

Aspire Adoption Annual Report (Dorset)

Adoption Agency Annual Report

- Agency name: Aspire Adoption
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1. Executive Summary

1.1 This 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. 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, system-wide pressures particular adopter sufficiency, workforce capacity, and increasing complexity of children's and families' needs impacted on timeliness and demand targeted improvement activity was required.

1.2 Adopter recruitment and sufficiency remained a key challenge. Activity continues across the Aspire region to strengthen recruitment, improve conversion rates, and maximise available capacity, supported by collaborative working and enhanced marketing approaches were addressed. Matching and placement activity remained carefully managed to ensure quality outcomes, with learning from disruptions and adopter feedback informing practice development however this also needs increased operational and strategic focus.

1.3 Demand for adoption support continued to grow, reflecting the increasing needs of children and adoptive families. The service has prioritised structured support planning, improved oversight of contact after adoption via the Keeping in Touch proposal and partnership working to ensure families receive timely and proportionate support, while managing financial and increasing operational pressures.

1.4 The Aspire Adoption workforce continued to demonstrate commitment and resilience. However, staff capacity was a recognised risk. This were mitigated through additional resource, strengthened management oversight, staff wellbeing support, and continued focus on professional development and practice quality.

1.5 Financial pressures were monitored closely during 25-26 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.

1.6 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.

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

2. Introduction

2.1 This is the 9th 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.

2.2 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).

2.3 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 across Dorset and BCP. Aspire provides support to all parties affected

by adoption, including adopters, adoptees, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives.

2.4 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. During 2026 this has been to reflect changes made in 2025 with the Kinship assessment and support teams moving from Aspire Back to Dorset Fostering Team.

2.5 It is important to note that the Quarter 4 data and information within this report is draft yearly data due to be finalised and submitted to the ASGLB on 31st May 2026. Additional Adoption Support Adult yearly data is due to be submitted by 28th July 2026 following a Pilot Data Collection of Q3 25/26 data. 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 through to adulthood.

3. Agency Overview

3.1 Vision, values, and strategic aims

Aspire Adoptions vision and the objectives aimed for are to achieve excellent outcomes for children and adults affected by adoption by:

- Working closely with our partner local authorities and other stakeholders to ensure that children's best interests are at the heart of placement decisions which will fully meet their needs.
- Targeted recruitment and the establishment of a wide and diverse pool of prospective adopters.
- Matching so that children are placed without delay in secure, loving families.
- Undertaking adoption support needs assessments which are through, evidence based, and timely.
- Providing creative and outstanding adoption support services.
- Investing in our workforce to ensure they have the right skills and capacity to deliver excellent services.
- Continually seeking to apply best practice and innovation to our ways of working.
- Actively listening to and learning from children, adults and staff with whom we work to develop and improve the services provided.

- Strategic and Operational delivery and challenges were analysed via a Diagnostic Assessment of the Aspire Adoption Service in May 2025. This gave opportunity for a strategic and operational deep dive into the priorities for improvements in a Diagnostic Implementation Plan which was implemented effectively addressing staffing capacity, service improvement and development.

3.2 Local context (demographics, demand trends)

3.2.1 Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) together form a largely coastal, predominantly rural–urban mixed area in the Southwest of England, characterised by an ageing population, relatively low ethnic diversity, and pockets of deprivation alongside more affluent communities.

3.2.2 BCP is more densely populated and urban, with greater socio-economic inequality, while the wider Dorset Council area is more rural with dispersed communities and limited access to services. Across the conurbation, the proportion of older residents is significantly higher than the national average, contributing to increasing demand on health, social care and support services, while the number of children and young people is comparatively lower but with growing complexity of need.

3.2.3 Demand trends show rising pressures in children's social care, including increase in number of children in care, those with complex trauma, disability or mental health needs. Housing affordability, workforce challenges and inward migration (including seasonal and transient populations) further shape service delivery.

3.2.4 Within adoption services nationally, there is a continued gap between the number of children requiring permanent homes—particularly sibling groups, older children and those with additional needs—and the availability of approved adopters, alongside a greater emphasis on early permanence planning and permanence options outside traditional adoption.

4. Service Delivery Overview

4.1 Recruitment of Adopters

4.1.1 Aspire recruits a wide range of diverse adopters. However, this remains a challenge due to the national sufficiency crisis relating to the recruitment of adopters. This year 23 approval of adopters which is a reduction of 25% compared to the previous year.

4.1.2 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.

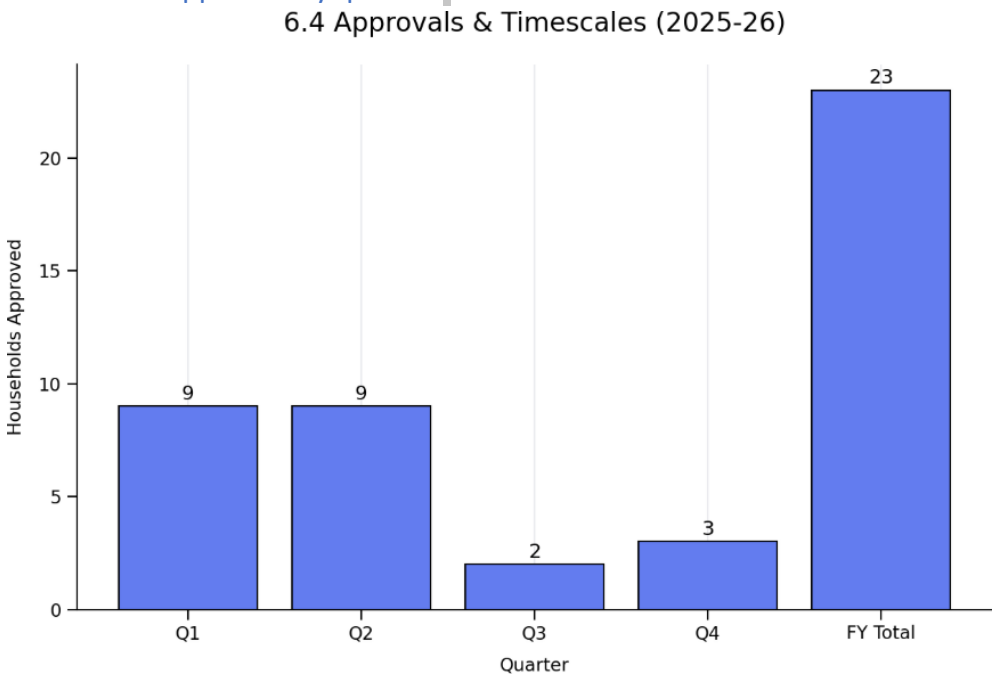
4.1.3 In December 2025 following successful recruitment, an Aspire Marketing Officer was appointed called Kirsty Chant. This is after a 3-year absence of anyone in post.

4.1.4 We continued 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.

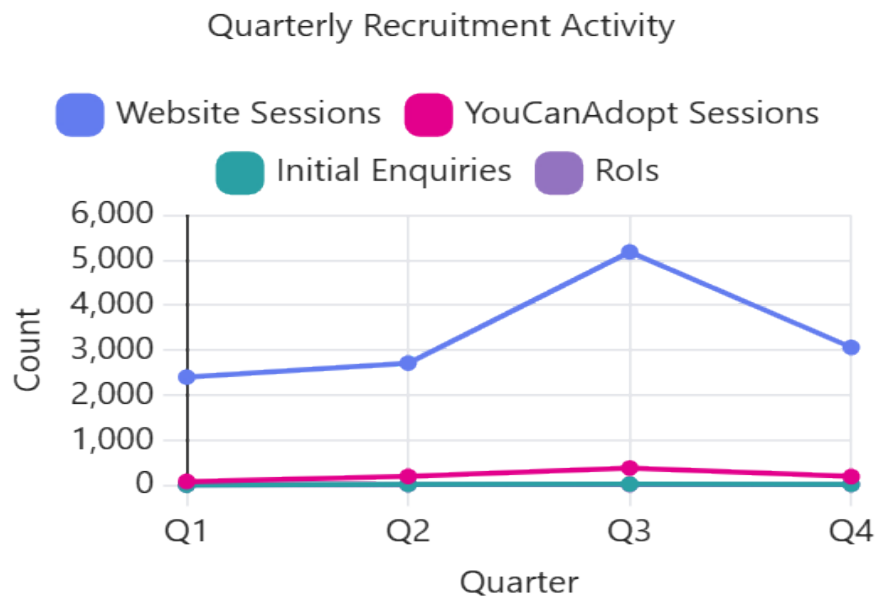
4.1.5 There continues to be a significant decrease in the number of approved adopters nationally within this year. Q1 and Q2 saw 9 approvals per quarters however due to staffing issues and delays in Stage 1s Q3 and Q4 saw a significant reduction in approval of adopters.

Fig 1 Approvals & Timescales (2025-26)

Households approved by quarter:



4.2 Recruitment strategy and activity



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4.21 Website traffic peaked in Q3 (5,186 sessions) before stepping back in Q4.highest absolute volume of youcanadopt.co.uk referrals (379). Enquiry volume and Initial Enquiries via the online form averaged 18 per quarter. Registration of Interest held broadly steady across the year (Q1: 11, Q2: 10, Q3: 14, Q4: 11), giving an annual total of 46 RoIs. Conversion from Enquiry to RoIs conversion (where measurable) ran at 73% in Q1, 43% in Q2 and 82% in Q3. (Fig3)

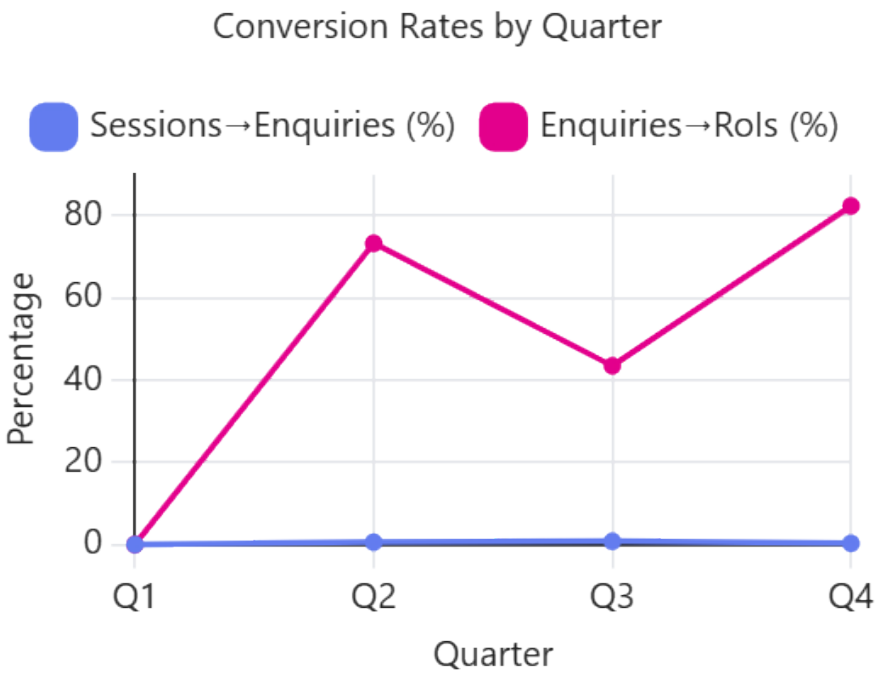
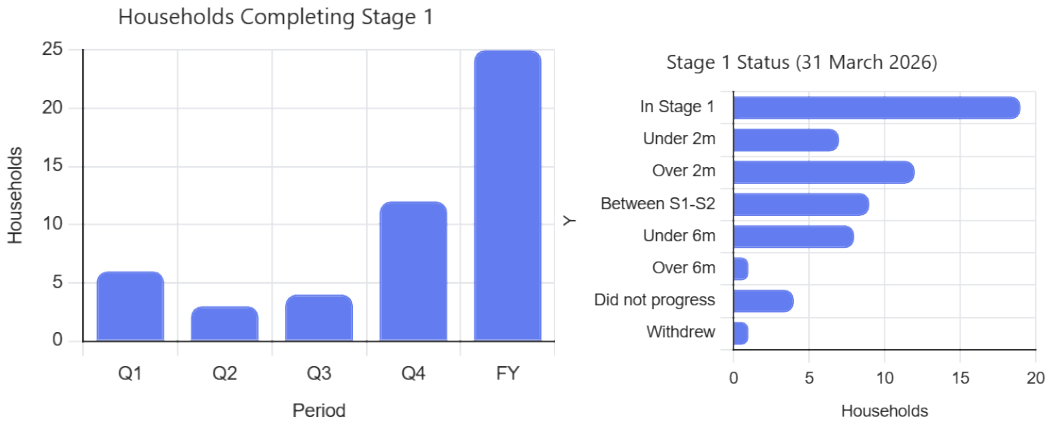


Fig 3. Enquiry to ROI.

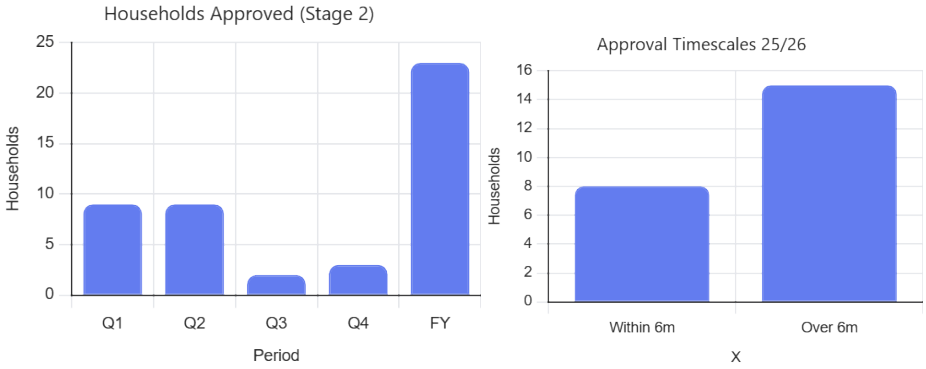
4.3 Assessment and Approval

Stage 1 & Stage 2 performance: (Fig 3 Stage 1 performance data)



4.3.1 Stage 1 performance data shows that 38 household's started Stage 1 across the year. Activity increased in Q3 & Q4 which would have been due to increased staffing capacity in the Aspire Recruitment and Assessment Team during this period. 67% of Stage 1s progressed to Stage 2 however 63% where in Stage 1 for over 2 months which is an nationally set adopter assessment KPI. Delays in medicals and staffing capacity being the rationale for this.

(Fig 4 Stage 2 Performance Data)



4.3.2 24 adopter households were approved with Q1 & Q2 frontloaded with 18 approvals during this period with a drop in Q3 & Q4. 43% of Stage 2 assessments were completed within 4 months during Q1 & Q2 with a decline to 64% in Q3 & Q4.

4.3.3 Complexity of assessments, staffing capacity and also adopters on hold is the rationale for this. However, Stage 2 maintains a healthy conversion rate despite the impact of capacity constraints and process delays. With the increased social worker capacity in late 2026 there is a renewed focus on achieving adopter approval targets for 26-27.

4.4 Quality Assurance Processes at Panel.

Aspire Adoption Panel 25-26.

4.4.1 Aspire Adoption Panel has continued to operate virtually, with business meetings, appraisals also online and training delivered through a combination of virtual and in-person formats. Full day training carried out half yearly is held in person, with two virtual half day training sessions carried out in between these dates including learning from disruptions, adoption support, early permanence, etiquette, questioning and confidentiality.

4.4.2 Panel focus remained on achieving the best outcomes for children through robust, child-centred decision-making. Panel colleagues and the Aspire have universally shown professionalism, flexibility and good humour throughout the year whilst ensuring that Panel is robust and provides a high level of quality assurance.

4.4.3 Panel met on twenty-seven occasions between April 2025 and March 2026. The Central List comprises of 26 active members, of whom including the chair and two vice chairs are independent members. The previous challenge around recruitment of social work members has been addressed through the addition of retired social work members and recruitment of one social work member working elsewhere within one of the councils. A birth parent and an adult adoptee are also members of panel. Recruiting more male panel members has remained a challenge. There now being 4 male Panel members but Aspire have ensured that there are two male panel members on panel including the chair.

4.4.4 The Aspire Adoption panel has continued to meet virtually twice a month. This year the panel made: -

- 23 Approvals
- 30 Matches
- 2 De-Registrations

4.5 Matches of children with adopters at Panel

4.5.1 Matches of children have continued well. The 30 matches identifying new homes for 37 children, including one sibling group of 3 and 5 groups of 2 children. The 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.

4.5.2 The advantage 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. There were 5 matches with adopters from external agencies, three for children from BCP and two for children from Dorset.

4.6 Adopter Approvals at Panel

4.6.1 The number of adopters approved this year has fallen markedly. The reason for this has been in part staffing challenges within the Recruitment and Assessment Team in Aspire and also a more general drop in those coming forward to offer themselves as adopters amongst the population at large. This situation is a national one and discussions with Panel colleagues who are Panel Chairs elsewhere are seeing reduction in adopter approvals at Aspire is not as significant as those experienced by many other agencies which is re-assuring.

4.6.2 Since the beginning of Q4 25-26 approvals began to increase once more, reflecting in particular the improved staffing situation with Aspire. It's heartening to see a significant number of adopter approvals booked onto the Adoption Panel forward plan over the next few months. There remain delays for adopters in being brought to Panel not of Aspire's making in those delays to both DBS checks and medical reports have held up a number of approvals. The number of deregistration's of adopters has significantly decreased, again impacted by the improved staffing situation and a focus on matching adopters with children.

4.7 Feedback from Panel

4.7.1 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. The process has enabled an objective and measurable assessment of the direction of travel of reports which have in large part been positive as most reports are given a 'green rating'. Panel report that the quality of reports continues to be good, with particular improvement around CPRs and APRs at the point of matching.

4.7.2 Analysis and evidencing of resilience in PARs have become uniformly good, leading to no deferrals of adoption approvals this year. Timeliness of assessments has generally improved but still remains outside statutory limits. Delays to DBS check return and medical assessments remaining the primary cause.

4.7.3 Panel has placed increased focus on keeping in touch arrangements, particularly as direct contact is increasingly ordered by the courts. Questioning now ensures adopters are prepared for and open to these arrangements and that appropriate support is in place.

Panel Business

Aspire's Adoption Panel has undertaken the following business over the past twelve months:

	April 2025 - March 20226	April 2024 – March 2025	April 2023 – March 2024	April 2022 – March	April 2021- March 2022	July 2020 – March 2021	January – June 2020	2019
Approvals	23	30	28	35	39	33	28	54
Approvals deferred	0	0	0	2	2	2	0	3
Matches	30*	27	34	38	29	34	26	52
Matches deferred	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
De-Registration	2	9	8	8	3	3	3	4
Should be placed for adoption	0	2	1	0	0	1		
Review of Adopters/Short Report	2**	0	0	1	1	1		
Total	57	68	72	84	74	74	57	63

*30 matches comprising 18 matches of 22 BCP children in total; 12 matches of 15 Dorset children in total.

Fig 5 (Panel Activity)

5. Matching and Family Finding of Children

5.1 Number of children waiting

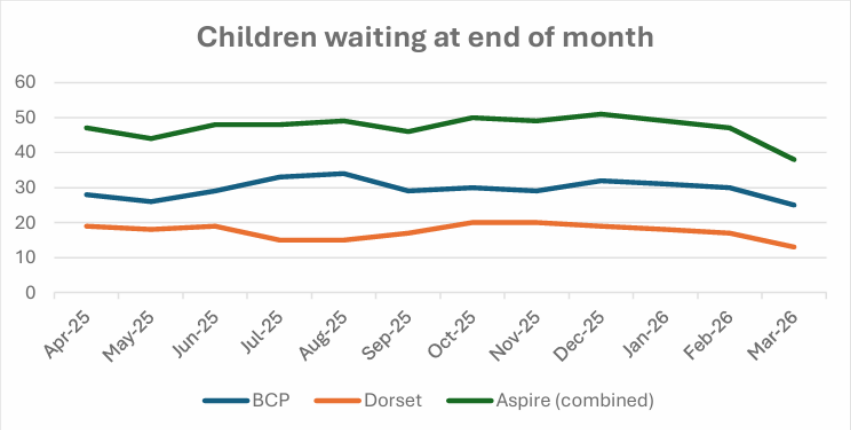


Fig 6.

5.1.1 The 25-26 data on children waiting indicates ongoing pressures within the service, with a sustained number of BCP and Dorset children awaiting placements or progression through the system. While there may be some fluctuations across the reporting period, the overall trend suggests that demand continues to exceed available resources in key areas.

5.1.2 A significant proportion of children BCP and Dorset children have been waiting for extended periods, highlighting challenges in securing suitable matches—particularly for those with more complex needs, sibling groups, or older children. This contributes to delays in achieving permanence and can impact children's emotional wellbeing and stability.

5.1.3 The 25-26 data may also show that new referrals and entries into the waiting cohort are occurring at a steady rate, which, combined with slower exits (through placement or change of plan), results in a backlog within the Aspire Family Finding Team. This indicates a need for ongoing recruitment of adopters/placements and more targeted matching strategies.

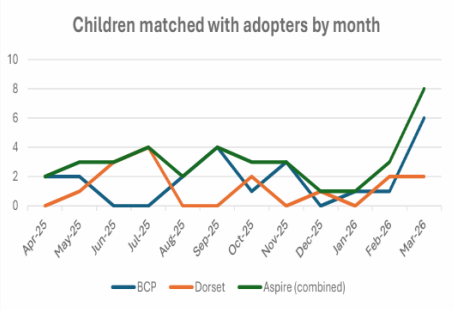
5.1.4 Positively, where reductions in children waiting numbers are seen, these are linked to focused interventions such as improved tracking and targeted family finding, or approval for external placement searches widening availability. However, these gains may be difficult to sustain without continued resource investment which is now happening in the Aspire Marketing Strategy 26-27 and the additional resource of the Aspire Marketing post which commenced on 1st December 2025.

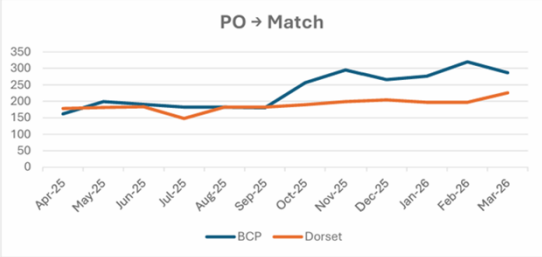
5.1.5 **Key themes** emerging in 25-26 was persistent demand and pressure on adopter placement sufficiency, longer waiting times for children with additional needs, Need for targeted recruitment and matching strategies and the importance of early intervention to reduce delays. Overall, the 25-26 data highlight the importance of maintaining momentum in recruitment, improving timeliness in decision-making, and strengthening permanence planning to reduce the number of children waiting and improve outcomes.

5.1.6 Children Matched with Adopters by Month (Apr 2025 – Mar 2026)

Metric	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	—	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
	BCP	BCP	BCP	BCP	—	Dorset	Dorset	Dorset	Dorset
Adoption Orders	27	22	23	15	|	26	16	20	14
Placements	24	24	19	20	|	16	19	17	15
Matches	25	22	17	22	|	16	19	17	15
Placement Orders	24	22	26	19	|	21	19	23	16
ADM BIDs	32	27	23	20	|	24	26	21	20
FFA/CP	1	3	3	6	|	2	10	7	2
A10 (BLA→placed, AO yr, days)	527	410	428	337	|	525	430	312	315
A2 (PO→match, AO yr, days)	283	156	178	299	|	236	116	180	157

Fig 6Year by year comparison of A10 & A2 KPIs for Adoption timeliness for children. ASGLB data





(Fig 7 & Fig 8)

5.1.7 The monthly data shows a variable but generally steady pattern of matching activity across the year, with clear peaks and quieter periods rather than a consistent upward trend. Across Aspire (BCP + Dorset combined), matches ranged from 1 to 8 per month, demonstrating fluctuations linked to operational activity and case progression.

- **Early year (Apr–Jul 2025):**
  Matching activity increased gradually from 2 in April to 4 in July, indicating a building pipeline of matches as the year began.
- **Late summer to early autumn (Aug–Oct 2025):**
  Activity remained moderate, with 2–4 matches per month, including a peak of 4 in September, suggesting a period of sustained family-finding progress.
- **Mid-year dip (Nov 2025 – Jan 2026):**
  There was a noticeable slowdown, with matches falling to 1 in December and

January, representing the lowest point in the year. This reflects seasonal pressures and delays in progressing matches over the holiday period.

- **Year-end recovery (Feb–Mar 2026):**
  Activity increased again, culminating in a significant peak of 8 matches in March, the highest monthly total of the year. This aligns with the broader Q4 trend of increased activity and throughput.

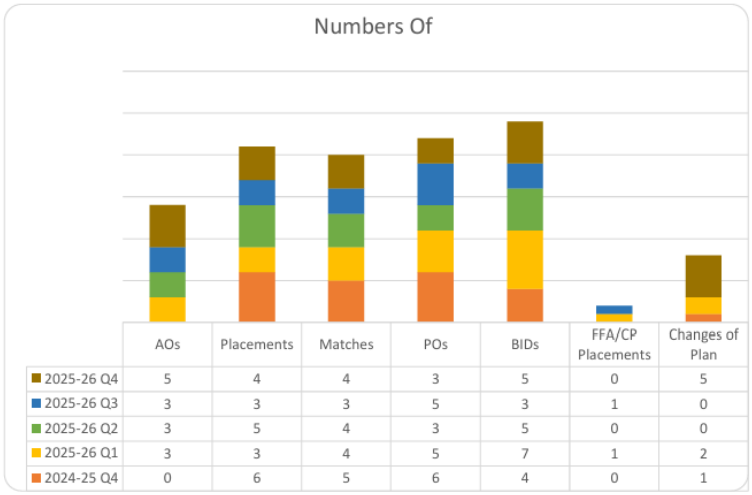


Overall Analysis of children's matches:

- Matching activity is inherently uneven, with peaks reflecting concentrated efforts to progress cases and quieter periods linked to operational or seasonal factors.
- The strong finish in March indicates a successful push to progress matches at year end, consistent with wider Q4 performance improvements.
- However, the mid-year dip highlights vulnerability in maintaining consistent matching momentum across all months.

While Aspire demonstrates the ability to deliver high volumes of children's matches in peak months, maintaining a more consistent monthly flow of matches remains a key area for development. Strengthening adopter availability, reducing delays between stages, and smoothing panel planning and court processes will be critical to achieving this.

5.2 Dorset Childrens Data 25/26



	AOs	Placements	Matches	POs	BIDs	FFA/CP Placements	Changes of Plan
2025-26 Q4	5	4	4	3	5	0	5
2025-26 Q3	3	3	3	5	3	1	0
2025-26 Q2	3	5	4	3	5	0	0
2025-26 Q1	3	3	4	5	7	1	2
2024-25 Q4	0	6	5	6	4	0	1

*** Fig 9 Coram Q4 return Dorset 25-26**

- There has been a consistent number of Best Interest Decisions (BIDs) throughout the year for Dorset children with should be placed for adoption decisions, although there has been a decrease in Placement Orders and Adoption Orders compared to the previous year. With regards to the Should Be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decisions, there are many variables why this has increased 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.

- There has been a decrease in children being placed within 2025/26. 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, 73% percent of children who were placed for adoption, were placed with Aspire adopters which is a decrease from 92% in the previous year for internal placements with adopters.

5.3 Should be placed for Adoption Decisions (SBPA)

5.3.1 Dorset have made 1 less SBPA decisions this year as they made in 2024/25. Dorset made a total of 20 SBPA decisions in 2025/2026 and of those 20 SBPA decisions made between April 2025 and March 2026, 11 were boys and 9 girls, there were 3 sibling groups, 2 of which were groups of two siblings, 1 of which were a group of three. 12 children were below the age of 2 and the remaining 8 children were aged between 2 and 5 years old at the time of the SBPA decision. 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.

5.4 Placement Orders

5.4.1 There has been a decrease by 7 of Placement Orders granted this year from 23 in 2024/25 to 16 in 2025/26. This is a 31% decrease in Placement Orders.

5.5 Children Placed

5.5.1 There has been a slight decrease in children being placed within 2025/26 to 15 from 17. Of the children placed 73% of Dorset Children were placed internally with Aspire adopters. Timeliness for children however has remained good in all areas which is positive.

5.6 Adoption Orders

5.6.1 There has also been a decrease in adoption orders made. There were 20 adoption orders granted in 2024/25 a decrease to 14 in 2025/26. This is the lowest amount in 4 consecutive years since 22/23 with a 30% decrease. Q4 25-26 seen 5 Adoption Orders made which is positive as in the same quarter in the previous year there were 0 adoption orders granted.

5.7 Children waiting for a match.

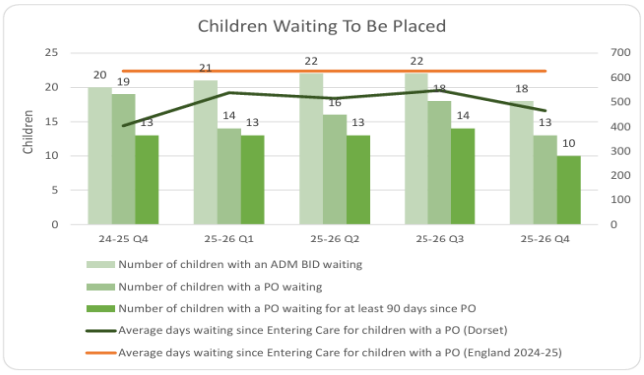


Fig 10

5.7.1 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.

5.7.2 For the children currently waiting for a match, 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 2025/26 this is evidenced by the children placed – 76% of Aspire children (BCP and Dorset combined), and 73.3% of Dorset Children were placed with Aspire adopters. External placements for Dorset where 8 children; all sibling groups bar 1 singleton.

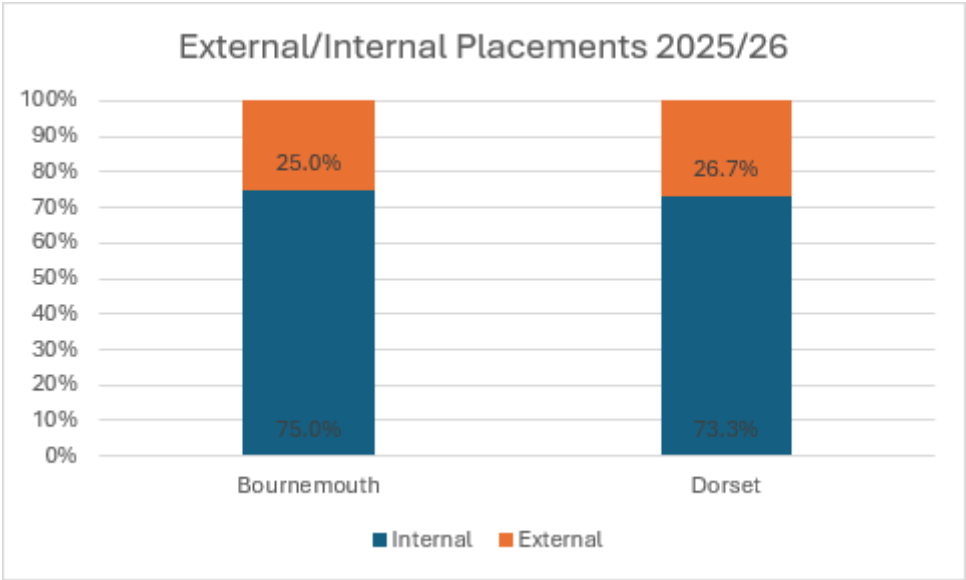


Fig 11.

- It does need emphasising that there continues to be a national sufficiency crisis with the recruitment of adopters, meaning that we have to work harder for older children and or sibling groups. Historically adopters who would have considered sibling groups and older children are now opting for children who have lesser needs on Linemaker Aspire have been part of the Southwest Permanency Project for disabled children and managed to secure 1 match from the project which was positive.
- 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. Coram Activity Days have also brought increased links for Dorset children who has external placement searches agreed.
- As of the 31st March 2026 there were 15 Dorset children waiting for a match, 4 sibling groups, 1 sibling group of 3. 1 child was matched and moving in June 2026, 1 sibling group of 2 at Panel in May 2026, 1 child shortlisting is happening in May, and 2 children family finding continues where Placement Order was granted in February and March 2026. 6 children also had a change of plan.
- 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.

5.8 Timeliness of Adoption for Dorset Children

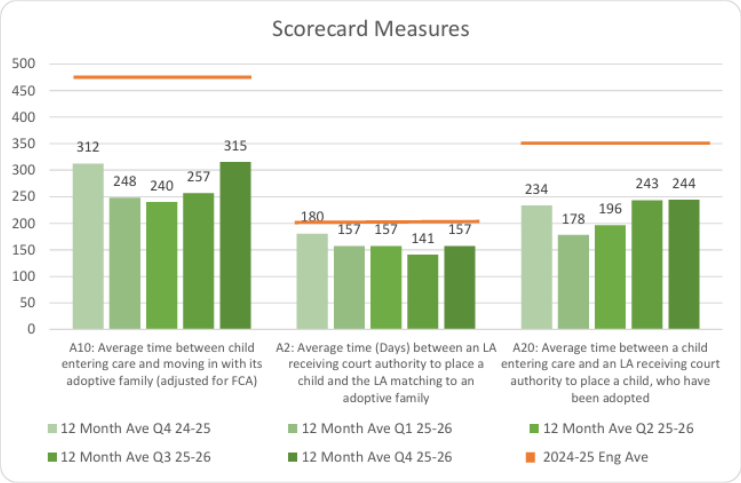


Fig 9 Q4 25/26 Dorset Coram Data.

5.8.1 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 throughout 25-26 timeliness for children in Dorset has remained strong for the A2, 10 and 20 being well below the national average. For all aspects of the child's journey through adoption (13) Dorset are achieving good timeliness for children in securing their permanence.

5.8.2 There has continued to be a decrease in both the time between entering care and being placed for adoption with a slight increase in Q4 25/26 and 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.

5.8.3 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.

5.8.4 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 continued oversight in the time scales which is again beneficial as permanence is achieved quicker for the children.

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

5.8.6 The most up to date scorecard data provided, at the time of writing, is the Q4 25/26 Dorset ASGLB RAA Dashboard - A1, A2, A10 and A20 timescales for children adopted in the year to 31 March 2026.

5.8.7 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.

5.9 Early Permanence

5.9.1 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.

5.9.2 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.

5.9.3 This year however has resulted in a decrease in number of EP placements to 2 from 7 the previous year which is a 72% decrease. There is however continued 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. This has been due to adopter sufficiency where not enough EP carers have been recruited during 25/26. A Sufficiency Strategy is being implemented in 26/27. Aspire have not met recruitment targets for EP during 25/26:

Sufficiency targets for the recruitment of adopters over the next 3 years:

YEAR	2 SIBLINGS	3 PLUS SIBLINGS	CHILDREN 4 PLUS	EP	TOTAL
2025– 2026	10	4	1	15	30
2026/2027	14	5	1	15	35
2027/2028	15	6	1	18	40
TOTALS:	39	15	3	48	105

Fig 10 Aspire Sufficiency Strategy 25-28.

- 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 historically in our use of early permanence with older children, and sibling groups, to reduce placement moves to avoid delay. The Aspire Early Permanence Offer and EP Policy has also been updated and agreed in 2025/2026 at Aspire Operational Board. Early Permanence in the Southwest Region also continues to be the strongest performance wise in utilisation of EP within court proceedings.

6. Adoption Support Service Delivery 25/26

ADOPTION SUPPORT		
Support services	Aspire Adoption Services	Local Authority
Assessment for adoption support	✓	
Developing and delivering adoption support plans	✓	
Agree and administer financial support to adoptive families pre and post Adoption Order		✓
Adoption support delivery including: • Support groups • Social events • Post adoption training • Independent Birth Relative services • Support with ongoing birth relative contact • Specialist Life Story practitioners • Adoption counselling and training	✓	
Financial support to adopters including adoption allowances		✓

6.1 During May 2025 the SGO element of Aspire was transferred back to BCP and Dorset Local Authority successfully along with the management and staffing establishment. Therefore the work was to concentrate solely on adoption.

Aspire Adoption services provide support for adopted children and adopted adults within the Dorset and BCP area. Aspire adoption services provide support for children outside of Dorset and BCP up until 3 years post adoption order. Birth relatives can access the Independent Birth Relative Service if their adopted child is considering keeping in Touch post order. A KiT Policy and Steering Group was developed further during 25/26.

6.2 **Aspire Adoption Support Principles**

6.2.1 Aspire Adoption Support Team deliver post adoption support in line with the following key principles: child-centred, trauma-informed, accessible, timely, collaborative, and proportionate. Aspire provides services to support adopted children and their families; child centred practice remains at the forefront of Aspire adoption services. Aspire recognizes accessibility, timely, and collaborative support with families is key to positive outcomes.

6.2.2 Aspire post adoption support core principle is to empower adopted families and their children and compliment their parenting, adopting support is a voluntary service which families opt in and of course can opt out if they should choose.

6.3 The Aspire Adoption Support Offer 25/26.

6.3.1 The service provides a graduated model of support including universal services, targeted support, and specialist interventions such as therapeutic services and support funded via the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund.

6.3.2 In terms of reference, support can be provided to anyone up to the age of 22 without ever receiving an EHCP or 25 if they have been supported by an EHCP. (This is not the same for Access to Records or Intermediary requests).

6.3.3 Aspire post adoption support is not a crisis service they provide assessed and tailored support to adoptive families, children, young people and adults.

6.3.4 **Universal support-** Families have during 25-26 been able to access, adoption support groups, coffee mornings, training and workshops, social events and have access to a CATCH (Child Attachment and Trauma Community Hub) membership. Families, children and young people will be able to access our duty services 4 out of 5 working days,9:30-15:30

6.3.5 **Targeted support –** as recognized following an assessment of need with a practitioner, to include signposting to specialist services such as virtual school, Local Authority SEN department, SENDIASS, CAMHS, Health or local authority early help.

6.3.6 **Specialist support –** as recognized following an assessment of need completed with a practitioner to explore and access specialist therapeutic support for the family, child or young person. Commissioned and reviewed through Aspire Adoption support services, funded through the ASGSF.

6.3.7 Families, children and young people have an allocated practitioner for a 6-month period to include the assessment, implementation and review of adoption support packages.

6.3.8 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

6.3.9 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. 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.

6.3.10 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 list of 3-6 days for a consultation with a Social Worker, if this is required.

6.3.11 The service has formed strong links with Virtual Schools, Early Help and universal services who offer bespoke services for our families. 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. The universal support offer which is inclusive and provides regular newsletters and information via the mailing list and support groups and workshops/training.

6.4 Assessment of Need.

6.4.1 Aspire adoption support services undertake an Adoption support assessment from an initial consultation. Aspire work alongside Aspire Adopted families to identify needs, considering the impact of trauma around your child's preadoption history. We explore support networks and work with other professionals to enable us to get a better understanding of adopted children whether that be CAMHS, education, SEN or health colleagues. To assist Aspire adoption services we seek consent to access your child's permanence report, adoption support plan, specialist health assessment, CAMHS assessments, EHCP or education psychology assessments.

6.4.2 Outcomes or the assessment of need is reviewed of your adoption support plan and include advice, universal support, a formal review of adoption support plan, or seeking specialist services and ASGSF commissioned services if required.

6.4.3 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 and provide support for up to three months, and an exit plan will be developed within the plan.

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

6.5 Quality Assurance of ASGSF commissioned services.

6.5.1 Aspire are 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. This is funded by Adoption England and during 25-26 the Southwest Therapeutic Framework.

6.5.2 During 25-26 Aspire Adoption Services have ensured quality assurance of services commissioned working with BCP Local authority to ensure that services meet their stringent framework whilst working towards the regional framework. When Aspire Adoption Services commission therapeutic services we will agree a minimum of 3 Goal Based Outcomes to ensure positive outcomes for adopted children.

6.5.3 Aspire will also request a midway report if the child is accessing more than 10 therapeutic sessions and every therapeutic intervention will have a final therapy review meeting and report we also seek the progressions of the 3 agreed goal-based outcomes.

6.5.4 On the rare occasion that a service which Aspire adoption services have commissioned does not meet the expectations of a family or there is a complaint raised against the provider Aspire will raise this on family's behalf and seek resolution. Additionally on the rare occasion that resolution cannot be agreed, Aspire will follow the BCP policy of raising complaints around a service provider. Make a complaint about children and young people services | BCP

6.6 Adoption Support Fund (ASF) & usage during 25/26

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

6.6.1 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.

6.6.2 The post support team help adopters 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 families to access therapeutic services despite changes to the ASGSF. In May 2025 the DfE announced key reductions to the fund:

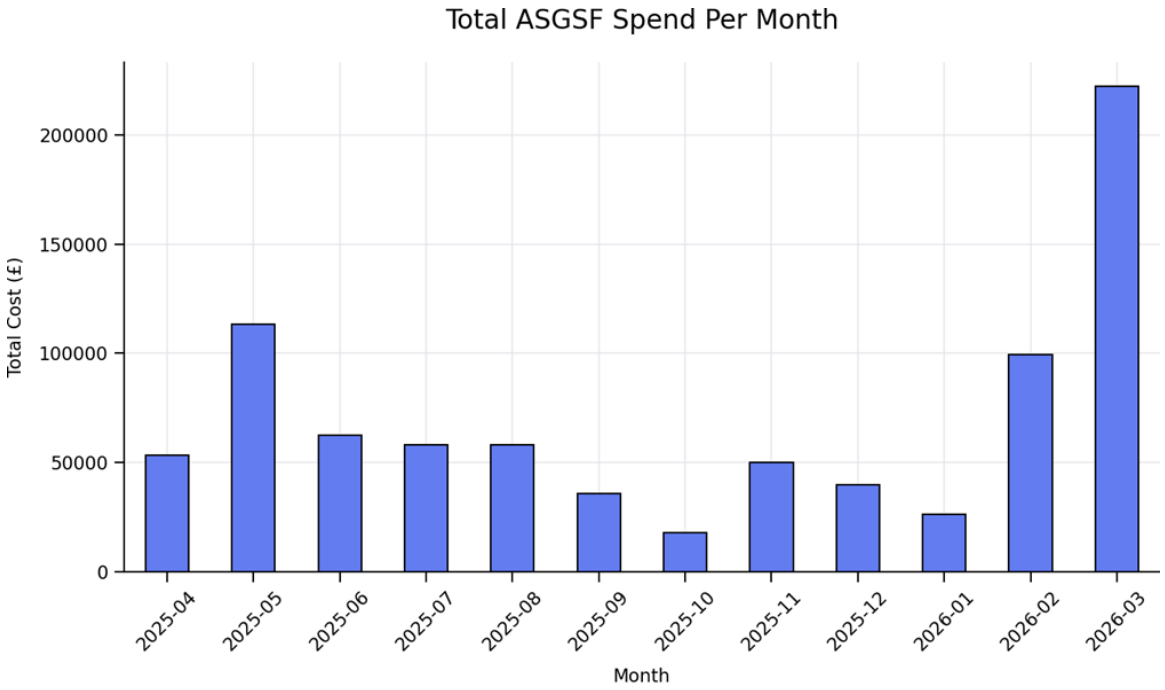
- **Fair Access Limit Cut:** The maximum therapy funding per child per year has been slashed by 40%, from £5,000 to £3,000.
- **Specialist Assessments Dropped:** The separate £2,500 allowance previously used to fund specialist assessments has been removed entirely.
- **Match-Funding Eliminated:** Local authority match-funding for children with exceptional, high-level needs above the £3,000 limit is no longer available.

6.6.3 The impact of the reduction of FAL is yet to see the full impact. Adopters are reporting the impact which has led to looking at how to use the fund more effectively. Regional RAA partnerships have also joined with Adopt UK to offer online parenting courses

which the project is in its early infancy but is co-delivered by Aspire FSPs and Adopt UK practitioners.

25-26 Monthly ASGSF Spend Overview

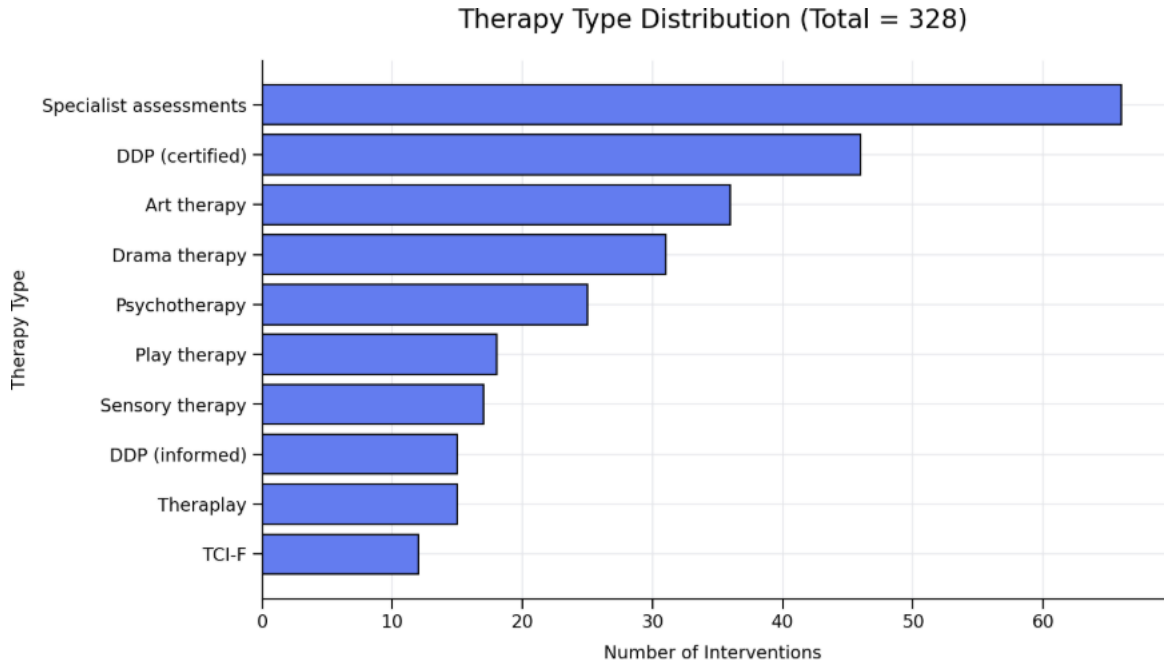
(Fig 11) Totals spend across all applications: £836,116.41.



Key Insight: Monthly expenditure demonstrates variation in funding demand and can support forecasting and service planning.

(Fig 12) Therapy Type Distribution 25-26

Total interventions delivered: 328



Key Insight: Service delivery is primarily focused on Specialist Assessments and attachment-based interventions (DDP), alongside strong use of creative therapies.

6.7 Demand for Adoption Support Services & modernisation of adoption.

6.7.1 This Aspire Adoption service has seen a continued increase in uptake over the year, and this is expected to continue with the Keeping in touch arrangements and modernisation of adoption. We are currently seeing more placement orders being made with recommendations or contact orders attached, for direct contact to take place. This has impacted on the support services during 25/26 due to all involved, birth family, adopters and children requiring support in the initial stages and throughout the case.

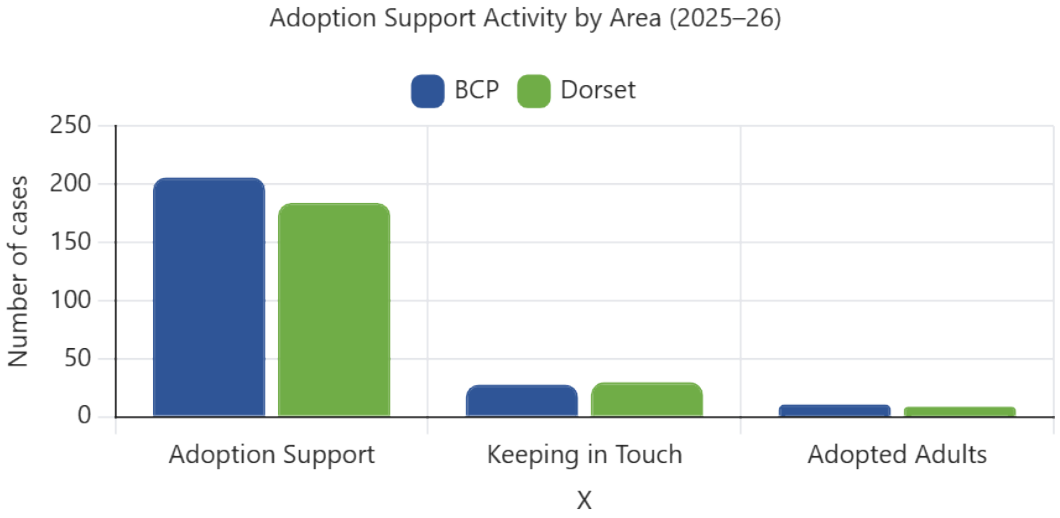
6.7.2 At the end of Q4 2026, Aspire reported 37 open cases of keeping in touch arrangements combining of historical direct contact and in-direct arrangements via the letterbox system direct contacts between children and their birth parents. There is an expectation that this will rise in the coming years. Aspire currently support 647 letterbox contacts, usually involving 2 parents which has increased by 20%.

6.7.3 In order to address this increased demands, Aspire Governance Boards requested a review of the adoption support team regarding income generation and an internal review of Keeping in Touch arrangements. Both reports enabled increased staffing capacity to address increased demands and budget for the modernisation of letterbox. The plan agreed is for 2026-2027 and new Keeping in Touch sub will be managed by an Assistant Team Manager with Birth Parent Support, KIT arrangements, Access to Records and modernisation of letterbox will be completed.

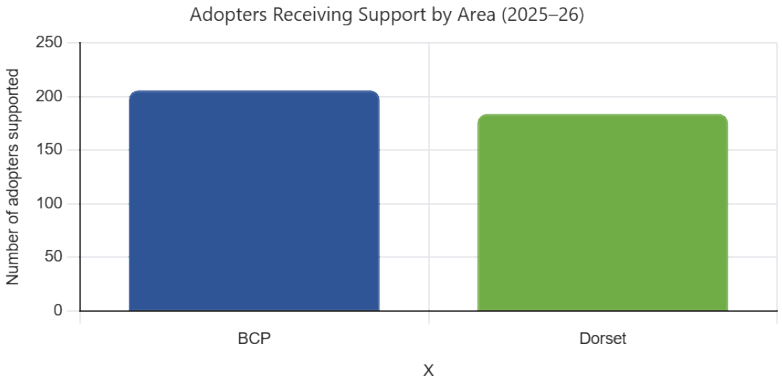
6.7.4 Birth parent services: It is a requirement that the birth family are offered independent support when a placement order is made in respect of their child. Aspire commissioned an independent agency, Parents and Children Together (PaCT) to deliver birth family support following the service ceasing 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. This however was not extended in 2025-2026 and the service was brought in house.

6.7.5 The service consists of 15 hours a week of an experienced social worker, management oversight and agency support. Recruitment has been delayed significantly, and the birth parent worker is due to commence in post in June 2026. This post will also sit in the Keeping in Touch new sub team.

6.8 Adoption Support Data 2025-2026



Across 2025–26, the Aspire Adoption service supported 390 children, with a broadly even distribution across BCP and Dorset. Activity relating to keeping in touch arrangements and adopted adult support remains comparatively small but consistent across both areas. In 2025-2026, there has been for BCP: 206 adopters supported, Dorset: 184 adopters supported.





6.9 Adopter Experience

6.9.1 Aspire Adoption value feedback from adopted families, children and young people. As see below some of this has been encapture and evidence strong relationships, high-impact support, safe, inclusive groups. This enables Aspire adopters and adoptees to builds confidence and connection.

6.9.2 Development would be to Improve continuity of social workers and expand access to groups and workshops.

Adopter Experience Feedback (2025–26)

Theme	What People Said (Quotes)	What This Means
Starting the Journey	"Our social worker really got us as a family." "They went above and beyond." "They were always there for us."	Strong relationships with social workers and good support during assessment
Challenges	"It was difficult when our social worker changed."	Continuity matters to families
Early Experience (EP)	"Support was 10/10, but daily hospital contact was hard."	High-quality support, though some arrangements are intense for families
Impact of Support	"The support has been amazing… a huge difference to our whole family."	Support creates real, lasting positive change
Support Groups	"Nice to meet others when I feel isolated." "People just get it." "Good to know you're not alone."	Reduces isolation and builds connection
Confidence & Parenting	"I feel better equipped to parent." "I've learnt so much from others."	Builds confidence and parenting skills

Community & Sharing	"We share advice and help each other." "It feels like a real community."	Strong peer support and shared learning
Safe Space	"It felt safe to share." "I feel valued and understood."	Safe, non-judgemental environments are a key strength
Facilitators	"They make sure everyone gets a chance to speak."	Skilled, inclusive facilitation
Workshops (LSB)	"It helped me a lot." "I liked being together." "I learned new things."	Workshops are valued and effective
What People Want More Of	Longer sessions More workshops Evening options	High demand for more flexible and extended support
In One Sentence	"A friendly place to talk, learn and feel understood."	Overall experience is positive, supportive and inclusive

7. Performance and Quality Assurance

7.1 **Performance and Quality Assurance:** Aspire Adoption Service has introduced in January 2026 a robust performance and quality assurance framework to ensure the delivery of safe, timely and effective services for children and families. Performance is monitored through a combination of key performance indicators (KPIs), regular audit activity has commenced again in March 2026 and learning from disruptions. The activity is overseen by the newly introduced Aspire Performance and Data Board then fed up to Aspire Governance Boards for consideration.

7.2 **Adoption Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**: The service tracks core Adoption KPIs to measure effectiveness and timeliness across the adoption journey. These include approval timescales, matching timeliness and placement stability. Performance is reviewed regularly by senior leaders and reported through governance structures to ensure oversight and challenge. Aspire Head of Service also attends monthly Dorset and BCP Performance and Sufficiency SLT meetings with now built in adoption KPIs.

7.3 **Approval Timescales:** Aspire Adoption continues to monitor adopter approval timescales in line with national expectations. The majority of prospective adopter's progress through Stage 1 and Stage 2 within the expected six-month timeframe. Where delays do occur, these are typically linked to adopter circumstances, the complexity of assessments, or the need for additional specialist information. The service maintains a strong focus on minimising drift by tracking individual cases and intervening early where issues arise.

7.4 **Matching Timeliness:** Timely matching of children with suitable adopters remains a key priority for Aspire and Dorset children. The service works collaboratively across regional arrangements to widen the pool of available adopters and reduce delay for children. Performance this year demonstrates continued effort to reduce the time between placement orders and match, although this remains variable depending on the needs of the child, particularly for sibling groups, older children and those with complex needs.

7.5 **Placement Stability:** Placement stability is closely monitored as a key indicator of quality. The majority of Dorset children placed through Aspire experience stable placements which progress to Adoption Orders. Where disruptions have occurred (2), these were subject to detailed review to understand contributory factors. Learning from these is embedded into practice, particularly in relation to preparation, matching quality, and post-placement support. This year change of plan for some Dorset children has occurred due to sufficiency.

7.6 **Benchmarking:** Aspire Adoption Service benchmarks its performance against regional RAAs where available, national data. This enables the service to understand its relative performance and identify areas for improvement. Comparative analysis indicates that Aspire performs broadly in line with similar services, with particular strengths in adopter approval timeliness and stable placements. Work continues to strengthen performance in reducing time to match for children with more complex profiles.

7.7 **Audit Activity and Findings:** A structured programme of case file audits which ceased in 2024 has now been devised in Q4 2025-2026 and thematic reviews are taking place to evaluate the quality of practice. Audits are undertaken by managers and senior leaders and focus on compliance, quality of assessment, decision-making, and the child's experience. 2026-2027 will focus on Adoption Support in preparation for Ofsted visits during this coming year.

7.8 **Learning from Complaints, Disruptions and Serious Incidents:** The service actively promotes a culture of learning and continuous improvement. Feedback from complaints, placement disruptions and any serious incidents is systematically reviewed to inform practice development. Complaints received during the year 25-26 were low in number (5 Stage 1s, 2 Stage 2 which led to Stage 3 and Corporate Review subsequently and were responded to within statutory timescales. Themes identified included communication and clarity of processes, which have informed service improvements.

7.9 All placement disruptions (2 in 2025-2026) are subject to formal disruption meetings. Learning from these reviews has led to:

- Enhanced adopter preparation for complex needs
- Improved matching processes and information sharing

- Strengthening of post-placement and therapeutic support

8. Safeguarding

8.1 Safeguarding remains a core priority for Aspire Adoption across Dorset, informing all aspects of service delivery for children, adoptive families and birth relatives. During 2025–26, the service continued to work within the expectations of Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership and local authority safeguarding procedures, ensuring that children remain protected and their welfare is promoted at all times.

8.2 Clear and robust safeguarding systems are in place throughout Aspire Adoption, with all concerns responded to promptly and managed in line with Dorset Council procedures. Staff work closely with children's social care, health, education and other partner agencies across Dorset to ensure a coordinated, multi-agency response where risks are identified. This partnership approach supports timely information-sharing and effective risk management.

8.3 Regular supervision, case tracking and quality assurance processes enable managers to maintain oversight of safeguarding practice, ensuring that any emerging concerns are addressed swiftly. Where appropriate, safeguarding issues are escalated through established local protocols to ensure that children receive the right level of intervention and support.

8.4 Training remains a key focus, with staff maintaining up-to-date knowledge of safeguarding legislation and local priorities identified within Dorset, including contextual safeguarding risks, trauma-informed practice and online safety. This ensures practitioners are equipped to respond effectively to the needs of children and families in the Dorset area.

8.5 Overall, Aspire Adoption continues to promote a strong safeguarding culture across Dorset, where vigilance, professional curiosity and partnership working underpin practice, and where continuous learning supports ongoing service improvement.

9. Workforce

9.1 Staffing overview (establishment, vacancies, turnover)

9.1.1 Aspire Adoption is delivered by a skilled, multidisciplinary workforce of approximately 40–45 staff (circa 36.5 FTE). The service is led by an Adoption Manager (Head of Service) and structured across three core teams: Family Finding and Matching, Recruitment and Assessment, and Adoption Support.

9.1.2 Each team benefits from dedicated management oversight, with a mix of social workers, family support practitioners, and specialist roles supporting the full adoption pathway—from recruitment and assessment through to post-adoption support. Additional capacity is provided through agency advisor, business support, and specialist functions, ensuring robust governance and operational effectiveness. The workforce model combines full-time and part-time roles, supporting flexibility while maintaining service continuity.

9.1.3 Staff turnover has been relatively low in 25-26. There has been the recruitment of a new permanent Head of Service, a 30-hour Marketing Officer post created within the staffing structure and additional Family Support Practitioners posts have been added to the Recruitment & Assessment Team along with the conversion of existing social work hours converting to FSP posts in both the R&A and Adoption Support Team.

9.1.4 Additional resource has been added to the Adoption Support Team to support the increased demand of keeping in touch arrangements and modernisation of adoption. Since April 2025, the Birth Parent Support Worker post was vacant which created additional impact on Family Finding Social Workers and the Adoption Support Team Manager who was allocated this role to meet legislation requirements. Delays where due to recruitment processes then 1 successful candidate refused the role which was then offered to the second appointable candidate.

9.1.5 Overall, the stability, experience, and professionalism of the workforce enable Aspire Adoption to deliver high-quality, child-centred services and positive outcomes for children and adoptive families.

10. Partnership Working

10.1 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.

10.2 Aspire Strategic Partnership Board is chaired by the Executive Director of children's services for Dorset Council, Paul Dempsey. The Board consists of the 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.

10.3 The Service Directors/Heads of Service for each of the local council authority children's services attend the quarterly and bi-quarterly Strategic and Operational Board meetings. In broad terms, the Operational Board has day-to-day operational responsibility for Aspire.

10.4 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.

10.5 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.

10.6 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.

10.7 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. 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.

10.8 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.

10.9 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.

10.10 Aspire are members of SWAC which consists of our regional partner RAA's Adoption West and Adopt Southwest, and the regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies, CCS Adoption, Parents and Children Together, and Barnardo's. All agencies work in partnership to support the development of practice through workshops and training events.

10.11 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.

10.12 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.

11. Finance

11.1 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 however this has been developed further in 2025/2026 via the Head of Service, BCP Director of Commissioning, Quality & Resources, Aspire Finance Officer and in particular with Dorset Senior Leadership who attend the Aspire Strategic Board.

11.2 The budget outturn for 2025/26 is an underspend of £44,800. This favourable variance is primarily due to higher-than-expected income generated on partnership income from selling Aspire adopters externally. The final outturn differs from the previous forecast surplus because of disruption in two external placements and an accounting period miscommunication. The surplus will be apportioned between the two authorities in accordance with 2025/26 funding percentages.

Aspire Adoption - 2025/26 Outturn

Expenditure Items	Working Budget 2025/26	2025/26 Outturn	2025/26 Budget Variance	2025/26 Forecast
	£	£	£	£
Staffing Costs	2,065,488	2,023,656	(41,832)	2,048,857
Other Employee Costs	9,000	8,139	(861)	9,000
Premises	4,000	50	(3,950)	0
Transport & Vehicles	25,000	24,962	(38)	29,000
Supplies and Services	21,800	58,560	36,760	48,700
Third Party & Transfer Payments	27,500	37,481	9,981	24,700
Recharge Costs	15,000	15,635	635	15,000
Other Grants, Reimbursements & Contributions	(200,000)	(208,677)	(8,677)	(318,000)
Service Fees & Charges	0	(36,822)	(36,822)	(36,822)
Total Expenditure	**1,967,788**	**1,922,984**	**(44,804)**	**1,820,436**

Funded By;	Working Budget 2025/26	2025/26 Outturn	2025/26 Budget Variance	2025/26 Forecast
	£	£	£	£
Dorset Council	802,858	802,858		802,858
BCP Council	1,164,930	1,164,930	0	1,164,930
Total Funding	**1,967,788**	**1,967,788**	**0**	**1,967,788**
Total Variance	**0**	**(44,804)**	**(44,804)**	**(147,352)**

11.3 Of the £208.677 it must be remembered that each local authority is responsible for the additional costs relating to interagency expenditure. Each placement is agreed with the appropriate Director/SM prior to the placement being made

11.4 The net operational underspend was shared proportionately among the two local councils according to the funding percentages. The Interagency fees were met by each Local Authority based upon the cost to them of the placements. It has been agreed for 26/27 that the £200k income target is removed to ensure that more of our adopters are supporting our own children waiting for adopters with the aim of reducing the reliance on external placements.

11.5 Looking forward to 2026/27, the budget for the Operational Budget has been agreed at the time of writing this report, and therefore under inter-authority agreement which is in final draft is amended to reflect the 2026/2027 budget. The increased overall cost to Dorset Council in 26/27 will be £991k from 802k in 25/26 however the additional cost of external placements will be significantly reduced.

12. Ofsted and Regulatory Compliance

12.1 Aspire Adoption Service remains fully committed to meeting its statutory responsibilities and maintaining compliance with Ofsted regulatory requirements. Throughout 2025–26, the service has operated in line with the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 (as amended), and the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

12.2 Robust governance and quality assurance processes have been in place to ensure continuous oversight of practice and performance which has improved significantly. Regular audits, case file reviews, and feedback mechanisms have been utilised to monitor compliance, identify areas for development, and drive service improvement. Any learning from complaints, compliments, and incidents has been systematically reviewed and embedded into practice.

12.3 The service has maintained clear and up-to-date policies and procedures, ensuring staff are supported to deliver safe, effective, and child-centred services. Workforce development has remained a priority, with staff receiving appropriate supervision, training, and professional development aligned with regulatory expectations.

12.4 Notifications to Ofsted have been submitted in a timely manner, and there have been no significant breaches of regulatory requirements during the reporting period. Aspire Adoption continues to work in partnership with local authorities, panel members, and other stakeholders to ensure transparency, accountability, and adherence to best practice.

12.5 Overall, the service demonstrates a strong commitment to regulatory compliance, safeguarding, and achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

13 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

13.1 Aspire has not previously had a specific EDI strategy however has an outline of what will be implemented in 2026-2027 following on from learning from practice and policies up to 2026.

13.2 The purpose of Aspire's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and Purpose will be to ensure Aspire Adoption Service delivers equitable, inclusive, and culturally competent services, improving outcomes for children and families while building a diverse and inclusive workforce. Key Strategic Priorities for 26-27 will be:

13.3 **Reduce Inequalities in Adoption Outcomes:** Address disparities in waiting times and placement outcomes, particularly for Black and minority ethnic children, disabled children, older children and sibling groups. We will strengthen early permanence and family finding for Dorset children with an anti-bias approach and the success measure would be reduced waiting time gaps and improved placement timeliness

13.4 **Diversify Adopter Recruitment:** Target underrepresented communities through tailored outreach and partnerships and ensure inclusive, accessible recruitment processes and materials, The success measure: Increased enquiries and approvals from diverse adopter groups.

13.5 **Embed Anti-Discriminatory Practice:** Mandatory EDI and anti-racism training for staff, panel members, and adopters will be reviewed and updated and look at introducing EDI-focused supervision and audit of assessments for bias. The success measure: Improved quality of assessments and positive user feedback.

13.6 **Promote Identity, Belonging and Lifelong Outcomes:** We will look to strengthen further life story work and identity planning for all Aspire children which will support adopters to meet children's cultural and identity needs. A success measure: Improved feedback from adopters and young people.

13.7 **Build an Inclusive Workforce:** We will review recruitment, progression, and retention to reduce inequality, monitor workforce diversity and promote inclusive leadership. The success measure will be increased workforce diversity and improved staff survey results.

13.8 **Strengthen Governance and Accountability:** Embed EDI in performance reporting and operational oversight by Quarterly reporting to Aspire Board on key EDI metrics. Devise an Annual EDI audit and action plan review. The success measure will be demonstrable progress against EDI indicators and inspection readiness**Key Enablers:** Robust data collection and analysis across protected characteristics will be collated, the co-production with Aspire adopters, young people, and birth families, strong partnerships with communities and agencies evidenced and leadership commitment and clear accountability

Implementation Timeline:

2025–26: Baseline data, training rollout, recruitment review.

2026–27: Embed practice improvements and targeted campaigns

2027–28: Evaluate impact and demonstrate measurable change

This strategy commits Aspire to tackling inequality, improving inclusion, and delivering better outcomes for children and families, supported by measurable targets and strong governance by Aspire Adoption.

14. Risks and Challenges 2025-2026

During 2025–26, Aspire Adoption continued to operate within a complex and pressured environment, with a number of significant risks and challenges impacting service delivery, performance, and outcomes for children and families.

1. Increasing Complexity of Children's Needs

Children waiting for adoption are presenting with increasingly complex needs, including trauma, developmental delay, and sibling group placements. This continues to extend family finding timescales and complicate matching processes. Additionally, to this also Increase the level of support required post-placement. Timeliness however for Dorset children has remained above National KPIs consistently which is positive.

2. Sufficiency and Recruitment of Adopters

Despite ongoing recruitment activity, there remains a shortage of adopters for Dorset children within Aspire with 73% of children placed internally with and 27% placed externally to meet the needs of older children, Sibling groups and Children with additional needs.

3. Growing Demand for Post-Adoption Support

Demand for support services has increased significantly, particularly in relation to keeping in touch arrangement, therapeutic interventions and emotional and behavioural support. There is a risk that demand exceeds available capacity and funding, which may impact placement stability particularly with the reductions in the ASGSF any decisions from the DfE National ASGSF Consultation due in 2027.

4. Financial Pressures and wider local authority financial constraints continue to affect service capacity, availability of specialist support. Commissioning decisions creates ongoing pressure to deliver effective services within constrained budgets. Inter-agency placement costs for external placements have impacted on Dorset in 25/26 however the review of the financial envelope took place in Q4 25-26 and was agreed.

6. Dependency on External Funding

The service remains reliant on the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)to deliver therapeutic support. Uncertainty regarding future funding levels presents a risk to Continuity of support provision and long-term planning for families

7. Partnership and Regional Working Complexity

Operating across multiple local authorities continues to present challenges however this has continued to strengthen in 2025-2026 by aligning policies and processes, maintaining consistency of practice and managing differing local pressures in the two local authorities and within Aspire.

Overall Position

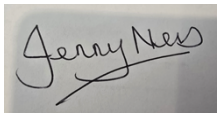
The overarching challenge for Aspire in 2025–26 has been balancing: Rising demand, increasing complexity of need, and constrained resources. This however has enabled Aspire Strategic and Operational Board to re- align priorities and ensure Dorset adopted families and children are offered a service which demonstrates resilience and commitment to positive outcomes with strategic planning, and continued investment to sustain performance and placement stability.

15. Priorities for the Coming Year 2026-2027:

……on next page.



Jenny Ness - Head of Service – Aspire Adoption.



22nd May 2026

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 to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

1.3 Aspire (RAA) is funded by Dorset County Council and BCP (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council) to deliver adoption statutory services.

1.4 Each local authority retains overall responsibility for their adoption services, continuing to have parental responsibility for their own Children in Care, but delegating most adoption 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

1. Governance

4.1 The following is taken from the Inter Authority Agreement which was being updated in 2025/2026.

SCHEDULE 2 – TERMS OF REFERENCE

Governance Structure



Aspire Strategic Partnership Board

The Aspire Boards 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.

TERMS OF REFERENCE where updated and agreed for both Boards in 2025-26.