

Cabinet

20 June 2023

Aspire Adoption Annual Report for Dorset Council

1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr B Quayle, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

Dorset Council has a duty under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to establish and maintain an adoption service for its area.

Dorset Council along with BCP Council discharges this duty through a delegation of functions to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency. Dorset retains overall responsibility for its adoption and special guardianship services, continuing to have parental responsibility for its own Children in Care but most adoption and some special guardianship functions are delegated to Aspire Adoption.

The appended report is the sixth annual adoption report presented by Aspire Adoption, summarising the work of the agency in the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023. It has been written to provide the Council with an opportunity to satisfy itself that the requirements of the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013 and the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014 are met.

This report provides a summary of the comprehensive self-evaluation of Aspire Regional Adoption Agency

Recommendation:

That Cabinet approve Aspire Annual Report and Statement of Purpose.

Reason for Recommendation:

That Cabinet is satisfied that Aspire Statement of Purpose accurately describes the activities that the agency discharges on behalf of Dorset Council and the Annual Report satisfies the report that these activities were discharged to a high standard in the reporting year.



Aspire Adoption Annual Report for Dorset Council

1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1 This is the sixth annual report for Aspire Adoption Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

1.2 During the year 2022-2023 there have been significant changes within Aspire, there was a permanent appointment to the Service Manager post in October 2022, following a period of Interim service managers, two changes of Team Manager, and a partner Voluntary Adoption Agency closed.

2. Children's Adoption Performance Data

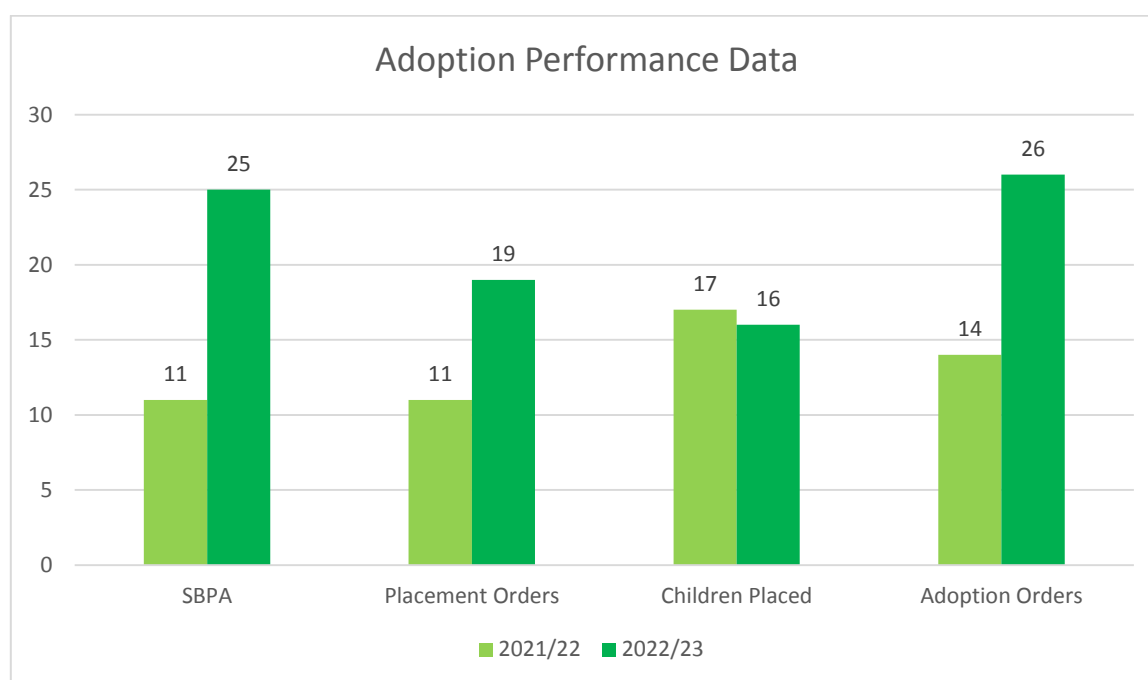


Fig1. Adoption Performance Data

2.1 Should be placed for Adoption Decisions (SBPA)

More children had a Local Authority Should Be Placed for Adoption (SBPA) plan this year.

Dorset have made a total of 25 SBPA decisions in 2022/2023 which is an increase of 127% over the 11 made in 21/22.

Of the 25 SBPA decisions made, 9 were boys and 16 girls, there were 6 sibling groups, 3 of which were groups of two siblings, 1 group of three and 1 group of four. 9 children were below the age of 2 and the remaining children were aged between 2 and 8 years old at the time of the SBPA decision.

There were 3 changes of SBPA decisions made, which related to 2 sibling groups of 2 and 1 single child. One sibling group of 2 and the single child

returned to their birth parents care, the other group were matched with long term foster carers.

2.2 Placement Orders.

There has been an increase in Placement Orders this year from 11 in 2021/22 to 19 in 2022/23. This is an increase of 72.7%. As the SBPA figures rise, then the expectation is that the Placement Orders will increase. We have observed that some placement Orders were taking longer to achieve through the Courts, however, since January 2023 the Courts have begun to refocus on the 26-week timescales for Care Proceedings, which should avoid delay in the placement orders being made.

2.3 Children Placed

There has been a slight decrease in children being placed within 2022/23. This is due to the complexity of the children having a plan for adoption and locating suitable adopters that can meet the children's needs.

2.4 Adoption Orders

There has also been an increase in adoption orders made. There were 26 adoption orders granted in 2022/2023 an increase of 85% compared to 14 in 2021/2022.

However, of these 25 adoption Orders made, some were related to the delays in 2021/22 due to the 'Somerset Ruling', which saw 9 adoption orders made in the month of May, of those 9, 5 related to adoption order hearings that were adjourned from the hearings due to be heard in Quarter 4 of 2021/22. The Courts had requested that statements of compliance were filed which confirmed that the children being considered for their adoption hearing were compliant with the regulations. This had been achieved and the adoption hearings were again relisted.

2.5 Children waiting for a match.

Both Dorset and Aspire are ambitious for their children and strive to seek placements for all children, no matter what age, level of need or sibling group size.

For the children currently waiting for a match. Aspire has worked hard to increase the range and diversity of adopters enabling children labelled the 'hardest to place' find loving adoptive families, by prioritising the assessment of those families wishing to consider sibling groups and older children. Aspire have also attended matching events both regionally and nationally, linked with

our Southwest Adoption Consortium Partners, and have used link maker, a national matching tool to link with external adopters. There are currently 11 prospective adopters who will consider older children and sibling groups, and 2 would be happy to explore older children with additional needs.

**Children with
PO waiting
for a match**

	Jun-30	Sep-30	Dec-31	Mar-31
Dorset	11	7	7	10

**Children with
PO linked to
adopters**

	Jun-30	Sep-30	Dec-31	Mar-31
Dorset	7	3	0	1

**Children with
PO not yet
linked**

	Jun-30	Sep-30	Dec-31	Mar-31
Dorset	4	4	7	9

Of the 10 children waiting for a match, 9 children are deemed harder to place (sibling groups and health needs). Since the end of Quarter 4, of the 9 children, 6 children have been linked with an adoptive family, and will be attending matching panel in May and June 2023. 1 child, not deemed harder to place, is also linked with a family and is attending matching panel in May 2023.

As a general principle, siblings will be placed together; however, due to the individual needs of children, this is not always appropriate and cannot always be achieved. It is essential that sibling assessments are carried out to ensure good quality decision making and support plans are evidence based if children are placed together or apart. Of the 3 sibling groups who were subject to placement orders and those who are waiting to be matched, only the sibling group of 3 is yet to be linked and there is consideration for a sibling split assessment taking place.

3. Timeliness of adoption

There has been an increase in both the time between entering care and being placed for adoption and the time from Placement Order to be matched with adopters.

The most up to date comparator figures available at the time of writing are the Coram BAAF quarter 3 figures to the 31st of December 2022. The England average was 478 days and Dorset 517.

(A10) Time between entering care and placed with family for adopted children

517 days Average number of days between entering care and moving in with adoptive family for adopted children (adjusted for foster carer adoptions)
25 children

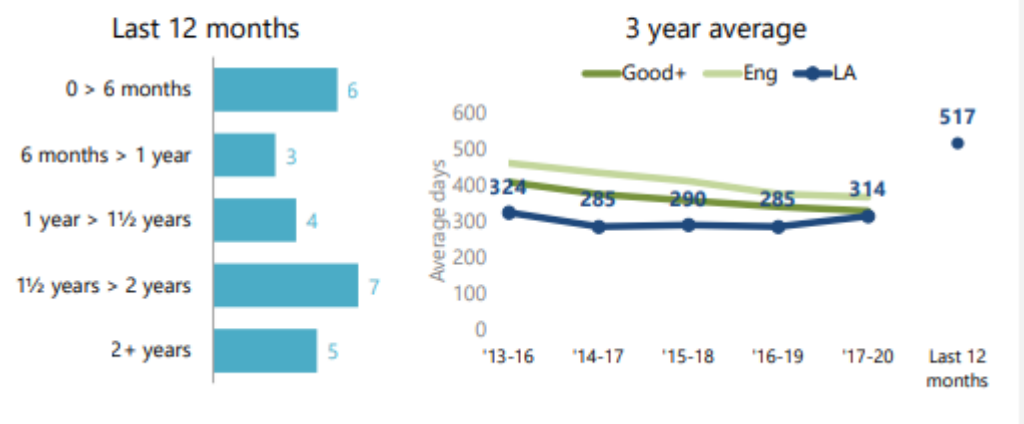


Fig 2. Time between entering care and placed with family.

The most up to date comparator figures available at the time of writing are the Coram BAAF quarter 3 figures to the 31st of December. The England average was 199 days and Dorset 296 days.

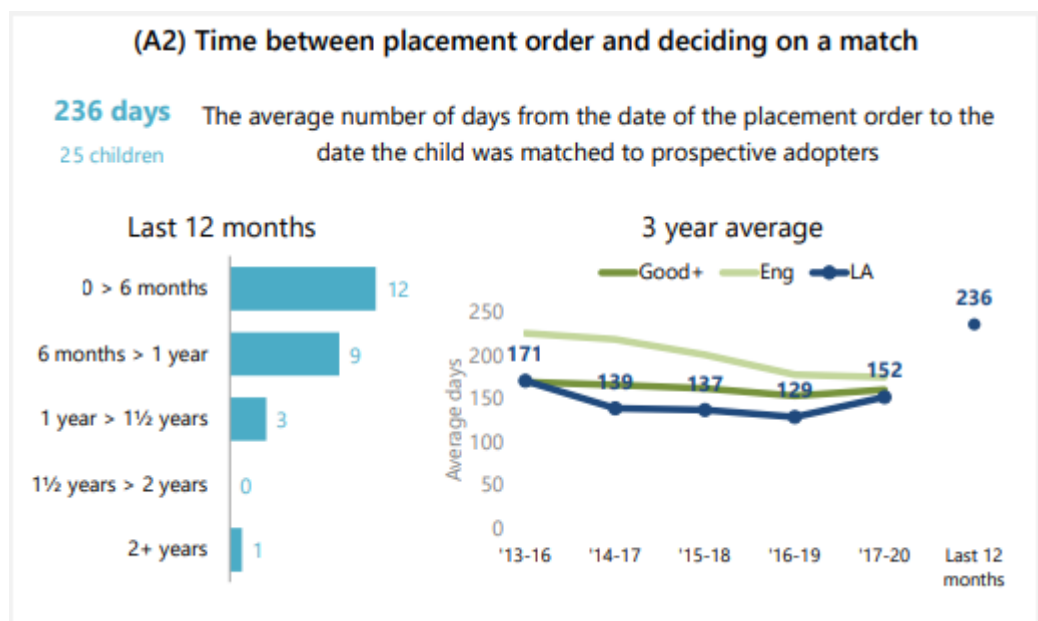


Fig 3. Time between placement order and match

While there is a significant increase for Dorset and this is worrying, this reflects the ambition that Dorset and Aspire have for their children.

These figures include a child who had been placed for adoption, which disrupted, who was then placed again in an EP placement in February 2022, and was successfully adopted in February 2023. There were children who were impacted by the Somerset ruling in early 2022, who were placed in Early Performance then matched once the Courts were satisfied that the Placement Orders were legally made. There was also one family who had extensive support throughout the placement, until the application for the adoption order was made.

Figures about timeliness therefore need to be treated with a degree of caution because figures can appear excellent when only placing easier to place children and less positive when children who have been challenging to place have good outcomes.

Aspire have reviewed The Family Finding Team services and have consolidated and updated their offer of family finding support to provide a much more consistent service to the cases where they do not hold case responsibility, as this has been identified as an area for development. This was launched in May 2023.

4. Early Permanence

Early Permanence					Total
	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Dorset	1	0	0	1	2

Early Permanence is where children are placed with prospective adopters on a fostering basis. If the courts decide that adoption is the right plan, they become their adopters. This avoids the additional trauma children suffer from changes in their primary carers.

Early Permanence has generally been used for babies. Aspire has placed babies direct from hospital so there are Dorset children who have only known the one carer. We have also been far more creative in our use of early permanence with older children to reduce placement moves to avoid delay.

Previously our adopters have proved that with the right support and information they can manage a high degree of risk, uncertainty, and contact. Two children ended up being returned to their birth families. They worked incredibly hard to make it a smooth transition for the child.

There has been a decrease in the use of early permanence placements for 2022/23, and whilst discussions have taken place regarding using this approach, they have not always resulted in the child being placed within an Early Permanence Placement.

Aspire have been part of a Pan regional Early Permanence project to develop a range of training packages for different audiences including Local Authority social workers, IROS/QARO'S, CAFCASS and the judiciary. The conference was held on the 19th April 2023 and this was attended by Aspire and members of Dorset's legal services and QARO's.

Aspire also provided an Early Permanence workshop at the Family Justice Conference held on March the 3rd 2023 to raise awareness and 'myth busting' which had a high attendance and received positive feedback from those attending and the designated Judge for Dorset.

To continue to promote the use of Early Permanence, Aspire are arranging early permanence workshops/training for Dorset staff, which will be included on the training schedule. It is hoped this training will dispel some myths, raise awareness of the purpose and use of Early Permanence, and increase confidence in using this approach.

Currently 44% of our adopters will consider Early Permanence

Greg's story

Greg was initially placed in his adoptive placement in July 2021. Unfortunately, this placement was ended in February 2022, following intensive support provided relating to 'blocked' care. To avoid further trauma work was undertaken to identify suitable potential Early Permanence adopters to avoid additional placement moves. Greg was placed with his Early permanence carers in February 2023, and then matched and placed with his Early Permanence adopters in August 2022. Greg was adopted in January 2023.

5. Adopter Recruitment

Aspire recruits a great range of diverse adopters. At any one time, we try to have around 25 - 30 families available to meet the needs of Dorset and BCP children.

Subtle changes to our social media messaging and changes to the induction programme have helped attract adopters for older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs that we require.

We have fine-tuned our messaging and work with adopters to flex around the needs of local children. We do adopt some babies, but we are mainly looking for adopters who will consider older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs.

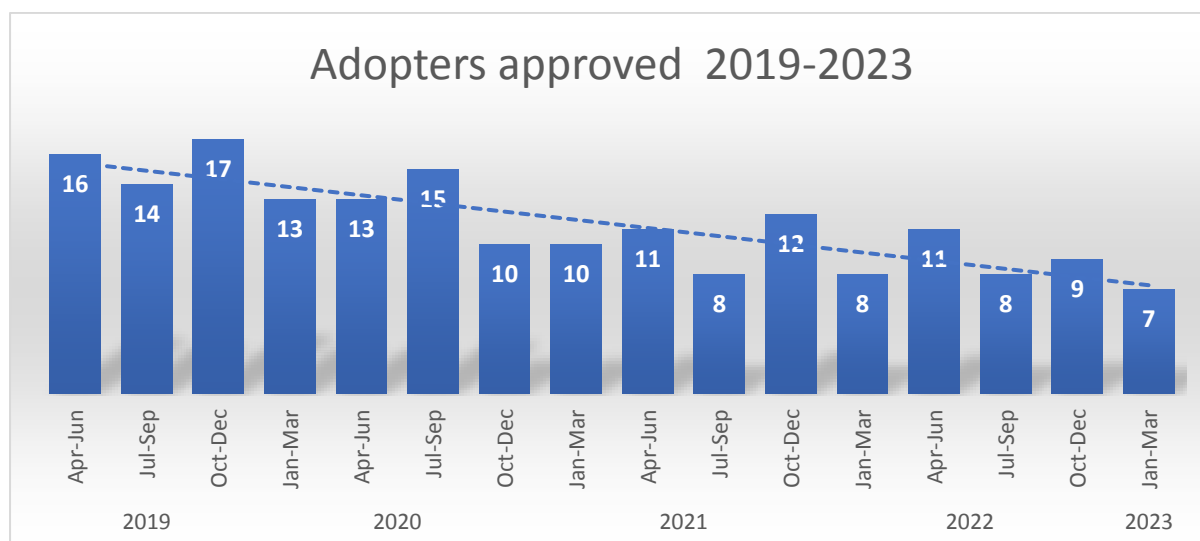


Fig 4 Adopters Approved

At any one time we have approximately 25-30 available approved adoptive households. If adopters are not matched with Dorset or BCP children, we support them to explore children nationally.

However, there has been a gradual decline in adopter enquiries and approvals, which is a national trend.

The ASG secretariat report “The number of adopter registrations and approvals have continued to decline, together with the numbers of adopters not yet approved, and adopters approved and waiting to be matched”. They report there were “660 Registrations, a decrease of 20% (160n) from Q2 2022/23 and a decrease of 18% (140n) when compared to Q3 2021/22 – 560 Approvals, an increase of 4% (20n) from Q2 2022/23 and a decrease of 27% (210n) when compared to Q3 2021/22” (Adoption and Special Guardianship Quarterly Data Collection Headline Measures: Q3 2022/23)

The closure of Families for Children impacted upon the ability of the Recruitment and Assessment Team to complete some assessments as immediate, and in some cases, intensive work had to be undertaken due to an influx of adopters at various stages of matching and children in placement.

Aspire are improving their website to recruit more adopters, this will include videos from current adopters, and up to date case studies relating to children and sibling groups. Aspire are also aiming to release recruitment information on social media sites in collaboration with Dorset.

Aspire have also made links with Homes for Good, a faith organisation within Dorset, and we hope to develop this partnership to aid recruitment. Aspire will be undertaking marketing for recruitment across the whole of Dorset to encourage more prospective adopters from across the county.

Of the 25 adopters available, 11 are happy to be considered for those older children and sibling groups, and 2 would be happy to explore older children with additional needs.

5.1 Interagency adoptions

Aspire supports national adopter sufficiency adopters.

This year Aspire spent £92,934 on adoptive placements and sold £221,629 on placements.

The close relationship and tracking we undertake with Dorset means that by the time the placement order is made, we will know whether Aspire has suitable adopters or not, and can immediately look elsewhere to avoid delay for children.

Our relentless focus on finding families for children means that almost all children with a plan for adoption are found families.

6. Post Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Services

Aspire offers support to Dorset adopters and special guardians until their children reach adult hood. This is a service that families choose to access. We have worked hard over the last year to eradicate the waiting list and offer an immediate response to families at the lower tiers through a daily duty system.

The cumulative increase in the number of adopters and special guardians eligible for this support continues to be challenge. This is a small team consisting of just under 3 FTE social workers and 4 and half family support workers. We have maximised capacity by reducing bureaucracy.

The service has undertaken a review and introduced a new tiered approach to services, which consists of a duty system, universal support, and a targeted Intervention.

The duty system is managed by experienced Family Support Practitioners who are able to give advice and guidance and signpost to other services if needed.

The universal support offer which is inclusive and provides regular newsletters and information via the mailing list and support_groups and workshops/training.

A targeted support offer for those families needing more than universal services. An assessment of need will be carried out. This will be done via a consultation with one of the experienced social workers.

For those families that need targeted support, a worker will be allocated to the family to carry out the identified work on the plan.

Allocations will be on a short-term basis (approx. 3 months) to provide an intensive package of support, to build a parents/carers skills, resilience, and confidence to parent the child/ren in their care.

86 parents (Dorset and BCP) attended Aspire training and workshops over 2022-2023, with many more attending the support groups.

The service has strong links with Virtual Schools, Early Help and universal services who offer bespoke services for our families.

167 Children (Dorset and BCP) are currently receiving direct social work support, with an allocated worker. It generally takes about 5 days to be allocated.

6.1 The Department for Education Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASF)

The post support team help adopters and special guardians to access the ASF fund completing the required assessment and sourcing the therapists using our procurement framework. This has become increasingly important for our families. and the current service, has meant we have been able to support significantly more Dorset families access therapeutic services. The annual claimed funding is.

2019 /20	57 Families
	£32,845.99
2020/ 21	130 Families
	£186,183.91
2020/22	261 Families
	£312,205.00

Fig 5. Claimed funding from ASF

6.2 Have the changes to the post support service had a positive impact for families?

Changes were made in consultation with the Adopter and Special Guardianship Forum. While they understood what the service wanted to achieve, there was some anxiety that moving away from a mainly allocated service would reduce the support available to families. However, feedback received has been positive.

The forum conducted an independent survey in January 2022, which their key findings of preference for support were.

- **Social events** (e.g., walk, picnic)
- Therapeutic **support for the whole family** is more important than therapy for the child or support (e.g., self-care) for parents.
- The **monthly support groups** are highly valued.
- The next most preferred support is **Access to ASF, Therapy for the child, and Help with educational settings.**

These key findings have been embedded within the services provided and Aspire are continually working to develop their workshops/training packages available for adopters and special guardians.

There are monthly social walks, and coffee mornings for SG and Adopter groups, and regular monthly support groups through stay and plays, summer picnics and Christmas parties. There is an adult adopter group held 6 times a year.

There are workshops provided to Special Guardians and Adopters, these are the Great behaviour breakdown, and Foundations of Attachments, and Nonviolent resistance.

There are now special guardianship support groups arranged in schools throughout Dorset to enable the special guardians to meet up and form links within their local area.

Clive and Harry (4 and 2 years old)

They are living under a SGO with their grandparents.

They called into ASPIRE asking for advice and guidance on parenting two children that have witnessed DV and alcohol/drug misuse in their early years.

The Special Guardians have stated that the worker is “part of the family” and they “don’t know what they would do without the support that has been provided.” There were weekly interventions in the home to model therapeutic parenting and set clear and consistent boundaries for both boys. This has now

reduced to once every two weeks and involves one outing a month supporting Nan to feel confident in parenting both young children in a social setting. Clive has a life story book which has supported the family in sharing the children's experience and their journey. They are also on the waiting list for Foundation of Attachment training (funded by the ASF) and have attended all of the SG meet ups in the school holidays making new connections.

6.3 Need for post support services

This service has seen a continued increase in uptake over the year which is expected to continue.

The service has in quarter 4 of 2022/23 had 870 enquires for support.

There have been 132 referrals for ASF support made in the same quarter.

6.4 Provision of therapeutic services by the Adoption and Special Guardianship support teams.

Aspire are currently providing services to 7 families which is funded through the ASF, there are three families receiving therapy techniques, 3 families receiving therapeutic life story work and 1 family receiving Think Bricks This will generate £20,834.19 income for Aspire.

There is a Foundation of Attachment course running currently which will generate a further £3,360.

There is currently a guaranteed income of £24,194.19.

There is also a waiting list of work for 5 families and if this work progresses this will generate a further £12,967.75.

There will be another Foundation of Attachment course running in September, however, until there is a confirmation of the numbers, we are unable to predict the amount that can be claimed.

There are two further workers who will be completing their therapeutic life story work qualification in September, and this would then enable more families to be supported.

6.5 The challenge for the Post Adoption and Special Guardianship Service

It is important that Aspire continues to review post support services closely with the Forum to ensure they continue to be accessible, timely, relevant and have impact. But it is clear that an increasing cohort and increasing demand is the greatest issue for the service.

At present the current change in systems are proving beneficial, and are manageable by the Team, meaning more families are being supported.

7. Aspire Adoption Panel

The Adoption panel has continued to meet virtually twice a month.

This year the panel made: -

- 36 Approvals
- 35 Matches
- 8 De-Registrations

7.1 Matches of children with adopters.

The statistics for Adoption Placements show the number matches to have returned to pre pandemic and Somerset Judgement levels. There were no deferred matches this year. One match was deferred due to paperwork being sent to the adopters (who were already caring for two children under early permanence), too late for them to read it before the Panel date. The match was subsequently approved at the following Panel.

7.2 Adopters

The number of adopters approved fell slightly this year. Panel considered 37 cases, approving 35 immediately and deferring two cases. One of these subsequently returned to Panel to be approved, while the second is currently on hold pending the adopters' decision whether to proceed. The number of deregistration's of adopters has been higher than usual, this as a result I think of social workers checking the status of those who have long been waiting.

7.3 Feedback from Panel

The Adoption Panel has been operating a RAG rating system for social worker reports since early 2021. This has been generally well received and has improved the consistency and quality of feedback. The process has enabled an objective and measurable assessment of the direction of travel of reports which has in large part been positive as most reports are given a 'green rating'.

The only area of vulnerability remains CPRs, where the quality can vary greatly but where once again there is an indication of the average score improving over the year.

Analysis in PARs has also been identified as an area requiring some improvement. Joint social worker and Panel training has been arranged for the Summer to discuss this and allow panel to articulate directly where they feel additional information would be of use. Panel has noticed a drop in the number of approvals and matches being undertaken within the advised time limits. In some cases, this has reflected the complexity of assessment needed, in others staffing pressures in Aspire has been the cause.

8. Birth parent services

It is a requirement that the birth family are offered independent support when a placement order is made in respect of their child. Aspire commissioned an independent Birth Family Matters (BFM) Support Service from Families for Children. This had been recommissioned from April 2022 to 31st of March 2024 with an option to extend for a further 2 years.

The service consists of 15 hours a week of an experienced social worker, management oversight and agency support. The social worker has at times gained additional external charitable funding to support activities.

However, Families for Children announced that they would be closing on the 31st August 2022. It wasn't possible to undertake a proper procurement exercise in the time available. It was also important that a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) delivering the service had experience of adoption. The only VAA in the region that met this requirement was Parents And Children Together (PACT). Permission was given to consult with PACT.

BCP and PACT separately, had to consider TUPE law and the detail of the contract. A process that would normally take some months was executed in 3 weeks. Although the cost of due diligence, compared to the size of the contract, didn't make business sense PACT took the long view facilitating a larger presence in the region. The contract was let to PACT at the end of August.

The service that was provided was a seamless transition that had no impact upon the families that the worker was engaged with, and the level of service was maintained. The worker is currently engaging with 80 birth families.

9. Special Guardianship (SG) Assessment

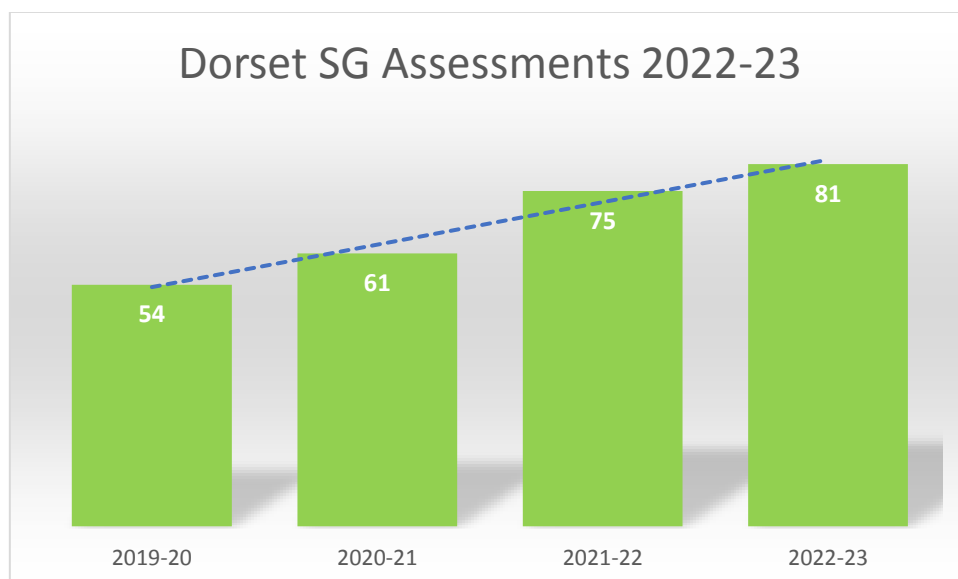


Fig 6 Number of SG Assessments

**SG
Assessments
filed 2022-
2023**

	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct- Dec	Jan- Mar	Total
Dorset	18	9	14	21	62

It should be noted that approximately a quarter of the special guardianship referrals received did not result in a full assessment being completed. This dropout rate is to be expected for a variety of reasons. For example, the family may decide that they cannot offer permanence, they chose to remain as foster carers, more than one family member is being assessed, issues arise during the assessment or the child's plan may change.

The number of special guardianship referrals from Dorset has risen and Dorset indicate that this is likely to remain the case as it is preferred that children live with their families wherever that is feasible.

During 2022/23 there were 61 Special Guardianship assessments filed with the Court for Dorset, an increase of 97% from the 34 completed in 2021/22.

Dorset and BCP agreed to expand the service by 1 social worker at the May 2021 board. To increase capacity from 100 to 120 pa for both authorities. Aspire has taken 179 referrals for assessments in total this year. The Team continues to be under pressure when the referrals increase.

Special Guardianship Referrals for both Local Authorities

2019-20 110

2020-21 140

2021-22 159

2022-23 179

There were 20 withdrawals of Special Guardians throughout 2022/23, however, these assessments had commenced, and as such workers time was used to complete them.

Where demand exceeds capacity Independent social workers are commissioned. These are more expensive, and parts of the assessment still must be completed by Aspire and the child's worker.

6. Financial Implications

Aspire is funded 49% by Dorset and 51% by BCP. Considerable work took place to agree a 3-year budget for Aspire from 2022 to 2025.

In terms of this financial year although the figures have not been fully signed off. We are expecting to report that Aspire has come over budget due to a variety of reasons.

The previous Service Manager of Aspire agreed use of casual workers to meet demand in the Special Guardianship Assessment Team and Recruitment and Assessment Team. There was agreement for 2 Family Support Practitioners to be employed funded via the Adoption Support Fund, to enable staff to undertake training to provide therapeutic services via the ASF. However, the ASF income could not meet this demand. There were secondments of staff within Aspire to cover posts.

7. Natural Environment, Climate and Ecology Implications

None

8. Well-being and Health Implications

None

9. Other Implications

10. Risk Assessment

10.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as: Low

Current Risk:Low

Residual Risk:Low

11. Equalities Impact Assessment

The service promotes permanence for children through Special Guardianship and Adoption and services to support adopters and Special Guardians. It commissions an independent birth parent service.

The statement of purpose outlines the services commitment to dignity, equality and respect for all who come into contact with the service

APPENDICES

Appendix A

1. Local authority statutory responsibilities

- 1.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 sets out the duty all Local Authorities to establish and maintain an adoption service, to meet the needs in relation to adoption, of children who have or may be adopted, of adults who have been adopted, parents and guardians of such children and persons who have or may adopt a child in their area
- 1.2 On the 1st July 2017 Dorset County Council delegated most of those functions, along with some statutory responsibilities in relation to special guardianship, to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). The division of responsibilities is detailed in Appendix 1.
- 1.3 Aspire (RAA) is funded by Dorset County Council and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council to deliver adoption and special guardianship services.
- 1.4 Each local authority retains overall responsibility for their adoption and special guardianship services, continuing to have parental responsibility for their own Children in Care, but delegating most adoption and some special guardianship functions to Aspire Adoption.
- 1.5 Aspire works closely with colleagues in the voluntary adoption sector, Parents and Children Together (PACT) are represented on the Aspire Partnership Board.
- 1.6 It is a requirement that elected members satisfy themselves that the Local Authority and the Regional Adoption Agency are working together to meet the needs of children requiring permanence through adoption as laid out by the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013 and the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014.

The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336069/Adoption_NMS_July_2014_for_publication.pdf

The 2013 Statutory Adoption Guidance can be accessed at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270100/adoption_statutory_guidance_2013.pdf

Appendix B

1. Division of roles and responsibilities between Aspire and the local authorities

- 1.1 Aspire has been delegated all of the local authority statutory responsibilities for adoption, other than the court work leading to Care and Placement Orders.
- 1.2 Aspire has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and intercountry adoptions.
- 1.3 The local authorities retain overall responsibility for their Children in Care but have delegated case responsibility for the majority of children with adoption plans to Aspire following the granting of a Placement Order.
- 1.4 Aspire is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans. The RAA is also responsible for preparing children for a move to adoption, for preparing moving calendars or diaries, undertaking life story work and creating life story books.
- 1.5 Aspire undertakes special guardianship assessments for court on behalf of the local authority as part of care proceedings, or in private law applications.
- 1.6 Aspire provides support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives, and also to special guardians, families created through special guardianship, and to the birth families whose children are subject to SGOs.
- 1.7 The table on the following page sums up the division of responsibilities between Aspire and the local authorities.

Function	Regional Adoption Agency	Local Authority
RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT		
Marketing and Recruitment Strategy	✓	
Adopter Recruitment and Enquiries	✓	
Assessment of Prospective Adopters – all Stage One and Stage Two functions	✓	
Completion of Prospective Adopter Report	✓	
Agency Decision Maker for approval of adopters	✓	
Post approval training	✓	
Matching	✓	
Post Placement training for Prospective Adopters	✓	
PERMANENCE PLANNING		
Early identification of a child possibly requiring adoption		✓

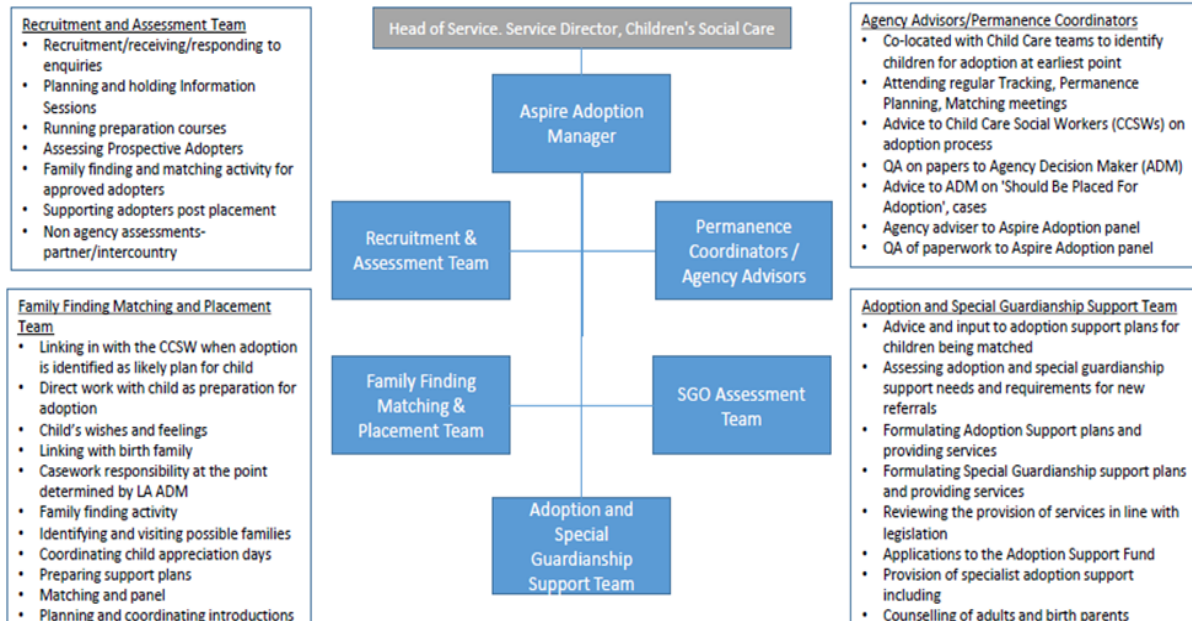
Tracking and monitoring the child possibly requiring adoption	✓	✓
Support and advice to child care social worker on the adoption process	✓	✓
Sibling or other specialist assessments if commissioned by LA	✓	
Direct work to prepare child prior to placement	✓	
Preparation of the Child Permanence Report		✓
Agency Decision Maker for “Should be placed for Adoption” decisions		✓
Case management prior to the point agreed by the LA ADM		✓
Case management from point agreed by the LA ADM	✓	
MATCHING AND PLACEMENT		
Family finding	✓	
Looked After Child reviews	✓	✓
Shortlist and visit potential families	✓	
Organising child appreciation day	✓	
Ongoing direct work to prepare child prior to placement	✓	
Adoption Panel administration and management	✓	
Agency adviser role	✓	
Agency Decision Maker for Matching prospective adopters and child	✓	
Placement Planning meeting administration and management of introductions	✓	
Support to family post placement and planning and delivery of adoption support	✓	
Ongoing life story work and preparation of Life story book	✓	
Independent Review Officer monitoring of quality of child’s care and care plan		✓
Support prospective adopters in preparation and submission of application for Adoption Order – including attending at court	✓	
Preparation of later life letter	✓	
ADOPTION AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP SUPPORT		
Assessment for adoption or special guardianship support	✓	
Developing and delivering adoption and special guardianship support plans	✓	
Agree and administer financial support to adoptive families pre and post Adoption Order		✓
Adoption and special guardianship support delivery including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support groups • Social events • Post adoption/special guardianship training 	✓	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Birth Relative services • Support with ongoing birth relative contact • Specialist Life Story practitioners • Adoption counselling and training 		
Financial support to adopters and special guardians including adoption and special guardianship allowances		✓
SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS		
Receipt of application or court request for special guardianship		✓
Assessment of applicants for Special Guardianship	✓	
NON-AGENCY ADOPTIONS		
Step parent/partner adoption assessments	✓	
Intercountry adoption assessments and post approval and post order support	✓	

Appendix C

1. Aspire Organisational Structure and Staffing

Aspire Adoption - Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) – Organisation Structure



2. Staffing

- 2.1 There are 43.54 permanent full -time equivalent posts in Aspire with the permanent staffing establishment supplemented by those on casual contracts to increase capacity where needed. Many of the staff work part time, with the total number of staff comprising of social workers, support workers, and business support staff totalling about 56.
- 2.2 The service is led and managed by the Aspire Adoption Service Manager, Allan Charlton, Allan Charlton is a qualified social worker, has a management qualification and is registered with Social Work England.
- 2.3 The Recruitment & Assessment Team comprises of a team manager, practice manager, and 7.44 social workers. There is included within this one 30hr vacancy. All are registered with Social Work England
- 2.4 The Family Finding, Matching and Placement Team comprises of a team manager, 1 FTE practice manager and 4.3 FTE social workers, all of whom are registered with Social Work England, and 3.64 FTE family support workers.
- 2.5 The Special Guardianship Assessment team has a team manager, practice manager and 5 social workers. All are registered with Social Work England.
- 2.6 The Adoption & Special Guardianship Support team consists of 1 Team Manager, 1 Assistant Team Manager, and 2.75 FTE Social Workers, all of whom are registered with Social Work England, and 4.5 FTE Family Support Practitioners.

The Team has a social work vacancy of 18.5 hours following a full-time worker taking flexible retirement. One part time FSP is currently absent, one fulltime FSP will be leaving the service on the 28th April 2023.

- 2.7 There are 2 FTE Permanence Coordinators, who also act as Agency Advisers to the Aspire Adoption Panel and Aspire Agency Decision Maker, and to the Agency Decision Makers in the local authorities in relation to decisions as to whether a child should be adopted.
- 2.8 The service is supported by 7 FTE business support staff including a senior business support officer, a panel administrator, and a marketing, media and monitoring officer.
- 2.9 All of the social workers employed by Aspire are registered with Social Work England, and many of the staff, including support workers, have additional qualifications including skills in a variety of therapeutic interventions such as theraplay, Therapeutic Life story work, sensory integration, mindfulness and DDP (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy).
- 2.10 Aspire also has access to dedicated clinical psychology support for staff and service users.
- 2.11 No agency staff are employed, and any vacancies attract a high standard of applications across all areas of the work undertaken by Aspire. Casual staff add capacity for one off pieces of work in the Recruitment and Assessment Team and the Special Guardianship Assessment Team.

3. Staff training and development

- 3.1 Staff in Aspire have access to training and courses run by Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole Council as the host authority paying for these from the Aspire training budget of £8,000 a year. They have access to external courses, but only dependent on budgetary restrictions. In 2022/23 6 members of staff attended Dyadic Developmental Parenting training stage 2.
- 3.2 Staff have monthly supervision and annual appraisals, and regular team case and practice reflection sessions are facilitated by the clinical psychologists.
- 3.3 A staff forum for all staff in Aspire is held every 6 months to update on Aspire performance data, local and national issues relating to the service and to develop the team service plans.

Appendix D

Governance

The following is taken from the Inter Authority Agreement

SCHEDULE 2 – TERMS OF REFERENCE

Governance Structure



Part 1 – Strategic Partnership Board

1 Name:

The name of the Board for Aspire Adoption shall be the **Strategic Partnership Board** which is established pursuant to an Inter Authority Agreement between Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council and the Borough of Poole ("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

2 Role:

The Board will provide advice, oversight and endorsement of the strategic direction of Aspire Adoption.

3 The Board will:

- 3.1 Provide and review the strategic direction of Aspire Adoption;
- 3.2 Oversee, review and endorse budget setting and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption;
- 3.3 Oversee, review and endorse the Business Plan annually and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption;
- 3.4 Attempt to resolve disputes between the Councils under the terms of the Inter Authority Agreement.

4 Accountability and Responsibility:

- 4.1 Each Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that their nominated representative(s) (or named substitute) are available to attend all Board meetings, which will be scheduled in advance.
- 4.2 All members of the Board will be in a position to make decisions within their respective organisation, where appropriate.
- 4.3 All members of the Board will be responsible for reporting to their organisation, through their respective governance arrangements.

5 Meetings of the Board

- 5.1 The Board will meet every six months or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.
- 5.2 The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.
- 5.3 The Chairperson will agree the dates, times and venues for the meetings of the Board. The meeting timetable will be scheduled over the year, to reflect both planned monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- 5.4 The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.
- 5.5 The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.
- 5.6 Agendas and papers for the meeting will be sent out at least five working days prior to the meeting in order to provide time for members of the Board to read them and identify actions for their own organisations.
- 5.7 Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

6 Membership:

- 6.1 The Board will consist of:
 - Portfolio Holder and Executive Director for Children's Services for Bournemouth Borough Council;
 - Cabinet Member for Learning, Skills and Children's Safeguarding and Corporate Director for Children's, Adults and Community Services for Dorset County Council;
 - Portfolio Holder and Strategic Director for Children's Services for the Borough of Poole Council.
- 6.2 The Board will consult (so far as it considers proper and appropriate to do so):

- Representatives from local Voluntary Adoption Agencies/Families for Children; and
- A representative from Stakeholders.

6.3 Members of the Board should:

- Commit to attending the majority of meetings or nominate a suitable substitute who can attend in their place who will be expected to exercise the powers of the Member for whom they are substituting. Only Board members or their named representatives can attend Board meetings;
- Uphold and support the Board decisions and be prepared to follow through actions and decisions for the Board proposals and declaring any conflict of interest should it arise;
- Be prepared to represent the Board at stakeholder events and support the agreed consensus view of the Board when speaking on behalf of the Board to other parties.

7 Voting – Quorum

- 7.1 No quorum is necessary for the routine business and the receiving of reports. However where the Chairperson determines that a critical decision is required there must be a representative from all the Councils.
- 7.2 In the spirit of effective collaboration and partnership working, the Board will always seek to come to agreement through consensus and unanimity following debate and discussion where all the members will be encouraged to participate.
- 7.3 The Members of the Board will be expected to subscribe to the seven principles of public life in their work and decision making. The principles are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- 7.4 Members will be expected to declare any personal interests in the business of the Board and to withdraw from participation where such interests are prejudicial or pecuniary.

Part 2 – Operational Management Board

1 Name:

The name of the Board for Aspire Adoption shall be the **Operational Management Board** which is established pursuant to an Inter Authority Agreement between Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council

and the Borough of Poole ("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

2 Role:

The Board will provide support, advice and management to Aspire Adoption to ensure that statutory requirements and the Business Plan is delivered effectively.

3 The Board will:

- 3.1 Oversee the implementation of the Aspire Adoption Budget and Business Plan;
- 3.2 Oversee the commissioning arrangements and operational performance against agreed local priorities and targets and in line with national priorities and targets.

4 Accountability and Responsibility:

- 4.1 Each Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that their nominated representative(s) (or named substitute) are available to attend all Board meetings, which will be scheduled in advance.
- 4.2 This Board will report to the Strategic Partnership Board.

5 Meetings of the Board

- 5.1 The Board will meet quarterly or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.
- 5.2 The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.
- 5.3 The Chairperson will agree the dates, times and venues for the meetings of the Board. The meeting timetable will be scheduled over the year, to reflect both planned monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- 5.4 The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.
- 5.5 The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.
- 5.6 Agendas and papers for the meeting will be sent out at least five working days prior to the meeting in order to provide time for members of the Board to read them and identify actions for their own organisations.
- 5.7 Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

6 Membership:

6.1 The Board will consist of:

- Service Director for Children's Social Care for Bournemouth;
- Assistant Director – Care and Protection for Dorset;
- Head of Children & Young People's Social Care for Poole;
- Childrens Services Commissioners from each of the three Parties;
- Adoption Aspire Manager.

6.2 Members of the Board should:

- 6.2.1 Commit to attending the majority of meetings or nominate a suitable substitute who can attend in their place who will be expected to exercise the powers of the Member for whom they are substituting. Only Board members or their named representatives can attend Board meetings;
- 6.2.2 Uphold and support the Board decisions and be prepared to follow through actions and decisions and declaring any conflict of interest should it arise;
- 6.2.3 Be prepared to represent the Board at stakeholder events and support the agreed consensus view of the Board when speaking on behalf of the Board to other parties.

7 Voting – Quorum

- 7.1 No quorum is necessary for the routine business and the receiving of reports. However where the Chairperson determines that a critical decision is required there must be a representative from all the Councils.
- 7.2 In the spirit of effective collaboration and partnership working, the Board will always seek to come to agreement through consensus and unanimity following debate and discussion where all the members will be encouraged to participate.
- 7.3 The Members of the Board will be expected to subscribe to the seven principles of public life in their work and decision making. The principles are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- 7.4 Members will be expected to declare any personal interests in the business of the Board and to withdraw from participation where such interests are prejudicial or pecuniary.

Appendix E–

1. Aspire Adoption Panel

- 1.1 Aspire Adoption operates an Adoption Panel, constituted in accordance with legislation, regulations and guidance. The panel has an independent chairperson, and 22 members on a Central List from which each panel is drawn. There is no legal maximum number of panel members at each panel but in practice, a maximum of 6 or 7 attend each panel, including the panel chair and a social worker. The designated doctor for looked after children in the local authorities funding Aspire is also the agency medical adviser and is a full member of the panel.
- 1.2 The panel is serviced by a panel administrator and has access to legal advice if needed. The professional advice to the panel is provided by the two FTE Agency and Panel Advisors, one of whom attends each Panel to ensure the smooth running and to advise on policies and procedures.
- 1.3 Current membership includes individuals with personal experience of adoption as adopters and adopted adults. It also includes experienced social workers with direct experience of adoption work, a psychotherapist with experience of working in a child and adolescent mental health setting, and panel members with experience of working in an educational setting.
- 1.4 Members of the Central List from which individual panel membership is drawn reflect the diversity of modern society as far as possible, and include those who are single, in heterosexual and same sex relationships. One panel member on the Central List has personal experience of disability. There is some diversity in terms of age, with panel members in their 30s and others who are retired. Although most panel members are of white British ethnic origin, one panel members is of black African ethnicity, and another is of Indian descent.
- 1.5 The functions of the panel in relation to adoption matters are.
 - to recommend whether prospective adopters are suitable to adopt a child.
 - to recommend whether a proposed match between a child and prospective adopters is a suitable one.
 - In circumstances where a child is relinquished for adoption and no Placement Order is applied for, the panel will recommend whether the child should be placed for adoption.
- 1.6 The panel can also give advice about the numbers and ages of children in relation to prospective adopters, also about post adoption contact, delegated parental responsibility and adoption support. The panel has a consultative role regarding the agency's policies and procedures, and a monitoring role regarding quality assurance and ensuring that the time scales set out in the Adoption & Children Act 2002 are met.

- 1.7 The Aspire Adoption Panel makes recommendations based on detailed written reports prepared by the child's social worker and adoption social worker, and the social worker and team manager's attendance at panel to clarify points if needed.
- 1.8 When considering the approval or deregistration of prospective adopters or a match between prospective adopters and a child, adoptive applicants have the option of attending panel in person, to provide scope to discuss and clarify any issues relevant to the application. Applicants who decide not to attend in person are not disadvantaged in any way and no judgement is made from their decision not to do so although every effort will be made to assist their attendance.
- 1.9 The recommendations and advice of the panel are referred, along with the final agreed minutes of the meeting, to the Agency Decision Maker, for a decision to be made and conveyed to all parties within the time scales laid down in the Adoption & Children Act 2002.
- 1.10 The Panel chair is independent, is an experienced chair and an adopter of 2 children. He attends the Aspire Strategic Partnership Board and presents a report to the Aspire Operational Management Board and Strategic Partnership Board every 6 months in line with standard 17 of the Adoption Minimum Standards, on the quality of reports being presented to the panel. This includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement. His most recent report is included as Appendix 5.
- 1.11 In 2022/23 the Adoption Panels have all been held virtually to enable full participation of members and adopters.

Appendix F

Aspire Adoption Statement of Purpose 2023 - 2024