

Cabinet

9 October 2025

Aspire Adoption annual report 2024/25 For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:

P Dempsey, Executive Director of People - Children

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Statutory Authority: Dorset Council

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

Executive summary

Aspire Adoption, the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) for Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Councils, continues to deliver statutory adoption services under a hosted model led by BCP Council. The agency is responsible for adopter recruitment, family finding, post-adoption support, and special guardianship assessments.

Key Achievements and Performance

- **Children's Outcomes:** Aspire placed 37 children and secured 44 adoption orders in 2024–25, a notable increase from the previous year. 92% of children were placed with Aspire adopters, demonstrating strong internal sufficiency.
- **Timeliness:** Aspire remains one of the top-performing RAAs nationally for adoption timeliness. Dorset's A10 (care to placement) and A2 (placement order to match) scores outperform national averages.
- **Early Permanence (EP):** Although EP placements decreased by 59% from 2023–24, Aspire continues to innovate in placing older children and sibling groups through EP arrangements.

Adopter Recruitment

Aspire maintained a positive adopter gap, one of only four RAAs nationally to do so. Enquiries rose to 211, with 36 approvals. Targeted social media and revised training have helped attract adopters for older children and those with additional needs.

Post-Adoption and Special Guardianship Support

Aspire offers a tiered support model—universal, duty-based, and targeted interventions. The team handled 377 ASGSF applications, securing over £1 million in therapeutic funding. Feedback from families and professionals has been overwhelmingly positive, with only two complaints since September 2023.

Special Guardianship

The service transitioned back to local authorities in April 2025. Aspire completed 126 assessments in 2024–25, with Dorset contributing 43 referrals. The withdrawal rate remained stable, indicating good quality referrals.

Partnerships and National Engagement

Aspire actively collaborates with Adoption England, SWAC, and the Southwest Permanence Project. It contributed to national research on case holding and piloted standalone support plans, now adopted as standard practice.

Governance and Structure

Aspire is overseen by a Strategic Partnership Board and an Operational Management Board. The service is staffed by 56 professionals, including social workers, support staff, and clinical psychologists. All social workers are registered with Social Work England.

Finance

Aspire reported a modest operational overspend of £33,988, primarily due to staff pay awards. Interagency placement costs totalled £102,000, covered by respective local authorities.

Challenges and Future Focus

Key challenges include national adopter sufficiency, increasing demand for post-order support, and the growing complexity of direct contact arrangements. Aspire is developing its 2025–2027 marketing strategy and continues to refine its support services to meet evolving needs.

Recommendation(s)

Cabinet members are requested to note the content of this report which captures the work of Aspire over the last financial year and progress made against priorities.

Reason for the recommendation(s)

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 functions are delegated to Aspire Adoption.

This report has been written to provide the local authority with an opportunity to satisfy itself that the requirements of the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013 and the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014 are met and that the activities of Aspire were discharged to a high standard in the last year.

1. The report

- 1.1 Aspire Adoption Annual Report 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 shown as Appendix 1

2. Alternative options considered

- 2.1 None considered. Aspire are the statutory regional adoption agency (RAA) for Dorset Council.

3. Legal considerations

- 3.1 Statutory guidance on adoption (July 2013)
- 3.2 Adoption: National Minimum standards

4. Financial implications

- 4.1 Aspire Adoption Agency delivered services for the financial year 2024 to 2025 over the agreed budget. Aspire Strategic Board will have access to the full financial report.

5. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

- 5.1 Having sufficient adopters who reflect the diverse needs of Dorset Children ensures that Aspire can meet the needs of our children who have a plan for adoption and that the plan is achieved in a timely way.
- 5.2 This also reduces the amount of travel undertaken by families and children's services staff. Reduced travel will lead to a reduction in the associated emissions from travel which is in line with the council's priority of protecting the natural environment, climate and ecology.

6. Well-being and health implications

6.1 Children can achieve permanence in a timely way.

7. Other implications

7.1 None identified

8. Risk implications

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

Current Risk: **LOW**

Residual Risk: **LOW**

9. Equalities

9.1 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.

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

10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1: Aspire Adoption Annual Report 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

11. Background papers

11.1 Aspire Adoption Statement of Purpose 2025 to 2026

12 Report sign-off

This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)