



Hertfordshire Adoption Agency Annual Report 2020-21



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Overview

This report details the performance of the Hertfordshire County Council Adoption Service in line with National Minimum Standards and Statutory Guidance looking at activity from 1st April 2020 until 31st March 2021 and focussing on plans for development for 2021-2022.

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, on the 26th March 2020 lockdown measures in England legally came into force changing the way the adoption services were able to be delivered. Therefore the 2020-2021 annual report should be considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Adoption Service sits within Hertfordshire Children's Services and is overseen by the Operational Director for Specialist Services. The Service is governed by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and associated regulations and guidance.

Purpose and Objectives of the Hertfordshire County Council Adoption Service

Our key purpose is to achieve permanence for Children Looked After in Hertfordshire, ensuring children who cannot live with their birth families can be brought up within loving stable families and have the best chances in life.

The Adoption Service provide the following core services in accordance with statutory requirements:

- Recruitment and assessment of prospective adoptive parents.
- Matching of children for adoption.
- Management of the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) functions and adoption panel for both children's adoption plans and matching of children to adoptive parents.
- Adoption support services both pre-and post-adoption.
- Financial support for adoptive families and special guardianship and child arrangement order applications where appropriate.
- Inter-country adoption services through the Intercountry Adoption Centre (IAC).
- Assessment, supervision, and family court reporting for non-agency adoptive parents (stepparents, parents who already have the child in their care).



Service Structure and Individual Team Functions

The Adoption Service has 5 teams:

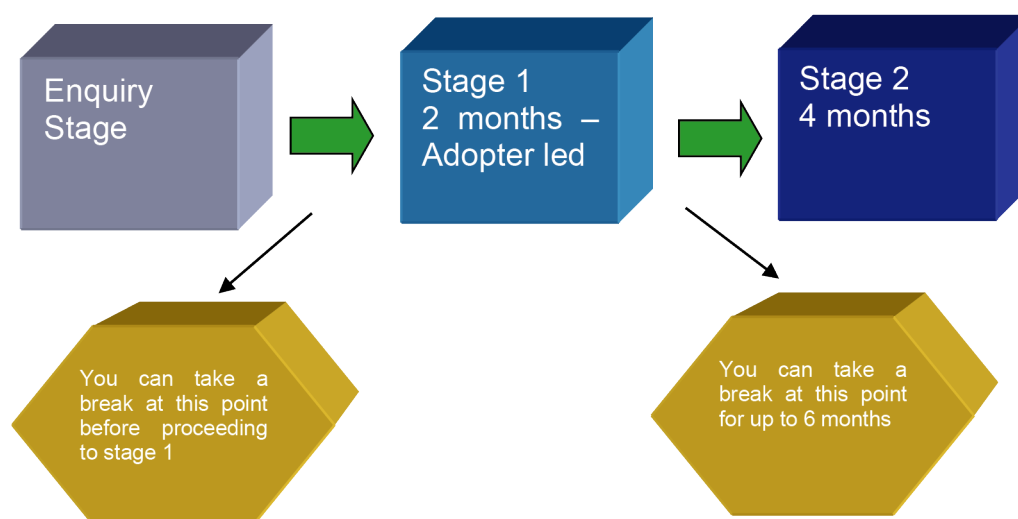
- 1 Recruitment Team
- 2 Assessments Teams
- 1 Family Finding Team
- 1 Post Adoption Support Team

The service is overseen by an Adoption Service Manager who also acts in an advisory role to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) regarding children's plans for adoption, (ADM's are senior managers who endorse all panel recommendation for adoption).

The Adoption Panel and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessment work sits under the Friends & Family Service and is overseen by a different Service Manager. However, both Service Managers work very closely together.

Hertfordshire operates a two-stage adoption recruitment process in line with statutory regulations. Stage One involves initial checks and registration and is adopter led. Stage Two is the training and assessment stage which is completed within four months. The recruitment team manage the Pre-stage Enquiry and the Stage One Process, and the adoption assessment teams are responsible for Stage Two.

The Two Stage Process



The final stage in the recruitment process is the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) process. Our Panel Team supports the panel and the ADM process for children's plans, coordinating the work of the Adoption Panel and ensuring that statutory timescales regarding the production of reports and minutes of Panel Meetings are met.

The Adoption Teams are in County Hall in Hertford, Farnham House in Stevenage, and Rainbow House at St Albans. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, services have continued to be run with staff working primarily at home.

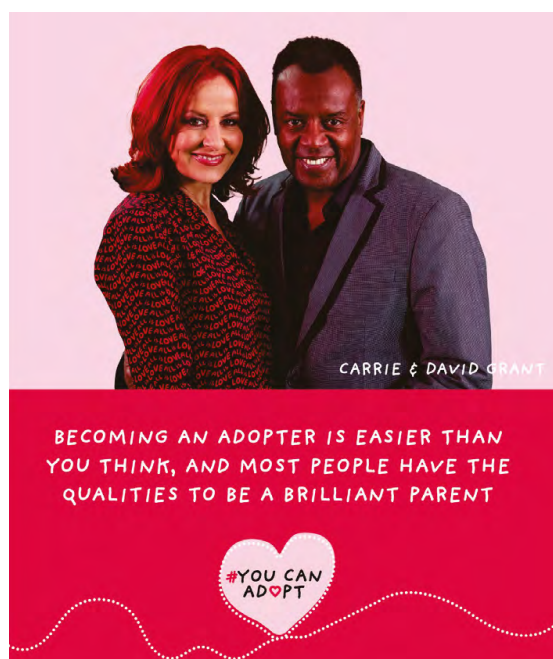
The Joint Adoption and Fostering Recruitment Team

Adoption recruitment activity is undertaken by a specialist Recruitment Team who undertake all our recruitment for both adoption and fostering in Hertfordshire. The Recruitment Team runs a monthly Adoption Information Evening for prospective applicants to find out more about adoption. The Recruitment Team then runs a further one day information session called our 'Foundation Day' for any applicants wanting to explore the option of adoption further before they submit a Registration of Interest should they wish to proceed. The Foundation Day is held monthly. During 2020-2021 all the Adoption Information Evenings and Foundation Days have taken place virtually over Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19 restrictions.

During 2020-2021 the Recruitment Team managed 117 enquiries.

During 2020-2021 recruitment activity centred around the profile of children who were waiting for adoptive homes and to be matched with families, including sibling groups and those with more complex needs. There was a particular focus on applicants willing to be considered as dually approved for both fostering and adopting and take 'Early Permanence' (foster to adopt) placements.

In 2020 a new nationwide adopter recruitment campaign was launched called '#YouCanAdopt' which aimed to raise awareness of adoption and 'bust' myths about who is eligible to adopt. Since its launch Hertfordshire's recruitment campaigns have aligned with the nationwide adopter recruitment campaign.



During 2020-2021 Hertfordshire have promoted our Regional Adoption Alliance, Adopt East, securing coverage in local newspapers and on BBC Look East.

Below are some examples of the publicity:

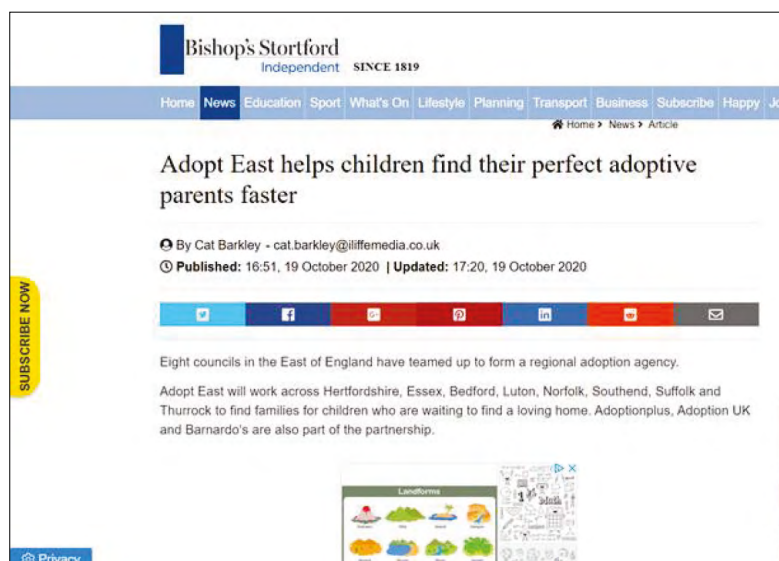
Hemel Gazette



Hertfordshire Mercury



Bishop's Stortford Independent



The Adoption Assessment Teams

The Adoption Assessment Teams progress applicants through Stage Two of the adoption process which involves undertaking a detailed home-study with them and presenting them along with their completed assessments to the Adoption Panel to consider a recommendation for approval. Final approval is then agreed by the ADM outside of the panel.

In addition, the Adoption Assessment Teams provide a statutory service for birth parents who wish to voluntarily relinquish babies for adoption. These assessments require intensive support by social workers. During 2020-2021 the Adoption Service managed 3 relinquished babies, 2 were placed for adoption and 1 returned to the care of their birth parents with support from the teams.

During 2020-2021 the assessment teams completed 38 Stage Two assessments.

These included:

- 32 first time approvals (prospective adopters who are adopting for the first time)
- 6 second time approvals (prospective adopter who have adopted previously).
- 9 dual approvals (approved both as early permanence foster carers and prospective adopters).

Both the Recruitment and the Adoption Assessment Teams provide preparation and training courses for prospective adoptive parents called Adoption Preparation Training (APT).

During 2020-2021, APT courses have been run monthly. These courses take place over four days. Applicants complete the first two days during Stage One of their assessment with the Recruitment Team. They complete the final two days during Stage Two of their assessment with the Adoption Assessment teams. These courses are co-facilitated by an experienced adoptive parent and an experienced Adoption Social Worker. Over the year all the courses have taken place virtually on Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Prospective adopters who are interested in early permanence and fostering to adopt are offered a further day and a half of specialist, dually approved/early permanency training. This course is also co-facilitated by an experienced early permanence carer and an experienced Adoption Social Worker. This course has also taken place virtually on Microsoft Teams this year virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In the latter part of 2020-2021, a series of 'Lite Bite' education sessions covering different topics were established both for families in the adoption assessment process and who had been approved as adopters and were awaiting a match with their adopted child. The 'Lite Bite' sessions provided participants with the opportunity to find out more about specific areas relevant to adoption with topics this year focused on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Autism and parental wellbeing.

All 'Lite Bite' sessions so far have been facilitated by one or more experienced Adoption Social Workers with plenty of input from adoptive parents. As with our other courses 'Lite Bites' have been conducted virtually on Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19 restrictions. Further 'Lite Bites' sessions are planned for the coming year.

The Family Finding Team

Each child with a plan for adoption receives a Family Finding Service. The Family Finding Team (FFT) work to ensure that all children are placed for adoption without delay. Each child has a bespoke Family Finding Plan which is regularly reviewed. The team works with the children's allocated social workers to establish the child's precise needs and identify potential adoptive families.

Matching Events

The Adoption Service has made extensive use of a Matching Co-ordinator, who supports the timely matching of children and ensures planning takes place as early as possible. The Matching Co-ordinator attends all Legal Planning Meetings for children with a potential plan of adoption (even if that is a parallel plan alongside long-term fostering or a potential Special Guardianship Order) across Children's Services and supports colleagues with planning as much as possible.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions a virtual programme of regional and in-house adopter led matching events was established over 2020-2021 to maximise chances of an early match for children with an adoption plan and reduce waiting time once a placement order was granted. Five Regional Virtual Profiling Events took place during 2020-2021.

Adopter Networking Evenings, established by existing adoptive families in previous years, are for adopters waiting for a match with a child. Three Adopter Networking Evenings took place virtually over 2020-2021. The events promoted both the strengths and opportunities of adopting children for whom it has been traditionally more difficult to find placements. These events have continued to be well received by adopters and have led to several creative matching opportunities

During 2020-2021, the Adoption Service continued to welcome applications from foster carers wishing to adopt children already in their care with a court agreed plan for adoption, three such applications were received over 2020-2021.

Ethnicity Match of Children

In Hertfordshire we recruit and match families who can support and promote a child's ethnic and cultural heritage. If there are no suitable families in Hertfordshire for any child, a referral is swiftly made to Linkmaker and to our regional partners to identify families as quickly as possible.

Hertfordshire continues to work with the statutory guidance issued regarding the placement of black and minority ethnic children to avoid any delay in matching on the grounds of ethnicity. This guidance states that it is unacceptable for a child to be denied loving adoptive parents solely on the grounds that the child and prospective adopters do not share the same ethnic background.

During 2020-2021, the Adoption Service worked effectively to ensure that children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds did not experience any undue delay in matching due to their ethnicity, or any other protected characteristics. 7 children of the 35 placed for adoption during 2020-2021 were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

Transitions and Siblings Assessments

The FFT have expertise in working with children in transition (from fostering to adoptive placements) and preparing children and adoptive parents to make successful attachments and relationships. The team also have expertise in sibling assessments and matches.

During 2020-2021, the FFT continued to provide specialist training to foster carers at the point which children placed in their care were due to move to their adoptive family and new home. The Family Finding team also continued to provide specialist transition training to approved adopters in the process of being matched with a child.

During 2020-2021 the FFT also provided a new programme of training for Children's Social Workers, upskilling them in completing sibling assessments.

The Adoption Support Team

The Adoption Support Team provide services in accordance with the Adoption Support Regulations (ASR) 2005 and as outlined in the Statutory Guidance, 2014.

By law all local authorities are required to provide a range of adoption support services this is stipulated in Section 3(1) of the Children and Families Act 2014. The Adoption Support Regulations 2005 (ASR) and the Adoption Support (Amendment) Regulations 2014.

Local Authorities need to provide:

- o Counselling, advice, and information.
- o Therapeutic services.
- o Financial support.
- o Services to support adoptive families and adoptive placements.
- o Assistance in relation to arrangements for contact with birth families.
- o Expert advice and facility for discussion about all matters relating to adoption.

Accordingly, the Adoption Support Team provide a range of Adoption Support Services to adoptive parents, adopted children, adult adoptees and birth relatives of children and adults who have been adopted.

The team provide the following services:

- Adult records search and reunion.
- Letter box and post adoption contact service.
- Support in complex family situations.
- Assessments for access to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF).
- Match funding for complex packages of interventions including (sensory attachment therapy, therapeutic life story, 'Thera Play').
- Peer support and group work.



With the COVID-19 pandemic we initially saw a decrease in the demand for adoption support. However, as the year progressed and as a society, we experienced prolonged lock down periods and uncertainty, the demand for adoption support significantly increased.

A continued and significant area of demand has been within the Letter Box Contact Service. This is a complex area of work, with approximately 1,000 individual active arrangements of letter box contact (contact only via letter) taking place each year.

Traditionally there have been an average of 10 requests for Letter Box Contact support per month. During 2020-2021 The Adoption Service facilitated additional letterbox contacts to reassure birth relatives who were concerned about their child who had been adopted. Most of these additional letterbox contacts took place between April to June 2020 which coincided with the start of COVID-19 pandemic in England and national lockdown.

The Adoption Support Team also manage and support direct contact arrangements between adopted children and young people and their birth relatives. This is an area where the demand is slowly increasing and as a service we are starting to consider and plan how we adapt to increase demand in coming years.

During 2020-2021 the Adoption Support Team had to adapt the core offer for adoptive families with the following courses and groups being conducted virtually:

- 'Adopteens', a specialist programme for adopted young people.
- Training for adoptive parents on life story work and talking to their child about adoption.
- Therapeutic parenting courses.
- The Virtual School's weekly helpline for education related queries.

The Adoption Support Team work closely with the Specialist Adolescent Service Hertfordshire (SASH), Attachment Regulation and Competency (ARC) Service, Families First (Early Help) and the 0-25 Service (for children and young people with disabilities) to ensure that adopted children, young people and their families can access a full range of support services in order to meet their individual needs.

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

Demand continues to grow for therapeutic services for adoptive families due to the increasing complexity of need of children placed for adoption. These services are critical to support families who are experiencing challenges in meeting the needs of adopted children. Most children requiring therapeutic support show behaviour linked to attachment and developmental trauma because of traumatic experiences within their birth families.

The introduction of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) in March 2015 has enabled Hertfordshire to expand the range of therapeutic provision for adoptive families with much support being accessed through this fund.

During the year ending March 2021, 234 applications were made to the Adoption Support Fund, with a total of £626,579.95 being received for a range of specialist therapeutic provision and assessment, including Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), Sensory Integration Therapy and Play Therapy.

This also included group applications for therapeutic support made to the ASF to support multiple families within therapeutic group interventions.

This however is a decrease on £677, 967.73 previously drawn from the fund over 2019-2020.

Changes to the administration of the fund have now required Hertfordshire to match fund any support over £2,500 for specialist assessments and up to £5,000 for therapy per child. Over 2020-2021, Hertfordshire match funded 1 package of therapeutic support with a total spend of £2,470.00

The ASF will continue into 2021-2022, after which time it is due to be reviewed again by central government.

In addition to regular ASF provision, Adopt East were successful in securing COVID-19 ASF funding for emergency therapeutic support for adoptive families within Adopt East, (including Hertfordshire) affected by COVID-19. These packages of support were in addition to the regular Adoption Support Fund applications.

Emergency therapeutic support accessed by Hertfordshire included:

- 1 year membership subscriptions with 'Adoption UK' for all adopters bringing a range of benefits
- 1 year membership subscriptions with the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting
- A weekly Sensory Regulation Newsletter written by an occupation therapist
- A weekly Clinical Psychology email for all adopters with several tutorials
- Non-Violence Resistance (NVR) training online for 8 families
- Virtual Counselling, DDP, therapeutic parenting, support for teenagers and occupational therapy sensory regulation.

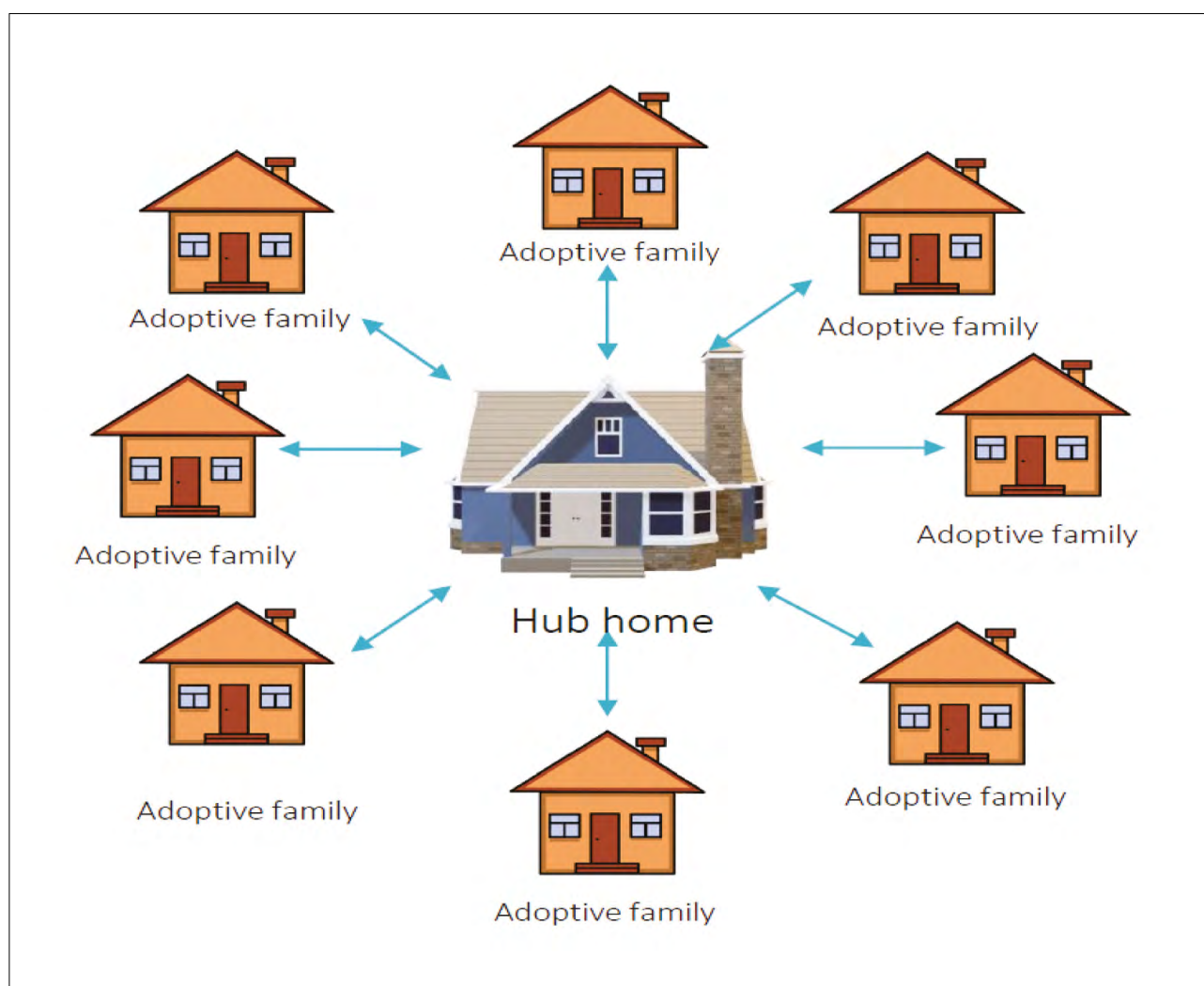
Our First Adoption Hub

In 2020-2021, Hertfordshire's Adoption Service developed and launched the first Adoption Hub, offering support to new adoptive parents and their children from an experienced adopter acting as a Hub Lead Carer. The aim of the hub is to create a community of support to new adoptive families.

The Adoption Hub is based on the same principles as Mockingbird Family Model which has been successfully developed for Hertfordshire fostering families and provides crucial support for several fostering families.

Key is the recruitment of the Hub Home Lead Carer who, in close liaison with the Adoption Service, offers practical and emotional support to the adoptive families connected as part of the Hub. Currently 11 adoptive families are supported in the Hub. The diagram below shows the Hub concept with one central Hub Home coordinating support for the other families and households who are part of the Hub.





Early Permanence (Foster to Adopt)

Fostering to Adopt involves placing children with local authority carers who have been dually approved for both fostering and adoption. These are carers intending to adopt who are willing to commence caring for a child as their foster carers with a plan to adopt the child, enabling continuity of care for that child.

A foster to adopt placement will only be made where there is clear evidence to the local authority that there is very little likelihood that the birth parents can resume caring for their child and where there are no other family members within the extended birth family who are able to care for the child.

The Adoption Service works closely with Children's Services colleagues to ensure that as many children as possible are considered at the start of permanence planning for the option of an early permanence placement. Relinquished babies are always considered for such arrangements.

The Adoption Service supported 8 children placed in Early Permanence Placements over 2020-2021, all of these children progressed to being placed for adoption.

The Hertfordshire Adoption Panel

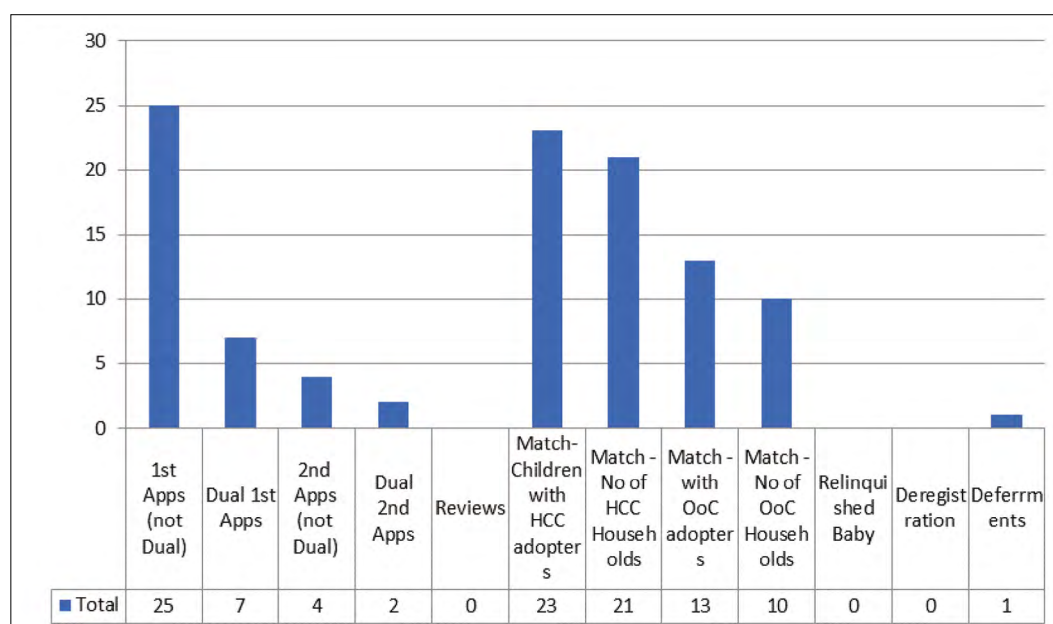
Hertfordshire has an independently chaired Adoption Panel which considers the following:

- Assessments of prospective adoptive parents for approval
- The assessment of dually approved carers (early permanence/foster for adoption)
- The matching of children to be placed for adoption with approved prospective adopters
- De-registration of approved adoptive parents who no longer wish to progress or are assessed as being unable to have an ongoing approval.

The Adoption Panel is organised and administered by a Panel Team which supports both the Fostering and Adoption Panels. The Panel and Fostering and Adoption management teams meet three times per year. An annual report is provided by the Adoption Panel Chair regarding quality of the panel business. Any improvements required are incorporated into the Annual Adoption Service Plan.

In 2020-2021 the Adoption Panel heard 70 adoption cases in total. Out of these, 32 were matches and 38 were approvals. Only one approval was deferred, but was then approved at a later panel. There were no deregistration's.

Adoption Panel Activity 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021



Non-Agency Adoption

Non-Agency Adoption refers to adoption assessments which involve families whose children are not in the care of the local authority such as an adoption undertaken by a stepparent.

Non-agency adoptions are managed by the Adoption Service. As with agency adoption assessments, the two-stage process is followed and robust monitoring through supervision and tracking meetings takes place to ensure a timely service is delivered. One Non-Agency Adoption application was made to the Adoption Service during 2020-2021.

Commissioned Services

Inter-Country Adoption

A Service Level Agreement is in place with the Intercountry Adoption Centre (IAC) to facilitate assessment for all people in Hertfordshire wishing to adopt a child from overseas as an 'Inter-Country Adoption.'

Regular monitoring meetings are held to ensure that this service is effectively meeting the needs of Hertfordshire service users.

No inter-country adoptions took place during 2020-2021 which we think was due to travel restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Independent Support to Birth Relatives

From 1st April 2020 Hertfordshire County Council commissioned 'Adoption Plus' to provide independent counselling support for birth relatives where a child has a plan of adoption and to adopted adults who have contacted Hertfordshire to support them in accessing their adoption records where they would benefit from counselling.

Over 2020-2021 we have made 16 referrals to Adoption Plus. 11 referrals were for birth parents, 2 were for birth grandparents and 3 referrals were for adopted adults.

All counselling sessions have taken place virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regular feedback is obtained from both the referrer, as well as the person accessing the counselling as part of our contract monitoring.

Participation

The Adoption Service actively promotes participation and engagement from adoptive parents and adopted children.

During 2020-2021 this has been more challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions in place. Our participation and engagement has been primarily conducted virtually in order to keep participants safe.

All training continued to be co-facilitated by an Adoption Social Worker together with an experienced adoptive parent. This ensures the adopter's voice and experienced input is present throughout a prospective adopter's journey to adoption.

There remains a very active community of adopters in Hertfordshire who have continued to provide informal support to local adoptive families virtually where possible over the past year. There are social group co-ordinators identified in each geographical area who co-ordinate informal support and link with the Adoption Service.

The Adoption Service have continued to meet quarterly with the Adoption Social Group Co-ordinators to ensure a feedback loop and exchange of vital information between adoptive families and the Adoption Service was maintained.

Over 2020-2021 an active community of adopters within Adopt East have developed virtual support groups for adoptive families across the Adopt East region. These groups have included a virtual group for solo adopters as well as a virtual group for early permanence carers.

The voices and participation of adopted children and young people is key in influencing and shaping the Adoption Service. Throughout the COVID pandemic we have had to be more creative in how we approach this, taking a more one to one approach when holding our usual larger group meetings was more challenging with restrictions.

Resuming face to face direct work with adopted children and young people was prioritised as soon as government restrictions eased to ensure each child receiving adoption intervention was being seen and heard during a time when many were not in school and had more restricted contact and levels of social support.

Increasing participation of adoptive parents, adopted children and adult adoptees is a priority for the Adoption Service going forward.

Performance

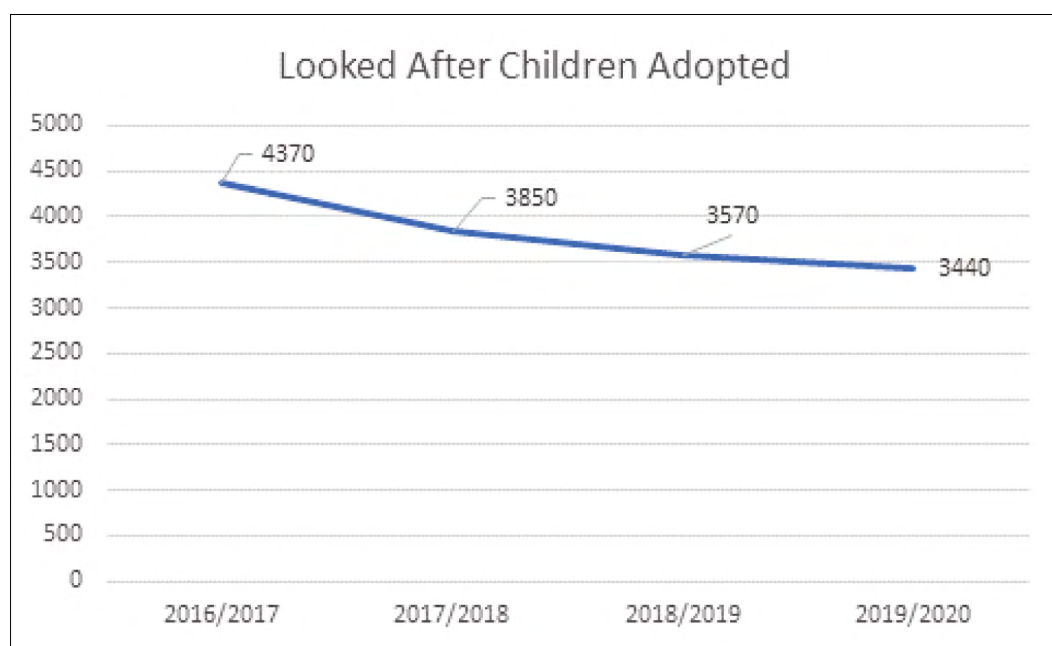
Hertfordshire makes use of the variety of performance indicators to triangulate evidence of outcomes (the Adoption, Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) data *Appendix B*, Hertfordshire performance monitoring and the Adoption Scorecard <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards>).

Hertfordshire continues to promote adoption as a permanence plan for children where this best meets their needs and has made improvements during this 12-month period in relation to timeliness in matching for adoption.

Performance has also improved on a 3-yearly average in reduced time from becoming looked after to adoptive placement.

The Family Justice Review's 26-week timescale for care proceedings has continued to have a significant impact on the timeliness of permanence planning for children. Local Authorities are required to develop permanence plans for children and place them in alternative family arrangements more quickly. There continues to be a steady rise in the use of Special Guardianship Orders granted to family members or close family friends, as an alternative route to achieve permanency. Courts are increasingly reluctant to make a placement order to achieve permanency through adoption, where an alternative and satisfactory arrangement is identified with a family member or a friend. The National Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board continues to report a decline in local authority decision making regarding adoption, and a reduction in the number of children with a court approved plan for adoption (placement orders).

The national picture has seen a decline in adoptions since 2015. In 2019/2020 there were 3440 looked after children who were adopted nationally. In 2018/2019 there were 3570 adoptions, in 2017/18 there were 3,850 adoptions and in 2016/17 there were 4,370 adoptions.



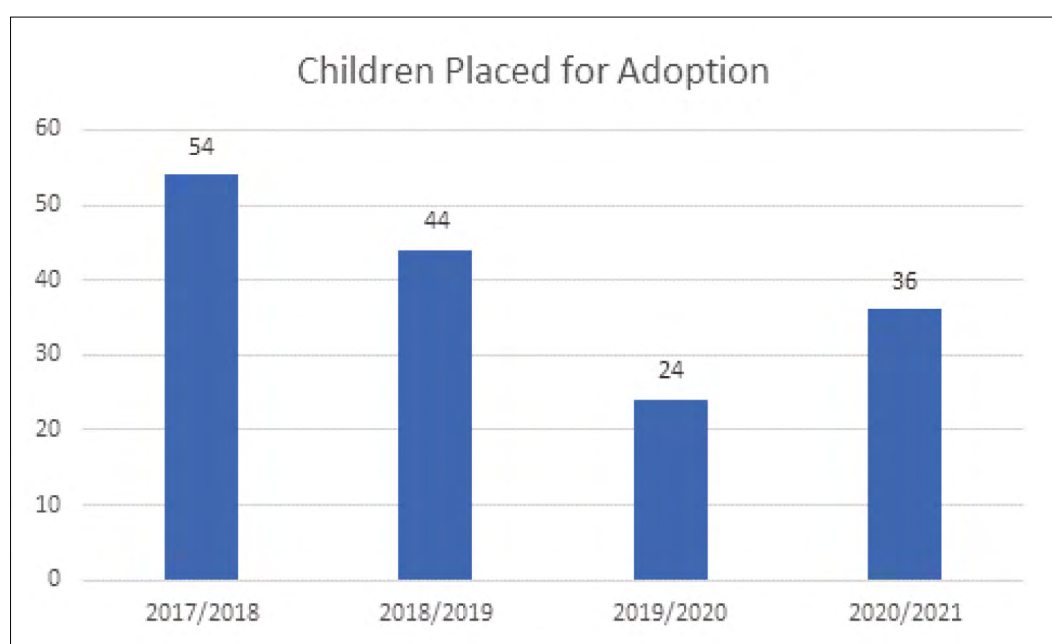
Our Children

Hertfordshire Children placed for Adoption

During 2020-2021, **36** children were placed for adoption, **8** were in early permanence arrangements (*foster to adopt*).

This is an increase compared to 2019-2020 when **24** children were placed for adoption. However over 2018-2019, **44** children were placed for adoption and over 2017-2018, **54** children were placed for adoption.

The following graph shows the numbers of Hertfordshire children successfully placed for Adoption each year from 2017-2021.



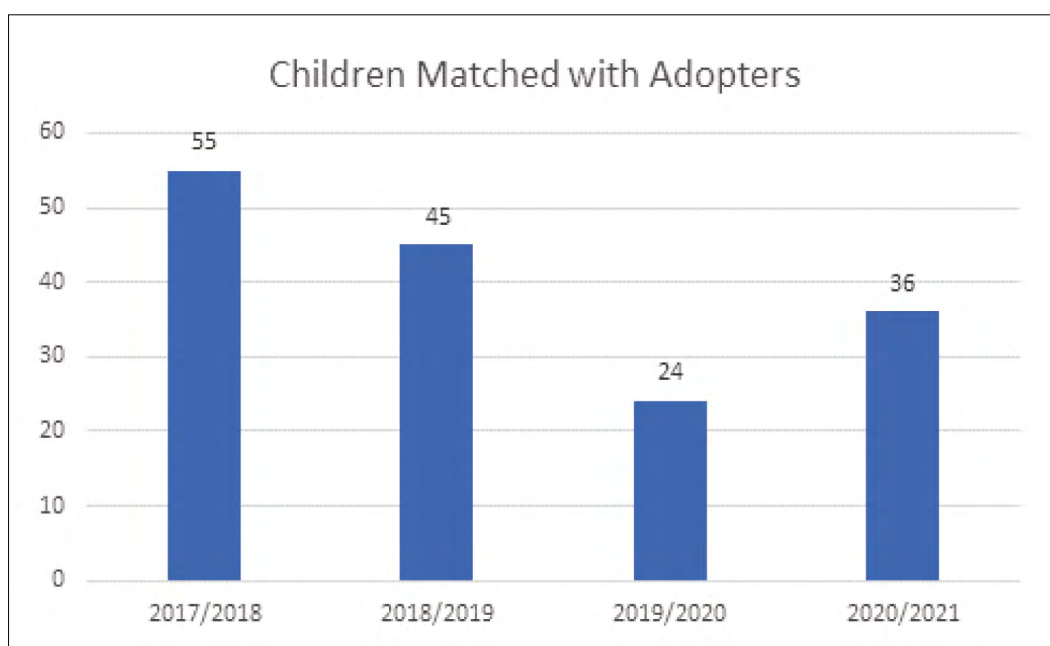
Hertfordshire Children matched with Adopters

36 children were matched with adopters during 2020-2021.

This is higher than the previous year 2019-2020 when **24** children were matched.

This is however fewer than the year 2018-2019 when **45** children were matched and 2017-2018 when **55** children were matched.

The following graph shows the numbers of Hertfordshire children successfully matched with their adoptive families each year from 2017-2021.



Adoption Plans Approved

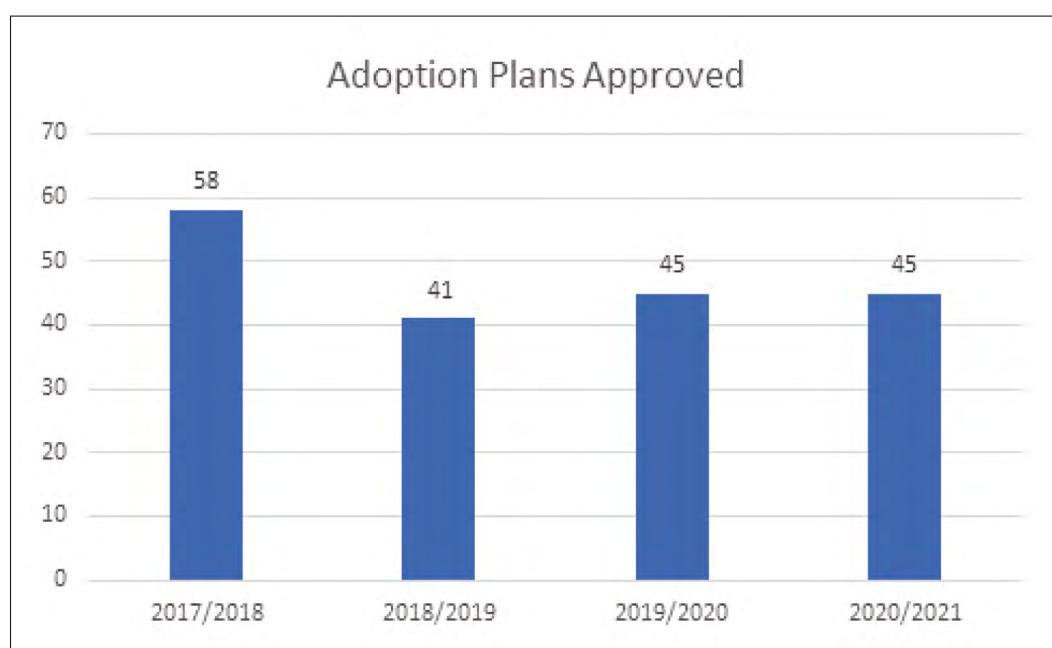
During 2020-2021, **45** Adoption Plans were approved by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

This is the same number as during the previous year from 2019-2020.

41 Adoption Plans were approved in 2018-2019

58 Adoption Plans were approved between 2017-2018.

The following graph shows the numbers of Hertfordshire Adoption Plans which were approved by ADM each year from 2017-2021.



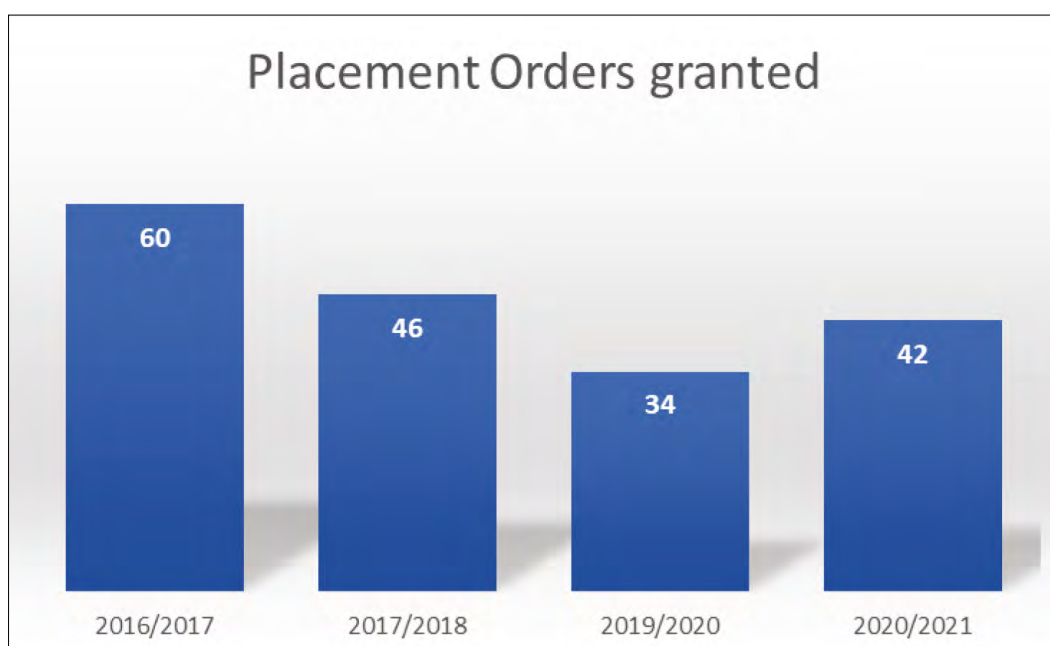
Placement Orders

During 2020-2021, **42** children received a court approved Plan for Adoption (Placement Order).

This is an increase from 2019-2020, where **34** Placement Orders were granted.

Over 2017-2018 there were **46** Placement Orders were granted and over 2016-2017, when **60** Placement Orders were granted.

The following graph shows the numbers of Hertfordshire Placement Orders which were granted each year from 2017-2021.



Adoption Orders

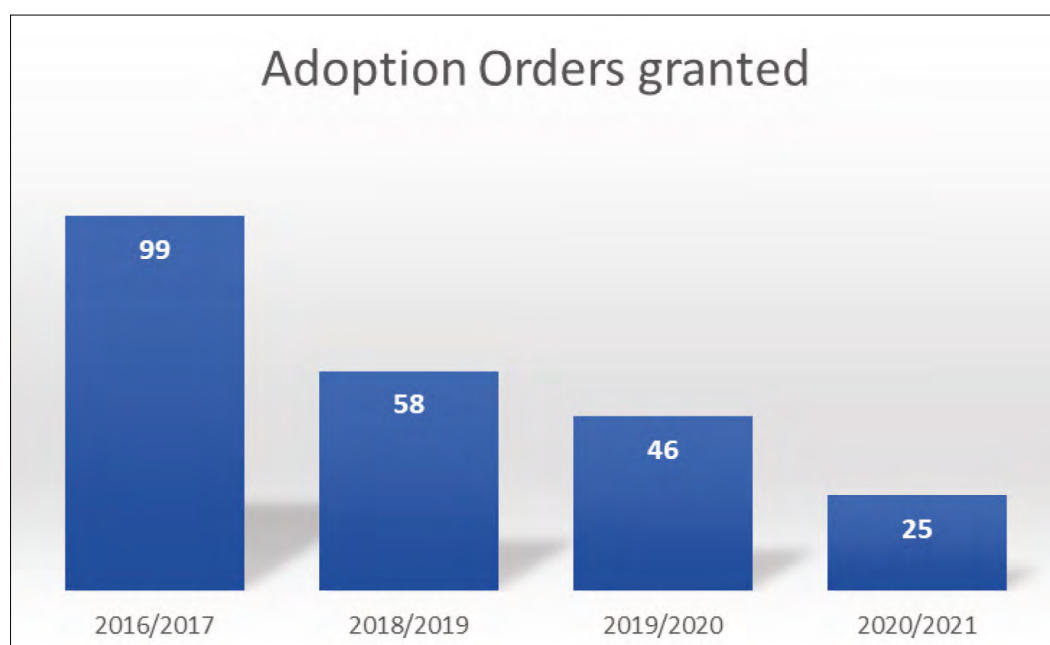
Adoption Orders have steadily declined over the past four years.

25 Adoption Orders were granted during 2020-2021, compared to **46** adoption orders granted during 2019-2020.

58 Adoption Orders were granted during 2018-2019 and **99** children adopted over 2016-2017.

One of the reasons for the steady decline is the trend for the Family Courts to make decisions for children to be placement within their wider families via Special Guardianship Orders or via placement with family as Family and Friends approved Foster carers.

The following graph shows the declining numbers of Adoption Orders being granted each year from 2017-2021, although this year's data may have been affected by delays in the Family Courts, particularly during the early part of the pandemic.

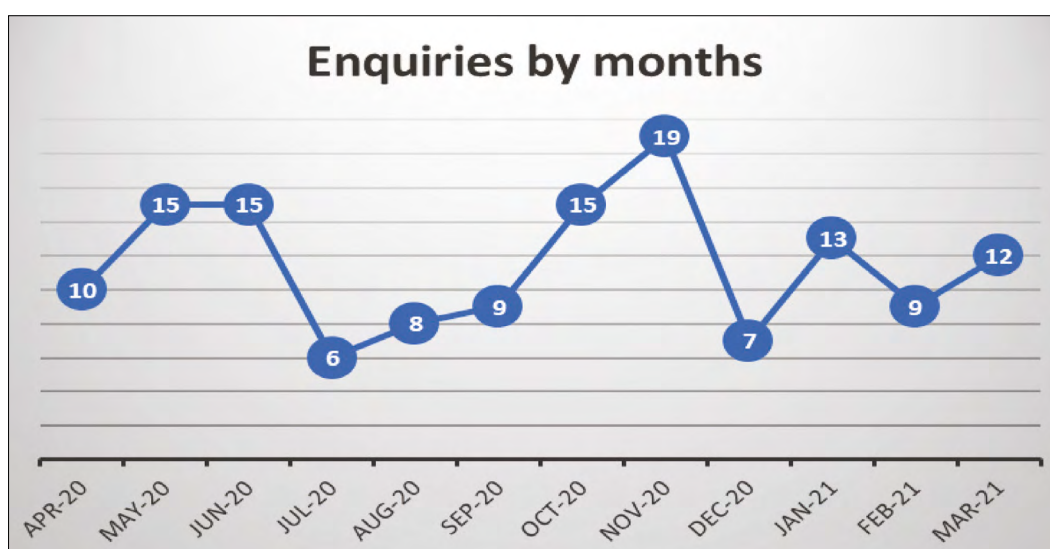


Our Adopters

During 2020-2021 we received **138** enquiries from people interested in adopting a child. This represented a 28% rise in enquiries between April and October 2020, compared to the same period over the previous year.

In contrast the service received **78** adoption enquires during 2019-2020 and **61** last year between 2018-2019.

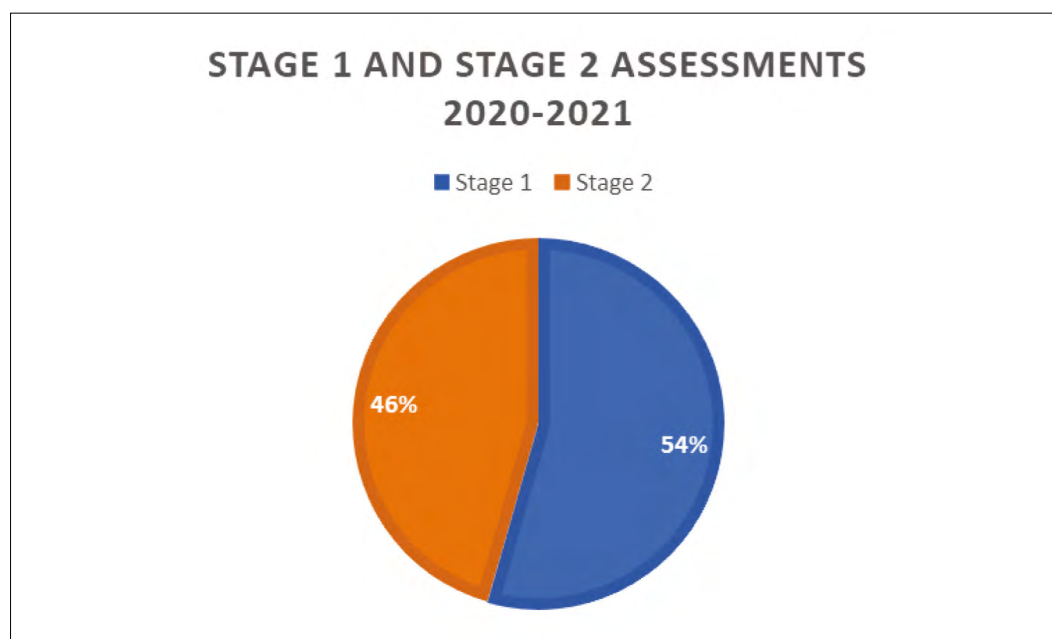
The following chart shows enquiries received by Hertfordshire Adoption Service by month over 2020-2021.



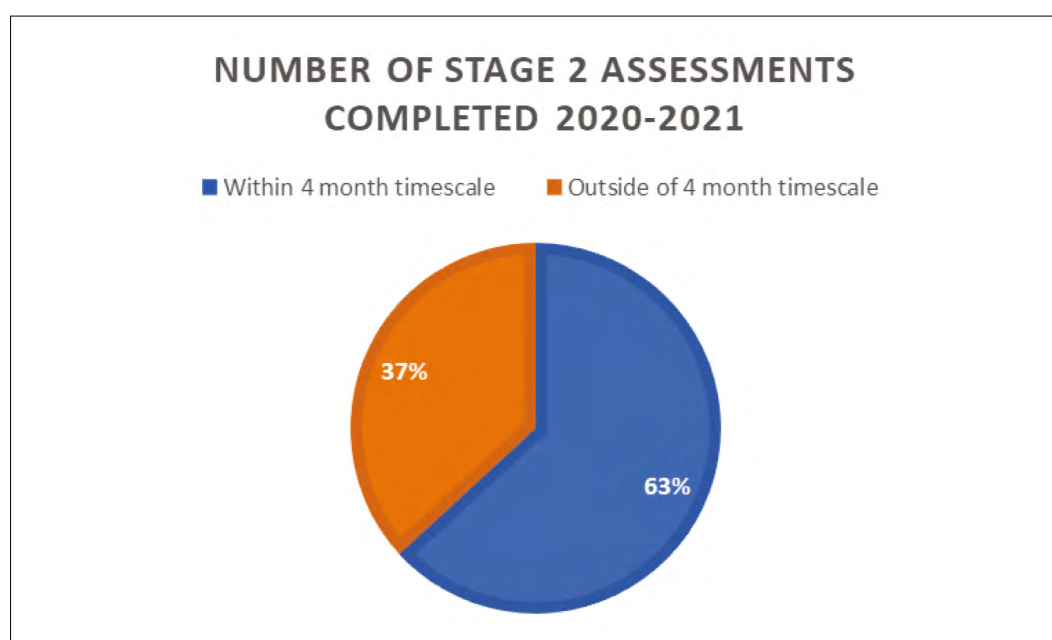
During 2020-2021, **43** Stage One Adoption Assessments were completed, **36** were completed over 2019-2020

During 2020-2021, **38** Stage Two Adoption Assessments were completed, **39** were completed over 2019 -2020.

The following chart shows the numbers of Stage One and Stage Two Adoption Assessments completed in Hertfordshire over 2020-2021.



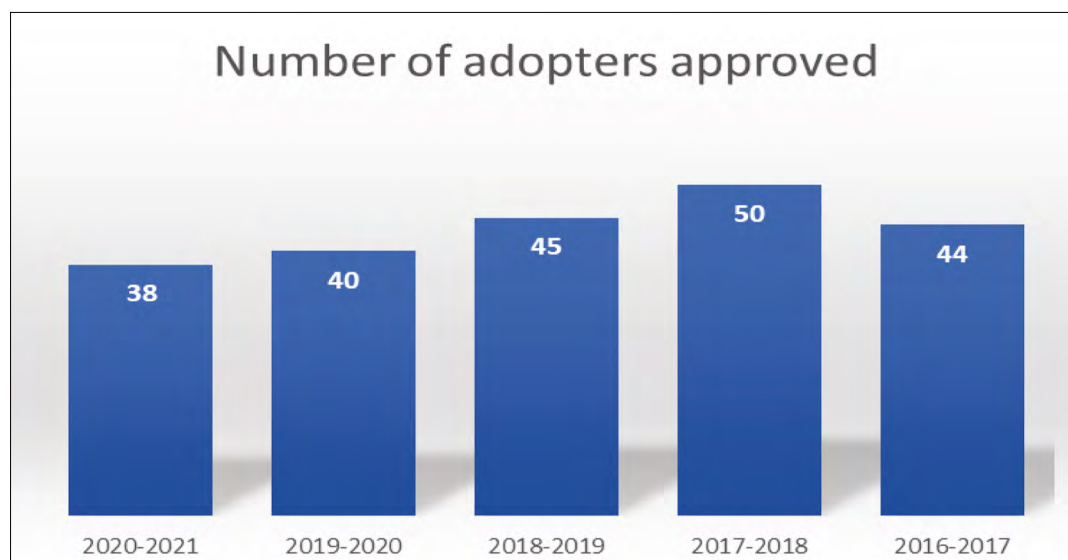
Of the **38** Stage Two Assessments completed over 2020-2021, **24** were completed within a 4 month timescale.



Approvals

38 adoptive households were approved Hertfordshire during 2020-2021.

The following table contrasts the number of adopters approved over the past 5 years from April 2016 to March 2021.



Dual Approval – Adoption and Fostering to Adopt

Over 2020-2021, there were **9** dual (foster to adopt) approvals. Foster to adopt approvals occur when an adopter is initially approved as a foster carer and then later as an adopter, enabling them to care for a child more immediately as a foster carer whilst they are assessed an adopter. They are important because they help with placement stability and continuity for a child and enable them to become settled in their permanent home more quickly. The service encourages dual approval wherever this is appropriate.

Adoptive households waiting

During 2020-2021, **5** approved adoptive households were waiting more than one year to be matched with a child from the date of their approval.

Out of County matches

Over 2020-2021, **8** Hertfordshire approved adoptive households were matched with children out of Hertfordshire. **2** of these matches were sibling groups of 2, the rest were individual children.

The Regional Adoption Alliance (RAA) Scorecard 2016-2019

The RAA Scorecard (previously known as the Adoption Scorecard) was first introduced in November 2011, to measure local authority performance in relation to achieving permanence for children looked after.

It is measured over a 3-year average and published 12 months after the reporting period has ended. The score card is published retrospectively with the latest data being 2019.

In Spring 2020 when the 2016-2019 Scorecard was published new indicators and changes were made to the RAA Scorecard. The purpose for these changes was to give Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) increased knowledge of their performance, and enable them to learn from other higher performing RAAs, with the aim of helping all RAAs to continually improve their performance and provide the best possible service to our most vulnerable children, their families, and prospective adopters.

For the period 2016-2019 the following improvements have been measured:

- ✓ The average time between a child entering care and moving to adoptive family in Hertfordshire was **413** days, **28** days faster than the time averaged over 2015-2018 which was **441** days.
- ✓ In 2019/2020 the average time between a child entering care and moving to an adoptive family in Hertfordshire has further reduced to **376** days which is the national average for the 2016-2019 period.
- ✓ The average time between a child entering care and the local authority receiving court authority to place a child for children adopted in Hertfordshire was **232** days, **25** days faster than the England Average of **257** days.
- ✓ In 2019 the average time between a child entering care and Hertfordshire obtaining a placement order was **215** days, **17** days faster than 2018 at **232** days.

The RAA Scorecard can be seen via this link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards>



Special Guardianship Orders

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) are private law orders which give the Special Guardian Parental Responsibility for the child concerned. Special Guardians are usually from within the child's wider family or close friendship group

An SGO is made where a child cannot return to a parent but does not need to remain within local authority care or be adopted, because there is someone within their wider family or friendship network who is able to look after them on a permanent basis.

SGOs are seen as an alternative to adoption. Special Guardians provide stability and permanence for a child who for whatever reason cannot continue to live with their birth family or where a parent has passed away.

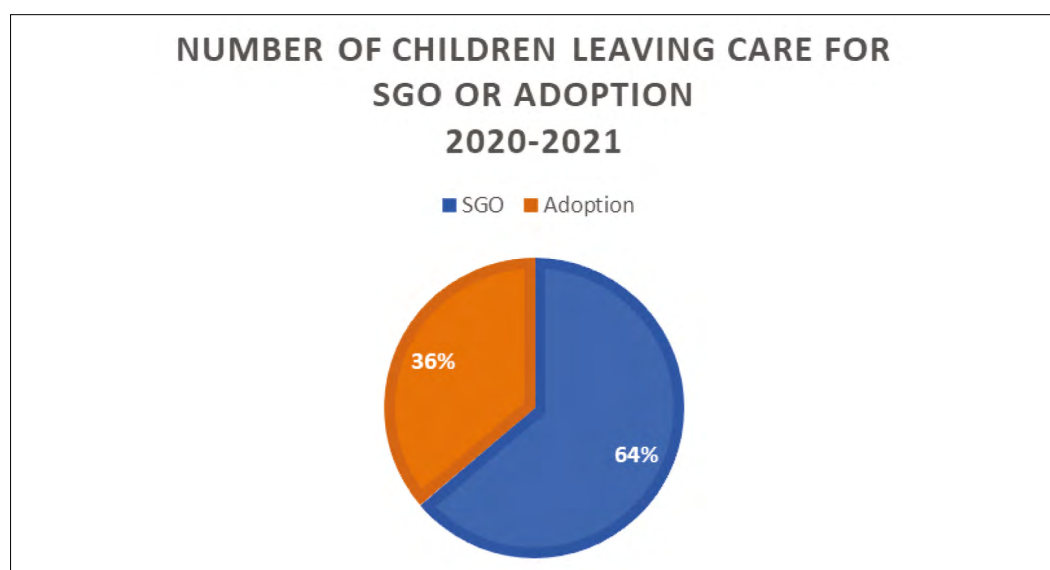
Under an SGO a child is able to maintain a relationship with their birth family and birth parents remain the child's legal parents, but their Parental Responsibility is limited. Contact is managed by the Special Guardian where it is safe to do so.

The completion of SGO reports is undertaken by the Family and Friends Fostering Service, who must assess the suitability of the prospective Special Guardians as permanent carers for children.

Two teams cover the North/East and South/West of the county. The Family and Friends Fostering Service in Hertfordshire are responsible for completing SGO reports in care proceedings of prospective Special Guardians, including those that live out of Hertfordshire and those who reside abroad, following the necessary international enquiries. Completion of the reports by Hertfordshire is governed by whether Hertfordshire is the responsible authority or in the case of a private SGO application, the Local Authority in which the prospective Special Guardian lives.

During 2020-2021, **44** children left care under SGOs.

The following graph shows the number of Hertfordshire children exiting care via SGO and via Adoption over 2020-2021.



Over 2020-2021 the Family and Friends Teams received a total of **156** referrals.

19 were for Family and Friends Fostering

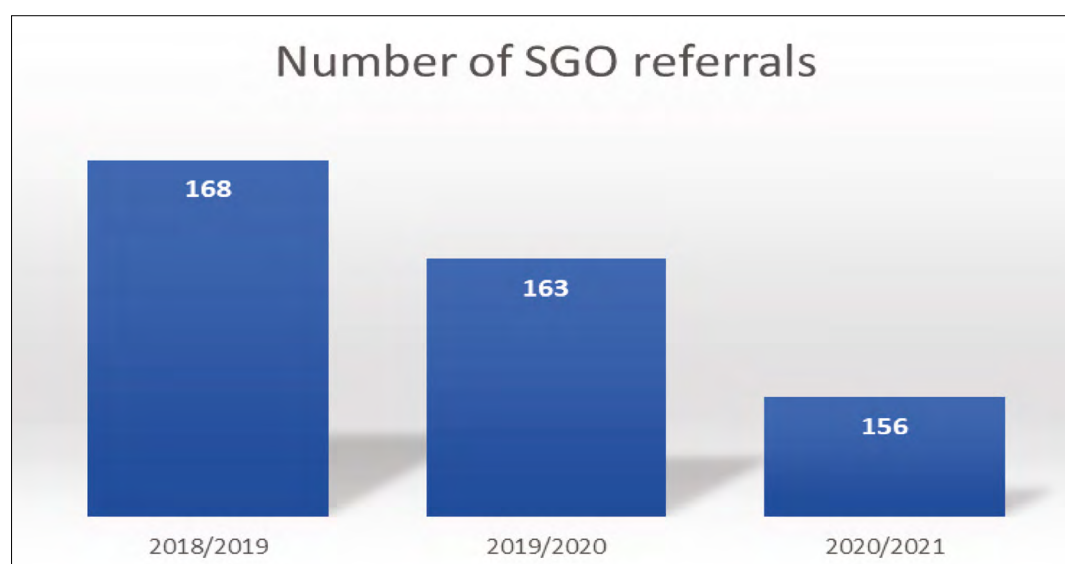
137 referrals were for SGO assessments.

Over 2019- 2020, there were of **163** referrals

During 2018-2019, there were **168** referrals.

It is important to highlight that not all these referrals resulted in SGO's being granted following the SGO assessment.

The following graph shows the numbers of referrals for SGP assessments received by Herefordshire from 2018-2021. the way the graph is drawn makes it look like there's a huge reduction yet we're saying there are more?



The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on court proceedings because have been significant delays in care proceedings being concluded. This in turn has impacted on the number of SGO's granted. It is predicted that there will be an increase in the number of SGO's over 2021-2022 as the courts open up fully and more proceedings conclude.

Over 2020-2021, the Family and Friends Fostering Service has seen an increase in Family Court requests for SGO reports in relation to duplicate family members. There has also been an increase in reports required as a parallel plan pending parenting assessment of one or both birth parents. An example from 2020-2021 was for a sibling group of three, where there were four court directed requests for SGO assessments of family members. Meaning that 12 SGO reports in total had to be completed for one family. The Family and Friends Fostering Service have also seen an increase in SGO reports being completed which do not result in any order being made.

There has been a steady rise in children under 5 placed under a Special Guardianship Order with **22** children leaving care by SGO over 2020-2021.

When the Local Authority place children within a family setting the Local Authority must regulate this placement under Regulation 27 Children Act 1989 and the family or connected person becomes a 'Family and Friends Foster Carer.'

All assessments for Family and Friends placements are taken to Hertfordshire's Fostering Panel for approval. Over 2020-2021, **28** applicants were approved under Regulation 27 at Hertfordshire's Fostering Panel. Some of these carers remain as Family and Friends Foster carers but many are also being assessed for an SGO. Children remain in their Family and Friends placements whilst the process of assessing the carers for Special Guardianship is completed.

During 2020-2021, there has also been an increase in children being placed within wider family under Regulation 24, that is their family are temporarily approved pending further assessment.

Before children are placed Special Guardians are provided with access to 'Under One Roof' preparation training. A support plan is also completed and submitted to the Family Court with the Special Guardianship Order report. Support plans are reviewed annually or more frequently if circumstances change.

All SGO carers are assessed for financial support which is means tested and where the criteria is met an allowance is paid. This is then reviewed annually.

Following the granting of an SGO, Special Guardian families do not have an allocated social worker. SGOs are intended so that these families can move forward and care for children independent of Local Authority involvement.

Families with SGOs are however offered ongoing support which can be accessed as and if they require it through a Special Guardianship duty social worker system.

Special Guardians have access to iLearn modules and training. Support Groups are available and held regularly and Special Guardians are invited to family activity days which are held twice a year.

If their child was previously looked after and they did not make a private application for an SGO (the application was via the Local Authority). Special Guardians also have access to:

- The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) for therapeutic support.
- The Virtual School.

At the end of March 2021, applications had been made to the Adoption Support Fund in respect of **10** families with SGOs. A total of £11,741.30 was received by these families for a range of specialist therapeutic provision.

Looking forward Hertfordshire are seeking to fully align the support for Special Guardians to that offered and provided to Adopters.

Disruptions

Disruptions are the term used for the breakdown of an adoptive placement. Hertfordshire has historically had a very low disruption rate, and this has been attributed to the quality of both our assessment and preparation services prior to adoption and our post adoption support services and support offer.

During 2020-2021 there was **1** disruption.

Over 2019-2020 there were **0** disruptions.

Disruption meetings are used to scrutinise cases and learn from a disruption as a group of multi agency professionals.

Hertfordshire use a strength-based approach, the meetings are chaired by an experienced independent person with social work expertise and the findings and recommendations are shared with relevant social workers, their managers, with multi-agency colleagues, the Adoption Panel and the Adoption Service.

Complaints, Feedback and Compliments

Compliments are received from adopters, children's social workers and multi-agency colleagues and are always very welcome.

During 2020-2021, **6** compliments were logged.

The Adoption Service received **2** formal complaint at stage 1 during 2020-2021. 1 Stage 1 complaint was partially upheld, the other Stage 1 complaint was not upheld.

The Adoption Service received a formal complaint at stage 2 during 2020-2021, this complaint was not upheld.

Finance

Financial Support for Adopters

Financial support for adopters (adoption allowances) continues to be available to meet the needs of children and ensure the stability of the adoption arrangement. Further discretionary payments for support are available, where resource is not covered by allowances or the Adoption Support Fund.

The year-end expenditure of £2,282,881.57 (adoption allowances) was fully aligned to resource availability (budget) of £2,361,216.30 supporting a total of 242 children

Inter-Agency Arrangements

During 2020-2021, 9 Hertfordshire children were placed in inter-agency arrangements costing £236 993. Hertfordshire adopters provided 9 placements for 10 children from other Local Authorities generating a total income of £263 620 from inter-agency fees.

Regionalisation - National Context and Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA)

Hertfordshire is part of the Regional Adoption Alliance known as Adopt East and on the 16th October 2020 Adopt East went live.

Adopt East is made up of Local Authority partners Hertfordshire, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Southend, Thurrock, Luton and Bedford Borough and also the Voluntary Adoption Agencies Adoption Plus and Barnardo's

Hertfordshire remained fully engaged in the change agenda for adoption and sought to respond robustly to the challenge by central government to increase the effectiveness of adoption services as set out in; 'An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay' (March 2012), 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes' in January 2013, and the adoption regionalisation agenda 'A Vision for Change' in March 2016.

Hertfordshire became part of discussions around Adopt East in 2015 and there has been ongoing discussion, work and progress over the past 5 years to get to the point of Adopt East being ready to go live.

The partners of Adopt East offer a wealth of specialist skills at all stages of the adoption journey and the alliance allows them to bring this together to provide a strong central support for all families going through the adoption process. The scale of the organisation means that adopters have access to a larger number of children waiting for adoption and this will help partners to match children with the right family for them, at the earliest opportunity. Adopt East is committed to providing good quality adoption support services to support all families with their adoption journey.



COVID-19 Pandemic

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on the 26th March 2020 lockdown measures in England legally came into force changing the way the adoption services were able to be delivered. Despite the need to adapt and change the way adoption services were delivered throughout 2020-2021 the adoption service in Hertfordshire was able to maintain its core business functions which is evidenced in the performance indicators outlined.

As required under national lockdowns, all staff had to adapt to working from home throughout 2020-2021 and most adoption staff have remained working from home.

The 'front door' – our Recruitment Team has remained open throughout 2020-2021 for adoption enquiries and all enquiries were able to be progressed virtually without delay.

All adoption recruitment and preparation training has been adapted to take place virtually and has continued to be virtual throughout 2020-2021.

Stage Two Assessments continued throughout 2020-2021. All Stage 2 assessments undertaken involved at least one home visit, no adopter was approved based on virtual visits alone.

As government restrictions eased a hybrid way of undertaking assessment visits evolved which included a combination of both virtual and face to face visits. This continued throughout 2020-2021.

All Adoption Panel's were conducted virtually.

Adoption Support visits both pre Adoption Order and post Adoption Order became virtual at the start of the national lockdown, however as government restrictions eased more face to face visits started to take place particularly with children and young people who had difficulty engaging in virtual support.

Many of the Adoption Support Funded therapy providers were able to continue the support of families virtually however, as with all the other areas, as government restrictions eased increased numbers of face to face therapeutic interventions resumed.

Direct work with children continued throughout 2020-2021 and most of this was done face to face where possible ensuring strict safety measures were in places as per government guidelines.

Children continued to be supported to transition from foster care to adoption throughout 2020-2021 and creative transition plans were put in place. Prior to any transitions commencing a COVID-19 risk assessment was undertaken in respect of all parties. Some foster carers and adopters really went the extra mile. They all self isolated for two weeks then the foster carers moved into the adoptive parents' homes for two weeks with the child to help the child through this transition as smoothly as possible.

This very challenging year highlighted the dedication, commitment and passion that the adoption service has for children with a plan of adoption in ensuring that the services provided continued to function as well as possible and children needs were still prioritised.

Our Key Objectives 2021-2022

- Review the current service, in particular post adoption support and contact including expanding the possibility of direct contact in line with modernising adoption.
- Continue to recruit adopters to match the needs of children waiting and not matched within the Adopt East region, including dually approved adopters.
- Continue to work with Adopt East partners to develop practice across the alliance to ensure the best possible outcome for children requiring adoption and adoptive families.
- Continue to focus on the planning activity that delivers timely matching for all children with a plan for adoption, utilising early permanency arrangements wherever possible and also increasing the number of children placed within the Adopt East region.
- Consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the needs of adoptive families and adapt the adoption support offer to provide timely, relevant and sustainable support that meets the needs of children, young people, their families and birth parents.
- Promote long term fostering with prospective adopters as an alternative route to permanence for some children during the initial enquiry phase.
- Work towards creating the most equitable support offer for children placed for permanence across adoption, special guardianship and long term foster care.



Summary

2020-2021 has been an unprecedented year due to COVID-19, government restrictions and national lockdowns. The real impact of COVID-19 will not be fully known for some time. Over the year Hertfordshire Adoption Service has had to adapt ways of working to overcome the challenges and to continue to deliver adoption services throughout the pandemic.

The performance of the Hertfordshire Adoption Service is linked to the overall performance within Children's Services in relation to achieving good outcomes for permanency. There are strong indications of improvements in the number of children matched and placed in adoptive families.

The Adoption Service continues to recruit successfully for adopters to meet the needs the needs of children waiting for adoptive families and remains committed to co-production of all service improvement plans with adopters and other key stakeholders (adopted young people and birth parents).

The Adoption Service is keen to strengthen engagement with key stakeholders.

The Adoption Service has remained committed to the regionalisation agenda and is a key partner in the Adopt East Alliance.

