

Annual Adoption Report

April 2022 - March 2023



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Introduction:

This report provides information about the Adoption Service and outcomes for children in care with Lincolnshire County Council, from the period 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023 inclusive.

The purpose of the Annual Report is to inform the public, elected members, partners and staff of the progress and developments of the Adoption Service during this period. The Adoption Service is part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) – Family Adoption Links.

The County Council's Business Plan outlines the organisational values that reflect the Council's vision and purpose, providing a set of consistent, simple values that guides attitudes and behaviours. These values define how we do things and are the principles by which we work together and with our customers and partners and are underpinned by the following statement:

Lincolnshire County Council's vision is:

- supporting high aspirations
- enabling everyone to enjoy life to the full
- creating thriving environments
- provide good value council services.

This approach by the Council underpins a one Council approach which ensures that services are working towards shared goals and will help different areas of the Council to work more effectively and alongside our strategic partners.

The Family Adoption Links Partnership has a strategic vision:

- It is a dynamic regional partnership aimed at delivering excellence in every aspect of adoption
- Family Adoption Links strive to ensure the best possible match for children and adoptive parents and develop a comprehensive range of support services to ensure a positive adoption journey
- The regional approach seeks to develop the widest pool of professionals who engage in innovative and groundbreaking new adoption practices

National Adoption Agenda:

The Government continues to maintain a clear focus on minimising delay for children with a plan for adoption and maximising the potential pool of adopters.

On the 13th March 2014, the Children and Families Bill received royal assent and became the Children and Families Act 2014 on 22nd April 2014. To reflect the changes; regulations, National Minimum Standards and the statutory guidance for adoption were amended and came into force in July 2014. The changes inherent in the Act have continued to be implemented in Lincolnshire, with the establishment of Foster to Adopt placements a two-stage approval process for adopters, and the development and expansion of support services to adoptive families.

On the 1st May 2015, the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) was rolled out to all Local Authorities. The fund offers a fast, simple service for Local Authorities to apply to, meaning that adoptive families can access the support they need, as and when they need it. The funds extend to Local Authorities and RAA's and funding is in place for eligible adoptive families and special guardianship orders (SGO's) until March 2025.

To access the fund, adoptive families/SGO arrangement need to have an assessment of adoption support needs completed by the Local Authority. Where the assessment identifies that therapeutic services would be beneficial to a family, the Local Authority can apply to the ASF on the family's behalf, who will then release the funding to the Local Authority.

In June 2015, the government published its proposal for the regionalisation of adoption services. The rationale behind this proposal was outlined as:

"By the end of this Parliament, we want to see all local authorities being part of regional agencies. We want to accelerate the pace of change to ensure those children for whom adoption is the right path, are given the best chance of finding a loving, forever family as quickly as possible. This year, we want to provide up to £4.5M of start-up funding to support early adopters to take forward their proposals."

Lincolnshire and Rutland, North Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Leicester City, and Northamptonshire Children's Trust launched as a (RAA) in October 2020 under the name Family Adoption Links. The RAA works collaboratively to develop and maintain the partnership, with an RAA management team, established regional family finding group, and have taken strides as a partnership to ensure that excellent practice and better resources for children and adoptive parents are shared within the region.

Developing the workforce to ensure all social workers have the skills and knowledge to make swift and robust decisions about the best placements for children to meet their long-term needs is seen as a priority, and in Lincolnshire the adoption staff apply the Signs of Safety framework to support their work. In addition, all the Supervising social Workers have completed their Adult Attachment Interview training to improve the quality of the adopter assessments, and to assist in the process of matching children to adopters.

In April 2019 Rutland commissioned Lincolnshire to deliver adoption services on their behalf, so a contract was developed with them, which continues to date. There have been regular meetings with Rutland staff to ensure that the work is completed in a timely way and to track cases.

Lincolnshire was actively involved in Rutland's OFSTED inspection in February 2020, by holding a training event with Rutland staff, providing children and adopters' files for evidence, and meeting with the inspector. The comments on adoption services in the Rutland OFSTED inspection report 2020 were positive. The contract for the delivery of adoption services for Rutland has been ongoing through 2022/2023.

At the end of March 2019, the statutory adoption register run by Coram BAAF ceased to operate, and was replaced by the Link Maker system, which enables social work staff and adopters to access information on children nationally and to have Lincolnshire children on the national system. This is effective for the regional colleagues to identify and source placements as well as the option to have children on the system nationally so that approved adopters seeking a child can do so through this system.

In January 2020, Lincolnshire became involved in a pilot project for Coram/BAAF which focussed on the 'Together or Apart' assessment model which had been constructed and developed by Shelagh Beckett to assist social workers with the task of making lifelong decisions regarding the placing of sibling groups. The Together or Apart assessment model is now used across the country.

In December 2021 there was the 'Somerset judgement' whereby an adoption case in Somerset was seen to have failed to follow regulations regarding adoption medicals for children with a plan for adoption. In response to this Lincolnshire adoption service reviewed and audited all cases in the preceding three years which had had an adoption decision by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), and it was reassuring to find that the practice in Lincolnshire remains robust and in line with the regulations. Following the judgement Lincolnshire have implemented the new forms for medical advisors, to ensure that decisions are recorded where required, and that adoption medicals are always considered by the ADM.

At the end of 2022, the adoption support fund announced that they would be continuing until March 2025, which secures the ongoing support for adoptive and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) families in being provided with therapeutic support.

Throughout 2022/23 the RAA has gone from strength to strength and workstreams continue to work hard and forge improved practices and produce optimum chances for children with a care plan for adoption.

There remains a clear alignment of the local, regional, and national agenda which is encapsulated in Lincolnshire County Council's vision "*that every child in every part of the county should achieve their potential.*" To achieve this, the work of the Adoption Service is delivered according to the principles that the council adheres to, specifically:

- Early help: Strong protective universal services accessible to all with a range of early help available so children have the best start in life and families have extra help when they need it.
- Safeguarding: A shared responsibility to ensure children are safe at home, school and in their community.
- Aspiration: Children are able to thrive and cope with life challenges.
- Learning and achievement: All children being the best they can be with targeted interventions to close the gap so vulnerable children achieve as well as their peers.
- Best use of resources: Integrated commissioning with a focus on best value, improved outcomes and community engagement

The report details how the activity of the Adoption Service fits within the framework of the above principles.

Progress on Development Goals identified in 2021/2022 Annual Report:

Early Help:

The use of the Signs of Safety model has continued to be embedded into practice, with all the staff having completed training. The Supervising Social Workers are using mapping as an effective tool in the initial assessment of prospective adopters. The children's workers have developed their skills in using words and pictures to enhance children's understanding of their situation and the plan for adoption.

There was continued good performance on the adoption scorecard performance against key threshold measures. The service continues to perform well in this area, despite the ongoing challenges of some delayed timescales within court proceedings. This means that wherever Lincolnshire children and those within the Family Adoption Links region are placed with their adoptive family as quickly as possible.

There has been a consistent increase in the number of families who we have been able to help through the Adoption Support Fund, with Lincolnshire being a high user of the fund, ensuring that adopted children within Lincolnshire have access to the specialist support and therapy that they need.

Adoption Scorecard:

The scorecards allow local authorities and regional adoption agencies to monitor and compare their performance in adoption. The government introduced scorecards as part of a new approach to address delays in the adoption system in 2012.

There are 2 main timeliness indicators captured within the scorecard pertinent to adoption performance:

In 2022/2023 -

- (A10) Average time between entering care and being placed in their adoptive family is 505 days. This is lower than the national average for the year of 555. A lower score in this area is better.
- (A2) Average time between gaining authority to place and deciding on a match is 159 days, significantly lower than all England average of 271. A lower score in this area is better.

A10 performance can be impacted by court proceedings that are extended, and also by having children in the cohort who are deemed more difficult to place .

A2 performance can be impacted on having children who are deemed difficult to place where the search for the right adoptive family can take some time.

Lincolnshire has performed well against the national average in this year and continues to strive for timely outcomes for every child.

There continues to be a small cohort of children within Lincolnshire whose timescales will fall out of the target, and this is due to them being difficult to place or applications from parents for leave of the court to appeal Placement Orders which the authority has no control over.

This year has seen an increased number of children with a plan of adoption, from 56 to 60, in line with the increased numbers of children in care. The trend for high numbers of children placed on Special Guardianship Orders has continued with higher number of SGOs granted this year 95 compared to 69 last year where is that data from? The number of adoption orders granted this year has gone up again to 46 from as compared with 31 last year, showing an improvement in performance.

Safeguarding:

Signs of Safety is a strengths based and safety orientated approach that continues to be incorporated into the adoption process as a model for assessing matches, creating adoptive placements, assessing risks or worries of applicants and in direct work with children whilst preparing them for placement. Staff members in the team continue to utilise the use of words and pictures in direct work with children assisting them in understanding the reasons they are in care and were not safe in their birth families.

The Supervising Social Workers in the team have all completed their adult attachment style training and are using this alongside 'mapping' as a way of analysing their initial assessments of adopters, to ensure that the service is assessing and approving adopters who will be able to manage the needs of the children who require adoptive placements. The team are also trained in restorative practice.

Aspiration and Well-being:

There has been an increase in the number of families who have been provided with therapeutic support via the Adoption Support Fund. Local authorities and RAA's can apply for therapeutic funding for eligible adoptive and Special Guardianship Families. This is a much

needed resource that continues to help families to meet the needs of children who have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

Over the course of 2022/23 there have been 412 applications for 272 children to the Adoption Support Fund to provide therapeutic input for adopted children and those who have Special Guardianship Orders. This is a significant increase from the 322 applications the year previously. The Adoption Support Fund applications in this year have amounted to £1,153,986.63.

Learning and achievement:

The Post Adoption Support team and the Children's team maintain strong links with the Virtual School and ensures that adopted children in schools receive the full benefit from initiatives including the Pupil Premium. The value and importance of children achieving and attaining threads throughout the children in care community and is an important aspect covered in the assessment and placement of children in their new families.

Best use of Resources:

The Post Adoption Support team has been involved in the development of a range of services for Special Guardian support, to enable them to have access post order assessment, therapies and therapeutic parenting support. Kinship Compass an independent online information, advice and support hub for kinship carers are providing webinars and support groups. Special Guardians are granted access to the e-Learning currently available for foster carers. Applications to the Adoption Support Fund are managed through the adoption service.

Membership with the Family Adoption Links partnership has brought about some efficiencies in terms of sharing the adoption training, resulting in less spent on venues and staff time delivering the training with more focus on other practice matters.

Having a wider pool of adopters for Lincolnshire children means that there is more placement choice for children and for adoptive parents. The aim is that children should have reduced waiting times to be adopted with increased families to choose from. The region has experienced successes in matching children deemed harder to place when they have attended a small and friendly "getting to know you event"

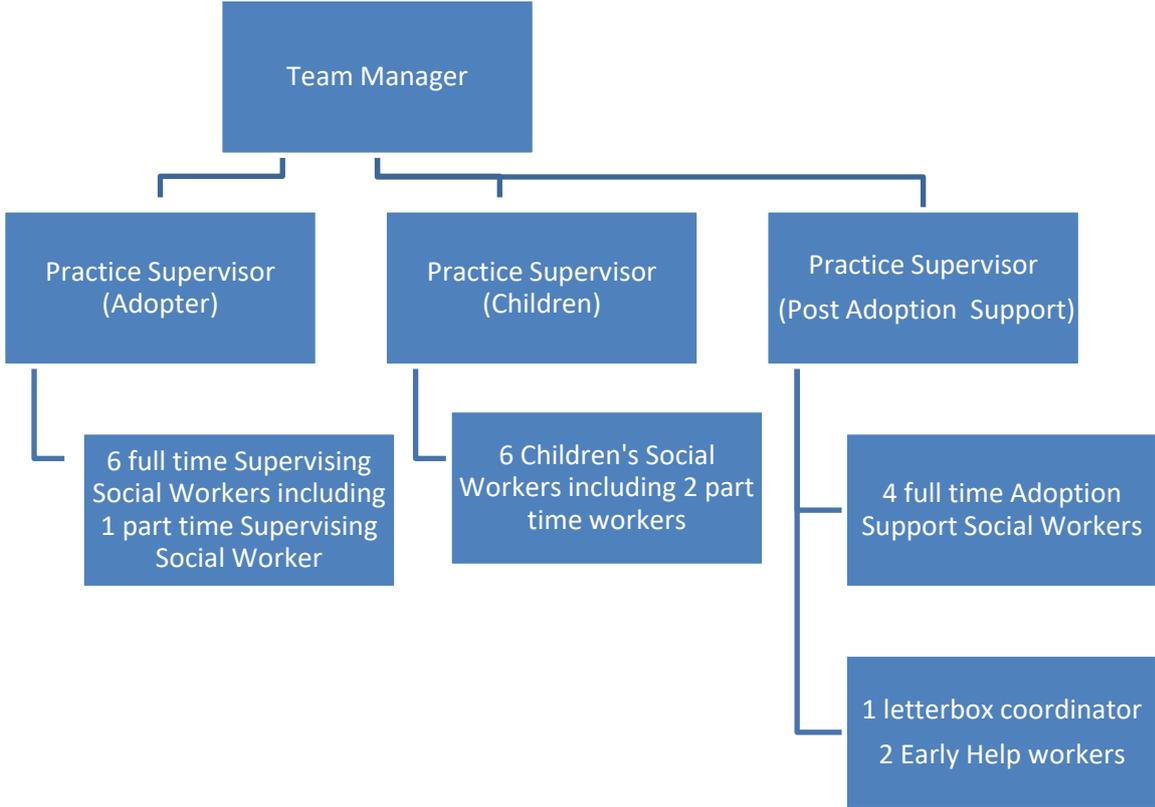
Sharing knowledge and expertise in sharing training courses for adopters ensures there is a consistent high quality. The staff also are able network and share best practice which only enhances the adopter's journey.

Service Role and Structure:

The core duties of the Adoption Service remain broadly unchanged. The Adoption Service continues to provide services to children, adopters and birth family members as required by the National Adoption Minimum Standards 2014 as issued by the Secretary of State under Sections 23 and 49 of the [Care Standards Act 2000](#), Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013, the Adoption Support Services Regulations (2005) and the Adoption Statutory Guidance July 2014, the Children Act 1989 and 2004 and the Children and Families Act 2014.

The Adoption Team remains a stand-alone countywide service with office bases at Lincoln, Sleaford, and Louth. This year all staff have been working on a hybrid model with access to the office within the smarter working policy which is anticipated to become business as usual in due course. All staff continue to be employed by Lincolnshire, but the adopter’s team and the adoption support team are now also part of the FAL Regional partnership.

TEAM STRUCTURE CHART:



The adoption service is staffed by a team manager, three practice supervisors, six children’s adoption Social Workers and six supervising Social Workers.

The Post Adoption Support Team has four full-time social workers two Early help workers and a Children and Families Officer who manages the letterbox scheme.

The letterbox scheme ensures that there is a link between an adopted children and other members of their birth family as the child grows with the birth family, adoptive parents and the child all being able to take part in a letterbox exchange, usually twice a year.

The Post Adoption Support team are responsible for the support of children and their families after an Adoption order or Special Guardianship order has been made. Their role involves the assessment and support for these families as well as managing the applications to the ASF, as well as providing therapy directly to families.

The Adoption Support Social Workers complete work directly with families who have adopted and who are struggling to manage issues specifically linked to their adoption. When families come to adoption support this is often due to issues such as issues with early trauma, educational issues, presentations with emotional difficulties often associated with attachment difficulties.

In addition, the adoption support team organise groups and activities to support adopters and adopted children. The children and family officer co-ordinates the indirect family time arrangements for adopted children and birth relatives together with the completion of life story work for the preparation of children placed for adoption.

The Children’s Adoption Social Workers progress children’s plans for adoption, by completing child permanence reports, family finding for children, matching and the planning and supervision of introductions, and supporting children in placements until their adoption order is granted. They also complete court reports for the placement order and the final adoption order.

The Supervising Social Workers recruit and assess prospective adopters, as well as completing step - parent adoption assessments. Supervising Social Workers also deliver 6 prepare to adopt training courses for prospective adopters. The workers are also responsible for running 4 courses about talking about adoption and 4 face to face friends and family training days throughout the year. Their role also involves the matching of adopters with children and supporting adoptive placements through to an adoption order being made.

Adoption Performance:

During April 2022 to March 2023 60 children had an agency decision of adoption, of which 46 went onto being subject to a Placement Order. For the children where a Placement Order was not made, the court determined a different plan, which comprised of reunification with parents or the making of an alternative order such as a Special Guardianship Order.

Of the 60 children there were the following groups of siblings:

- 2 groups of 3 children
- 11 groups of 2 children
- 32 single children.

This is a higher number of sibling groups as compared to last year, but also an increased number of single placements. There continued to be an increase in kinship placements and Special Guardianship Orders throughout the 2022/23 performance year, and the numbers of SGO orders made increased to 95, a significant increase of 26 from the previous year.

Age ranges of children with an Agency decision of adoption 2022/2023:

- 0 - 5 years = 59 [60]
- 6 -10 years = 1 [0]
- 10 plus = 0 [0]

(Previous year's performance in brackets)

The predominant ethnicity of the children with a best interest plan remains white British although there were 7 children of other white heritage, an increase of 5 on the previous year. There were also 4 children of mixed or multiple ethnic groups.

All the children this year were aged 6 and under. There was only one child aged 6. This child was part of a sibling group with a younger sibling. Therefore, the target of the service's recruitment strategy continues to be targeting adopters willing to consider sibling groups and older children.

Profile of children placed for adoption:

With regard to placements made this year, 41 were placed (which is a different performance measure to the number of children adopted in the year). This is 5 more than in the previous year. Of these, 25 were singleton placements, a decrease of 7 children. 16 children were placed in 8 sibling groups of 2, which is double from the year before.

23 of the children were placed before they were 2 years old, with 15 children placed between the age of 2 and five years and 3 children aged over 5. There were no children aged over 5 placed for adoption last year, so this is an increase.

There were 25 boys placed and 16 girls, continuing a trend of having more boys than girls with a plan of adoption.

Overall, there were double the number of sibling groups placed together than in the previous year and the cohort of children were slightly older than in previous years.

Children Awaiting Placement at the close of 2022/2023:

Despite best practice and great effort there are a small number of children each year that despite best efforts, a plan of adoption cannot be achieved within reasonable timescales. During the year there were 11 children where the plan changed away from one of adoption.

In these cases, an application is made to revoke the Placement Order. Not being able to achieve adoption is usually due to the complex needs of the child and no regional or nationwide match with adopters. Older children and sibling groups tend to wait longer for a placement. Children with complex health and developmental needs may also not achieve a plan of adoption. The decision to revoke a placement order is a serious one and involves all professionals and the court process.

There were then 13 children with Placement Orders and no placement, a decrease from 28 from the last year.

In addition, there were 3 children in the process of being adopted by their foster carers, a decrease of 7 from the previous year.

There were two relinquished children, an increase of one from the previous year.

The rest of the cohort are either awaiting a Placement Order being made or in active family finding for those in the harder to place categories.

From this cohort there were 6 children whose plans were delayed due to complex care proceedings and subsequent delay.

Adopters approved as suitable to adopt during 2022/2023:

A total of 30 adoptive parents were approved to adopt during 2022/2023, an increase of 3 from the previous year. 8 of these were also dual approved for Foster to Adopt; a slight increase of 2 from the previous year. No adopters were approved for inter-country adoption.

The trend continues to be that there are more adoptive parents than children waiting for a placement within the county. As there have been delays in children's court proceedings which are beginning to reduce, the service has always had approved adopters waiting to ensure choice when making matches.

On the 31st March 2023 there were 9 adopters approved and waiting; two of which were being considered for possible links. In addition, there were 2 foster to adopt families fostering children with a view to adoption.

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16
Total Adopters approved	30	27	25	28	43	22	32
Of which Foster-to-Adopt	8	6	8	7	15	14	12
Foster-to-Adopt New Applications	6	5	8	6	10	5	12
Foster-to-Adopt Subsequent Applications	2	1	0	1	4	9	5

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16
Approved for one child	23	16	19	18	37	13	20
Approved for two children	7	11	6	10	6	9	11
Approved for three children	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16
White	25	26	22	25	40	21	29
Asian/Asian British	0	1	1	0	1	1	2
Other white background	2	0	2	1	1	0	1
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	2	0	0	0	1		

Other ethnic group	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
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Adoption Orders made 2022/2023:

There were 38 adoptive Lincolnshire approved adopters who successfully adopted children in this year. An additional 4 families approved by other agencies adopted Lincolnshire children. In total 46 children were adopted in this year.

From this cohort there were 28 adoptive families who identified as heterosexual, 6 adoptions by male same sex couples and 4 female same sex couples.

34 of the families were in a marriage or partnership and there were 4 single applicants in this year.

In order to reflect the government's aspiration to encourage foster carers who then go on to adopt, the Council supported five fostering families with children in placement to apply directly to the courts for an Adoption Order.

It is noted that there has been a reduction in the numbers of adoptive families wanting to provide families for sibling groups, and this may be due to the uncertainties following Covid. The service will continue to maximise our capacity to recruit for larger sibling groups, through a mixture of targeted recruitment and the flexible use of support packages for families seeking to adopt three or more children.

Marketing and Branding:

The RAA partnership has its own marketing officer who coordinates and leads on all marketing activity. Marketing highlights for 2022/2023 are as follows:

High performing website:

The Family Adoption Links website empowers potential adopters to self-serve with information on the children we are family finding for, the ability to book on to an information event, watch the You Can Adopt video, download a You Can Adopt information guide or speak to a member of staff.

In addition, the site is a key pillar in our post adoption support offer. Adopters can book training, watch online videos, access the Adopter Resource Hub (a collaborative piece of work between FAL and the Adopter Consultation Hub) and ask questions/queries and seek advice.

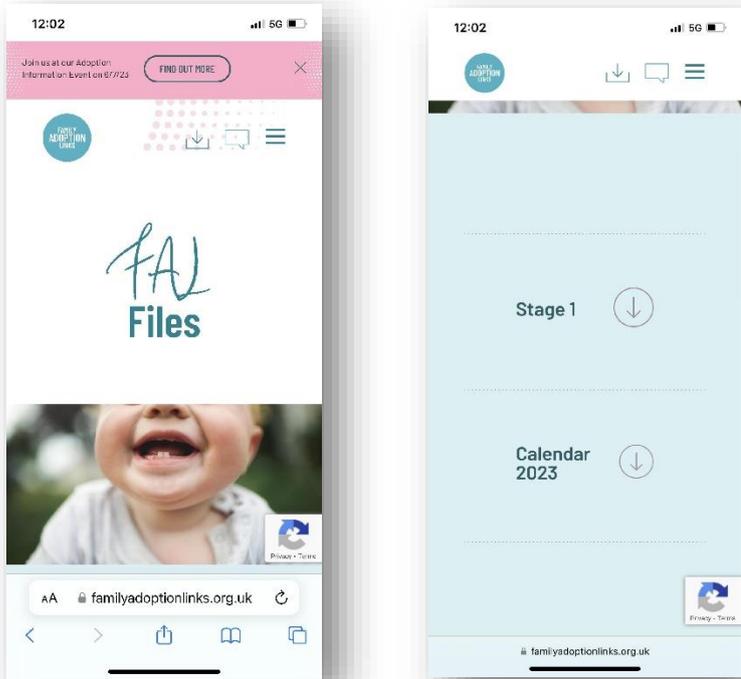
The highest performing area of the site continues to be 'The children we are family finding for' with over 18,000 page views in the last 12 months.

New development - Staff Intranet:

The partnership has been working hard to align the practices and paperwork of Stage 1 of the application process. The new documents are now available via the new staff Intranet - FAL

Files. This enables all paperwork to be branded, centrally approved, consistent and if necessary, changed without delay. The intranet also hosts the Family Adoption Links calendar, an interactive pdf where you can not only see all of our events but also book on to them.

The group now are working hard to re-brand and align the Stage 2 resources.



Training:

The training offer continues to be an integral part of what the adoption service regionally offer. Investing in and hosting training by using the Eventbrite platform has encouraged. 621 training places being booked since its conception in July 2022.

From feedback gained from the You Can Adopt training, 100% of guests found it easy to both find and book on to these events and there have been many comments about what a seamless, branded and professional experience it offers.

Internally, this platform has saved Social Worker time freeing the practitioners to concentrate on the delivery of the courses.

The service has also benefitted from reduced no-shows thanks to the automatic reminders that are in place and feedback from each course has been gained centrally enabling us to refine and improve each course through our training workgroup.

Family Finding Events:

The 'Getting to know you' event.

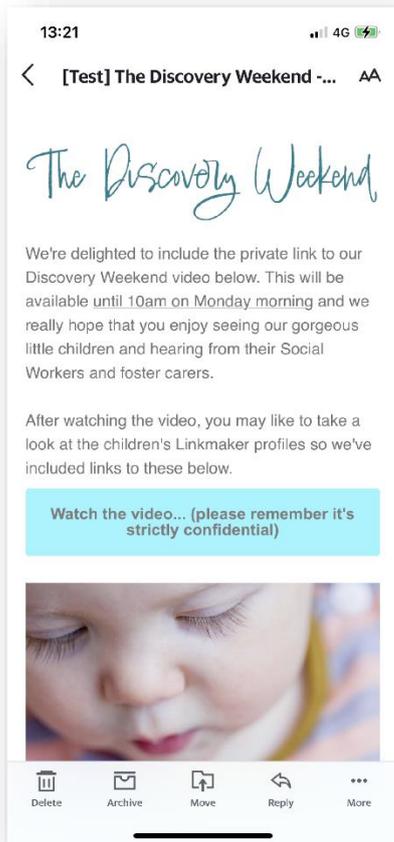
The partnership hosted 2 'Getting to know you' events to enable waiting children and adopters to meet each other in a relaxed and party like environment. The objectives of the events were to stretch adopter thinking by giving them the opportunity to get to know children that they may otherwise have not considered.

The events were attended by 26 adopter households and 18 sets of children resulting in 5 adoptions and 4 sets of children having a link pursued. The cost per child was £89 vs a cost per child of £600 per child for a Coram BAAF event. All of the children who attended were deemed to be in the harder to place category and had waited a significant time for a match. Adopters who attended the event were able to widen their matching criteria and spend time with children, resulting in matches that would otherwise not have happened.



The Discovery Event:

For those adopters who were unable to attend the 'Getting to know you' event we created the innovative 'Discovery Event' – a confidential video profiling event. This was sent using a private link and available for 48 hours only, the video attracted 141 views and saw enquiries increase 400% on Link Maker during the weekend of the event.



Thrive Adoption Support Newsletter:

The quarterly Adoption Support newsletter 'Thrive' is sent to over 1,000 adopters offering them an invaluable source of information, advice and support. Content is discussed and created by representatives from across the partnership and performance rates are closely monitored to ensure that we are delivering articles that adopters want to read.

Thrive

Adoption Support Newsletter



Happy New Year from everyone at Family Adoption Links,

We're feeling inspired for 2023 and are looking forward to providing you

Recruitment Statistics:

From 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023:

- 119 Initial Expression of Interest forms (IEIs) were received through the recruitment desk.
- There is a similar number to last year's figures, but the service has still had adopters awaiting placement throughout the year, so sufficiency has not been an issue. Lincolnshire has continued to have a steady rate of enquiries whereas our regional partners have struggled to retain their numbers.

Financial Year	Number of IEIs received
2022 - 2023	119
2021 - 2023	115
2020 - 2021	208
2019 - 2020	186
2018 - 2019	198

Adoption Panel Activity for 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023:

The Adoption National Minimum Standards 2014 standard 17.2 provides a requirement for:

“Adoption Panels to provide quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months 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.”

There is excellent communication between the panel chair, the panel advisor and the adoption team, and they have regular meetings where feedback is given, and any practice issues raised. This helps to maintain standards of practice and development of the service.

Children's Plans for Adoption:

As part of the Quality Assurance process for children to be considered for Adoption, these reports have been scrutinized in advance by the Panel Advisor along with Team Managers from Fostering, Adoption, FAST, Children in Care and the Independent Reviewing Service.

The Quality Assurance meeting is held each week and cases are booked in consultation with Legal Services and the Adoption Team in advance to ensure the timescales in relation to care proceedings are met. Bookings are reviewed on a monthly basis within the legal permanence meeting which allows for a rigorous cross-agency check to ensure that legal timescales are met, and the work is of a high enough standard and that the child's wishes and views are recorded.

When compiling these reports the current foster carers provide a profile for the child, which is circulated. The views of parents and birth family are detailed within these reports. If there

are no views, then the advisor will request that the facts and reasons why there are no views from the parents are recorded.

Written legal advice is provided independent of the case holder and ensures that any matters concerning Re B-S case law (Children) 2013 are well evidenced for the Agency Decision Maker and that the plans are robust and there are no legal issues which may prevent the plans from being considered.

The Quality Assurance meeting collectively scrutinises each report to ensure that the Welfare Checklist, Children Act 1989 has been addressed and that, if any expert reports have been requested in care proceedings, these are available. This is particularly important to ensure there is a balanced approach and that key points raised have been considered fully within the child's permanence report.

A summary of the assessments is included in the child permanence report and copies of those expert reports are available to the Agency Decision Maker in good time to be read.

The Panel Advisor liaises with the agency to provide any actions and feedback from this forum; this may be addressed with the Adoption Service, FAST Teams, Independent Reviewing Service and Legal Services.

The Agency Decision Maker considers the following in making every decision.

“the relationship which the child has with relatives and with any other person in relation to whom the court or agency considers the relationship to be relevant, including:

- (i) the likelihood of any such relationship continuing and the value to the child of its doing so, (ii) the ability and willingness of any of the child's relatives, or of any such person, to provide the child with a secure environment in which the child can develop, and otherwise to meet the child's need and
- (ii) (iii) the wishes and feelings of any of the child's relatives, or of any such person, regarding the child, to ensure that any recommendations made have taken account of these relationships.”

Analysis:

Child permanence reports detail the child's history well and are written in a style which is easy to read and make sense of their life to date. There is evidence that consideration is given to how the views of children who are nonverbal can still be represented in the reports.

The wishes and views of birth parents can be difficult for the workers to report on due to the family disengaging with the workers or disagreeing with the recommendations. Workers continue to build upon and strengthen restorative/relationship-based practice to engage with birth family to elicit their views and contributions where possible.

The reports addressing a child's plan of adoption are written to a high standard and they utilise the Signs of Safety tools in their analysis. The reports detail the child's history well and are easily read and understood. The report details the challenges that a child may have faced in their early life including matters which detail the harm which was attributed to the care given to them by their birth family. The reports provide a clear rationale for decision making.

The reports consider fully the lifelong impact of adoption and are mindful in addressing matters around family time post adoption both with birth parents but all those who are important to the child including siblings whose plans may not be that of adoption. There is evidence of consideration of ongoing direct sibling relationships where appropriate.

The reports also provide significant insight into the functioning and experiences of the birth family and extended family members; this allows for a fuller understanding of who was considered and an explanation as to why they could not offer care to a particular child.

This is key important information for prospective adopters and in due course the child themselves who may come to view these reports at a later stage.

Between April 2022 and March 2023, there have been 60 children who have had a decision to support a plan for Adoption made by the Agency Decision Maker. This is an increase of 6 from the previous year and is broken down as follows:

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
Boys approved for adoption	34	32	24	29	24	35	17	12
Girls approved for adoption	26	22	26	15	27	20	6	8
Total children approved for adoption	60	54	49	44	51	55	23	20
Single children approved	32	33	37	31	38	41	15	16
Children in sibling groups of two	22 (11)	2 [4]	6 [12]	5 [10]	5 [10]	4 [8]	2 [4]	2 [4]
Children in sibling groups of three	6 (2)	2 [6]	0	1 [3]	1 [3]	2 [6]	0	0
Children in sibling groups of four	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 [4]	0
White British children	50	46	48	42	45	52	22	19
Other white background (European)	5	3	0	1	2	1	1	1
Other	5	5	1	2	4	2	0	0
Age Range 0 - 2	44	40	40	36	39	32	15	11
Age Range 3 - 5	13	16	8	8	8	15	6	8
Age Range 6 - 8	3	0	1	0	3	6	2	1
Age Range 9 -11	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Age Range 11+	0	0	0	0	1			
% Meeting the National Minimum Standard 17.6	100%	96%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Between April 2022 and March 2023, the following children have been placed for Adoption.

National Minimum Standard 17.7

The Adoption Panel makes a considered recommendation on the proposed placement of a child with adopters within 6 months of the Adoption Agency Decision Maker deciding the child be placed for adoption.

The children who were placed outside of the 6 month timescale are likely to fall into the harder to place category, such as older children, sibling groups and children with complex health and developmental needs. There will also be a number of children who were delayed by appeals being made by parents wishing to oppose the making of the Placement Order.

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/2021	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/14
Total Children	41	37	49	44	51	55	23
Linked with adopters in timescale NMS 17.7	22	20	11	18	19	23	17
Linked with adopters outside timescale NMS 17.7	19	6	0	10	11	3	1
Awaiting link	13	10	38	6	21	29	1
Awaiting link – no placement order		10		6			
Returned to family		1	0	1	0	0	4
Change of care plan	3	2	0	2			
Adopted via Direct Application	3			1			
% meeting the National Minimum Standard 17.7	53.6%	78%	100%	78%	78.5%	94.5%	95%

Suitability of Prospective Adopters:

There have been twenty-two Adoption/Permanence Panels in this period. In that time the following applicants have been approved.

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
Total Adopters approved	30	27	25	28	43	22	32	24
Of which Foster-to-Adopt	8	6	8	7	15	14	12	0
Foster-to-Adopt New Applications	6	5	8	6	10	5	12	6
Foster-to-Adopt Subsequent Applications	2	1	0	1	4	9	5	0

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
Approved for one child	23	16	19	18	37	13	20	14
Approved for two children	7	11	6	10	6	9	11	9
Approved for three children	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16
White	25	26	22	25	40	21	29
Asian/Asian British	0	1	1	0	1	1	2
Other white background	2	0	2	1	1	0	1
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	2	0	0	0	1		
Other ethnic group	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

% reports meeting the National Minimum Standard 10.6 timescale 88%:

These reports have all been prepared by social workers who meet the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005.

Panel Administration requests the papers are available fourteen days ahead of the Panel date to allow the quality assurance process to take place. Reports are passed to the panel advisor who checks that the applicant's statutory checks have been completed and that health checks as well as health and safety checklists have been completed. Alongside this the advisor will ensure that the assessment is completed and that it covers aspects of the couple's or individual's strengths as adopters and their ability to provide safe care to a child.

The report must ensure that the couple's or individual's childcare experience, background history and life story, including education, is detailed as well as their support network and what attitude they have regarding contact arrangements for the future. The couple's or individual's financial details should be contained in the report.

The panel advisor reports that the quality of Prospective Adopters Reports (PAR) is very good and Adult Style Attachment interviews are being used as well as evidence from referees to appropriately explore skills and strengths.

On occasion the Panel Advisor has had consultation with the Adoption Team in respect of specific cases prior to formal consideration by Panel however this is rare. There has been one occasion whereby a brief prospective adopter's report under Adoption Agencies Regulation (AAR) 30(4) was presented to Panel for consideration of their suitability to adopt.

If there is any third-party information or clarification of issues sought by panel the workers will be asked to join Panel ahead of the applicants.

A further quality assurance check has been agreed when Lincolnshire are considering a link with out of county adopters. These PARs will be checked by both the Practice Supervisor in Lincolnshire and the Panel Advisor to ensure they comply with the standards in Lincolnshire.

Analysis:

There is evidence within the minutes of Panel that detail the panel's key consideration of applicants. The current central list provides the Council with panel members who have the experience and understanding of the adoption process to be able to consider the assessment.

There has been further development in using the referees as a positive source of evidence for the assessment with workers using the referee interview to confirm the views of the workers or in some cases to appropriately challenge the prospective adopter's views.

The Prospective Adopter Reports (PAR) continue to be of a high standard with only single numbers where further information has been needed to achieve the standard.

These reports have all been prepared or been supervised by Social Workers who meet the requirements of the restrictions on the preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005.

Panel administration requests the papers are available fourteen days ahead of the Panel date to allow the quality assurance process to take place. Reports are passed to the Advisor who checks that the applicant's statutory checks are up-to-date and that health checks as well as health and safety checklists have been completed and that a comprehensive and detailed family time plan is included within the reports.

The panel advisor will request any update of reports, medicals and support plans be prepared ahead of panel to be circulated to panel members ahead of the deadline.

Following the Somerset ruling, a full audit of all cases was held which confirmed that an appropriate adoption medical was completed for all children with a care plan of adoption.

The advisor quality assures all the reports to ensure that a full assessment is provided with a clear analysis as to why this family has been suggested as the best match for the child and how they will best meet the child's needs.

Further work continues to be supported by staff on developing a more thorough narrative by adopters on why they wish to adopt a particular child. This further identifies any potential support needs between the child and the potential adopters. The Panel Members will also consider the relative strengths of each match and any areas where they may require further clarity.

The quality of these reports has been good with positive matches for sibling groups and single children. Reports have detailed the needs of children and how the prospective adopters will meet these needs.

Panel minutes show the various matches of children to couples and single carers and confirm that questioning has been relevant and focussed upon the specific task i.e., the match with the adopters to ensure that the needs of a child can be met in the suggested placement.

The positive impact of the Regional Adoption Agency can be seen in panel with the placement of children with approved adopters in the region and the Panel Advisor’s attendance at regional forums.

Post Adoption Support:

The period covered by this report has seen further increases in the range of adoption support services which are provided within the framework set out within the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005, in line with a further increase in requests for adoption support.

Most of the support is now provided through the Adoption Support Fund, the service is provided on a tiered basis dependent on assessed need.

During 2022/2023 adoption staff have continued to use Theraplay theory and methods, so that they can support adoptive families with children newly in placement to use therapeutic parenting models to enhance the building of positive attachments in the early stages of placement.

There are six workers within the Post Adoption Support Team who are trained in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), which assists their work with adoptive families, and they have a range of other therapies they are able to deliver including Theraplay, therapeutic Life Story work, Psychotherapy and yoga therapy thus, creating a flexible and sustainable adoption service.

The current Post Adoption offer:

Tier 1	Support to adopters includes family time (contact) co-ordination, helpline advice, information via the Lincolnshire adoption website. Birth records counselling for adults. Also included in this tier is counselling for birth relatives whose children have been adopted as well as seminars for grandparents of adopters.
Tier 2	All of tier 1 and in addition adoption support groups/activities for adopters and for children affected by adoption. These include a programme of activities which bring adoptive children together to share experiences of adoption as part of leisure activities. Access to training events and newsletters to share resources

Tier 3	Previous tier support plus specific adoption support includes assessment of need, individual adoption support packages, that include a range of diverse therapeutic approaches provided by our in-house therapist or our network of private providers. Since the launch of the Adoption Support Fund, therapeutic interventions can be claimed from the central fund to ensure that adoptive families have access to therapeutic support. Support is provided to children until the age of 21, or 25 if that child has an Education Health Care Plan
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Letterbox activity

As of 31st March 2023, there were 642 children registered for letterbox.

For the twelve-month period there were 43 new children added and 52 children removed as they turned 18.

There are 12 letterbox arrangements for families who hold Special Guardianship Orders and 2 where children are not adopted but letterbox was felt appropriate.

Direct Family Time:

- 15 children have some form of direct family time with one or both birth parents. This is an increase of four from last year.
- 14 children have some form of direct contact with siblings in foster care or not adopted, an increase of 5.
- 8 have some form of direct contact with grandparents, which is double the number for last year.

This is a positive change evidencing that more adoptive parents are open to ongoing direct contact with family members.

Adoption Support Groups:

There are locally held evening support groups for adopters to attend. These are run by adopters and funded by the adoption service. Groups meet in the Lincoln, Louth and Bourne areas. There is also a flourishing stay and play group in the Lincoln area, for children to play and for adopters to meet and offer support to each other. The groups also organise fun Family days out for all adoptive families throughout the year. Their social worker will assist them to join a local support group and discuss with the adopter's issues such as information sharing within the group. The adoption service will provide adopters with access to the Family Adoption Links website which provides links to useful information relating to all aspects of adoption and signposting to services and resources. In addition, in 2014 the service introduced a quarterly newsletter for adopters, which is sent to all current and past adopters with children under 21.

In addition to the support groups, we have an adopter hub and a children's hub called Collabor8. Both groups meet bi-monthly to ensure that their views are gathered and that they contribute to service delivery and shaping services going forward.

Activity days:

During the year the adoption support team have funded and supported a number of activities for adopted children and young people. These activities allow children who share similar backgrounds and experience to come together to learn new skills and to make new friendships as well as providing a break to adoptive parents during school holidays.

Activities have included:

Splash day: a fun day on the water where children have time to play and work together as a team

Create your own music workshop: group to explore acoustic and digital music with other adopted children.

Children's Woodland Adventure: a range of activities to learn new skills and work in a team all set in the woodland environment.

Podcast pro: exploring how to produce a podcast.

Service planning:

The development goals for the coming 12-month period continue to be aligned to the five County Council principles set out at the beginning of the report and the objectives for children which are set out below.

Children and young people are healthy and safe:

Over the last year and moving forward the adoption service are committed to develop the Signs of Safety model to all aspects of our work. There has been increased use of restorative practice in the adoption process. This is used as the framework for preparing children for placement, and also in the work that they do with birth parents and extended family members and also in our work with the adoptive families. The past year has evidenced the positive impact of this approach, and we manage to have good working relationships with birth parents under what can be difficult circumstances.

Over the next year the service wish to continue to make progress on improving adoption scorecard performance against key threshold measures to minimise delay for children requiring adoption placements across the region. To do this the service will ensure that placements are timely either through placing children as soon as they are subject to a Placement Order or through placement for Foster to Adopt where possible, making best use of in-house, regional, and national family finding.

To continue to review and improve the range of training available to adopters; to provide them with therapeutic parenting skills and a range of post adoption training accessed through the regional hub.

Children develop full potential in early years and are ready for school:

- Over the last year we have extended the Adoption Support Service to include intensive support at the early stage in placements for sibling groups, to promote therapeutic parenting, and attachment work early in the placement, so that children are 'ready for school. We wish to continue building on this service and strengthen links with nurseries and schools to share this approach.
- Continue to make use of the Caring 2 Learn approach with adopters.
- To build on the excellent year that our support groups have had, especially the stay and play and adoption activities we offer to children and their families.
- To continue making good use of nursery provision for adopted children, ensuring that every child accesses the funded provision to which they are entitled.

Learn and achieve:

- To continue to maximise the benefits to adoptive and Special Guardian families in Lincolnshire arising from the Adoption Support Fund, and to be fully involved in shaping services going forward.
- To continue to make best use of the pupil premium to support adopted children in school.
- To continue and build our creative and innovative approach in terms of developing children's activities to ensure that adopted children have the opportunity to spend time with other children who share the same background and experiences.

Children and young people are ready for adult life:

- To continue to work on building links with the leaving care service to ensure smooth transitions for adopted young people and those cared for under Special Guardianship arrangements into independent living.
- To continue to provide activities for adopted children which build their skills, recognise their achievements, and build their confidence.

- To increase our learning from the experiences of children through the Collabor8e young person's group, helping to shape our support as children get older and prepare for independence.
- Support adopted young people who are in full time further education.

Best use of Resources:

- Continue our work in exploring options to broaden Adoption Support Model to other permanence options such as Special Guardianship Orders. To shape services nationally though being part of the pathfinder programme.
- Through the regional lead, to continue our important role with the Family Adoption Links region to improve choice and outcomes for children and adoptive families.

National Changes:

There are exciting national changes to the service in the near future with the implementation of the Independent Children's Social Care review, whose seven key themes are Support, Strengthening families, Safety, Care, Delivery, Sustainability and Accountability. The key areas of the review expected to impact on the Adoption team will be around Kinship and Foster to Adopt.

The current in-house review of the Special Guardianship offer is well underway, and Lincolnshire is also part of development in this area in the East Midlands region.

It has recently been announced that Lincolnshire has been chosen by the Department of Education as one of the three national Families First for Children Pathfinders where it is expected that Kinship and Special Guardianship will have a large focus. Further resources for the team have been agreed for the team under the Pathfinders project, and this is an exciting opportunity for the Local Authority and for the adoption team.

There will also be ongoing Family Adoption Links development work that will impact on the team as we continue to align practice and policies across the region in the areas of family finding, matching, recruitment activity, foster to adopt and Post Adoption support.

Summary:

Lincolnshire are a high performing and positive adoption service who have close working relationships with our colleagues across the Family Adoption Links region, and wider regional and national organisations.

The challenge for 2022/2023 was to maintain services post covid to ensure that children were still placed in adoptive placements in a timely way and at the earliest possible opportunity, whilst minimising risk and maintaining high levels of performance against government targets.

There have been issues relating to the length of court process, which has created delay for some children, and has made the government timescales more challenging to achieve. In general, despite these challenges, the service has been successful in attaining these goals and continues to show good levels of performance and excellent outcomes for children.

Throughout the year there have been approved adopters waiting for placement within Lincolnshire and the Family Adoption Links region, so there has been placement choice for many children. There has continued to be a small group of children who were difficult to place due to their age and complex health and developmental needs. The majority of these children have now been placed.

The regional work for all the teams has been significant and all the adoption leadership group have been engaged in the regional workstreams as the service work to develop an integrated regional service. This has focussed on developing the procedures which will be followed in family finding, agreeing a standardised model for recruitment and training, developing the adoption support offer and the processes required for the increased use of the adoption support fund. The regional partnership continues to be a main focus of the work of the team as regional working is developed, extended and reviewed.

Again, there has been significant increased demand and activity in Post Adoption and Special Guardianship services, and it has been challenging at times to meet this increase. The service has made significant progress in the management of the Adoption Support Fund to enable Lincolnshire families to benefit from a range of therapeutic services, but the need to complete assessments for the fund has also had an impact on the ability to deliver some of the other services which are needed.

Performance in 2022/2023 against the key threshold measures in the adoption scorecard has remained good both for the single year and for the three-year rolling average, despite the challenges the service has faced. The number of adoptions completed this year was higher than average, and timescales have been maintained. Some children with overly complex needs have taken longer to be adopted which does impact on the rolling average, however this is a positive outcome for the child.

Going forward the service will look to respond positively to the challenges presented through the cost-of-living crisis and the regionalisation agenda and the forthcoming national changes. It will strive to maintain its strong focus on delivering excellent outcomes for the children of Lincolnshire who have a plan for adoption.



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