



Aspire Adoption Annual Report

1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is the 8th annual report for Aspire Adoption Services. Aspire is the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) that undertakes the adoption functions on behalf of the local councils of Dorset and BCP Councils.
- 1.2 The provision of an adoption service is a statutory requirement. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 provides the structure for an adoption service. Under the Adoption Act 2002 s3, each council must continue to maintain within its area an adoption service designed to meet the needs of children who may be adopted, their parents, their natural parents and former guardians. These services are referred to as the Adoption Service, (Adoption and Children Act 2002 s2 (1)). An adoption agency refers either to a local authority or to a registered adoption society under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 s2 (1).
- 1.3 On 17 July 2017 Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset Councils combined their adoption services to form Aspire Adoption Services (Aspire). This changed in March 2019 with a local government reorganisation to create a new council of Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Council (BCP), and Dorset Council. The Councils choose a hosted model as their delivery model for the RAA. BCP council act as the host for Aspire.
- 1.4 Whilst each local council retains overall responsibility for their adoption services and continues to retain overall responsibility for their cared-for children, most adoption functions are delegated to Aspire. The detail of this is outlined in our schedule of responsibility's.
- 1.5 Aspire has responsibility for recruiting, assessing, and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and for intercountry adoptions. Aspire is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans in the Dorset region. Aspire provides support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptees, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives.
- 1.6 An Inter Authority Agreement sets out the terms and conditions for the establishment and operation of Aspire between the parties, including the key objectives of Aspire; the principles of collaboration; the governance structures for Aspire; and the respective roles and responsibilities the parties have during the currency of the agreement.

- 1.7 It is important to note that the data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2025. Plans for children are dynamic and develop every day and the picture will have changed at the point this is read. Our task has been to place children promptly in adoptive families that have been robustly assessed and are well-prepared for the challenges of adoption. We support children and their families throughout their childhood and adolescence.



2. Partnership working, local, regional and national

- 2.1 Aspire has the responsibility to discharge the two local authorities' responsibilities as an Adoption Agency. The working relationship between the local council (local authority) and Aspire is fundamental to the success of the partnership working.
- 2.2 Aspire Strategic Partnership Board is chaired by the Executive Director of children's services for Dorset Council, Paul Dempsey. The Board consists of the Lead Member for Children's Services, the Director of Children's Services of each of the local councils, a representative from a voluntary adoption agency, Parents and Children Together (PaCT), the Designated Doctor for Children in Care, pan Dorset and, Parents and Carers Together, the Service User Consultative Forum.
- 2.3 The Service Directors/Heads of Service for each of the local council authority children's services attend the quarterly Operational Board meetings. In broad terms, the Operational Board has day-to-day operational responsibility for Aspire.
- 2.4 Since the beginning of 2025-26, a review of the governance arrangements of Aspire has commenced in partnership with both partner agencies. This is due to the many changes that have occurred over the past year, both within Aspire and in both partner agencies.

- 2.5 Aspire work closely with the local councils, BCP and Dorset – these are our local authority (LA) partners. We attend LA tracking and legal planning meetings across the RAA in order to support our LA colleagues and progress as promptly as possible where children are unable to live with their birth families and need an adoptive family.
- 2.6 Aspire take over all child in care duties and case responsibility for all BCP children once a Placement Order is made, and for those aged 2 and under for Dorset children.
- 2.7 For those children within Dorset aged 2 and over, Aspire provide a comprehensive Family Finding offer and support our colleagues within the Children's services teams to progress the plans in a timely manner in respect of achieving adoption.
- 2.8 In all children's cases, Aspire co-allocate a Family Finding Social Worker from the should be placed for adoption decision and remain involved until the making of the adoption order.
- 2.9 With regards to the provision of Adoption support, Aspire are a small co-located RAA, and as a small RAA we are privileged to be able to know our adoptive families well and offer a bespoke wrap around support package from pre-match to post Adoption Order, resulting in fewer placement breakdowns. We have developed close working relationships with children's teams, Early Help and virtual schools, to ensure that families get the support they need.
- 2.10 Aspire also work closely with Adoption England, The Southwest Adoption Consortium (SWAC) and the Southwest Permanence Project. The service manager for Aspire sits on the Governance boards for Adoption England, SWAC, and the Southwest Permanence project.



- 2.11 Adoption England is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies working together with a small central team working nationally, aiming to improving adoption practice and develop support and services to better meet the needs of children and families.
- 2.12 Aspire have been directly involved in national projects such as the Early Permanence Project, promoting the use of Early Permanence (EP), and providing training to both our partner LA's and to the Judiciary, local solicitors, Barristers and Cafcass to improve the use and understanding of EP.
- 2.13 Aspire have been involved with the recent research project into RAA's case holding from Placement Order, as Aspire are just one of 5 RAA's that undertake this work. This work was commissioned as many other RAA's are considering taking on this role, but there was no evidential base to identify whether this was beneficial for the children.
- 2.14 This research was published in June 2024. The research can be found here [Copy of Case holding research report](#)

- 2.15 There is currently work being undertaken on a National and Regional level to explore improvements in the commissioning of adoption support services. Aspire are working closely with Adoption West and Adopt Southwest, in conjunction with the Adoption England National Commissioning Team to progress this. This work is funded by the DfE until 2026.
- 2.16 From February 2024 until June 2024, Aspire piloted the 'standalone' support plan designed by Adoption England and Coram. This plan was created as feedback from the Adoption barometer shows many adoptive families do not believe that they have an easily accessible support plan, or that they are aware they have one as it was incorporated in other adoption paperwork.
- 2.17 The use of the plan as a formal document began in June 2024, and the feedback received from Aspire's adoption panel, and Adopters has been positive.

The introduction last year of Adoption Support Plans as a separate document as part of the trial carried out by Coram BAAF has been very much welcomed. The plans now identify the support needs of adopters alongside the identified challenges of the children with which they are matched. This has been particularly useful in the assessment of early permanence matches, where ongoing support required by adopters is more easily identified and evidenced against their experience of parenting through the early permanence period.
Nick Adams-King, Aspire Adoption Panel Chair.



- 2.18 Aspire are members of SWAC which consists of our regional partner RAA's Adoption West and Adopt Southwest, and the regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Clifton Childrens Services, Parents and Children Together, and Barnardo's. All agencies work in partnership to support the development of practice through workshops and training events.
- 2.19 SWAC run 3 Adoption Exchanges a year, either virtually or in person. At these exchanges, family finders for children have the opportunity to profile the children they have waiting, and social workers who are supporting adopters waiting also attend, as do prospective adopters themselves. All the SWAC Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) are invited to profile their children waiting, and neighbouring RAAs are also invited to these events.
- 2.20 There are also monthly profiling sessions held virtually where family finders in the 3 SWAC Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) can profile their children waiting. Workers in the RAAs and VAAs also attend virtually, to represent their adoptive families waiting.



- 2.21 Aspire are also involved in the Southwest Permanence project, which is a project involving all the Southwest Regional adoption agencies. The experience of the RAA's in this region when finding adoptive families for children with disabilities is that traditional approaches to adopter recruitment identify few adopters who feel they can provide a family for a child with a disability or complex health needs.
- 2.22 The area covered includes 3 Regional Adoption Agencies, 13 Local Authorities and 5 Voluntary Adoption Agencies. This project is a three-year research project looking into ways of ensuring permanence for those children with complex health needs.
- 2.23 The project has, so far, resulted in changes to the way children with a diagnosed disability are profiled on Linkmaker, a specialist Multi-Disciplinary specialist Assessment provided by the Maudsley Hospital being approved by the ASGSF for inclusion into their process.
- 2.24 The projects funding was due to end in September 2025, with the evaluation report being published at this time. However, further funding has been confirmed for the project to continue and to inform the other matching work that is taking place nationally.

3. Children's Adoption Performance Data

3.1 Who are the Children?



- 3.1.1 As can be seen in Fig 1. There was an even split between male and female children placed and adopted in this period. However, it is interesting to note that 50% of the females were aged 3 and over compared to 28% of the males, whilst 72% of the male children were 2 and under.

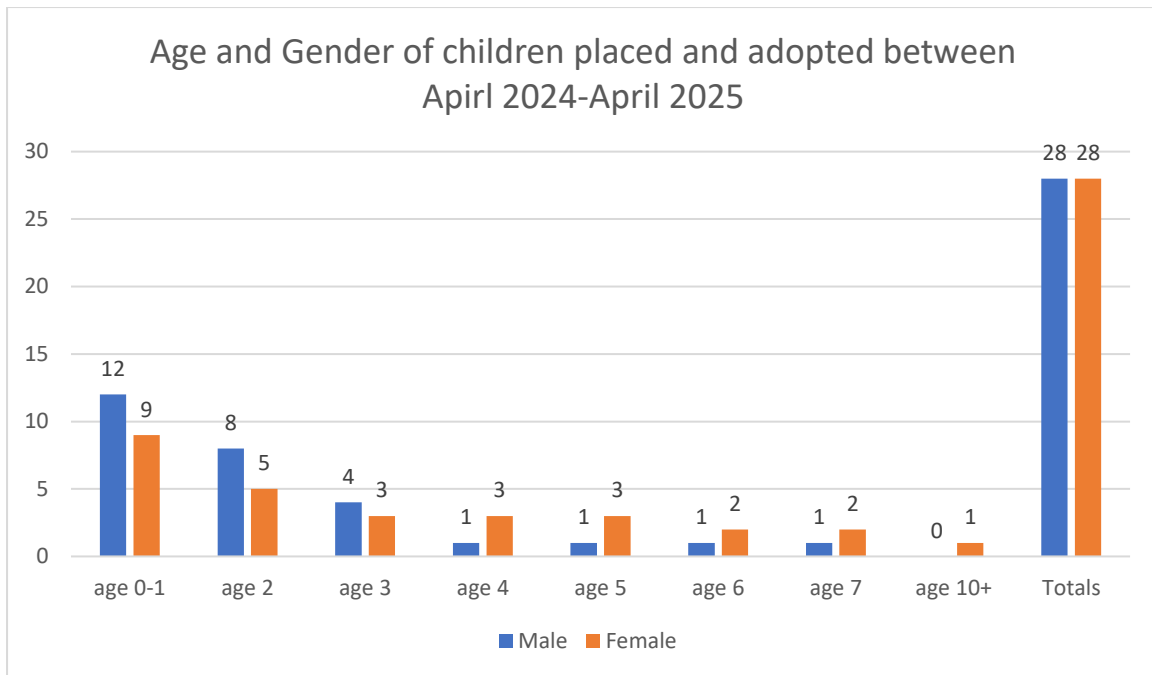


Fig 1

3.1.2 Aspire have also placed sibling groups within the past year. Except for 3 sibling groups of 2 children, all were placed with Aspire adopters. As can be seen in Fig 2, this included older siblings placed with younger siblings (the ages of each child are within the bars).

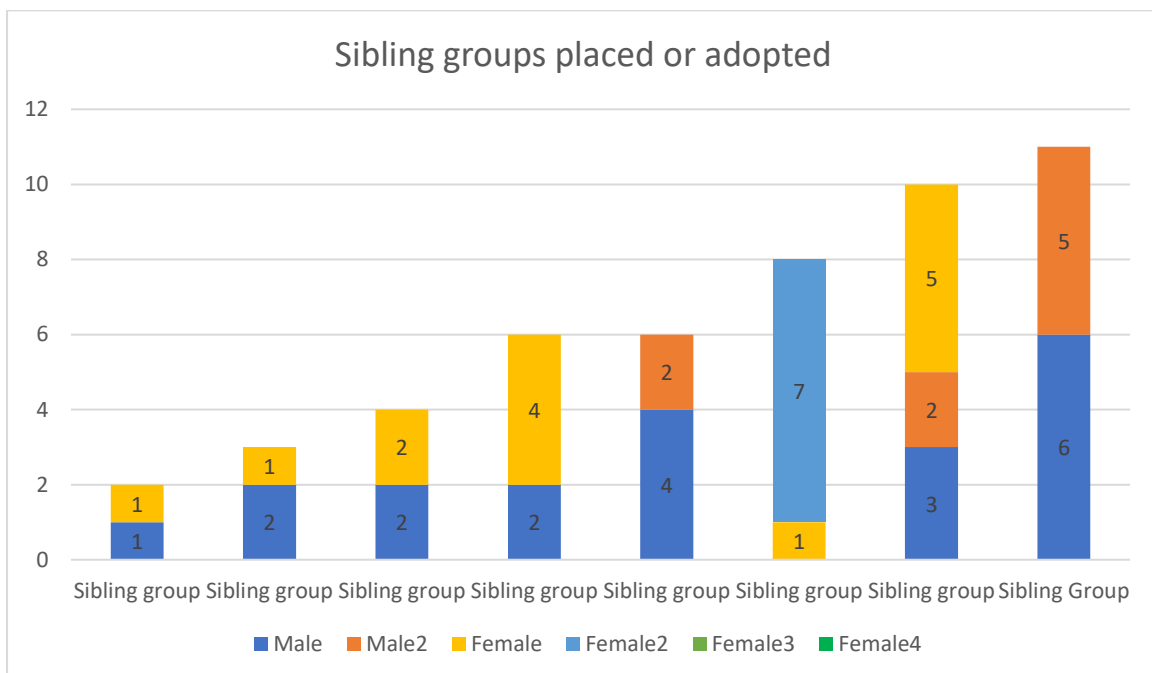


Fig 2

3.1.3 Figure 3 shows the combined numbers of children and the key stages of their adoptive journey for the RAA.

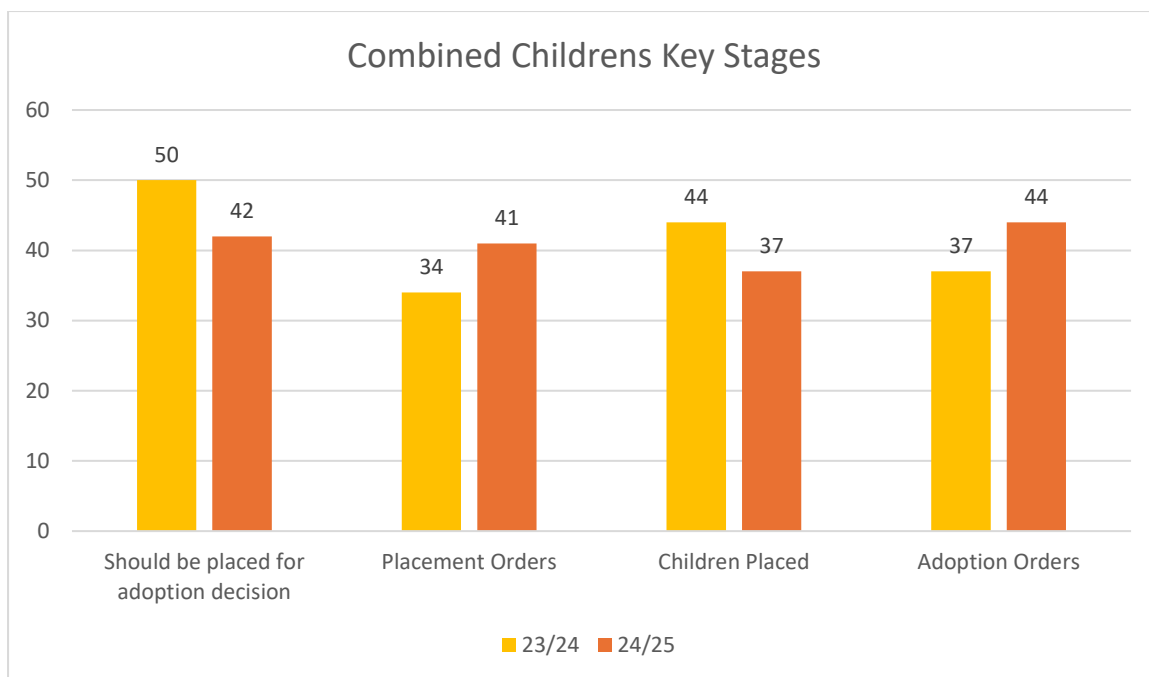


Fig 3.

3.1.4 There has been a reduction of throughout the year in children with should be placed for adoption decisions (SBPA), although an increase in Placement Orders and Adoption Orders.

3.1.5 With regards to the SBPA decisions, there are many variables why this has decreased for the LA's, changes of plan, extended family or kinship carers being identified prior to the plan being adoption, or birth parents making the necessary identified changes to parenting.

3.1.6 There have been some delays with Placement Orders being made, due to the timeliness of the Placement Application being made, which has resulted in Care Orders being granted, with Placement Order applications being filed with the Courts at a later stage. This is a recent development following changes to legal aid in March 2023, whereby birth family can seek legal aid for the Placement Order application. This enables the Court to make a Care Order without delaying this for the Placement Order application.

3.1.7 There has been a decrease in children being placed within 2024/25. This has been due to children having to wait longer for adopters to be identified. Of the children placed 84% of Dorset Children and 100% of BCP children were placed with Aspire adopters. Overall, 92% percent of children who were placed for adoption, were placed with Aspire adopters.

3.1.8 There has been an increase in the number of Adoption Orders made within the year. There were several adoption applications before the Court's in 2023/24 that carried into 2024/25 due to the parents seeking leave to oppose. This is a regular occurrence within the Court's in Dorset and leads to approximately 12 weeks additional delay to the making of the adoption order even if the application to oppose is denied. This is due to the additional time for statements, hearings, and a period of 21 days to enable birth parents to appeal the decision.

3.1.9 Figure 4 shows the individual data for Dorset; Figure 5 shows the number of children for Dorset placed with Aspire Adopters and placed within Interagency Placements.

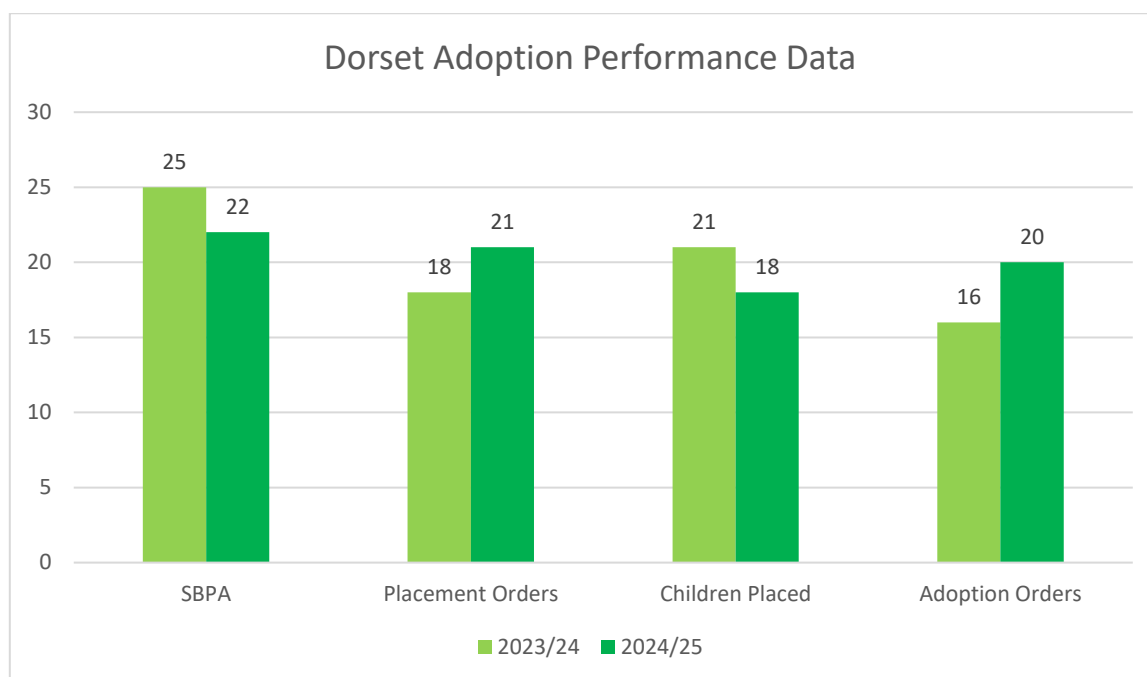


Fig 4

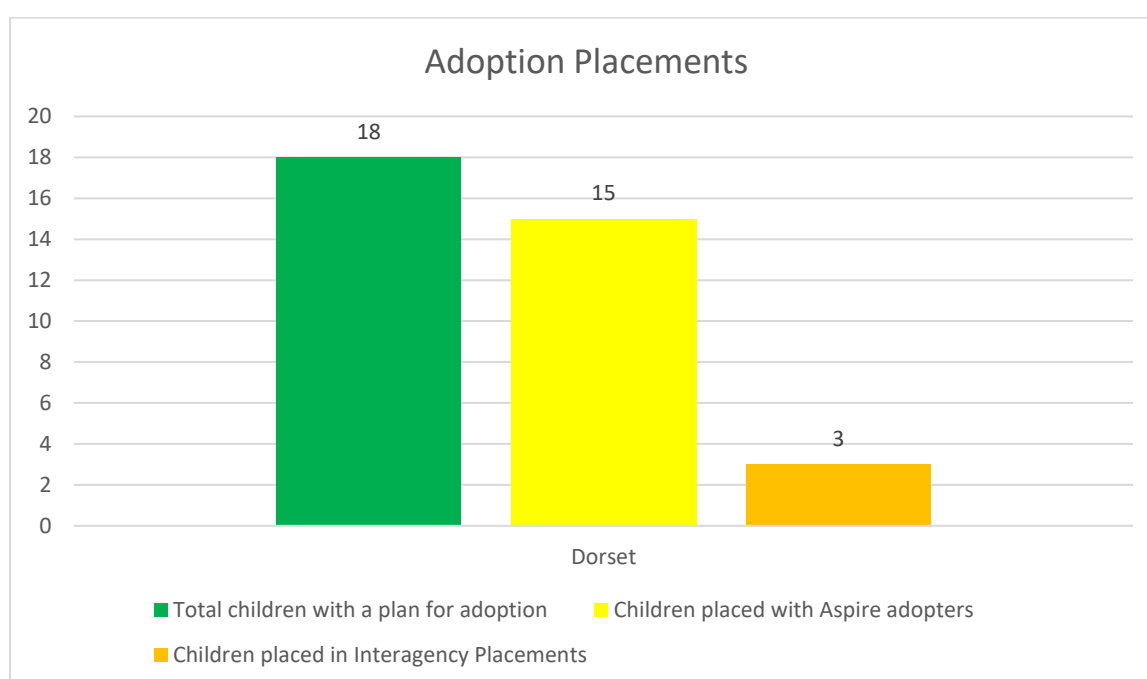


Fig 5

3.2 Should be placed for Adoption Decisions (SBPA)

3.2.1 Dorset have made 3 less SBPA decisions this year as they made in 2023/24. Dorset made a total of 22 SBPA decisions in 2024/2025

3.2.2 Of the 22 SBPA decisions made, 12 were boys and 10 girls, there were 4 sibling groups, 3 of which were groups of two siblings, 1 of which were a group of three. 10 children were below the age of 2 and the remaining children were aged between 2 and 5 years old at the time of the SBPA decision.

3.2.3 All but three children were White British, those not, were a sibling group of 2 who were White/Chinese, and 1 child was White/Black Caribbean.

4. Placement Orders.

4.1 There has been an increase by 3 of Placement Orders granted this year from 18 in 2023/24 to 21 in 2024/25.

5. Children Placed

5.1 There has been a slight decrease in children being placed within 2024/25. Of the children placed 84% of Dorset Children were placed with Aspire adopters.

5.2 Those children that were placed Interagency, were for Dorset, a sibling group of two, aged 1 and 7, and a female child aged 5.

6. Adoption Orders

6.1 There has also been an increase overall in adoption orders made. There were 44 adoption orders granted in 2024/25 an increase of 18% compared to 37 in 2023/24. There has been an increase for Dorset by 4 orders made overall compared to 2023/24.

6.2 The measurement of the number of adoptions order made within a year is problematic, as applications can be made in quarter 3 and quarter 4, but the orders not made for some 3 months later, due to delays with the Courts, which then can skew the figures.

7. Children waiting for a match.

7.1 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.

7.2 For the children currently waiting for a match (Fig6). Aspire has worked hard to increase the range and diversity of adopters enabling children who are older, or in sibling groups loving adoptive families, by prioritising the assessment of those families. For 2024/25 this is evidenced by the children placed - 92% of Aspire children (BCP and Dorset combined), and 84% of Dorset Children were placed with Aspire adopters.

7.3 It does need emphasising that there is a national sufficiency crisis with the recruitment of adopters, meaning that we have to work harder for older children and or sibling groups. and anecdotally, it has been reported by other RAA's and VAA's that those adopters approved for older children and sibling groups, are seeking out children who have lesser needs on Linkmaker.

7.4 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.

**Children with PO
waiting for a
match**

	Apr	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March
Dorset	12	7	10	8	10	15	15	13	15	17	14	13

**Children with PO
linked to
adopters**

	Apr	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March
Dorset	2	0	3	1	1	5	6	7	10	11	8	4

**Children with PO
not yet linked**

	Apr	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March
Dorset	10	7	7	7	9	10	9	6	5	6	6	9

Fig 6

7.5 Of the 13 Dorset children waiting for a match, 4 are linked to adopters and have matching panels booked. 3 children had their placement orders made within 4 weeks of the end of Quarter 4 2024/25. Of those 9 children, there were three sibling groups of 2, and two children with additional needs.

7.6 As a general principle, siblings will be placed together; however, due to the individual needs of children, this is not always right for them 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.

8. Timeliness of Adoption

8.1 Nationally, Aspire are one of the best performing RAA's in respect of their timeliness of the child's journey through the adoption process, and one of only 4 RAA's with a positive adopter gap, meaning we have more adopters available than children waiting.

8.2 There has continued to be a decrease in both the time between entering care and being placed for adoption, the time from Placement Order to be matched with adopters and from becoming looked after to being adopted. It must be remembered that lower is better for these figures as this indicates minimum delay in children achieving their permanence.

8.3 This is attributable to the close working partnerships between Dorset and Aspire. There has been a sustained improvement in tracking the children's progress throughout their adoptive journey.

8.4 Aspire implemented a tracking process in early 2024/25 from when the child was placed with their adoptive family, and the 10 weeks point when the adoption application could be made. This has seen a significant decrease in the time scales which is again beneficial as permanence is achieved quicker for the children.

8.5 This consolidated joint working, and targeted recruitment of adopters for our children, has resulted in a timelier process, enabling children to be with their families sooner rather than later.

8.6 The most up to date scorecard data provided, at the time of writing, is the ASGLB RAA Dashboard Q3-2024/25 - A1, A2, A10 and A20 timescales for children adopted in the year to 31 December 2023.

- 8.7 As can be seen below (Fig 7), the England average at Q3 for A10 was 485 days, and 216 days for A2. Dorset is performing better than the national average, their A10 is 365 days and A2 is 166 days.

ASGLB RAA Dashboard - Aspire 2024/25 Q3 - A1, A2, A10 and A20 timescales for children placed (A1, A10), matched (A2) and granted a PO (A20) in the year to 31 December 2024

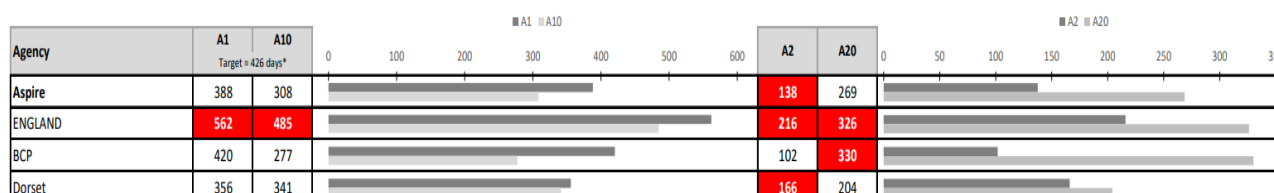
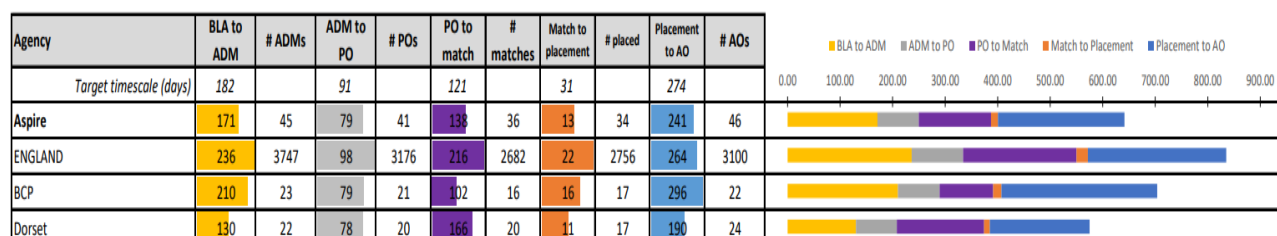


Fig 7

- 8.7 For all aspects of the child's journey through adoption (Fig 8 & 8a), Dorset are achieving good timeliness for children in securing their permanence.

ASGLB RAA Dashboard - Aspire 2024/25 Q3 - Average days to complete key phases of child's journey in the 12 months to 31 December 2024



A1 = entering care to adoptive placement; A10 = entering care to adoptive placement / fostering placement if foster carer adopts child; A2 = placement order to match; A20 = entering care to Placement.

Fig 8

9. Dorset Timeliness

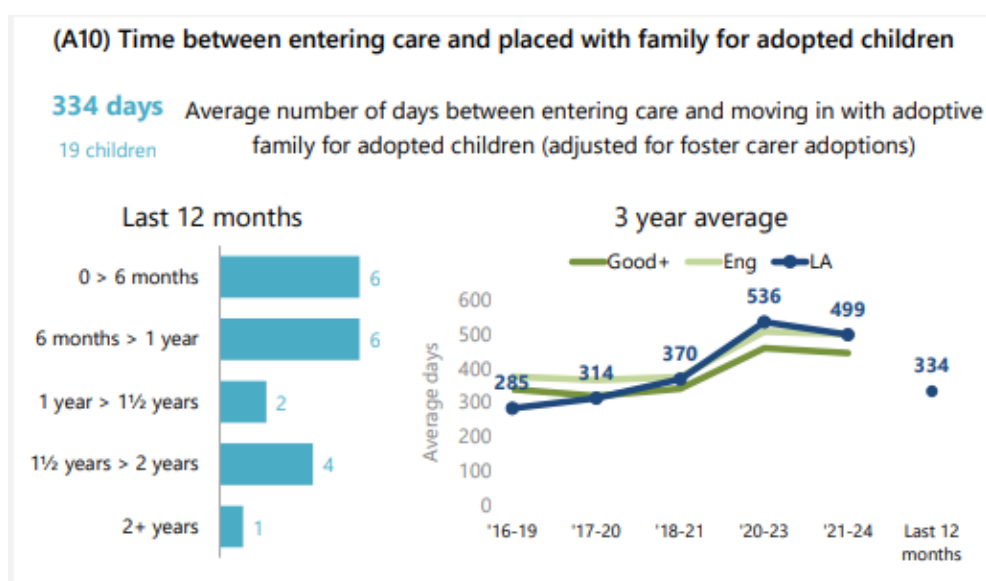


Fig 8a

- 9.1 Dorset are performing better than the England and Good averages in this area (Fig 9). However, this data does include the time taken from entering care to the making of the Placement Order, and there can be delays within the Court process, such as multiple assessments at a late stage, additional applications for Special Guardianship Orders, which can and do impact upon these timescales.

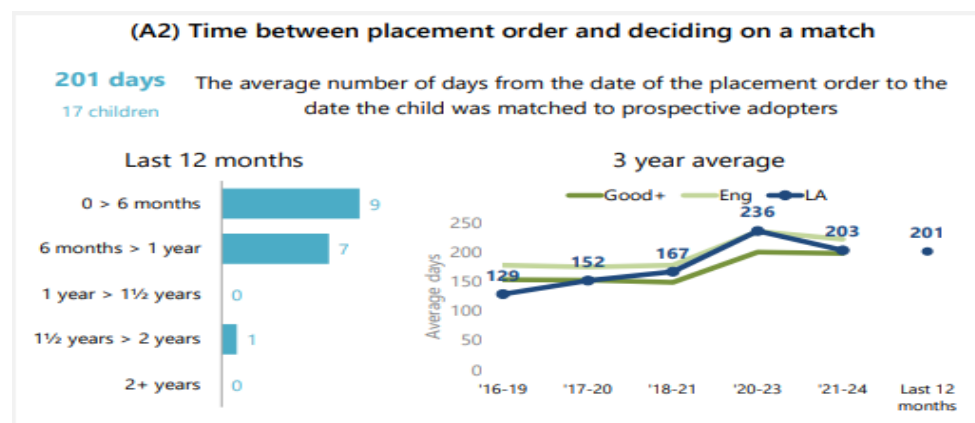


Fig 9

- 9.2 The timeliness between authority to place and deciding on a match has continued to improve over the last 12 months, despite the national sufficiency crisis. Dorset are performing better than the England and Good national averages. There has been much earlier tracking of children deemed harder to place, and targeted recruitment, and in some cases fast tracking of the assessment of the adopters, for those children, to enable them to achieve permanence within their families.

10. Early Permanence

- 10.1 Early Permanence (EP) is an umbrella term for two main placement types where children have been placed with approved adopters who are also approved as foster carers. These placement types have previously been known as concurrent placements and foster to adopt placements.
- 10.2 Early permanence is seen to be win-win for a child, either they stay with the family they know and feel safe with, or they return to the care of their birth family who they also know and feel safe with. It is the adults who have to manage the uncertainty and challenges.
- 10.3 This has resulted in an increase in the confidence and use of EP, which is extremely positive for the children, as they have fewer placement moves, and as above, either go on to be adopted or return to family. Figure 10 shows the number of children placed within EP placements in 2024/25.

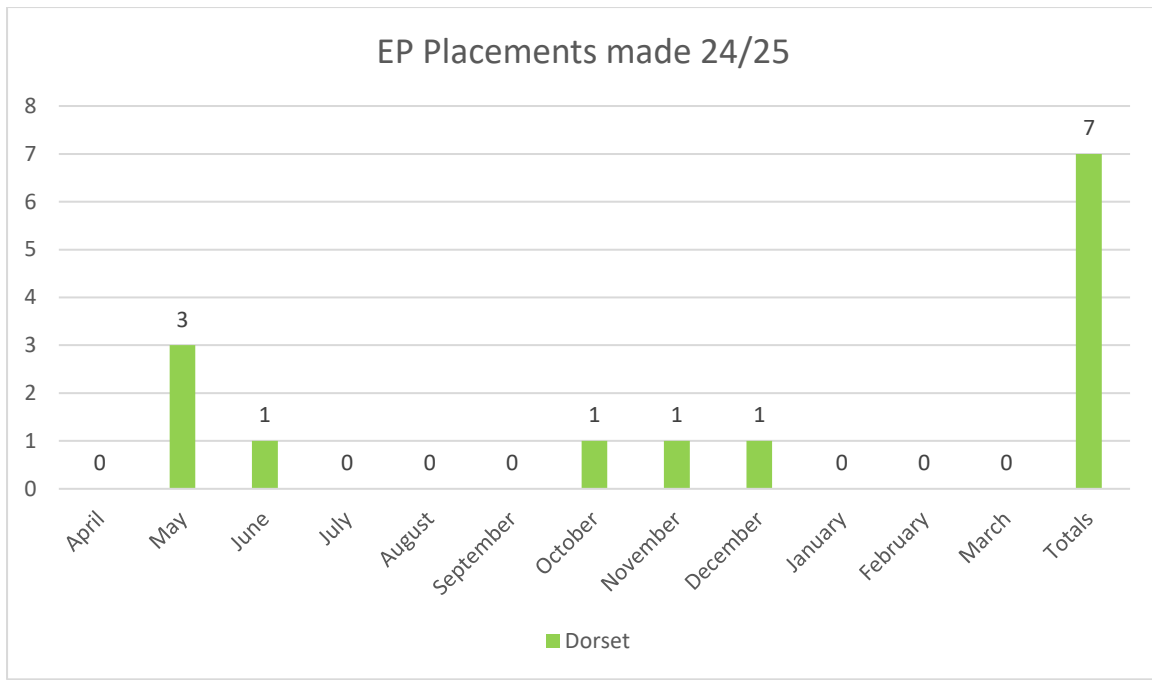


Fig 10

10.4 This is a reduction of 59% of the number of EP placements made in 2024/25 compared to the numbers of EP placements made in 2023/24 year. To compare these figures, the graph (Fig 11), shows the total historic use of Early Permanence.

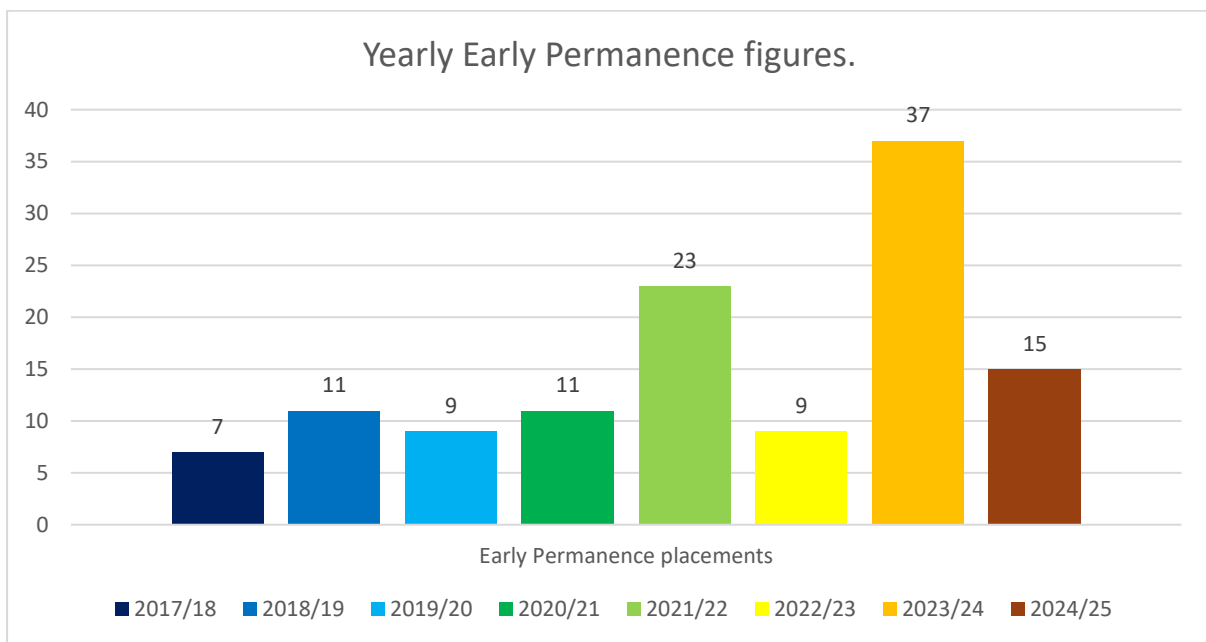


Fig 11

10.5 The increase in 2021/22 was due to the 'Somerset Judgement', and the use of Early Permanence whilst the decision making was scrutinised to ensure that the SBPA decision was compliant with the adoption regulations, whilst avoiding delay for children.

- 10.6 In 2023/24, Dorset placed 19 children within an EP placement, this was completely against the norm, and it was due to a larger number of siblings groups, ranging between sibling groups of 2, 3 and 4 children being placed with adopters specifically recruited, fast tracked and assessed for those children.
- 10.7 We have not seen the same levels of larger sibling groups during 2024/25, and where we have larger sibling groups, these have been more complex, with 1 child not placed with their siblings, resulting in a need to ensure that the children are living together prior to placing in an adoptive placement. We have also seen a decrease in adopters willing to undertake EP at the point of approval.
- 10.8 Whilst Early Permanence has generally been used for babies. Aspire has placed babies direct from hospital so there are children who have only known the one carer. We have also been far more creative in our use of early permanence with older children, and sibling groups, to reduce placement moves to avoid delay.
- 10.9 Our adopters have proved that with the right support and information they can manage a high degree of risk, uncertainty, and contact. Three children ended up being returned to their birth families. They worked incredibly hard to make it a smooth transition for the child.

11. Adopter Recruitment

- 11.1 Aspire recruits a great range of diverse adopters. However, this remains a challenge due to the national sufficiency crisis relating to the recruitment of adopters. However, for the second year running Aspire have continued to 'buck' this trend and have been able to maintain a pool of available adopters for our children. There are only 4 RAA's nationally that have a positive adopter gap. Aspire being one.
- 11.2 Targeted changes to our social media messaging and changes to the induction programme and preparation training, have helped attract adopters for older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs that we require.
- 11.3 We continue to fine-tune our messaging and work with adopters to flex around the needs of our 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. If adopters are not matched with Dorset or BCP children, we support them to explore children nationally.

11.4 There continues to be a significant decrease in the number of approved adopters nationally within this year, however, Fig 12 shows that Aspire have remained relatively uniform in their recruitment and approval of adopters, with a growth in numbers back to the 2022/23 levels.

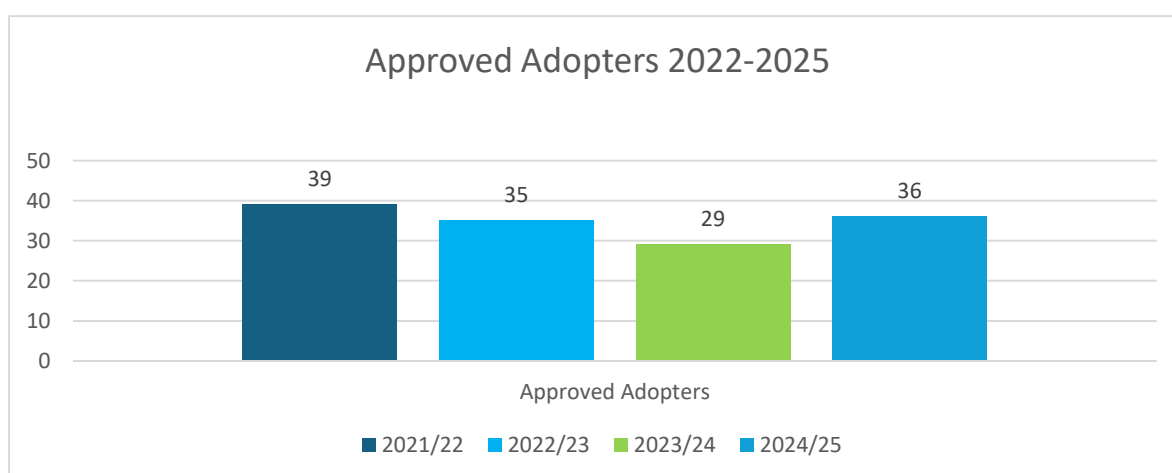


Fig 12

11.5 Aspire have continued to challenge the downward trend in the recruitment of adopters despite the national picture as Fig13 shows. Whilst our approvals are reduced in line with the England national average, we have been able to still approve adopters for our children and have a much bigger adopter gap i.e. more adopters than children. Although this has significant decreased from the 90% adopter gap it was in Q3 2023/24

As at 31-Dec-24						
Families available	Families needed	Adopter Gap*	% children who had been waiting 3 months ago now placed	Open S2 cases	Cases pending S2	Open S1 cases
26	21	27%	59%	12	5	11
1476	2183	-32%	20%	879	275	986

Fig 13 ASGLB RAA Dashboard Q3-2024/25

11.6 In respect of recruitment Fig 14 shows that the enquiries over 2024/25 have increased compared to the data from 2023/24, however not all of these converted to Registrations of Interest or progressed to stage 1 or 2.

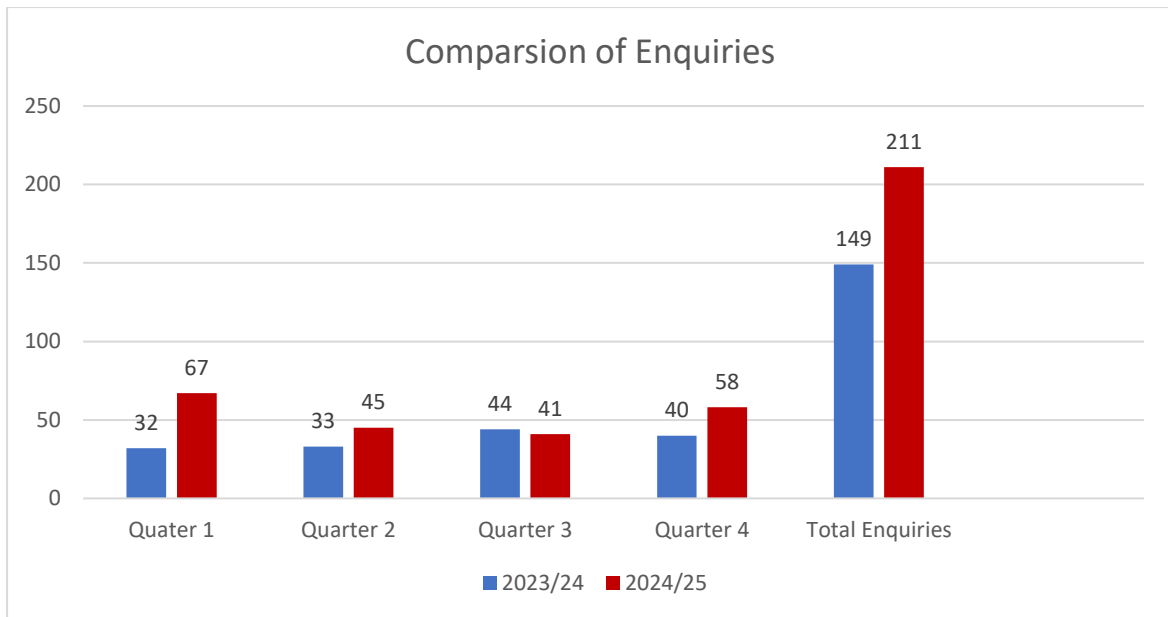


Fig 14

11.7 To further understand this increase of enquires, a dip sample of 92 enquiries from April 2024 to April 2025 was undertaken and the results are as in Fig 15. The highest percentage of enquiries, 61 % came through a google search for local adoption. The second highest at 28% was due to word of mouth. In 7 enquiries the prospective adopter had searched online for their local adoption agency, then spoke to other adopters who had adopted through Aspire. The lowest enquiries came through Dorset (2%) and BCP's (1%) websites. 6.5% of the enquiries were from adopters who had previously adopted through Aspire.

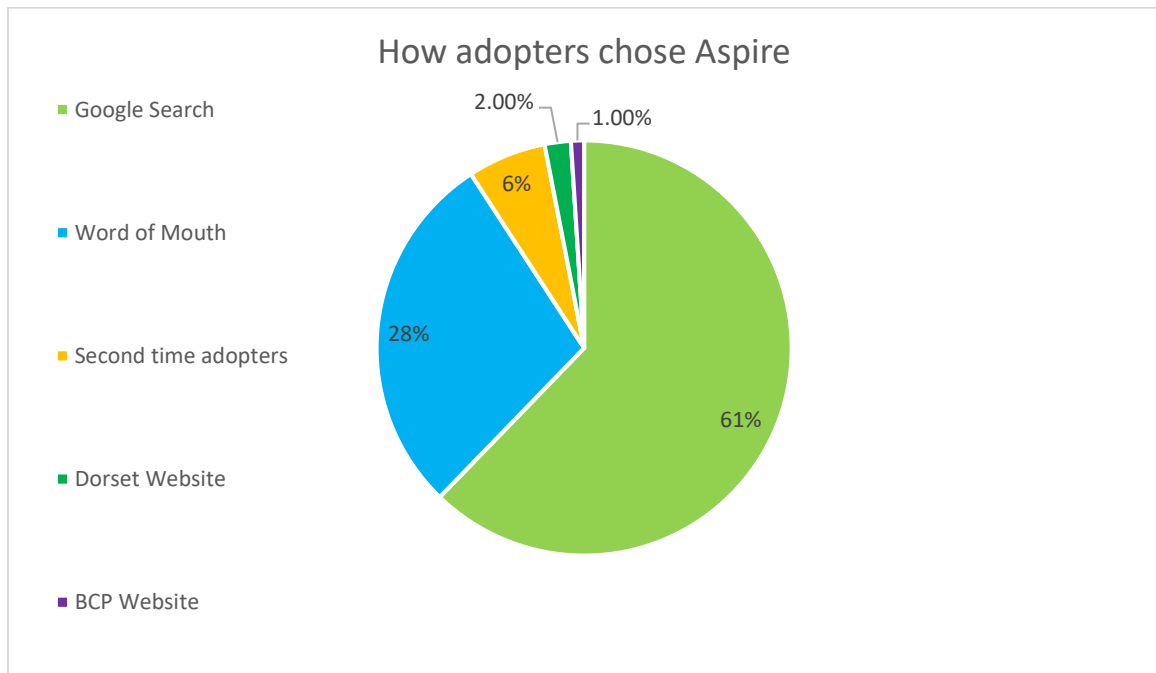


Fig 15

- 11.8 In respect of marketing and recruitment, this would indicate that a larger online presence is required, with marketing and recruitment taking place through social media. Aspire have continued to use social media to advertise its support services and keep their adopters and Special Guardians updated as to what is on offer. This appears to have continued to positively influence the number of enquiries.
- 11.9 Aspire are developing its 2025-2027 marketing policy, using information gained from those that have progressed their adoption journey with Aspire to inform this policy.
- 11.10 There are currently 5 adoptive families with EP placements. Whilst this is extremely positive for those children, it does impact on the availability of adoptive families for the more traditional route to adoption.

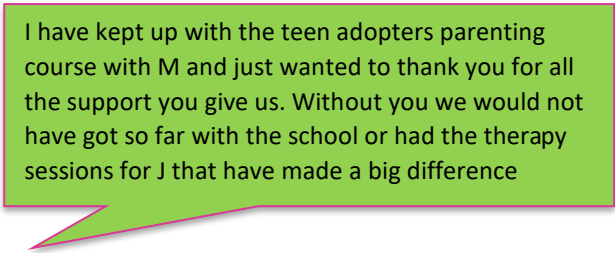
12. Interagency Adoptions

- 12.1 Aspire supports national adopter sufficiency adopters.
- 12.2 Aspire brought 2 interagency placements in 2024/25, at a cost of £91,689 and provided adopters nationally generating £268,000 income. There were two interagency placements made for Dorset children made in 2024-25.
- 12.3 There is a disparity of charges for adopters when sourced from Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA). The cost for one child placed with a VAA adoptive family is £35,565 and for RAA's this is £27,000.
- 12.4 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.
- 12.5 Our relentless focus on finding families for children means that almost all children with a plan for adoption are found families.

13. Post Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Services

- 13.1 There continues to be national work taking place, involving all the RAA's, regarding Adoption Support, to produce practice standards, so there is a national defined core offer of support, and a shared understanding of practice. There is also national and regional work being undertaken in respect of the commissioning of support services. Funding for this has been secured to continue into 2025/26.
- 13.2 Aspire were specifically involved with this as we piloted the Adoption Support Plans during 2024/25 and in June 2024 implemented the use of the plans.
- 13.3 We also use the Adoption Support Transfer process which enables a seamless transfer of support should a family move from the area they are receiving support or reside in an area where the post three years support has ceased.
- 13.4 Aspire are also working with our regional partners Adoption West and Adopt Southwest to review the commissioning of support services and work on ways to improve and standardise the services on offer.
- 13.5 Aspire offers support to all adopters and special guardians, pan Dorset, until their children reach adult hood. Support is also offered to all adopters and Special Guardians, whose children come from other LA's once the support provided by their own LA ceases 3 years post order.

- 13.6 As most children from BCP and Dorset are placed with Aspire adopters this means that the support is provided throughout the child's minority and into further education. This also creates a sufficiency issue in the ability to meet need, as the support will not cease after the 3 years, and transfer to the area the child is placed
- 13.7 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 4 FTE social workers and 3 and half family support workers. We have maximised capacity by reducing bureaucracy.
- 13.8 The support team worked closely, in 2023/24 with our host Local Authority's Information Teams to have dedicated workflows implemented on the electronic case management system. This was fully implemented at the end of May 2024. This enables a clearer understanding of the families that we support and has standardised the work undertaken.
- 13.9 Close partnership working between the Support Team and both Local Authority's fostering services took place in 2024/25 to ensure the smooth transition of the Special Guardianship support services back to each Local Authority. This work was carefully managed to prevent any gaps in service. Those families affected were kept informed via social media posts, emails and drop-in sessions. The services successfully transitioned on the 1 April 2025



I have kept up with the teen adopters parenting course with M and just wanted to thank you for all the support you give us. Without you we would not have got so far with the school or had the therapy sessions for J that have made a big difference

14. The Core Offer of Support

- 14.1 Aspire continue to offer a tiered approach to support services, which consists of a duty system, universal support, and targeted Intervention. This has proved the most effective way of providing support within the region.
- 14.2 Aspire continues to work hard to eradicate waiting lists and offer an immediate response to families at the lower tiers through a daily duty system. However, due to the sheer volume of work, there is a waiting last of 3-6 days for a consultation with a Social Worker, if this is required.
- 14.3 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. This includes but is not limited to; meetings with Clinical Psychologists, bespoke training packages, therapeutic input delivered by Aspire staff, individual commissioned membership of Children and Trauma Community Hub (CaTCH), a dedicated web based support service providing online training, workshops, advice etc for Adopters and Special Guardians.
- 14.4 The service has formed strong links with Virtual Schools, Early Help and universal services who offer bespoke services for our families.

14.5 The duty system receives approximately 300 enquiries a month, which vary dependant on the time of year i.e. holidays and Christmas seeing an increase in enquiries.

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

Universal Support
• Access to Duty system for advice and guidance • Support groups for adults only • Support groups with children • Regular Newsletters • Access to workshops/training • Social events SG and Adopter specific • Coffee mornings/Drop ins in a school setting SG only • Children and trauma community hub membership log ins.

Just wanted to say a great big thank you for the party this year. It was fab.

All our kids enjoyed so much even the very cool, very nearly 12 year old!

14.7 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.

Targeted Support
• Short term intensive support from a social worker/ family support practitioner • Direct work with children/family around therapeutic parenting • Continued advice/guidance to parents/carers • Continued advice and guidance to education settings where necessary • Access to therapy funded through the ASF (if eligible) • Referral to Psychological support via Dorset/BCP referral process

14.8 For those families that need targeted support, a worker will be allocated to the family to carry out the identified work and provide support for up to three months, and an exit plan will be developed within the plan.

14.9 This is not an exhaustive list as bespoke services and workshops/training can be tailored to individual family's dependant on need.

14.10 Allocations are 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 children in their care.

14.11 As well as the more traditional support, there are monthly social walks, and coffee mornings for SG and Adopter groups, and regular monthly support groups, stay and plays, summer picnics and Christmas parties. These provide those families the opportunity to have a reflective space to discuss their circumstances and build up peer support. There is an adult adopter group held 6 times a year.

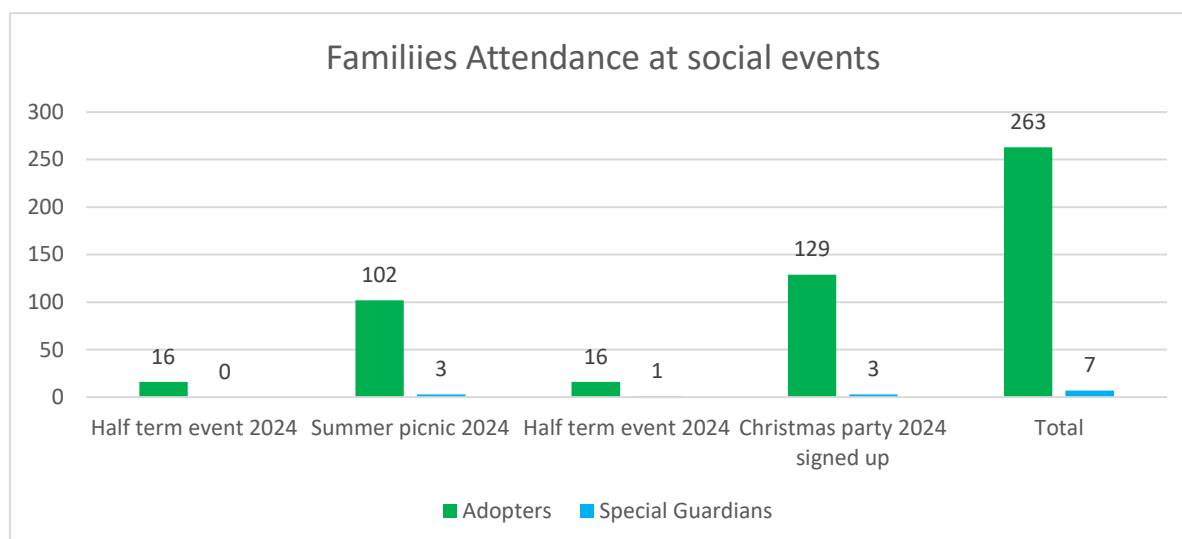


Fig 16 shows the attendance of those families at the main holiday social events held throughout the year.

15. The Department for Education Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

15.1 The adoption and special guardian support fund provides funds to local authorities and regional adoption agencies to pay for essential therapeutic services for eligible adoptive, special guardianship order and child arrangement order families.

15.2 The post support team help adopters and special guardians to access the ASGSF by 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 families to access therapeutic services.

15.3 There were 377 applications made to the ASGSF fund in 2024/25 which relates to £1,059,063.93 of funding for therapeutic input for those Adoptive and Special Guardian's within the area. Fig 17 shows the breakdown by Local Authority and Adopters and Special Guardians.

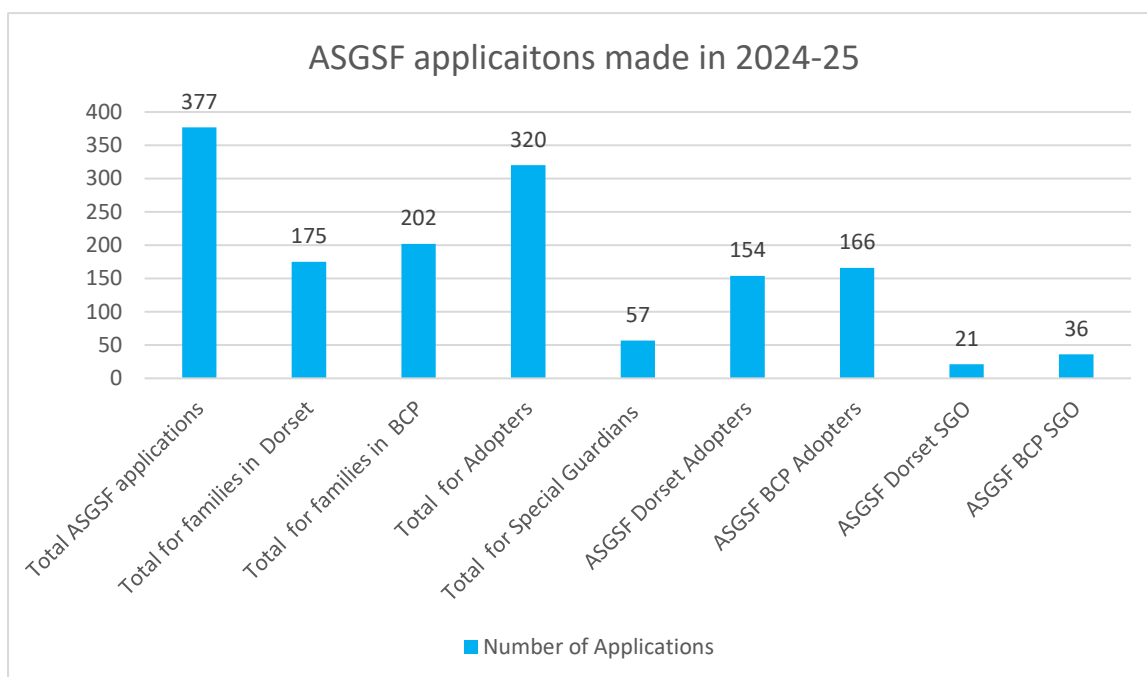


Fig 17

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

- 16.1 Changes were made, and implemented as detailed previously, at the beginning of 2024/25 following 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. This has not occurred, and the levels and quality of the support has remained the same.
- 16.2 There are workshops provided to Special Guardians and Adopters, these are the Great behaviour breakdown, Foundations of Attachment, and Nonviolent resistance. In total throughout 2024/25 187 families across Dorset have been supported through the groups, workshops and social events provided by the Support Team
- 16.3 There has been positive feedback received from the Adopter and Special Guardianship Forum relating to the Support services within Aspire, and from individual adopters and Special Guardians. A further indicator of a positive impact is that there have been only 2 complaints relating to Aspire support services since September 2023. These are a selection of the compliments the service has received during 2024/25:

“Thank you so much for your time and effort with this financial issue I have had, it feels like for the first time in nearly 10 years I am getting support as it has always previously been about the biological mother, so I really do appreciate your support”.

Special Guardian

“I appreciate it's late but I just wanted to say thank you very much for the life story book we've read it this evening and it's fantastic. I can see how much effort has gone into it and I'm very much looking forward to sharing it with Sxxxxx as he gets a little bigger”.

Adopters upon receipt of life story book

“I hope you are well. I cannot put into words how utterly amazing Sxxxx's life story is. I got quite emotional reading it and thinking how proud she will be to show people her adoption life story. You have written it beautifully and I love how user friendly it is and the clip art is relevant and not too much. You've done us proud”.

Adopter on receiving a life story book

“I've just sent the midway report for Wxxxx but I just wanted to email separately to say that I really appreciated how positively you led the review meeting. You made me feel that everything had been really listened to and although we had 2 children to discuss you allowed everyone to say what they needed to without the meeting taking an age too - a skill indeed!”

Therapist relating to a mid-way review

“The whole team is wonderful, we all always really look forward to the summer picnic & Xmas party, it's a great time to see the staff again, including Hayley Curtis, Hayley Rumkie, Kathryn Kerr & Venessa & chat with other adopters we know. We don't always get the chance to dial into the support meetings in the evenings, but when we do, we always leave feeling much happier, supported & that we are not the only ones who experience difficulty!”

“After I send this email, I will think of 100 other things I should have mentioned, but in essence, the post support team are truly excellent, full of empathy, kindness & support both emotionally & with accessing support. They are always at the end of the phone & make you feel comfortable to be honest about any difficulties you are having & are always full of endless reassurance. Thank you, you are outstanding.

Adoptive Family

17. Demand for post support services

- 17.1 This service has seen a continued increase in uptake over the year, and this is expected to continue.
- 17.2 Many support enquiries are dealt with as advice and signposting, or the provision of CaTCH membership. however, as can be seen from the data, there has been an increase in the number of referrals for support via the ASGSF throughout the year more than doubling the funding applied for in the previous year.
- 17.3 We are currently seeing more placement order being made with recommendations or contact orders attached, for direct contact to take place. This will impact on the support services required moving forward, as all involved, birth family, adopters and children, will require support in the initial stages.

- 17.4 Aspire currently support 7 direct contacts between children and their birth parents. There is an expectation that this will rise in the coming years.
- 17.5 Aspire also provide the indirect contact between birth parents and the children through the 'letterbox' system. Aspire currently support 576 letterbox contacts, usually involving 2 parents.
- 17.6 Whilst much of the Support Teams work is providing support post order, the team are also involved with the completion of the Adoption Support Plans, and the Special Guardianship support plans to enable a realistic and needs led approach.
- 17.7 There have been no family breakdowns, either Adoptive or Special Guardianship families when the support services have been involved. Aspire advertise their services via social media, and through mailshots to all known adopters in the area.

18. The challenge for the Post Adoption and Special Guardianship Service

- 18.1 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.
- 18.2 However, we do need to be mindful for the potential increase in the more with direct contact post adoption order potentially becoming the norm. This would require all those involved, Birth parents, Adopters and Children to be prepared and supported through this process in the initial stages.
- 18.3 At present the current change in systems are proving beneficial, and are manageable by the Team, meaning more families are being supported. The Special Guardianship support left Aspire on the 1st April 2025.



19. Aspire Adoption Panel

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

19.1.1 This year the panel made: -

- 36 Approvals
- 27 Matches
- 9 De-Registrations
- 2 Should be placed for adoption Decisions

19.2 Matches of children with adopters.

19.2.1 Matches of children have continued well. The 27 matches identifying new homes for 35 children, including one sibling group of 3 and 5 groups of 2 children. A slight majority of matches were of adopters with children who had already been placed with them under early permanence arrangements. The cases provide the challenge of ensuring appropriate scrutiny of a match which has, to all intents and purposes, already been agreed and settled. The advent of the Adoption Support Plan being used as a separate and more detailed document has helped considerably in allowing Panel to properly scrutinise the support going forward, most particularly from the perspective of there being experience of the children being in the adopters' care.

19.3 Adopters

19.3.1 It has been heartening to see the number of adopters increase this year after the reduction in approvals during 2023-24. There remain delays for adopters in bring brought to Panel not of Aspire's making in that delays to both DBS checks and medical reports have held up a number of approvals.

19.3.2 The number of de-registrations of adopters increased slightly. These adopters had often been approved for over two years and had not been matched. Either their criteria had resulted in them not finding a child they felt able to parent, or personal issues had intervened with their cases.

19.3.3 The stability of Aspire staff also played a part and panel feedback on these cases has reflected the impact of staff changes in the recruitments and assessment team in two adopters feeling unsupported through their journey, resulting in their wishing to withdraw from the process.

19.4 Feedback from Panel

19.4.1 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.

19.4.2 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'.

19.4.3 Panel report that the quality of reports continues to be good, with particular improvement around CPRs and APRs at the point of matching.

19.4.4 Analysis and evidencing of resilience in PARs has become uniformly good, leading to no deferrals of adoption approvals this year.

19.4.5 Timeliness of assessments has generally improved but still remains outside statutory limits. Delays to DBS check return and medical assessments remaining the primary cause

20. Birth parent services

- 20.1 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 agency, Parents and Children Together (PaCT) (BFM) following the service ceasing with Families for Children This had been recommissioned from April 2022 to 31 March 2024 with an option to extend for a further 2 years.
- 20.2 The service consists of 15 hours a week of an experienced social worker, management oversight and agency support. The social worker had at times gained additional external charitable funding to support activities.
- 20.3 Following concerns expressed by PaCT, regarding the ability to meet need within the current constraints of the post, they provided notice on the 30 January 2024, that they were not renewing the contract on the 31 March 2024.
- 20.4 The worker was subject to TUPE and therefore remained on her current terms and conditions, which would be met through the current budget. The worker was Taped into Aspire on the 5 May 2024. However, the worker was signed off as unfit to work and resigned in November 2024.
- 20.5 To ensure that this service was met, agreement was provided to use an independent Social Worker to cover the post. This has continued, and recruitment to the post is now taking place.
- 20.6 The service remains under the name of Birth Family Matters and has its own Email address and contact number, and sits within the Aspire support services, offering independence from the line management of children's cases.

21. Special Guardianship Assessments

21.1 Transitioning of Services

- 21.1.2 It was agreed at the Strategic Partnership Board in December 2023, that the Special Guardianship work should transition back into the respective Local Authorities and align within the Fostering/Kinship Care Services. This work commenced in January 2024 and was finalised with a successful transitioning of staff and services in April 2025. Aspire no longer provide Special Guardianship Assessments nor support services as these are now part of the Fostering/Kinship services within each Local Authority.

21.2 Special Guardianship Work

- 21.2.1 For the second successive year there has been a decrease in the number of referrals to the Special Guardianship Assessment Team (Fig 18). This is still above the 120 referrals that Aspire were funded to undertake.
- 21.2.2 Dorset ceased making referrals in January 2025, as the service was to be transitioning out of Aspire, and the timescales for completing and filing the assessments would have passed the transfer date.

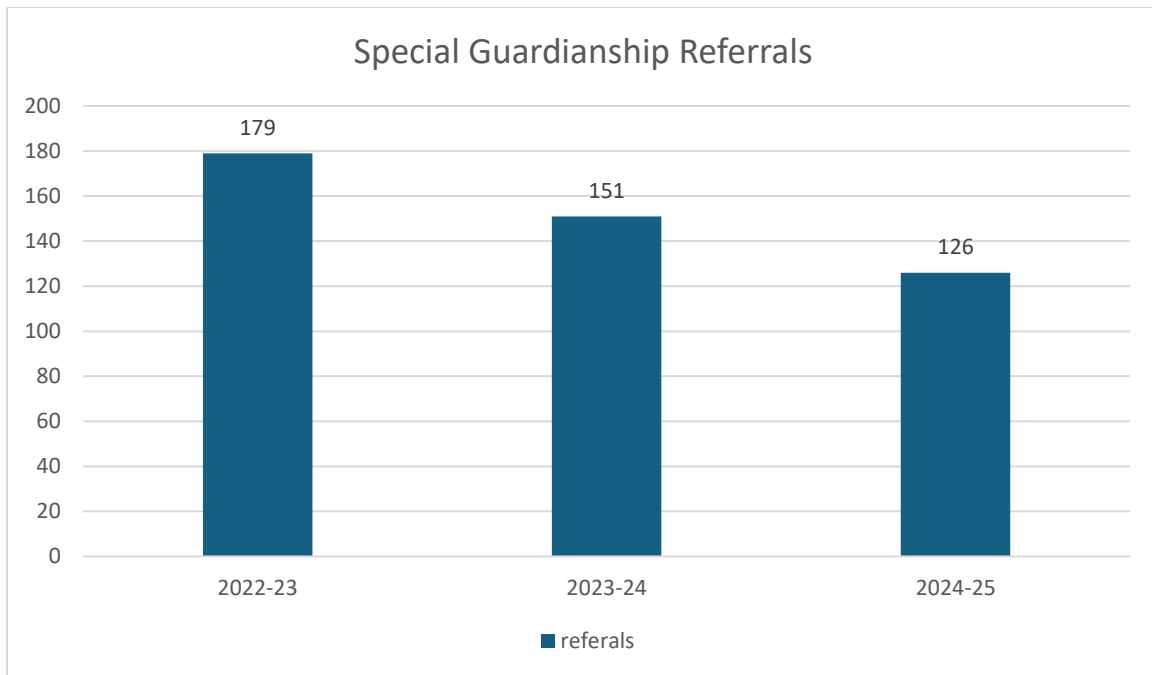


Fig 18

21.2.3 For Dorset, the details relating to the Special Guardianship Assessments are shown in Fig 19.

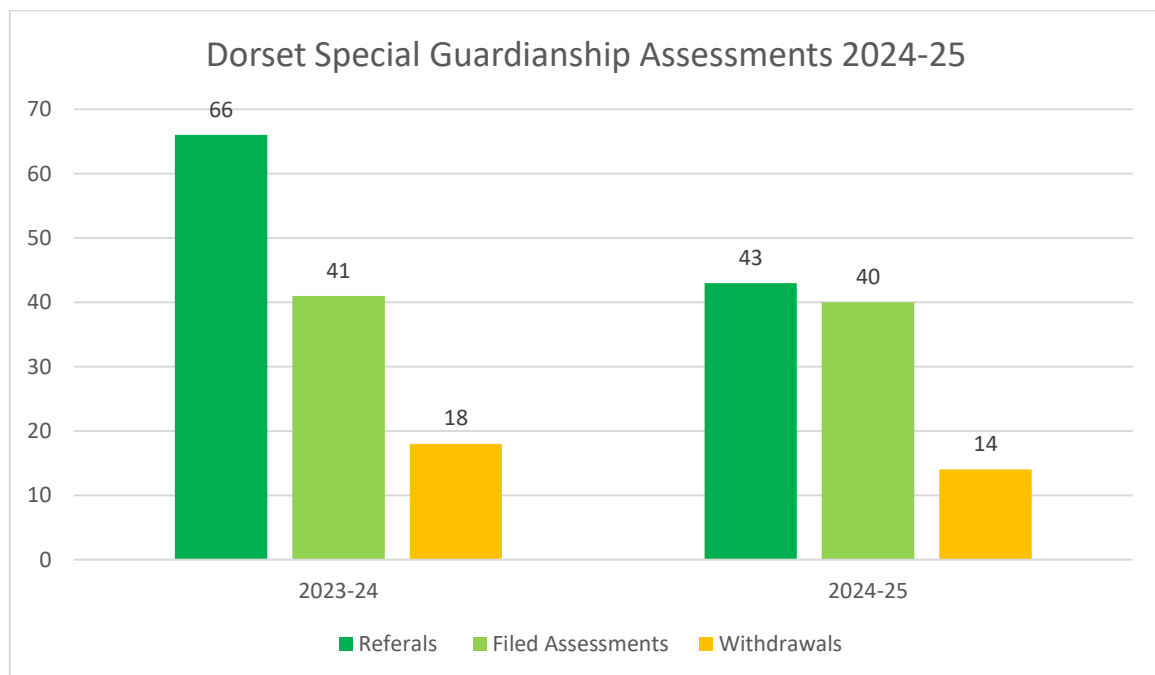


Fig 19

21.2.4 The number of special guardianship referrals from Dorset has decreased since 2023/24 by 35%. During 2023/24 there were 41 Special Guardianship assessments filed with the Court compared to 40 in 2023/24 for Dorset, a decrease of 2.5%.

21.2.5 However, the completion of the Special Guardianship assessment takes 12 weeks from commencement to completion and filing with the Court, there were 12 assessments being undertaken in March 2024, that were from referrals made in Quarter 4 of 2023-24 that were filed within the first Quarter of 2024-25.

21.2.6 Approximately 32% of the special guardianship referrals received did not result in a full assessment being completed.

21.2.7 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 Kinship/ foster carers, more than one family member is being assessed, issues arise during the assessment or the child's plan may change.

21.2.8 For Dorset the reasons for the withdraws are as follows

Number of withdrawals	Reason for withdrawal
2	Withdrew as they felt the assessment was too intrusive.
3	Wished to remain connect person carers.
1	Withdrawn by LA.
8	They couldn't commit to the child.

21.2.9 Dorset's withdrawal rate has remained reasonable static, with a increase of 5% from the previous year. The withdrawal reasons would indicate that Dorset's referrals are good quality, all the applicants gave valid reasons for withdrawing.

22. Finance

22.1 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.

22.2 In 2024/25 the forecast position for Aspire's operational budget was an overspend of £33,988. This overspend mainly arose due to a higher-than-expected staff pay award and included the unfunded element of the 22/23 pay award of £63,000.

Aspire Adoption 2024/2025 Budget Monitoring Statement - position to 26th March 2025							Reasons for variances		
	Annual Budget 2024/25	YTD Budget	YTD Actuals (March salaries not yet charged)	Forecast Variance 2024/25	Forecast 2024/25	Forecast Variance 2024/25	Foreca st March salaries to be charge d	Interagenc y Income	Total Year End Adjustmen ts
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Staffing Costs	2,485,557	2,485,557	2,373,306	(112,251)	2,587,545	101,988	101,988		101,988
Other Employee Costs	10,000	10,000	7,452	(2,548)	10,000	0			
Premises	4,000	4,000	327	(3,673)	4,000	0			
Transport	25,000	25,000	26,353	1,353	25,000	0			
Supplies and Services	36,800	36,800	116,548	79,748	36,800	0			
Third Party Payments (Inc Adoption Panel costs)	43,243	43,243	42,778	(465)	43,243	0			
Interagency Fee Expenditure	0	0	0	0		0			
Interagency Fee Income	(200,000)	(200,000)	(81,000)	119,000	(268,000)	(68,000)		(68,000)	(68,000)
Total Expenditure	2,404,600	2,404,600	2,485,765	81,165	2,438,588	33,988	101,988	(68,000)	33,988

- 22.3 In addition to the potential forecast pressure of £33,988k it must be remembered that each local authority is responsible for the costs relating to interagency expenditure. The current projection of interagency expenditure is a total of £102k. Each placement is agreed with the appropriate Director/SM prior to the placement being made.
- 22.4 The net operational overspend of £33,988 was shared proportionately among the two local councils according to the funding percentages. The Interagency fee's were met by each Local Authority based upon the cost to them of the placements.
- 22.5 Looking forward to 2025/26, the budget for the Operational Budget has not been agreed at the time of writing this report, and therefore under the inter-authority agreement the budget currently remains the same as it was for 2024/25.

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 1 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.
- 1.7 The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at [Department for Education](#).
- 1.8 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

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

- 2.1 Aspire has been delegated all of the local authority statutory responsibilities for adoption, other than the court work leading to Care and Placement Orders.
- 2.2 Aspire has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and intercountry adoptions.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 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.
- 2.5 Aspire undertakes special guardianship assessments for court on behalf of the local authority as part of care proceedings, or in private law applications.
- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 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 childcare 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		✓

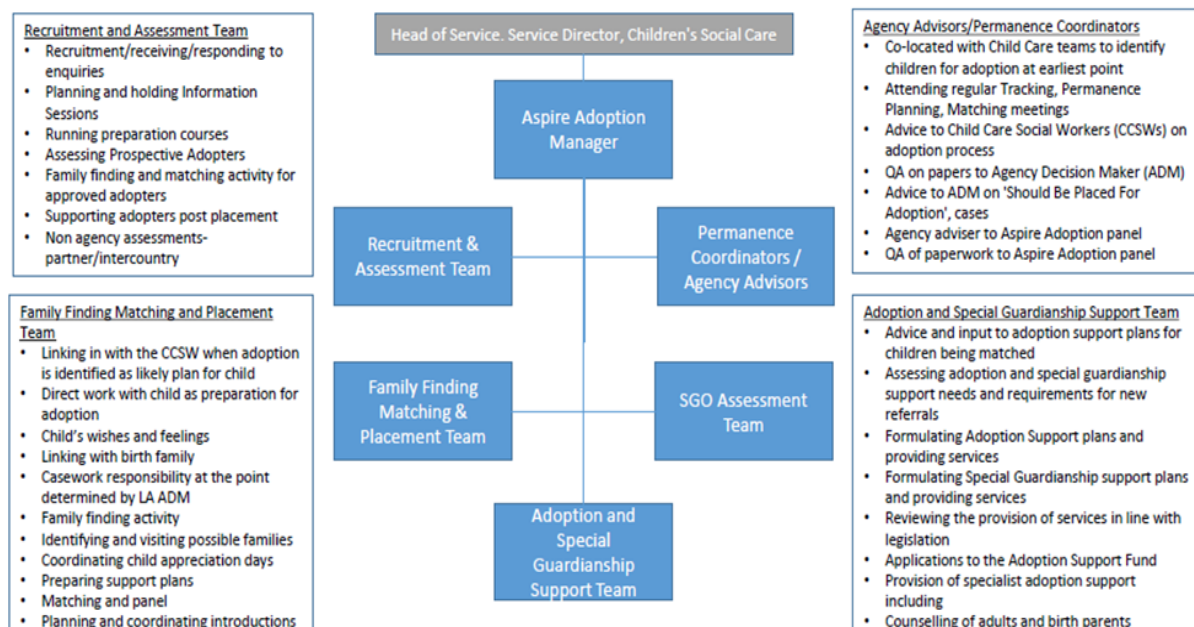
Case management prior to the point agreed by the LA ADM		✓
Case management from point agreed by the LA ADM	✓	
MATCHING AND PLACEMENT		
Family finding	✓	
Looked After Child reviews	✓	✓
Shortlist and visit potential families	✓	
Organising child appreciation day	✓	
Ongoing direct work to prepare child prior 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: • Support groups • Social events • Post adoption/special guardianship training • 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

3. Aspire Organisational Structure and Staffing

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



3.1 Staffing

3.1.1 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.

3.1.2 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.

3.1.3 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

3.1.4 The Family Finding, Matching and Placement Team comprises of a team manager, 1 FTE practice manager and 4.FTE social workers, all of whom are registered with Social Work England, and 3.64 FTE family support workers.

3.1.5 The Special Guardianship Assessment team has a team manager, practice manager and 5 social workers. All are registered with Social Work England.

3.1.6 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 28 April 2023.

- 3.1.7 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.
- 3.1.8 The service is supported by 6 FTE business support staff including a senior business support officer, a panel administrator, the Marketing, Media and Monitoring officer's position is vacant.
- 3.1.9 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).
- 3.1.10 Aspire also has access to dedicated clinical psychology support for staff and service users.
- 3.1.11 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.

3.2 Staff training and development

- 3.2.1 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.
- 3.2.2 Staff have monthly supervision and annual appraisals, and regular team case and practice reflection sessions are facilitated by the clinical psychologists.
- 3.2.3 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

4. Governance

4.1 The following is taken from the Inter Authority Agreement

SCHEDULE 2 – TERMS OF REFERENCE

Governance Structure



Part 1 – Strategic Partnership Board

4.1.1 **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, Christchurch and Poole, and Dorset Councils ("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

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

4.1.3 **The Board will:** Provide and review the strategic direction of Aspire Adoption;

- Oversee, review and endorse budget setting and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption.
- Oversee, review and endorse the Business Plan annually and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption.
- Attempt to resolve disputes between the Councils under the terms of the Inter Authority Agreement.

4.2 Accountability and Responsibility:

4.2.1 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.

4.2.2 All members of the Board will be in a position to make decisions within their respective organisation, where appropriate.

4.2.3 All members of the Board will be responsible for reporting to their organisation, through their respective governance arrangements.

4.3 Meetings of the Board

4.3.1 The Board will meet every six months or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.

4.3.2 The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.

4.3.3 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.

4.3.4 The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.

4.3.5 The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.

4.3.6 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.

4.3.7 Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

4.4 Membership:

4.4.1 The Board will consist of:

- Portfolio Holder and Executive Director for Childrens Services for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council;
- Portfolio Holder and Executive Director for Childrens Services for the Borough of Poole Council.

4.4.2 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.

4.4.3 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.

4.5 Voting – Quorum

4.5.1 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.

- 4.5.2 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.
- 4.5.3 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.
- 4.5.4 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

- 4.6 **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, Christchurch and Poole and Dorset Council("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.
- 4.7 **Role:** The Board will provide support, advice and management to Aspire Adoption to ensure that statutory requirements and the Business Plan is delivered effectively.
- 4.8 **The Board will:**
- oversee the implementation of the Aspire Adoption Budget and Business Plan;
 - oversee the commissioning arrangements and operational performance against agreed local priorities and targets and in line with national priorities and targets.
- 4.9 **Accountability and Responsibility:** 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. This Board will report to the Strategic Partnership Board.
- 4.10 **Meetings of the Board**
- The Board will meet quarterly or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.
 - The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.
 - 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.
 - The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.
 - The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.
 - 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.
 - Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

4.11 Membership: The Board will consist of:

- Service Director for Children's Social Care for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.
- Head of Service for Children in Care and Care leavers Dorset Council
- Adoption Aspire Manager.
- Representatives from Health
- Representatives from Virtual School
- Representatives from the adopter reference Group

4.12 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 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.

4.13 Voting – Quorum

4.13.1 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.

4.13.2 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.

4.13.3 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.

4.13.4 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

5. Aspire Adoption Panel

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 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.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 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.
- 5.5 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.
- 5.6 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.
- 5.7 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.
- 5.8 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.

- 5.9 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.
- 5.10 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.
- 5.11 In 2024/25 the Adoption Panels have all been held virtually to enable full participation of members and adopters.