked after children upon the conclusion of care proceedings to reduce drift and delay in achieving the agreed plan
- Advise and make recommendations in respect of care planning and consider the potential for the use of early permanence placements. For families where previous children have been placed for adoption consider the appropriateness of early discussions with previous adoptive families
- Monitor and advise on permanency planning processes to maintain a focus on plans being progressed in a timely manner
- Track permanency planning for adoption from the conclusion of proceedings through to the point it is secured for the child
- Endeavour to resolve any presenting issues/obstacles and ensure that there is effective communication between the professionals involved
- Escalate concerns with senior manager, as required, where cases highlight drift or difficulties that will hinder implementation of agreed plans
- Provide 6 monthly reports to the SLT on the numbers of cases reviewed, outcomes and any practice issues
- Monitor cases in respect of changes of permanence care plan and ensure that revocations of orders are progressed in a timely way e.g., placement or care orders
- Panels will agree a review period on a case-by-case basis generally between 3 and 6 months.

Whilst there has only been tracking 1 panel held at the time of writing this report it has demonstrated the value of the additional level of oversight and professional curiosity brings to the care planning and monitoring process for the child.

As the FAL partnership develops there is an increasing shared ownership of the family finding task in terms of taking a whole partnership responsibility for oversight of children waiting for placements across the region. Monthly FAL family finding meetings share information in relation to children and adopters waiting to support the early identification of potential links across the partnership and all partner agency children's detail are placed on the FAL link maker site from the point that the ADM agrees a plan of adoption.

This collective ownership supports the partnerships' ability to be responsive to the needs of children waiting for placements across the partner agencies e.g., in organising adoption activity days, profiling events or featuring children (anonymously) within the partnership website

On 27.1.23, the partnership held a virtual profiling event called a 'Discovery Event.' The Discovery Event provides registered adopters with a secure link to where they are able to see information



including videos, photos and an overview of the child provided by a recording of the social worker and /or foster carer talking about the children. The secure link is accessible to view for a period of 72 hours.

The partnership has also held two in person activity style days called 'Getting to Know You' events on 14.10.22 and 18.03.23

Below is an overview of the numbers children who attended these events and the impact -

Getting to Know You Event – June 2022

16 children attended the event 1 of whom was from NCT. The event resulted in 4 partner agency children being matched with adopters.

Getting to Know you Event – March 2023

13 children attended this event 1 of whom was from NCT. The event resulted in 6 links being explored for children of which 2 were with NCT adopters.

Discovery Event – January 2023

The secure link video was viewed 171 times and over the weekend that it was shared Linkmaker enquiries quadrupled in relation to the children featured

All adopters who attended reported the event was beneficial for them with specific feedback noting that –

'We found it beneficial being face to face with children'

'It was nice to spend time with children, not just looking at profiles'

During the 2022/23 reporting period in addition to the above at a local level the service have held 2 *virtual profiling events* where approved and waiting adopters are provided with anonymised information about children for whom the service are family finding to support the ability for adopters to remain open minded in relation to the characteristics of the children they may be able to consider, adopters were also able to hear how the service identify and match children and the processes involved in this.

Feedback from adopters attending the sessions was that -

'Adopters felt reassured about the robustness of the matching process and pleased that they weren't aware that they were being considered for a particular child until it was identified that the match was positive'



A practice guidance model for family finding and adoption transitions was developed and launched in May 2022, the practice model was designed utilising the research and transition model developed by the University of East Anglia (UEA). The model has strengthened existing family finding practices and led to a more child focussed, evidence based and transparent approach to matching and linking.

'I feel linking with our adopters is much more child focussed this past year.' – Quote from Family Finding Social Worker.

When family finding for children, it is essential that adopters are supported to make an informed decision in relation to linking and matching with a specific child or siblings. The new family finding model incorporates increased opportunities for foster carers and adopters to meet and share information ahead of the formal introductions process and for adopters to have *anonymous 'getting to know you'* meetings with the child to help them to *'learn the child'* outside of the formal introductions process. Feedback from foster carers and adopters who have experienced these meetings is very positive. Family Finding Social workers report that;

'Without exception, all foster carers, adopters and social workers have expressed very positive views re the 'Getting to Know You visits'. Feedback has been that these have had a positive impact on introductions with the child and adopters feeling better prepared for the intensity of introductions being familiar with each other already. Prior to the changes last year these were done with some but not all children. Feedback has been that all involved are pleased these are now in place for all of our children.'

As a result of work undertaken by the service to consider the learning from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review, undertaken by Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership, following the death of Leiland James Corkhill the service has developed a presentation which will be delivered to the support network of adopters prior to the children being placed with them which revisits some general topics from family and friends training they may have attended but is personalised to focus on the specific child's early life experiences. The session will be facilitated by the adoption SW and focus on what the child's early life experience may mean now and in the future for the child and adopters and give ideas in relation to therapeutic parenting techniques that may be useful. The session will also reinforce that until an adoption order is granted the child remains a looked after child and that the adopters will have delegated parental responsibility during this period, what this means and also the responsibilities of the network in respect of sharing any concerns they may have both in relation to the support needs of the adopters and in respect of the welfare of the child. These sessions will commence for matches progressing from April 2023.



9. Early Permanence

Early Permanence placements allow babies and young children who may need adopting to be placed with a potential permanent family earlier than a conventional adoption.

Early Permanence is an umbrella term we use when talking about certain types of adoption placements for babies or toddlers. It includes placements also referred to as Fostering for Adoption (FfA) and Concurrency placements.

Early Permanence helps to avoid delay in deciding a very young child's future, at a time in their life when days and weeks really matter.

Findings from the Coram 2017/18 Longitudinal study of Early Placements noted that early placement is not a panacea but offers the opportunity to build secure attachments from the earliest age. This has created stability of placement despite the difficulties presented which in turns supports the long-term connection and understanding of the adopter in respect of their child and has benefits in relation to maintaining relationships with birth family relatives and the child's life story.

**13 children
were placed in
early
permanence**

- ❖ During the 2022- 2023 reporting period 13 Northamptonshire children benefitted from early permanence placements. This allowed these children to be placed within their prospective adoptive placement an average of 183 days earlier than if a traditional adoption placement route had been followed.

There is currently a national focus on the use of early permanence placements for children with a view to increasing the use of such placements for a wider range of children including siblings. The adoption service manager is leading the FAL Early Permanence workstream and attends national learning events to support the development of practice and process at a local and regional level. As part of the agreed work plan for the FAL Early Permanence workstream an application for the *Working Towards Early Permanence Quality Mark* is being prepared for submission in the summer of 2023.

10. Adoption Orders Granted



- ❖ During the 2022-2023 reporting period 32 adoption orders were granted for Northamptonshire children.
- ❖ In addition to adoption orders granted at the end of the reporting period there were a further 17 children in adoption placements awaiting the adoption order.

11. Adoption Disruptions

During the 2022 – 2023 reporting period sadly there were 3 disruptions to placements of children pre-adoption order. These 3 disruptions equate to 5 children – 2 sibling groups of 2 and 1 single child.

Disruption meetings have been held in relation to the two disruptions involving the siblings and a third meeting is scheduled for April 2023 in relation to the 3rd disruption. Disruption meetings are chaired by an independent chair with experience and expertise of adoption who, following the meeting, produces a report and practice recommendations for the agency as appropriate.

Disruption meetings are not intended to apportion blame to individuals involved and recognise and acknowledge that disruptions occur due to complex, multi-faceted issues which could not have been predicted, that said they provide a valuable forum for reflection, review, and learning.

As an agency we have used the learning from these meetings to review and develop our practice, strengthening areas of potential vulnerability and have produced reports in response to the recommendations made. Reports are shared with panel, and we have plans for a joint service and panel learning event to consider the key themes emerging from the meetings.

12. Adopter Recruitment

The service offers a daily enquiry line which those considering adoption can access to speak directly with an adoption social worker should they wish to do so. Information in relation to adoption and an online enquiry form can also be accessed by the website which has been rebranded as the service has become a member of the Family Adoption Links Regional Adoption Alliance. As a result of this



membership monthly information evenings are now managed and delivered centrally by the partnership.

Below is a selection of feedback provided by prospective adopters attending the sessions.

'Whole presentation very good and all useful'

'I found it very informative, I had already read and researched the information given, but hearing it directly also clarified a few thoughts I'd had about it. I think if anything could be improved, it would be to go through any questions at the end as it broke up the continuity of the information given. But I had a really enjoyable evening.'

'The most useful part of the process was hearing from people who had gone through the adoption process.'

A central calendar of training including preparation training for adopters is accessible via the FAL website, in addition NCT adopters are able to access locally provided training details of which are included later within the report.

At a local and national level there are recognised challenges in identifying placements for sibling groups, children from black minority ethnic backgrounds, children over the age of 5 or those with additional or complex health needs and the service will undertake specific marketing activity to attract adopters able to consider children with these characteristics as required. The website includes anonymised information in relation to children waiting for adoption from these *priority groups*, these stories are regularly updated in order to maintain a focus on the children and interest of prospective adopters.

As a partner of Family Adoption Links Regional Adoption Alliance (RAA), the VAA is able to utilise a broader range of adopter recruitment and awareness raising opportunities via social media and at a local *'in person'* level. All of which is undertaken in liaison with NCT Communications colleagues.

During the 2022-2023 reporting period enquiries to adopt and attendance at information events was centrally managed and coordinated by the FAL hub team. During this period across the FAL partners 778 households registered to attend an information event of which 137 were NCT VAA enquiries with 395 households attending 111 of which were NCT VAA enquiries.

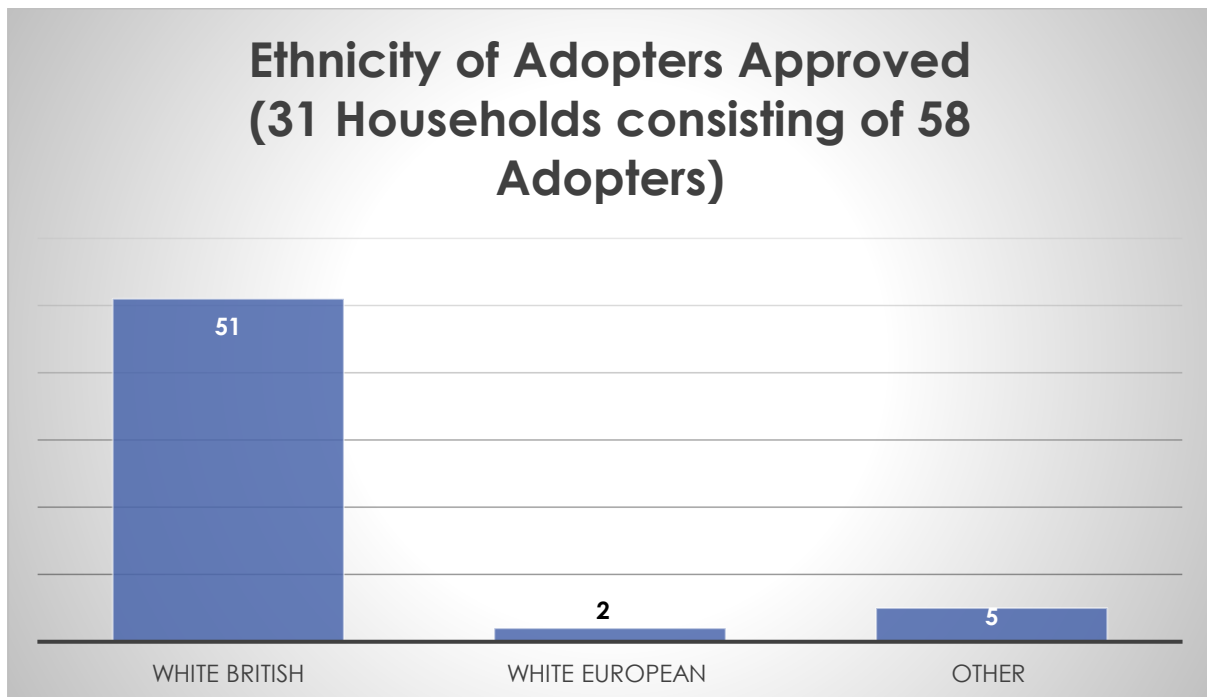


Overall NCT enquiries in this reporting period resulted in the progression to stage 1 of 28 Adopters, 25 of which have progressed to stage 2, which resulted in **31** adopter households being approved, a demographic breakdown of which is illustrated within the tables which follow.

Below is a sample of feedback from adopters in relation to their NCT VAA adoption assessment experience.

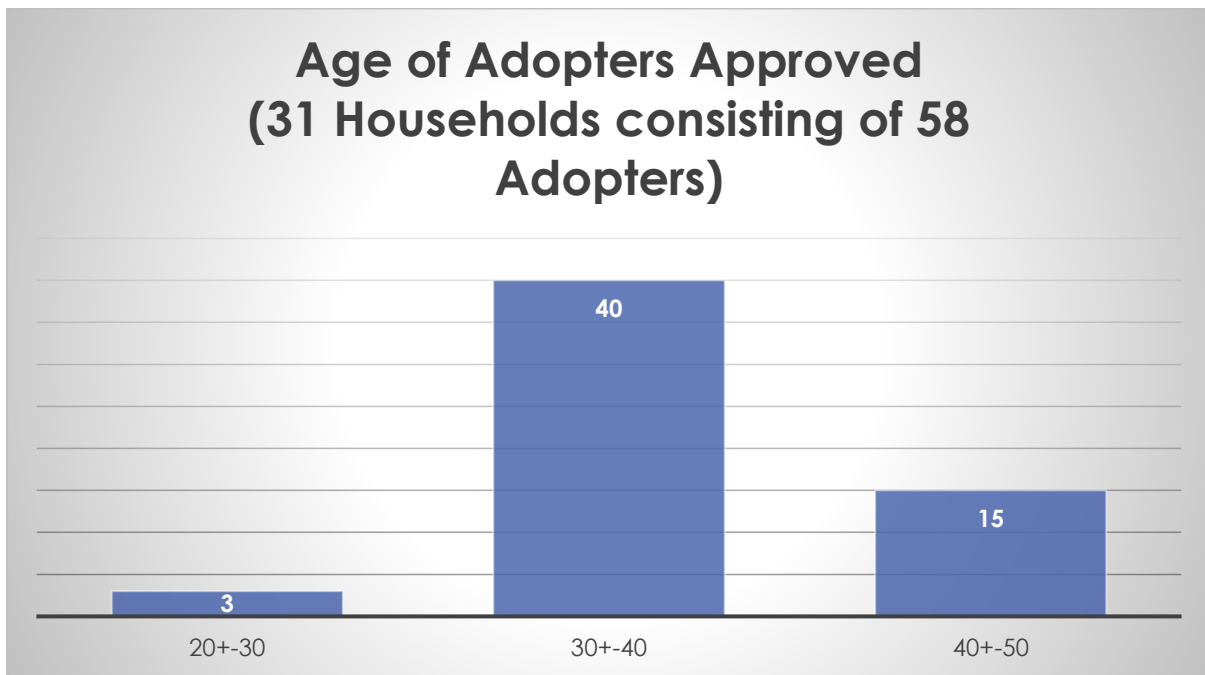
'We have been lucky to have had the same adoption social worker throughout our process, and have a good relationship with them, as we feel we can ask her anything especially for support.'

'Our social worker has been amazing throughout the process; she has talked us through all the sections of process and supported us when things got a bit tough in looking for a match.'

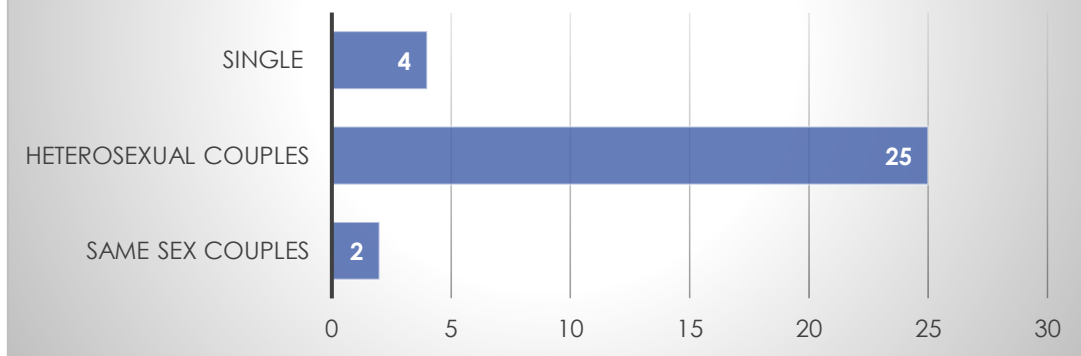




As outlined above the ethnicity of NCT adopters recruited broadly reflects the ethnicity of NCT children for whom adoptive placements are sought. As an agency we are always mindful of the need to recruit a broad range of adopters able to meet the needs of children at a local, regional and national level and as such marketing activity and materials designed in conjunction with our FAL partners aims to reflect this. Our FAL partner agencies have differing ethnic and cultural demographics to NCT which supports the partnership to work collaboratively at a regional level to identify cohorts of children with a plan for adoption and target recruitment activity in response to this.



Relationship Status of Adopters Approved (31 Households consisting of 58 Adopters)



Timeliness of adopter assessments is tracked via the adoption panel as part of their quality assurance process, during the 2022-2023 reporting period the panel noted that 41.94% of stage 2 adopter assessment presented to panel were completed within the recommended 12 week timescale. This is in part due to unprecedented level of staff absence within the service during this period and also due to the complexities presented within the assessment for some households which, in some instances, has led to the need to pause the assessment process or to extend it in order to give sufficient time to explore issues and undertake a robust assessment. The service is mindful of this and will monitor this timescale going forward – strengthened practice during stage 1 of the assessment should support the ability to progress applicants at a time that is right for them and identify any issues that may need addressing prior to commencing stage 2. We have a target for completion of stage 2 assessments within the 12-week timescale of 80% for the 2023- 2024 reporting period.

The adopter recruitment and assessment team work closely with colleagues within the post order support team who are able to offer advice on adoption support and learning opportunities in preparation for the matching and placement of children with an adoptive family. Post adoption support is routinely discussed with prospective adopters during their training and preparation and the post order team co-deliver the preparation training provided to adopters. Workers from the post order support team are available for advice and consultation with SW's and adopters when placements are being considered and during transitions and early stages of placement.



As a result of the publication of the Leiland James Corkhill Child safeguarding practice review, undertaken by Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership, the service has undertaken a review of adopter assessment, family finding and support practice and as a result have introduced additional measures to support robust safeguarding. These include the requirement to seek references from counsellor's adopters may have engaged with and more detailed exploration of financial information including debt management during stage 1 of the adopter assessment process. In addition, we have introduced an '*end of stage 1 meeting*' which is chaired by the adoption team manager and is the point at which the applicants experience, and views of their stage 1 process are discussed, references and checks are reviewed and progression to stage 2 is discussed and agreed as appropriate. A direct work tool kit has been developed to support social workers to gain the views and support an understanding of the *lived experience of children already part of the prospective adopter household* including birth children, step-children or previously adopted children.

13. Step-Parent Adoption



9 Step-Parent Adoption Assessments

- ❖ In addition to adopter recruitment, assessment, and preparation the team also undertake assessments for Step-Parent Adoption. During the 2022 -2023 reporting period the service received 120 enquiries in relation to applying for a step-parent adoption and undertook 9 step-parent adoption assessments resulting in 6 adoption orders being granted.

14. Adoption Support

The Post Order Support Team provides support services for children, young people and their families following the granting of an Adoption or Special Guardianship Order (SGO). In addition, the service provides specialist support to birth relatives via an independent counsellor based within the team and supports adopted adults wishing to access their birth records.

These services include:

- Counselling, information and support for birth parents whose children have a plan of adoption or are placed for adoption



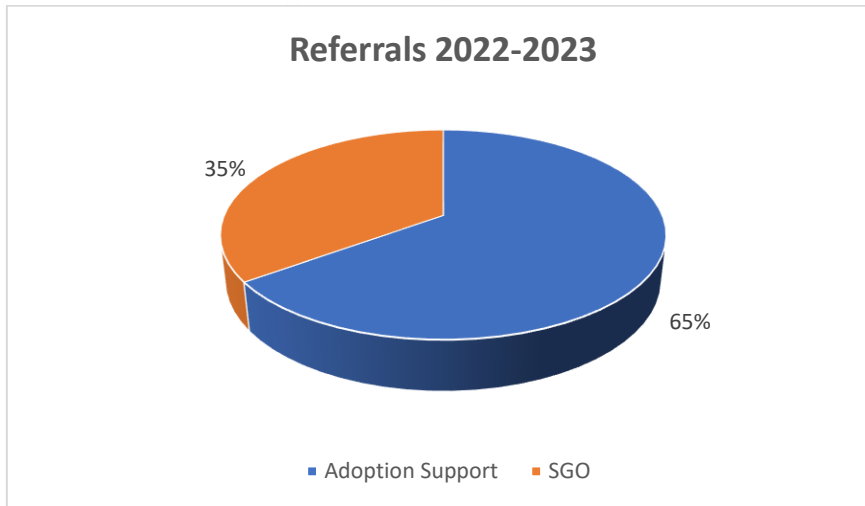
- Counselling for adopted adults in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Those wanting intermediary service to track birth relatives are signposted to appropriate independent agencies.
- Assessments of adoption support needs pre and post order and when appropriate will make applications to the Adoption Support Fund to support the provision of therapeutic services for adopted children and their families.
- Comprehensive adoption support for those affected by adoption in line with the Adoption Support Services Regulations, both prior to and after an Adoption Order has been made. This will include adoptive families' not known to the Agency who reside in the County and request adoption support assessments three years after their Adoption Order was granted. Likewise, the team provides adoption support to adoptive families who have adopted placements Northamptonshire children but live outside of our area for a period of three years after the granting of the Adoption Order.
- Post order support services for families where children are placed under a Special Guardianship arrangement.

As previously mentioned, Post adoption support is routinely discussed with prospective adopters during their training and preparation, and day 2 of the adoption preparation training is delivered by workers from the post order team. Workers from the post adoption support team and the adoption recruitment team now co facilitate adoption support groups which provides further opportunities for adopters to speak to and become familiar with the post order team

What we know from the feedback received from the families with whom we work, other professionals and from the Ofsted inspection is that what we do has a positive impact upon children, young people and their families both in terms of supporting the quality of family life and relationships and in terms of children managing to access education.



- ❖ Of these referrals 65% related to adoption support and 35% to SGO support as documented below.
- ❖ Resulting in 160 assessments of need.



The post order support offer for families starts with the provision of a listening ear and an open door, provided via the VAA duty social work facility, which is open to all SGO and adoptive families. Contact information for this is outlined in both Adoption and SGO Support Plans which are prepared for the families at the point the child or young person is placed with them and accessible via the Adoption service website.

There is a duty worker available daily to respond to contacts from families. The duty worker can offer advice and signposting and if appropriate will commence the referral/initial assessment pathway to families and will use a Developmental Dyadic Practitioner (DDP) informed approach to offer an empathic and supportive experience to a family.

The service works closely with colleagues in NCT Children in Care teams to provide information in relation to support services and are available to offer in person information and advice to those families considering SGO.

During the 2022/23 reporting period the service has worked collaboratively with colleagues within the fostering connected persons team to develop an SGO pathway which included information for prospective SGO carers in relation to the role of an SGO carer, training to help them prepare for the role and understand the lifelong implications for children of their early life experiences and supports available. The SGO support plan document has been updated to support an improved emphasis on the likely and known support needs of the child and therefore what support the SGO carers may need. During January 2023 SGO workshops were delivered to staff across NCT to launch the SGO pathway and a further session are planned which will be recorded and can be used within the training and induction process for new employees.



At times SGO and adoptive families may be in receipt of services via NCT safeguarding teams in these circumstances the post order team will provide advice and support as a member of the *team around the child* in recognition of their post order status and the lifelong implications of their early life experiences.

On a national level there is a focus on support and services provided to SGO and Kinship carers, as a service we are participants in the East Midlands Permanence Board Project /Steering Group the focus of which is Improving Services to SGO and Kinship Carers. The work of the group is in the early stages and an audit of services and current provisions for partner agencies has been completed and will inform priorities and focus going forward.

15. Social worker support

Both the social workers and family support worker within the post order support team are trained in a combination of therapeutic parenting interventions including

- Therapeutic life story work at foundation and diploma level
- Theraplay© at foundation level, higher level and on the practicum with clinical supervision
- DDP at level one and level two
- Video Interactive Guidance
- NVR at foundation level
- BUSS model

This supports the team's ability to undertake focussed direct work with children, young people, and their families. The team have developed a number of tools to support them to gain the views, wishes and feelings of children including a young person's referral form and a suite of direct work resources. A children and young people's guide to post order support has been developed and is available via the website link below:

[https://www.nctrust.co.uk/adoption-fostering/Documents/Post Adoption Support A guide for children.pdf](https://www.nctrust.co.uk/adoption-fostering/Documents/Post%20Adoption%20Support%20A%20guide%20for%20children.pdf)



During the 2022/23 reporting period the service has facilitated three therapeutic based programmes for families which include two types of group-based support and one individual programme for families as follows.

Empowering Parents Therapeutic (EmPaTh) groups:

These are groups to support therapeutic parenting, delivered by a therapy provider on a commissioned basis and funded by ASF or directly by NC Trust where ASF access is not available. To date, there have been five groups completed and there is one group currently ongoing. The groups last for 12 weeks and are led by a psychologist and supported by a therapist.

35 families (representing 69 children) have engaged in the groups and feedback has been extremely positive. Access to the groups is offered as soon as a family contact the team for support and some families attend groups prior to being allocated a social worker, whereas others attend the groups as an outcome of an assessment of need and this may be alongside the support of a social worker.

25% of those who attended the groups did not seek any further support outside of the groups, which indicates that the support made sufficient difference to eliminate the need for more intrusive/intensive social work support.

Feedback has been extremely positive, with 71% of families providing written feedback which indicated that the course was helpful and was very positive. Examples of general feedback include:

“The course has really helped me to be still and calm and not try to fix everything straight away and to be more accepting of the situation”

“It hasn't been easy, but it has been useful”

“Easy minor tweaks to what I was already doing made quite a difference”

“I've tried to use a few strategies with my child and when I have, it has worked really well. It's trying to remember to use them and not react in the moment. As I definitely see a different outcome when I use a strategy learnt on the course, then reacting to certain behaviour. Sometimes difficult though.”



Energy Groups

These groups have been run over a six week period for children aged 5-9 who are struggling with emotional regulation. The groups use a combination of the BUSS method and interoception curriculum to support children to build awareness of body sensations which will support emotional regulation.

As a result of building up the child's interoception awareness, using fun sensory based activities and 'experiments', the programme seeks to increase the child's awareness and encourage the child to link their body sensations with emotions and hence to learn about their triggers and gain valuable coping strategies which support emotional regulation and result in more positive choices/behaviours. Parent sessions assist families to learn about their child's sensory needs and how to support them and a parent participation session is included as part of the groups.

The groups have only just commenced, and we have so far reached 8 children with the first group. Feedback from parents is in the process of being gathered in the one to one applying the learning sessions but an early comment that was offered in writing was:

"The regulation group was brilliant and has given me loads of ideas"

Building Bridges

This is a six week programme facilitated by the family support worker which uses a DDP and Theraplay© base from a qualified Theraplay© and VIG practitioner. The programme focusses on empowering parents to start to understand the trauma needs of their child and to use PACE model to meet the individual needs of their child. Observations of the parent-child relationship form the basis of parent coaching and support.

This has been offered to 6 families this year and feedback has been positive, including:

"I just want to say what a difference (the worker) has made to our lives. She has helped us through a difficult time and given us the tools and strength to keep going"



At times parents, carers and children can be in a place of feeling very distressed and getting the help they need to understand their children can change life for everyone. Below are some examples of the feedback received from families accessing the service:

“Thank you so much for all you’ve done for us this year, it makes the world of difference! “

“(worker) gave us loads of practical strategies and was really able to get to the reasons behind Arthur’s behaviours. Dee has an incredible wealth of knowledge and was excellent in supporting us. She is so easy to talk to and very friendly. We really enjoyed the sessions with her.”

“(worker) was kind, capable and professional and genuinely cared about improving C’s situation”

As is evident from the feedback above families accessing services from the team feel that those interventions had a positive impact on their family life and the wellbeing of their children. This is also a view shared by other professionals involved with the families, working collaboratively with the service to consider the holistic needs of the child or young person. The service has built positive links and working relationships with colleagues in the virtual school which supports them to advocate for adopted children and their families as appropriate.

16. Support Groups

Support groups are facilitated for adoptive families and special guardians pre and post order.

Support groups for adopters are facilitated jointly by the adopter recruitment and post order support team and are open for adopters at all stages of their journey (following approval as suitable to adopt). Daytime groups are held monthly and have been re branded as ‘Adoption Stay and Play’ sessions as anecdotal feedback was indicating that the title ‘support group’ may be off putting for some who felt they didn’t need support but would want to have an opportunity to meet other adopters and for them to have a space for their children to meet.

Social workers facilitating the Stay and Play groups see the session as an opportunity to have informal discussions with families re their children’s presenting behaviours and offer advice re therapeutic parenting techniques which may support them and their child as well as an opportunity to revisit the adoption support offer available.



In recognition that not all adopters are able to attend daytime support groups the service also facilitates a monthly evening online support group. As with the stay and play sessions adopters are invited to attend from the point that they commence Stage 2 of their assessment process. The sessions have a broad discussion topic which is emailed out to adopters on the mailing list in advance of the group in order for them to make a decision to attend if particular topics are pertinent to them at any given point.

As well as being advised of the groups via their SW's, adopters are routinely invited by via the service mailing list and information is available on the NCT and FAL website All NCT VAA groups are open to adopters from FAL partner agencies and in addition there is a FAL online support group which adopters are able to attend.

Feedback from sessions is positive as demonstrated below –

'We enjoyed meeting others in the same position as ourselves and others who have had a child placed with them, in an informal social setting,'

Social activities including summer picnics and Christmas parties are also facilitated by the service supporting the ability for adoptive families to make connections with others informally and for adopted children to have the opportunity to get to know other children like them to support their sense of acceptance and self-esteem. In addition, the post order support team negotiated cut price tickets to a Christmas Light Show and a day at Wicksteed Park for adoptive and SGO families.

One family reported that;

'We particularly found the organised social events to be supportive and encouraging.'

Support groups are also held for SGO carers which mirror the offer outlined above for adopters, other than access to groups via FAL, and are facilitated solely by the post order support team.

Going forward the post adoption & SGO support team will have a supporting role in a coffee morning designed for kinship carers including Special Guardians, alongside the fostering service.



17. Training

Adopters are able to access a range of training pre and post order as detailed below, some of which is directly delivered by the service and some via other routes. As part of the Family Adoption Links partnership a programme of core training across the region has been developed which will be complimented by specific training or workshops on a local level in response to the needs of those accessing the service.

An overview of the FAL training offer can be found via the [2023 FAL What's On Calendar](#)– some training is delivered face to face e.g. the adoption preparation training and Early Permanence training whilst others are online. Adopters are able to book onto any courses via an Eventbrite system which is centrally managed by the FAL hub team.

Since the FAL programme was launched in July 2022 and up until the end of March 2023 NCT adopters accessed 170 training sessions on courses including;

- Non-Violent Resistance
- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- The Child's Sensory World
- Adopting Siblings
- Early Permanence
- Therapeutic Parenting
- Talking about Adoption
- Family and Friends Training



At a local level NCT adopters are also able to access training via the NCT ILearn programme and E-Learning training via the link below. During the 2022-2023 reporting period adopters attended 168 training sessions via this route. which includes courses relating to the following topics;

- An Introduction to Attachment
- Birth Parents in the Lifelong Adoption Journey
- Child Development
- Bitesize training Gangs & Knife Crime
- Identity
- First Aid
- Letterbox contact
- Separation and Loss
- Transracial Adoption
- Equality and Diversity
- Contextual Safeguarding
- Radicalisation
- Resilience and recovery

[Children Services Training Online - AC Education \(ac-education.co.uk\)](https://www.ac-education.co.uk)

Below is a sample of the feedback received from adopters attending training;

'The prepare to adopt training got me thinking more about the child being at the centre of adoption process. I will try and do this throughout the journey going forward as it's not just about my wants.'

'We gained a better understanding of a child's view from the prepare to adopt training. It was great thanks'

'We found the friends and family training really good. It will help us to support everyone when the child moves in with them.'

Therapeutic parenting training groups have also been established the details of which are within the post order support section of the report.



Below is an overview of the training and support groups available to adopters for the coming year.

Training /Support Groups Programmes	
20 April 2023	Stay and Play Group
26 April 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group birth family time - Modernising our ideas around direct contact and letterbox with birth families.
18 May 2023	Stay and Play Group
31 May 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group behaviour - Challenges & triumphs with behaviour issues
15 June 2023	Stay and Play Group
28 June 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group - Exploitation and how we can do our best to protect our children
14 July 2023	Kinship Coffee Morning (SGO)
20 July 2023	Stay and Play Group
26 July 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group - Therapeutic parenting
17 August 2023	Stay and Play Group
23 August 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group - Self-care and family fun. Ideas for fun family times and holidays and keeping self-care alive in August!
20 September 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group - School support - Challenges & triumphs with school issues
6 October 2023	Kinship Coffee Morning (SGO)
19 October 2023	Stay and Play Group
25 October 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group - Facing fears and phobias
28 November 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group - Letting birth family time letterbox families.
20 December 2023 8-9pm	Online Support Group - Managing the holidays, sharing ideas and common tricky moments and how to plan to succeed.
January 2024 8-9pm	Online Support Group: You're ok, I'm ok - Promoting good self esteem
21 March 2024	Stay and Play Group.
February 2024 8-9pm	Online Support Group: non-violent resistance parenting. Dealing with loss and grief.
March 2024 8-9pm	Online Support Group: looking after adult relationships /Your adult relationships and how to care for them.

18. Financial Support

Within the service there is a finance officer whose role it is to undertake annual reviews of financial support allowances and set up new allowances once agreed for both adoption and SGO families.

749 financial allowances

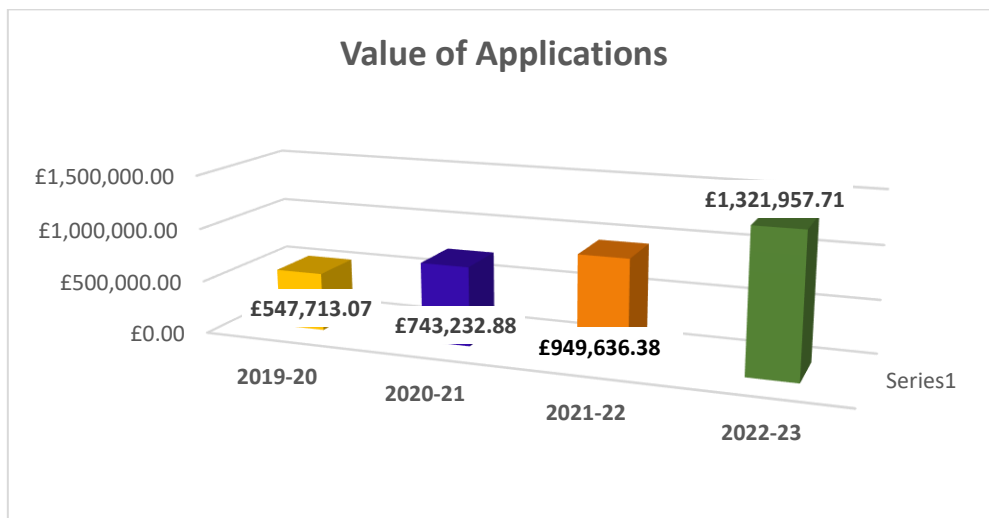
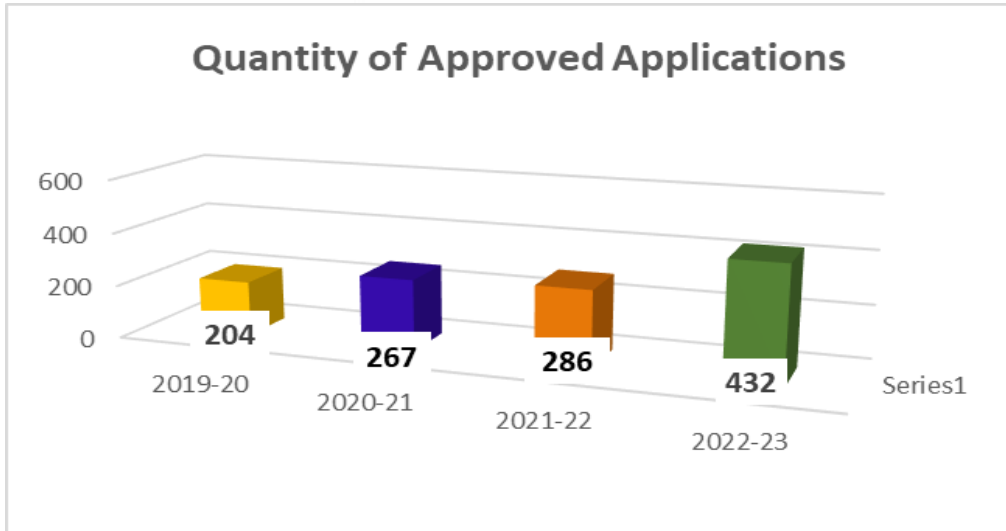
There are currently 749 financial allowances being paid to carers and there have been 37 new allowances awarded during the 2022-2023 reporting period. Adoption support allowances are not common with only 76 out of the total 668 allowances being paid to adoptive families. Allowances are normally offered for a time limited period either at the start of an adoption or as a result of an assessment of need where a family experiences additional financial pressure relating from the needs of their child. All allowances are subject to an annual review.

The SGO financial support policy was reviewed and updated in November 2022.

19. Adoption Support Fund

432 Applications to Adoption Support Fund

The provision of post order support for both adoption and SGO families is enhanced by the use of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF). During this reporting period the service made 432 applications to the adoption support fund resulting in the provision of over £1.3m of funding for specialist therapeutic interventions to support children, young people and their families. The charts below indicate a rise in both applications to the ASF and the allocation of funding compared to the previous three reporting periods.



As a high user of the ASF the service was invited to take part in the ASF outcomes pilot which commenced in January 2022. Independent evaluation and feedback from the adoption sector indicates that the provision of funding for therapeutic services is having a positive effect however there is not a systematic way of measuring outcomes from ASF funded therapy. The outcome measures pilot aims to support the development of the ASF and improve the overall understanding of what works and also.

- Improve agency's ability to deliver the right support offer to children a families
- Inform which therapies work best for children and families
- Enable services to have data to inform their commissioning



The outcome measures pilot reported on its findings at the end of 2022, which concluded that a national rollout of the Outcome Measures Project will be incorporate into all ASF activities in the coming years, and we expect this to begin in June 2023. As a service we are in a very strong position to participate in this due to the involvement that we had in the pilot project.

20. Adoption Support Newsletter

As a partner agency of Family Adoption Links the VAA co produce a quarterly newsletter called 'Thrive' which can be emailed via the service mailing list or downloaded by adopters via the website. The newsletter provides information in relation to training, social events articles, and ideas for adoptive families. In March 2023 900 adopters across the FAL partnership received the online newsletter and there was an opening rate of 59.4%.

21. Birth Family Support



During the 2022-2023 reporting period the service received 33 referrals from birth family members requesting support in relation to the children being adopted or placed in a special guardianship arrangement. Below is an example of feedback from those accessing this service.

'(Counsellor) has helped me immensely, she has helped me separate my feelings/emotions into what I can deal with now and in future. She is kind understanding and has huge knowledge of many things. I feel more settled in myself and parenting than I have at any point before.'

Links have been developed by the service with the PAUSE project and as a result the adoption service manager is a member of the PAUSE strategic partnership board and work is being finalised to develop links with the project to gain the views of birth mothers in relation to what support services, they may find useful. The service would like to develop this work with an aim of making a video with birth mothers to share at adopter training to support adopters understanding of birth parents' situations and the significance of their ongoing role in adopted children's lives.

22. Post Order Contact



619 Letterbox Exchanges

There is a dedicated letterbox co-ordinator within the post order service who manages post order contact arrangements for both adoption and SGO families, during the 2022-2023 reporting period there have been **619** exchanges of letters, cards and photos between birth and adoptive families. The letter box coordinator is also central, due to the relationships built with birth parents, in exploring introducing direct contact where either birth family or adoptive family are seeking to establish this and mediates to consider these possibilities, alongside social workers from the service.

We have supported 8 direct family time sessions during this reporting period a family support worker within the team is engaged in assisting families to make agreements and facilitate meetings. This is an area of work we plan to develop in the coming year in line with the modernising adoption agenda and the importance of supporting children and young people to develop a sense of their identity and maintain significant relationships. Post order contact plans are routinely discussed during permanence planning meetings to support with the development of care plans reflecting the lifelong needs of adopted children.

The Adoption UK Adoption Barometer report published in June 2022 reporting the following from the online survey completed as part of the information gathering process;

- 70% of prospective adopters believe direct contact should be standard for adopted children as long as it is deemed safe
- 69% of adopted adults who did not have childhood direct contact regretted not having the opportunity
- 80% of adopted adults and 88% of adoptive parents who were involved in direct contact during childhood were glad they had participated

As a service we recognise and value the ongoing importance that birth family members have in relation to children placed for adoption or cared for via special guardianship arrangements in respect of supporting the child's sense of self and their identity. We are committed to developing the services we provide to support contact arrangements including direct contact. This includes the need to discuss plans for children during permanency planning meetings and by asking professionally curious questions during tracking panels and Child in Care reviews and when necessary, challenging the notion of risk often associated with post order contact.



Below is feedback from those who have been supported by the service, in face-to-face family time:

“(worker) has been like a breath of fresh air and she really has supported me not just with arranging contact but also while we are at contact. (worker) has been amazing and very supportive and helpful during and in between visits.”

23.Support to Adopted Adults

Supported 141
Adopted
Adults

Within the service there is a coordinator and social worker who support adults who have been adopted who live in Northamptonshire to locate and access their records. These records can be paper or electronic and can be from last year or as long ago as the 1930/40’s.

Finding their records enables adopted adults to learn details about their early life that may have eluded them for many years and to resolve worries and questions that they may never have even shared with anyone. Where appropriate the service will offer advice and signpost people in relation to how to trace and locate their birth family and this is a life changing event for many who thought they would be lost to each other forever.

During the 2022-2023 reporting period the service has supported 141 adopted adults to access their birth records compared to 90 in the 2021/22 reporting period.

Below is an example of feedback received from an adopted adult:

“It was a wonderfully endearing experience to read through such detailed and well logged work over all those years. I learnt so much about myself and lots of memories came flooding back, both good and bad. I think I have got some kind of closure from the documents, which was like being handed your past on paper. I really enjoyed it. Thanks so much for your help”



24. Summary

The service has continued to have a successful year in terms of adopter recruitment, matching for children and supporting families post order. During the 2022/23 reporting period the service has taken the opportunity to *take stock* and review practice across the teams. Work following the Leiland James Corkhill safeguarding practice review has strengthened practice which will support the ability of the service to safeguard children throughout their adoption journey.

The partnership with Family Adoption Links (FAL) is now embedded and is bringing benefits in terms of a broader training and support offer for families and in terms of supporting family finding for children across the partnership.

As a service we remain aspirational in terms of our vision for an *Effective Adoption Agency in the 21st Century* and as such recognise that whilst it is important to continually monitor the effectiveness of our locally and regionally delivered services It is equally as important to maintain an outward facing awareness and response to national drivers, reports and research and consider the implications of this upon local practice development.

In July 2021 the Department for Education published the *Adoption Strategy – Achieving Excellence Everywhere*. The strategy set an expectation to strive for excellence in all adoption services meeting the needs of every child waiting for adoption and for all adopted children who need support. Whilst this strategy was published in 2021 the aspirations outlined within it remain the focus of work being undertaken at a national, regional, and local level as it continues to mirror the vision which we have as a service.

In June 2022 Adoption UK published its annual Adoption Barometer report, below is a summary of the recommendations made;

- Create and implement quality standards for the journey of prospective adopters through preparation, approvals and matching, for use by all adoption agencies.
- Introduced ringfenced, multi-year government funding for adoption support across all nations of the UK.
- Produce clear, specific support plans for every child to be placed for adoption, distinct from the placement plan, agreed with their adopters and reviewed at least once a year.
- Adoption agencies to have a duty to provide the adoption support set out in a child's assessment of support needs.
- Train education and health professionals in early childhood trauma and associated conditions, including Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Attachment Disorder.



- Provide free, expert, lifelong support for establishing and maintaining birth family relationships including during childhood and when tracing birth relatives in adulthood

These recommendations are aspirational and far reaching in terms of considering adoption within the wider societal context. As a service whilst we cannot address all the recommendations, we are mindful of them within our day-to-day practice and service planning and are mindful that these are recommendations borne out of feedback gathered from adopters, adopted young people, adopted adults, birth parents and professionals across the sector. As such we have a responsibility to view this as we would other forms of feedback. In response, as part of our review of service areas during the 2022/23 reporting period we have:

- Strengthened our QA process in relation to support plans to ensure they are reflective of the child's needs,
- Maintained links with education and health partners and share information and training opportunities with them to support attachment aware practice
- Held workshops with education colleagues re Supporting the attachment needs of children in schools, and education passport is being developed via the FAL adoption support work stream
- Made a commitment to applying for the Early Permanence Quality Mark which is underpinned by an agreed set of nationally agreed practice standards.
- Established links with the PAUSE project to support our understanding in relation to what birth families would find useful in terms of support services including support with post order contact arrangements.
- Developed training workshops re managing attachment needs which can be delivered to staff across residential children's settings.

Overall, we feel we have had a positive year across the service and whilst we are all saddened by the adoption disruptions, we have experienced we have used these as opportunities for review and reflection of practice and as such continue to strive for excellence in all that we do.



18. Plans for development 2023/24

The service has a strong foundation of good practice upon which to continue to develop during the 2023 – 2024 reporting period and have identified the following priority areas.

1. Continued development of tracking systems including embedding the adoption tracking panel to support oversight and planning for children alongside effective tracking of adopters to ensure that matches for children are made in a timely manner.
2. Tracking and data collection systems to be developed for the post order support team.
3. Strengthened quality assurance systems including an audit framework to be embedded within the service.
4. Awareness raising activities and training in relation to the benefits and challenges of direct contact in adoption to be established for adopters, SW's and panel members.
5. Feedback mechanisms for service users to be embedded and feedback used to inform practice developments and co-production – including feedback from the Adopter Consultation Hub and Colabor8 groups.
6. Early Permanence Quality Mark to be applied for.
7. Share learning from recent disruptions to inform practice across the service including with the adoption panel and the wider children's trust teams.
8. Developing an Adoption Community to support adopters and adopted children and young people to have a network where that can share experiences and links with others who share an *adoption identity*.

Tracy Morton

Adoption Service Manager

April 2023