Cabinet
23 June 2026
Aspire Adoption Annual Report 2025-26
For Decision

Cabinet Member:
Cllr C Sutton, Children, Families & Education

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:
P Dempsey - Executive Director, Children's Services

Report author and job title: Jenny Ness, Head of Aspire Adoption Services
Email: jenny.ness@aspireadoption.co.uk

Statutory Authority:

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

1. Executive summary

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

1.2 Dorset Council in partnership with BCP discharges this duty through a delegation of functions to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency. Dorset retains overall responsibility for its statutory adoption services, continuing to have parental responsibility for its own Children in Care.

1.3 The annual report is the ninth annual adoption report produced by Aspire Adoption, summarising the work of the agency in the period 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026. The report provides a summary of the operational and strategic activity of Aspire Regional Adoption Agency during 2025/26.

1.4 The annual report provides Dorset Council with an opportunity to satisfy itself that the requirements of the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013 and the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014 are met.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 We are recommending that Cabinet note the activity and performance of Aspire Regional Adoption Agency in 2025/26, as set out in the annual report.

3 Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 That Cabinet is satisfied that adoption statutory duties that the agency discharges on behalf of Dorset Council and the Aspire Annual Report 25/26 satisfies that these activities were discharged to a high standard in the last year.

4. The report:

4.1 The report provides assurance on the performance, quality, and strategic position of the Aspire Adoption Service during 2025-2026. Overall, the service remains stable, well-led, and effectively governed, with clear oversight of risks and pressures and appropriate mitigating actions in place.

4.2 Aspire Adoption continues to deliver safe and effective adoption outcomes for children, with a strong focus on securing permanence and promoting long-term stability. While performance has broadly been in line with expectations in 25-26, system-wide pressures particularly adopter sufficiency, workforce capacity, and increasing complexity of children's and families' needs impacted on timeliness and demand targeted improvement activity was required.

4.3 Financial pressures were monitored closely through the Aspire Strategic Board, particularly in relation to staffing and service budget and expenditure. Governance decisions ensured that resources were aligned to service priorities while maintaining value for money and safeguarding outcomes for children.

4.4 Key risks during 25/26 were adopter sufficiency, workforce capacity, and service demand are clearly evidenced and articulated within the report, with actions in place and subject to ongoing review through established performance and quality assurance frameworks.

4.5 Looking ahead priorities for 26-27 include strengthening adopter recruitment and retention, improving timeliness across the adoption journey, further developing adoption support and KiT contact arrangements, and sustaining a stable and skilled workforce.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 It is a statutory requirement under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 which 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 children and persons who have or may adopt a child in their area.

6. Legal considerations

6.1 It is a requirement that Cabinet 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.

6.2 The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at Department for Education.

6.3 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.

6.4 The Interagency Agreement between Dorset and BCP for the delivery of Aspire Adoption Services is currently being updated to reflect the movement of the Kinship care service back into Dorset Fostering Service and the changes to the budget.

7. Financial implications

7.1 Section 12 of the Dorset Aspire Annual Report shows the finance budget and resourcing of Aspire Adoption. In 2025/26 there was a total underspend of £44,800. This relates to income from recouped costs of aspire adopters adopting from local authorities outside of Dorset/BCP, payments from the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF) for therapeutic interventions delivered to adopted families by Aspire and from staffing vacancies.

7.2 The contribution split between Dorset and BCP to fund Aspire and the overall budget has been reviewed for 26/27 based upon the number of placement orders and adoption orders for each Local Authority averaged over the previous 3 years. This will be reflected in the updated Inter Agency Agreement.

7.3 The Aspire Budget 26/27 is £2,210,400 with the cost to Dorset being £991,900. This has increased in line with inflation and to enable removal of the income targets to reduce reliance on external placements which are additional cost to Dorset.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 No adverse environmental impact has been identified. The Covid-19 pandemic, and subsequent reduction of office space, led to an increase in Aspire staff members working from home, with a consequent reduction in staff travel.

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 Adopted children in contact with Aspire Adoption are known to be more likely than other children to have a degree of unmet or unidentified health needs. Aspire Adoption works directly with CAMHS and health colleagues who facilitate their engagement with clinical psychology support for adopters. ASGSF funds provide specialist assessment and therapeutic support. Section 8 The Adoption Support offer provides data for Aspire Dorset Families accessing the ASGSF and number of families supported.

10. Other implications

10.1 No other implications have been identified.

11. Risk implications

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

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

12. Equalities

12.1 The Aspire Adoption Annual Report 25-26 for Dorset does not relate to a new strategy, policy or function so an Equalities Impact Assessment has not been undertaken. Some information about equalities issues is included in the report. No adverse equalities impacts have been identified.

13. Appendices

13.1 Appendices A – Local Authority Statutory Duties.

B – Governance of Aspire.

C – Aspire Adoption Annual Report 25-26.

14. Background papers

14.1 None.

15. Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Assistant Director for Children Services and Head of Adoption and Fostering in Dorset Childrens Services.