



Hertfordshire Adoption Agency

Annual Report 2021-22



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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 2021 until 31st March 2022 and focussing on plans for development for 2022-2023.

The Adoption Service sits within Hertfordshire Children's Services and is overseen by the Operational Director for Specialist Services. The Adoption 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 provides the following core services in accordance with statutory requirements:

- Recruitment and assessment of prospective adoptive parents.
- Matching of children for adoption.
- Management of the 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).



Hertfordshire Adoption Service Structure and Individual Team Functions

The Adoption Service has 5 teams:

- 1 Recruitment Team
- 2 Assessments Teams

¹ A Special Guardianship Order is a court order stipulating that the family member or connected person cares for the child on a permanent basis until adulthood becoming a 'Special Guardian'. and

A Child Arrangement Order is an order from the Court which details the arrangements for a child, including where the child will live and how they will spend time with each parent

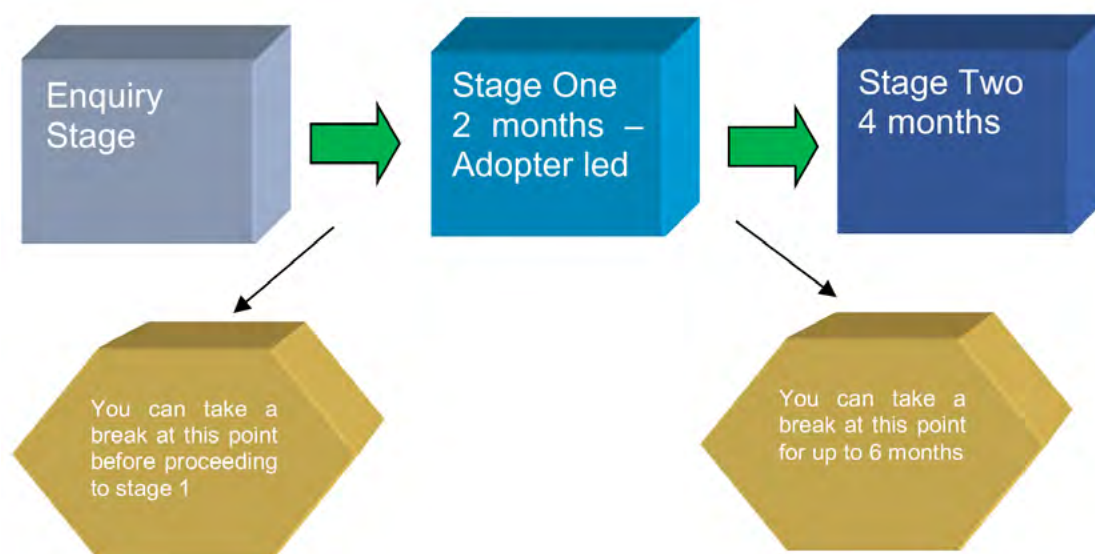
- 1 Family Finding Team
- 1 Post Adoption Support Team

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, ADMs are required to be senior managers and they endorse all panel recommendations either in favour of or against 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 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 Adoption 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 have locations in both Farnham House in Stevenage, and Rainbow House in St Albans however over the past year all adoption staff have adapted to a hybrid way of working.

Our Joint Adoption and Fostering Recruitment Team

Adoption recruitment activity is undertaken by a specialist Recruitment Team who undertake all the recruitment for both adoption and fostering in Hertfordshire.

During 2021-2022 the Recruitment Team managed 92 adoption enquiries.

The Recruitment Team run a monthly Adoption Information Evening for prospective applicants to find out more about adoption.

The Recruitment Team then run a further one day information session called 'Foundation Day' for any applicants wanting to explore the option of adoption further before they submit a formal Registration of Interest should they wish to proceed with being assessed. The Foundation Day is held monthly.

During 2021-2022 all the Adoption Information Evenings and Foundation Days have taken place virtually over Microsoft Teams due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Based on feedback from participants the plan for 2022-2023 as we come through the pandemic is for the Foundation Day training to return to face to face whilst the rest of the training sessions will remain virtual. This will continue to be reviewed on a quarterly basis.

Over 2021-2022 a Book Club focussed on material related to adoption was established for applicants in Stage 1. Meeting virtually monthly this group has been very popular.

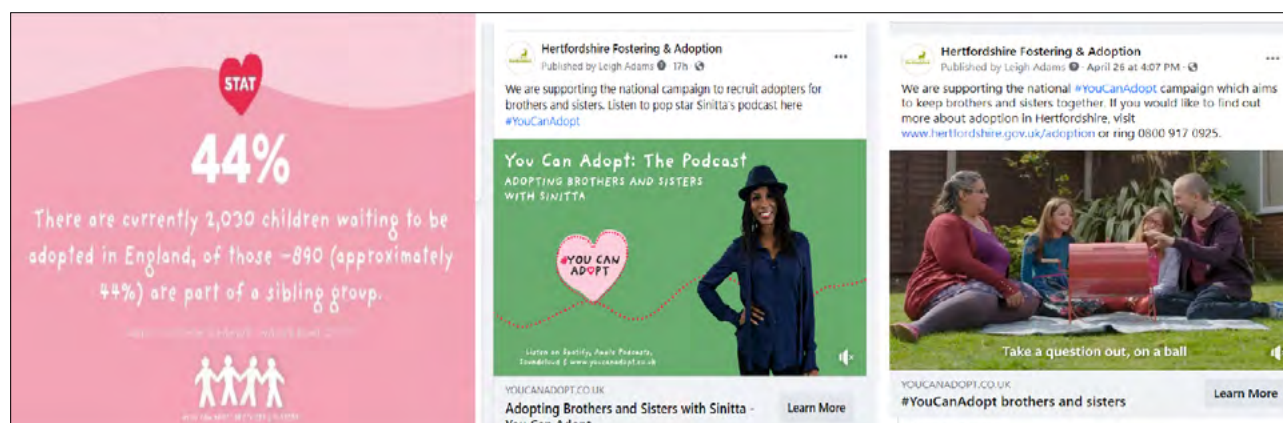
Adoption Recruitment Campaigns

As there continued to be a steady flow of applicants for adoption in 2021-2022, our campaigns have been centred on national and regional awareness weeks rather than on proactive targeted campaigns.

Over the last year, we have produced social media campaigns to mark the #YouCanAdopt Brothers and Sisters campaign, National Adoption Week and the Black Adopters campaign. We have highlighted these campaigns on Facebook and Twitter, on our Update Me subscription newsletter and have promoted them internally to staff.

#YouCanAdopt Brothers and Sisters campaign

We ran publicity for the #YouCanAdopt campaign for two weeks across the end of April and beginning of May, with social media for imagery and videos from Adopt East. This included promotional podcasts featuring adopters and celebrities like singer, Sinitta, videos, quotes from adopters and stat cards.



National Adoption Week

We shared in the national #YouCanAdopt campaign during the week of October 18-23, sharing images and videos created by Adopt East on our social media channels



Black Adopters Campaign

We ran a Black Adopters Campaign over social media in September, adapting material supplied to us by the #YouCanAdopt campaign team. There were some great images designed to catch the eye of scrollers on social media.



Recruitment Collaboration with Adopt East our Regional Adoption Alliance

Adopt East is a regional adoption alliance of eight local authorities (Southend, Thurrock, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Hertfordshire, Bedford and Luton), two voluntary adoption agencies (Adoptionplus and Barnardo's), and the charity Adoption UK.



As a member we have actively been involved developing Adopt East's Marketing and Communications Strategy, attending workshops to agree branding, messaging and direction, including sessions on the design of the website and associated wording.

We have worked with Adopt East partners to ensure a joined-up approach to our alliance, and to facilitate generation of new ideas regarding branding and marketing. It has been important to co-develop a new service that fits the needs of all counties involved. This work is ongoing as the creation of Adopt East continues.

Our Adoption Assessment Teams

Our two 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 and possibly dual approval as adopt. Final approval is then agreed by the ADM outside of the Adoption Panel.

During 2021-2022 the assessment teams completed 47 Stage Two assessments.

These included:

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

The Adoption Assessment Teams are responsible for supporting prospective adopters whilst waiting for a match post approval, throughout the family finding and matching process and then once they have a child placed up until the child is made subject to an Adoption Order. The adoption assessment social workers work across the country as Hertfordshire approved adoptive parents may have children placed from anywhere across the United Kingdom. Over 2021-2022 there has been an increased need for support for prospective adopters prior to placement and more immediately once a child is placed. This appears to have been during the COVID-19 pandemic, when families have been more isolated than they would usually have been.

Adoption Assessment social workers act as supervising social workers for early permanence placements. Early permanence is the term used for prospective adopters who are initially approved as foster carers and take children into their care as early as possible before they are approved as adopters. We have seen an increase in the number of early permanence placements over 2021-2022 which has increased the level of statutory work being undertaken by the adoption assessment teams.

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. Numbers of relinquished babies remain low each year. During 2021-2022, two relinquished babies were placed for adoption.

Adoption Assessment Teams facilitate the second half of the monthly, Adoption Preparation Training (APT). These courses are co-facilitated by an experienced adoptive parent and an experienced Adoption Social Worker.

Network Evening events provide an opportunity for those in Stage 2 awaiting a match to hear experiences directly from adoptive parents and adoptees and have continued to take place virtually on a quarterly basis. Over 2022-2023 we aim to expand Network Events to enable adopters across Adopt East to attend. For this reason, the network events will remain virtual.

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 worker to establish the child's precise needs and identify potential adoptive families.

Family Finding social workers work closely with other adoption agencies within the Adopt East region as well as across the United Kingdom, to find the best match for each child.

Matching Events

Our Matching Co-ordinator supports the timely matching of children and ensures planning takes place as early as possible, attending all Legal Planning Meetings for children with a potential plan of adoption and supporting colleagues with planning.

Over 2021-2022 a programme of regional Adopt East matching events took place. Four regional virtual profiling events took place and one face to face profiling event took place.

7 matching events known as 'Craft Days' took place. These events involve children taking part in a range of art and craft activities whilst being given the opportunity to meet prospective adopters. Nine Hertfordshire children attended seven Craft Days (three sibling groups and three single children).

During 2021-2022, the Adoption Service welcomed two applications from foster carers wishing to adopt children already in their care with a court agreed plan for adoption.

Ethnicity Match of Children

In Hertfordshire we are mindful to 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 the Linkmaker system and to our regional partners to identify families as quickly as possible.

We continue to work within statutory guidance regarding the placement of black and minority ethnic children, which 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 2021-2022, 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. Seven of the 41 children we placed for adoption during were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

Transitions and Siblings Assessments

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

Over 2021-2022, alongside our partners in Adopt East, we have started to follow the University of East Anglia (UEA) Moving to Adoption Model, a practice framework supporting children's moves from foster care to adoption. Over the coming year we plan to embed this model, so it is used consistently across Adoption and Fostering in Hertfordshire. For more information, please access their website here:

[Moving to Adoption – The UEA Moving to Adoption model](#)

Specialist Training

The FFT continued to provide specialist training to:

- Foster carers during children's transition to adoption
- Approved adopters in the process of being matched with a child.
- Children's Social Workers, in particular upskilling them in completion of sibling assessments.

The Adoption Support Team

The Adoption Support Team provide a range of adoption support services in accordance with *Part 1 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Adoption Support Regulations 2005 (ASR) and the Adoption Support (Amendment) Regulations 2014.*

The 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 which include:

Local Authorities need to provide:

- Counselling, advice, and information
- Therapeutic services
- Financial support.
- Services to support adoptive families and adoptive placements.
- Assistance in relation to arrangements for contact with birth families
- Expert advice and facility for discussion about all matters relating to adoption
- Adult records search and reunion.
- Letter box and post adoption contact service.
- Support in complex family situations.
- 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.

The demand for adoption support has continued to increase, evidenced through the increase in applications made to the ASF for therapeutic services, compared to the previous year.

During 2021-2022 the Adoption Support Team continued to adapt their core offer for adoptive families with a blend of virtual and face to face courses and groups. Over 2021-2022 the following courses and groups have taken place:

- 'Adopteens' - specialist programme for adopted young people
- Life story work training for adoptive parents
- Therapeutic parenting courses – both virtual and face to face
- Working in partnership with our Virtual School to provide a telephone helpline for education related queries.

The Adoption Support Team manage and support direct post adoption with children and their birth families. This is an area where the demand continues to increase. A children's practitioner is responsible for overseeing all direct contacts. This continues to be an area of growth as part of our modernising adoption agenda.

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 and an average of 10 new requests for a service each month. A dedicated children's practitioner manages this service.

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 to meet their individual needs.

Adopted Adults

The Adoption Support Team are responsible for all requests for Access to Adoption records as well as requests from Intermediary Agencies. Over 2021-2022 the service accepted 93 referrals for Access to Records and requests from Intermediary Agencies.

In addition, the service received an average of 5 enquiries per week from adopted adults and birth relatives of adopted adults.

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

Demand continues to grow year on year for therapeutic services for adoptive families due to the adopted children's increasing complexity of need. These services are critical in supporting 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 2022, 286 applications were made to the Adoption Support Fund, with a total of £767,119.37 being received for a range of specialist therapeutic provision and assessment, including Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), Sensory Integration Therapy and Play Therapy.

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

This is a significant increase on £626,579.95 drawn from the fund over 2020-2021 and on the 234 applicants made in 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 2 packages of therapeutic support with a total spend of £3081.03

The ASF will continue into 2022-2023, after which time it is due to be reviewed again by central government.

Hertfordshire's Adoption Hub

Hertfordshire's Adoption Service developed and launched the first Adoption Hub the previous over 2020-2021, offering support to new adoptive parents and their children from an experienced adopter acting as a Hub Lead Carer. The aim of the hub was 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, providing crucial support for fostering families.

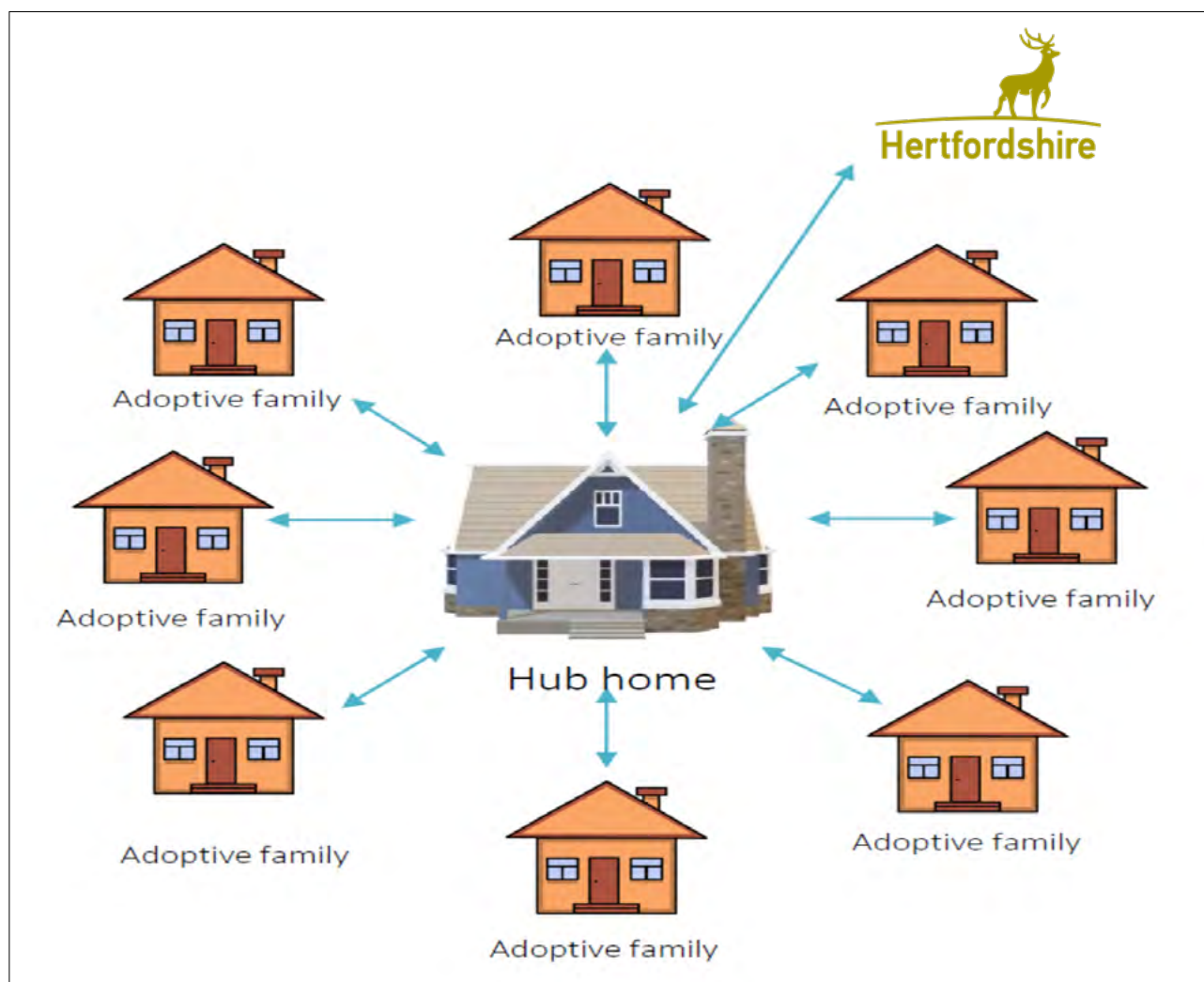
Key is the recruitment of the Hub Home Lead Carer who, in close liaison with the Adoption Service, offers practical and emotional support to the adoptive families connected as part of the Hub.

In 2021-2022 Hertfordshire's First Adoption Hub has continued to go from strength to strength. 10 adoptive families have been supported by the Hub at any one time. The Hub provides the following services:

- A readily available support from a dedicated hub carer.
- The fun of a monthly get together
- Regular support meetings including coffee mornings/evenings
- Increased emotional and practical support network for adopters and children in their care.



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.



In 2021-2022 a Department for Education (DfE) bid of £115 000 was awarded to Adopt East and Hertfordshire was selected as the lead agency to develop several Adoption Hub's across the Adopt East region. We launched Adopters Together Community Hub (ATCH) and subsequently 3 ATCH's have been launched across Adopt East with 3 more due to be launched soon.

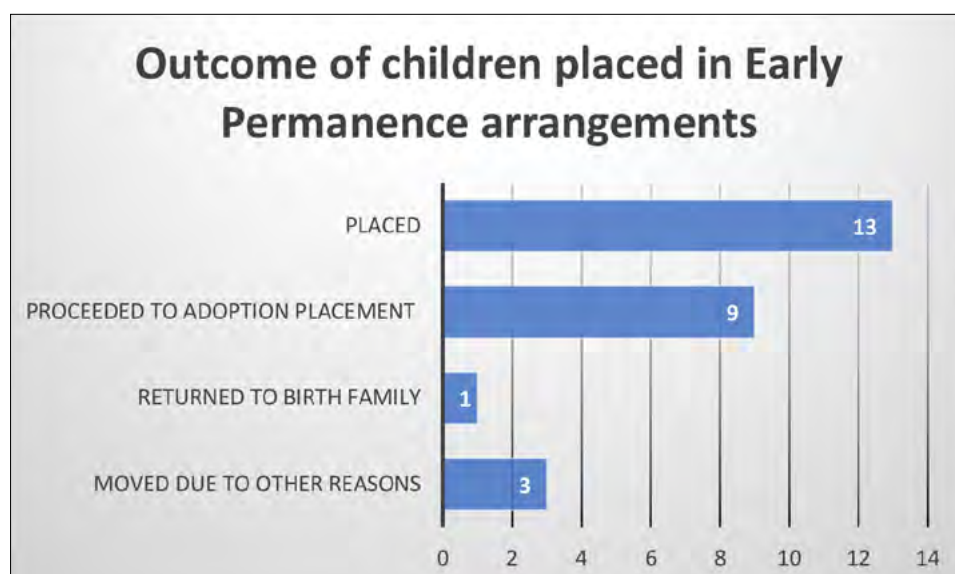
Early Permanence (Foster to Adopt)

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 the child to settle as early as possible, providing the best 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 13 children placed in Early Permanence Placements over 2021-2022. 2 of the children placed in early permanence were relinquished babies and for both children they have proceeded to be matched and placed with the early permanence carers under adoption regulations. 1 child was placed by another Local Authority outside of Adopt East with Hertfordshire approved early permanence carers and the remainder were Hertfordshire children placed with Hertfordshire approved early permanence carers. Of all these children placed under early permanence 2 children returned to the care of birth family and 3 children experienced a move from their early permanence carers.



Prospective adopters are encouraged to attend an additional specialist training session on early permanence/fostering to adopt and dual approval. This course is a day and a half in length and is co-facilitated by an experienced early permanence carer and an experienced adoption social worker.

The Hertfordshire Adoption Panel

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

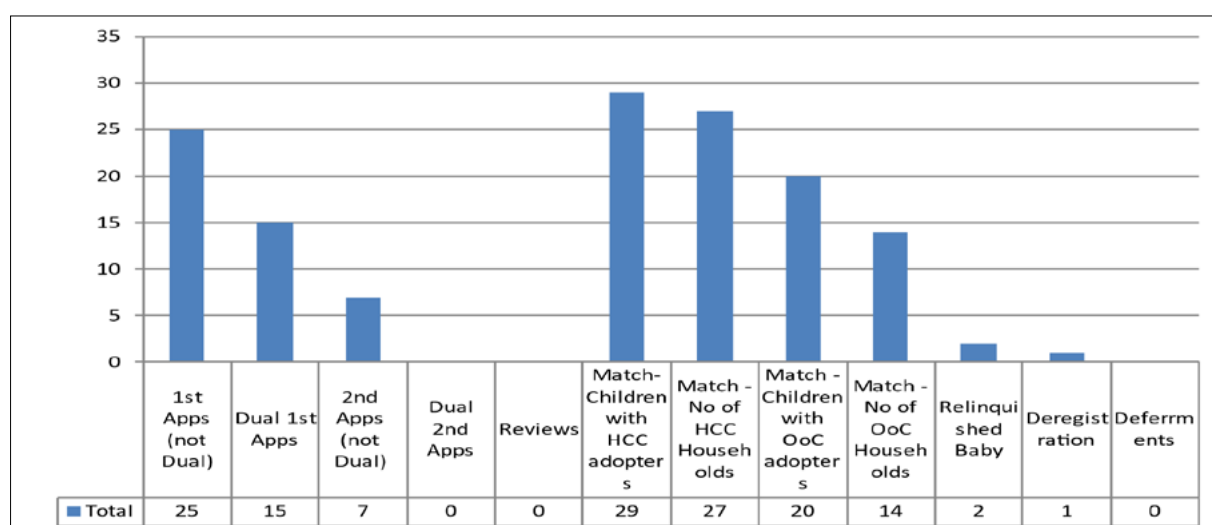
- Assessments of prospective adoptive parents for approval
- The assessment of dually approved carers (early permanence/foster for adoption)
- The matching of children to be placed for adoption with approved prospective adopters
- De-registration of approved adoptive parents who no longer wish to progress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

In 2021-2022 the Adoption Panel heard 88 adoption cases in total. Of these there were:

- 41 matches
- 47 approvals
- 1 deregistration

No approvals were deferred.

Adoption Panel Activity 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022



The Adoption Panel is organised and administered by a Panel Team which supports both the Fostering and Adoption Panels. The Panel and the Fostering and Adoption management teams meet three times per year to discuss service developments and best practice. 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. Lynn Busby has continued to serve as Interim Chair since the resignation of Wes Cuell in March 2021.

The following passage has been taken from the 2021-2022 Adoption Panel Chair's Annual Report:

"It has been a very busy and productive year for adoption panel. I am proud to report that Panel has the benefit of efficient systems which means that recommendations are ratified by the ADM in a timely way ... There has been one occasion this year when the ADM has not agreed with a panel recommendation. This was fully discussed and reflected upon by all concerned and there has been learning for all concerned. The ADM regularly observes panel to ensure standards are maintained and panel abiding by regulations. Panel has a close and mutually respectful relationship with the ADM and other senior managers within the authority.

The members of the Hertfordshire Adoption Panel remain very committed to the importance of their roles in ensuring the overall quality of the assessment, approval and matching processes that eventually lead to successful adoption placements. Adoption Panel will welcome the return to face-to-face Panels. None of us could have predicted how long this pandemic would impact us all, nor that panel would learn to function so well in the virtual world. Adoption Panel believes it has responded well to the challenges presented by Covid-19."

Non-Agency Adoption

Non-Agency Adoption is managed by the Adoption Service and 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.

As with agency adoption assessments, a two-stage process is followed and robust monitoring through supervision and tracking meetings takes place to ensure a timely service is delivered. 4 Non-Agency Adoption application were progressed by the Adoption Service during 2021-2022.

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.

We plan to joint commission the Inter-County Adoption Centre (IAC) together with our partners in Adopt East and continue to provide this service.

Independent Support to Birth Relatives

Since April 2020 we have commissioned Adoption Plus, a voluntary adoption agency to provide independent counselling support for birth relatives where a child has a plan of adoption and to adopted adults who have contacted Hertfordshire for support accessing their records where they would benefit from counselling.

Over 2021-2022, 48 referrals have been made to Adoption Plus. Of these, 33 people attended at least one counselling session. This is a significant increase from 2020-21 when 15 referrals were made.



Participation

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

All training continues to be co-facilitated by an Adoption Social Worker together with an experienced adoptive parent. This ensures the adopter's voice and adopters 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 the Adoption Social Group Co-ordinators to ensure a feedback loop and exchange of vital information between adoptive families and the Service is maintained.

Over 2021-2022 there has been an increase in the number of regional support groups available for adoptive families. These groups are usually facilitated by an adoption social worker and an adoptive parent. There is a dedicated group for solo adopters, a virtual group for early permanence carers and a group for LGBTQ+ adopters. We also have a regional support group for adopted teenagers called Say It Like It Is.

The voices and participation of our adopted children and young people are key in influencing and shaping our Adoption Service. Resuming face to face direct work with adopted children and young people was prioritised as soon Covid-19 government restrictions eased to ensure each child were being seen and heard during a time when many were not in school and had more restricted contact and levels of social support. This practice continued throughout 2021-2022.

Hertfordshire's Youth Panel is a facilitated group of adopted young people who meet on a quarterly basis to share their experiences of adoption to prospective adoptive parents. The Youth Panel resumed face to face in 2021-2022.

The core offer group for adopted teenagers called 'Adopteens' provides a good opportunity for adopted young people to share their experiences and have a voice in shaping the adoption service. The plan for 2022-2023 is to develop an 'Adopteens' group for adopted young people who are within the tweens age group.

Over 2022-2023 we plan to resume a support group for birth parents, so they have a stronger voice within the adoption service.

Adoption UK represents the voice of the adoptive parents more widely within Adopt East and we are fortunate to have an Adopt East Adopter Voice Representative from Hertfordshire to ensure adoptive parents within Hertfordshire have a voice in shaping our services in Adopt East.

Regionalisation - National Context and Regional Adoption

Agencies (RAA)

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

As noted above ,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. Adoption UK represent the adopter voice.

Since discussions around Adopt East started in 2015 Hertfordshire has 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.

The partners of Adopt East offer a wealth of specialist skills at all stages of the adoption journey and the alliance allows us 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 helping to match children with the right family at the earliest opportunity. Adopt East is committed to providing good quality adoption support services to support all families with their adoption journey.

Performance

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

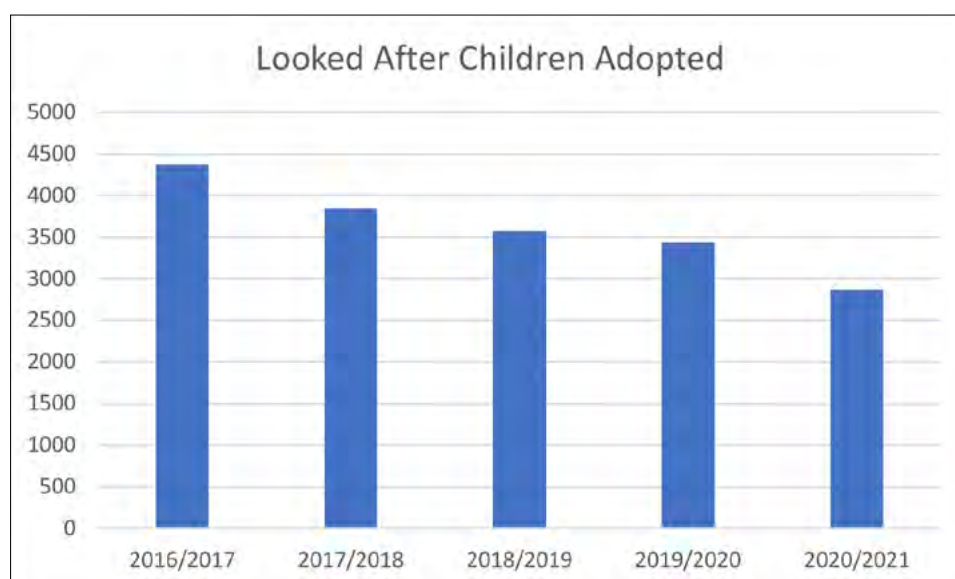
The Family Justice Review's requirement for a 26-week timescale for care proceedings has continued to have a significant impact on the timeliness of permanence planning for children. Local Authorities are required to develop permanence plans for children and place them in alternative family arrangements more quickly. 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. Consequently, 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. The National Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board continue 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).

Nationally there has been a decline in adoptions since 2015. Between 2020-2021, 2870 children were adopted nationally, an 18% decrease from 2019-2020. Previously from:

- 2018-2019, 3570 children were adopted
- 2017-2018, 3,850 children were adopted
- 2016-17, 4,370 children were adopted



The below graph reflects the decline in adoptions nationally



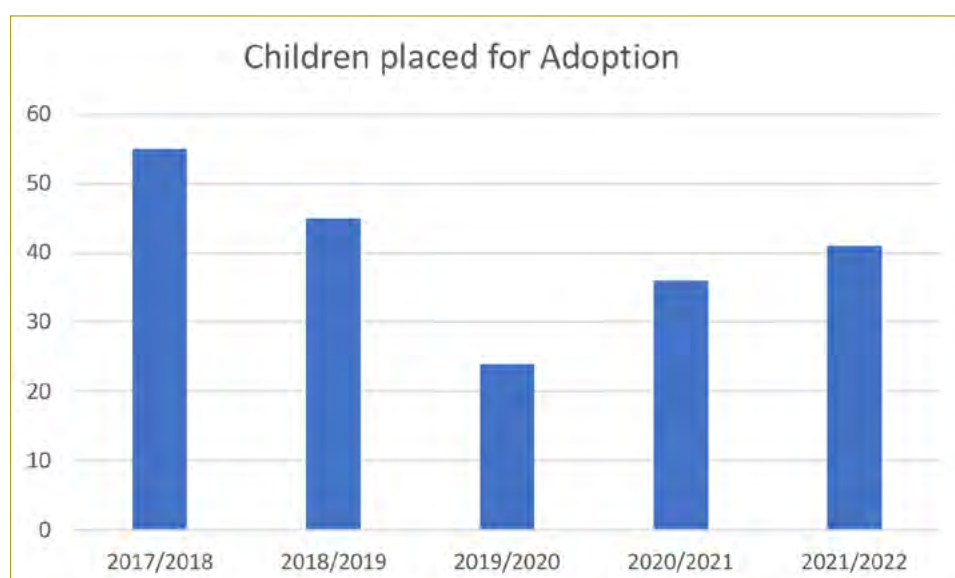
Hertfordshire children placed for adoption

During 2021-2022, **41** children were placed for adoption.

This is an increase compared to 2020-2021 when **36** children were placed for adoption and previously:

- Over 2019-2020 **24** children were placed for adoption
- Over 2018-2019, **44** children were placed for adoption
- 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 2017-2022.

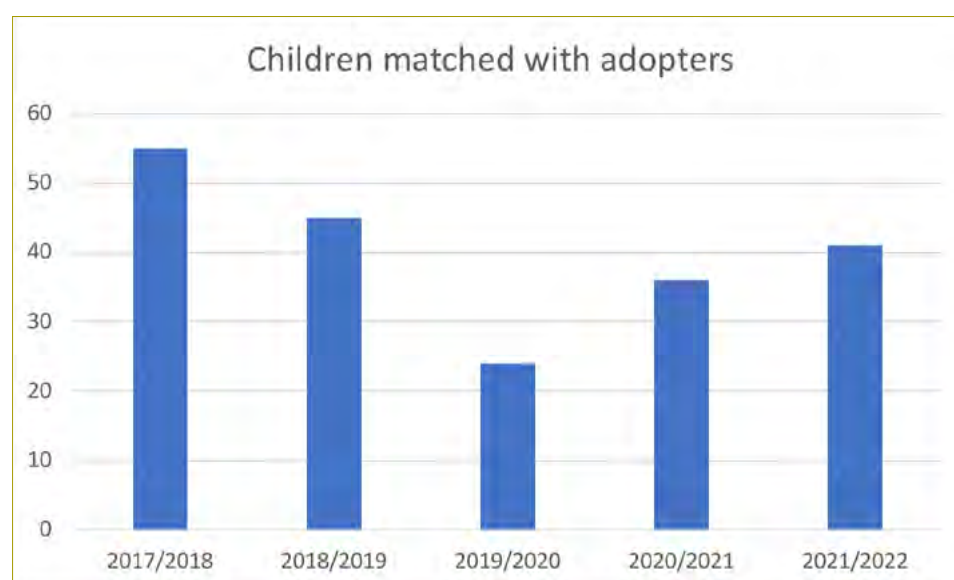


Hertfordshire children matched with adopters

41 children were matched with adopters during 2021-2022

This is higher than the previous year 2020-2021 when **36** children were matched.

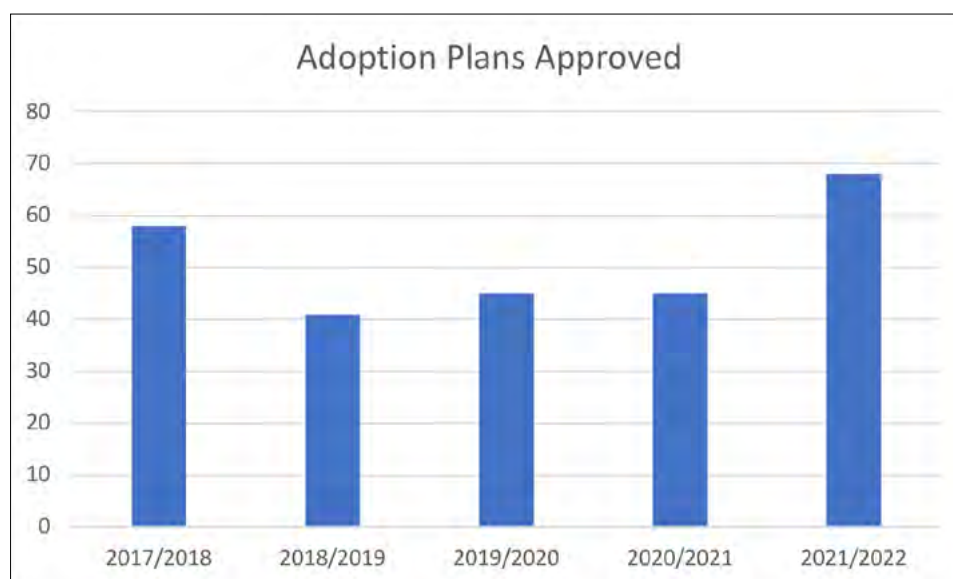
The following graph shows the numbers of Hertfordshire children successfully matched with their adoptive families each year from 2017-2021.

***Adoption Plans Approved***

During 2021-2022, **68** Adoption Plans were approved by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

- **45** Adoption Plans were approved in 2020-2021
- **45** Adoption Plans were approved in 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 2017-2022.



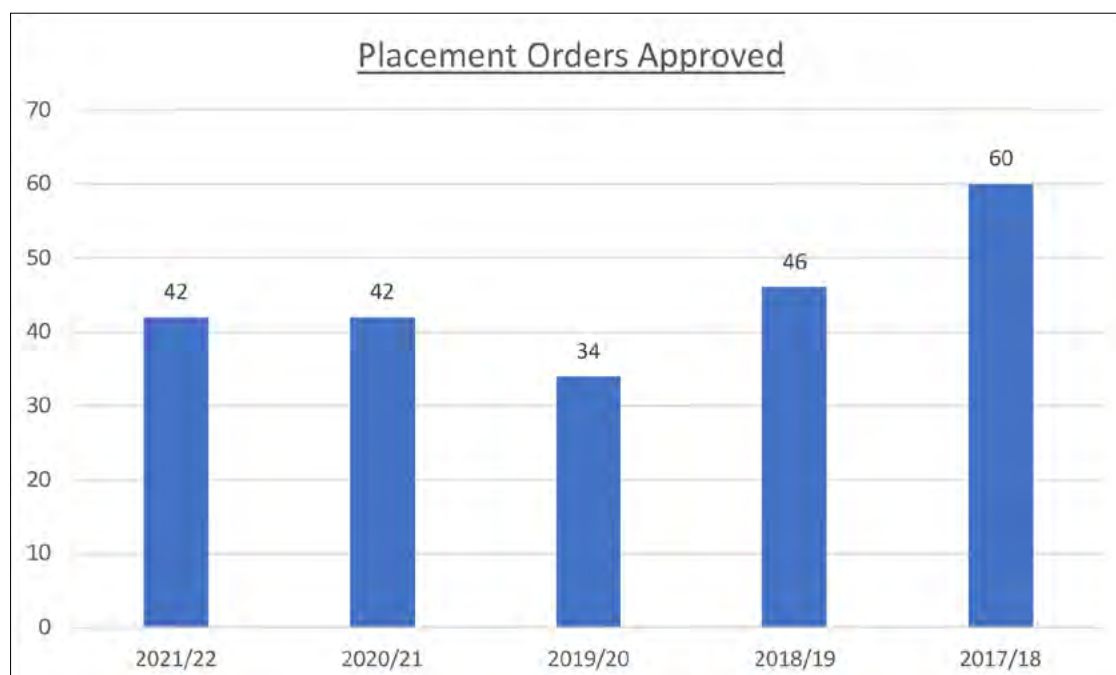
Placement Orders

During 2021-2022, **42** children received a court approved Plan for Adoption (Placement Order). This is the same number as the previous year 2020-2021.

- Over 2019-2020, **34** Placement Orders were granted.
- Over 2017-2018, **46** Placement Orders were granted
- Over 2016-2017, **60** Placement Orders were granted.



The following graph shows the numbers of Hertfordshire Placement Orders which were granted each year from 2017-2022.



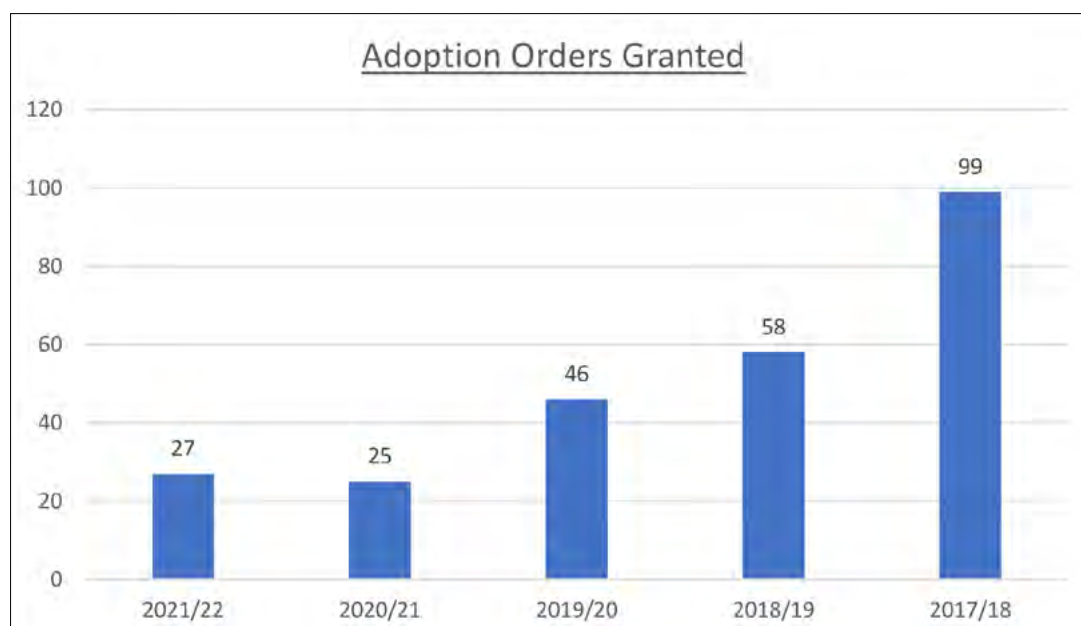
Adoption Orders

27 Adoption Orders were granted during 2021-2022 which is a slight increase from 2022-2021 when 25 Adoption Orders were granted.

- **46** adoption orders granted during 2019-2020.
- **58** Adoption Orders were granted during 2018-2019
- **99** Adoption Orders were granted over 2016-2017.

There was a slight increase in the number of Adoption Orders granted over 2021-2022 but this was a result of courts decreased capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore difficult at this stage to ascertain whether there is any reversal trend back toward growth, what is known is that the number of adoption orders has been declining steadily since 2017.

The following graph shows the numbers of Adoption Orders being granted each year since 2017-2022, we think this year's data may have been affected by delays in the Family Courts, particularly during the early part of the pandemic.



Our Adopters and Enquiries

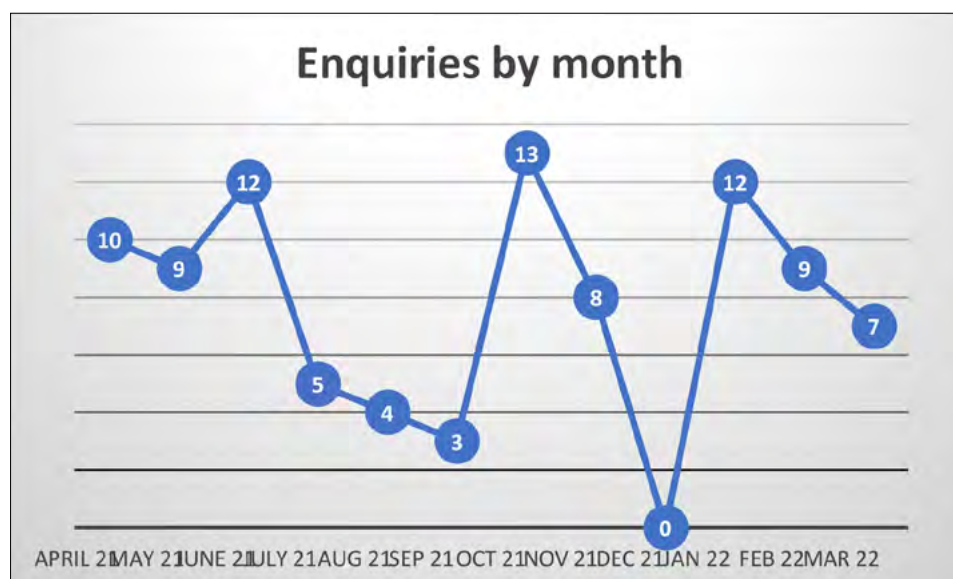
During 2021-2022 we received **92** enquiries from people interested in adopting a child.

This is a decrease in the number of enquiries received in 2020-2021 when we received **138**

The service received:

- **78** adoption enquires during 2019-2020
- **61** adoption enquires between 2018-2019.

The following chart shows enquiries received by Hertfordshire Adoption Service by month over 2021-2022.



During 2020-2021, **41** Stage One Adoption Assessments were completed, this is 2 less than the previous year 2020-2021 when 43 Stage One Assessments were completed.

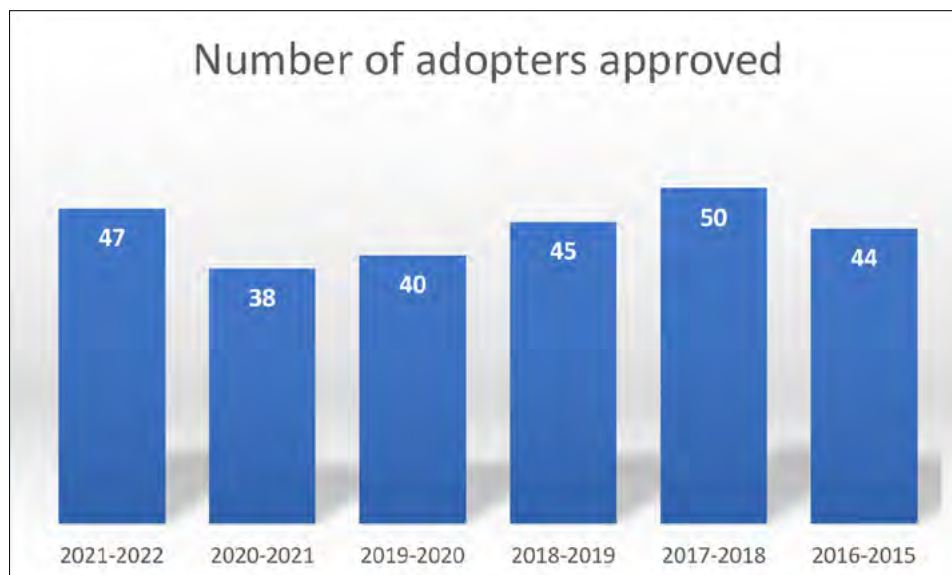
During 2021-2022, **47** Stage Two Adoption Assessments were completed, this is an increase of 9 more than the previous year 2020-2021 when **38** Stage Two assessments were completed.

Approvals

47 adoptive households were approved by Hertfordshire during 2021-2022.



The following table contrasts the number of adopters approved over the past 6 years between April 2016 and March 2022.



Dual Approval – Adoption and Fostering to Adopt

Over 2021-2022, there were **15** dual (foster to adopt) approvals.

Compared to **9** dual (foster to adopt) approvals in 2020-2021

Adoptive households waiting

On the 31st March 2022 there were **3** approved adoptive households waiting more than one year from the date of their approval to be matched with a child, due to their matching criteria being highly specific.

A further **4** approved adoptive households had been waiting more than two years from date of approval to being matched. This was due to changes in circumstances and again very specific matching criteria.

Matches outside of Hertfordshire

- Over 2021-2022, **1** Hertfordshire approved adoptive household was matched with a sibling group of 2 children outside of Adopt East.
- Over 2021-2022 **10** Hertfordshire approved adoptive households were matched with children outside of Hertfordshire but within Adopt East. **3** of these matches were sibling groups of 2.

The Regional Adoption Alliance (RAA) Scorecard 2016-2019

The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Scorecard (previously known as the Adoption Scorecard) was first introduced in November 2011, to measure local authority performance across local authorities 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, our current RAA Score Card has data from the period ending March 2020

In Spring 2020 new indicators were added to the RAA Scorecard to give Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) enhanced knowledge of their performance and enable them to learn from other higher performing RAAs.

In Hertfordshire between 2017-2020:

- ✓ The average time between a child entering care and moving to adoptive family was **356** days, **11** days faster than the time averaged in England
- ✓ 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 **228** days, **28** days faster than the England Average of **256** days.

Our RAA Scorecard can be seen at this link:

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



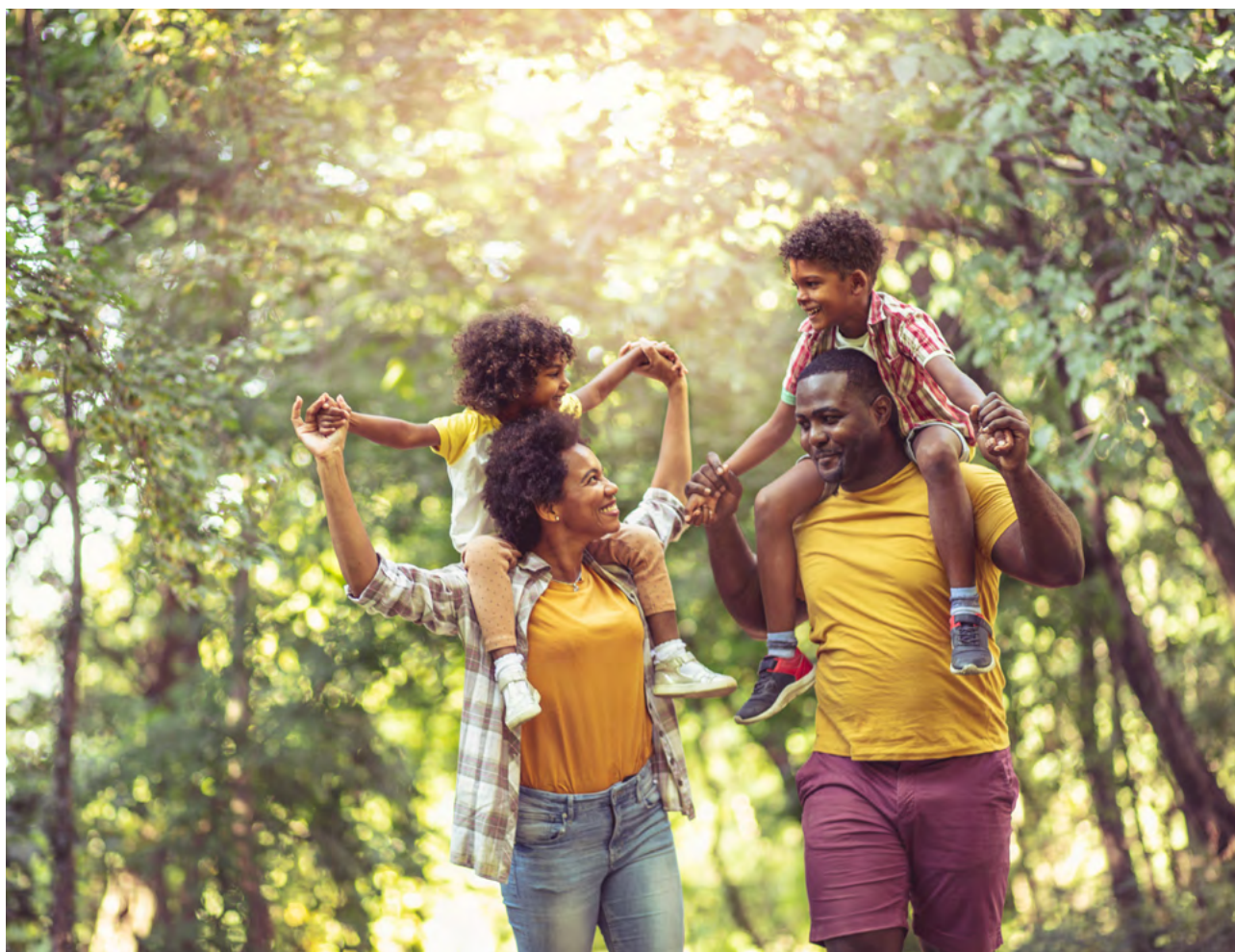
Equalities Implications

The Adoption Services is a culturally sensitive service, ensuring that all people are treated with equal respect and receive equal access to services and links to the wider Children's Services Diversity and Inclusion agenda.

All out recruitment and publicity material reflects our diverse population.

Diversity training features particularly within preparation and assessment training and in our ongoing support of adoptive families.

The Adoption Service constantly strives to recruit carers from diverse background who reflect the needs of our Hertfordshire children needing families.



Special Guardianship Orders

Family and Friends or Kinship foster carers are people who have been approved by the Local Authority to foster children within their family or friendship network who are unable to live at home with their parents. We have two dedicated Family and Friends Fostering teams based in Apsley and Farnham House. These teams assess and support all family members, friends and other connected people caring for children within their family and social networks.

When the Local Authority are involved in the placement of children within a family setting the Local Authority must comply with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, by assessing the prospective family members or connected persons as carers and taking the case to Hertfordshire's Fostering Panel for formal approval. In 2021-2022, 61 applicants were approved to become Family and Friends Foster Carers. The Family and Friends team support both approved carers and those carers who are going through the assessment process.

Some of these carers remain as Family and Friends Foster carers but many are also assessed for a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) this is a court order that the family member or connected person cares for the child on a permanent basis until adulthood becoming a 'Special Guardian'.

Special Guardians have access to:

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

At 31.03.22, **385** Special Guardians were being supported by the Family and Friends Service.

During 2021-2022, **22** applications from Special Guardians were agreed by the Adoption Support Fund.

Disruptions

Disruption is the term used for the breakdown of an adoptive placement prior to an Adoption Order being granted. Hertfordshire has historically had very low disruption rates. This has been attributed to the quality of our assessments, the way we prepare prospective adopters and our post adoption support services.

During 2021-2022 there were **2** disruptions.

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 2021-2022:

- **6** compliments were formally logged with the Complaints Team.
- **1** informal complaint was received and resolved satisfactorily.
- **1** formal complaint had been received but was still being investigated on 31.03.22.
- **1** complaint progressed to the Local Government Ombudsmen (LGO) and has now been satisfactorily resolved.

Finance

Financial Support for Adopters

Adoption allowances continue to be available to meet the needs of children and ensure the stability of the adoption. Further discretionary payments for support are available, where needs are not covered by allowances or the Adoption Support Fund.

The year-end expenditure of £2,414,999 (adoption allowances) was fully aligned to resource availability (budget) of £2,373,371 supporting a total of 247 children

Inter-Agency Arrangements and costs

During 2021-2022, 11 Hertfordshire children (6 placements including 2 sibling groups of 3 children and two sibling groups of 2 children and 37 single children) were placed in inter-agency arrangements costing £294,556. Hertfordshire adopters provided 5 placements for 6 children from other Local Authorities generating a total income of £136,454 from inter-agency fees.

As of 1st July 2021, interagency fees between Adopt East Local Authority alliance members were abolished by agreement. From 1st July 2021 to 31st March 2022 Hertfordshire placed 10 children within Adopt East.



Key Priorities 2022-2023

- Continue to develop practice in assessment as the lead Adopt East partner.
- Consolidate our partnership in Adopt East through increased joint commissioning of support services.
- Participate in the review of front door arrangements across Adopt East.
- Continue to ensure timely permanence for children by utilising early permanence (foster to adopt) arrangements wherever possible and increasing the number of children placed within Adopt East.
- Continue to develop our modernising permanence agenda by increasing contact with birth families.
- Work with partners in fostering and kinship care towards creating the most equitable support offer for children placed for permanence across adoption, special guardianship and long term fostering.

