



Annual Adoption Report 2020/2021

Introduction

This report provides information about the Adoption Service and outcomes for children in care with Lincolnshire County Council, from the period April 2020 – March 2021 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 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 will guide our 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:

Our vision

Is working for a better future by:

- Building on our strengths
- Protecting your lifestyle, and
- Being ambitious for the future

Our purpose

- Investing in infrastructure and the provision of services
- Commissioning for outcomes based on our communities' needs
- Promoting community wellbeing and resilience
- Influencing, coordinating and supporting other organisations that contribute to the life of Lincolnshire, and
- Making the best use of all of our resources.

Our purpose within Regulated Services is to ensure that every child in every part of the county achieves their potential, responding appropriately to the assessed needs of all looked after children and young people, to ensure that their life chances are maximised by their experience of the service. The vision is 'Putting Children First'.

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 offered 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. To access the fund, adoptive families 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."

The government invited local authorities and voluntary organisations to combine their resources and submit an expression of interest to become early adopters of regionalisation.

In response to the proposal, The East Midlands Adoption Consortium submitted, and was successful, in its bid for government granted development funding to progress plans for an adoption agency, which would bring together five local authorities, three unitary authorities, and three voluntary agencies into a new regional adoption agency (RAA) across the East Midlands area. Lincolnshire was a member of the consortium supporting the development of the project. Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Leicester City and Rutland launched as Regional Adoption Agency in October 2020 under the name Family Adoption Links. They continue to work co-operatively together to develop the RAA partnership, with an RAA management team, established regional family finding group, and plans in place to co-ordinate the work processes across 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 short and long term needs was seen as a priority, and in Lincolnshire the adoption staff have all been involved in the Signs of Safety framework in order to support their work. In addition all of the supervising social workers have completed their 'adult attachment interview' training in order to improve the quality of the adopter assessments, and to assist in the process of matching children to adopters.

In April 2019 Lincolnshire was commissioned by Rutland to deliver adoption services on their behalf, so a contract was developed with them, and over the course of the year Lincolnshire conducted a marketing campaign in Rutland and the first adoption information evening in Oakham, where several couples expressed an interest in becoming adopters. 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.

At the end of March 2019 the statutory adoption register run by Coram BAAF ceased to operate, so Lincolnshire joined the Linkmaker system, which enabled social work staff and adopters to access information on children nationally and to have Lincolnshire children on the national system. This has been effective as the regional colleagues also use this system so there is a regional area where the family finding for the region is held, but also the option to have children on the system nationally so that approved adopters seeking a child can do so through this system.

In April 2019 Lincolnshire was inspected under the new ILACS system by OFSTED and was rated 'Outstanding'. This was the third consecutive 'Outstanding' for Lincolnshire Adoption Service.

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. Unfortunately due to Coronavirus it was not possible to develop the work on this as was planned. The project has been extended and will be modified to a 'virtual' model of delivery. The pilot has now been completed and the new Together or Apart assessment model is available and in use.

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 Intervention and prevention
- Safeguarding
- Aspiration and well-being
- Learning and achievement
- Best use of resources.

In addition to the above principles, four strategic outcomes for children have been agreed by Children's Services.

- Children and young people are healthy and safe
- Develop to their full potential in their early years and are ready for school
- Learn and Achieve
- Children and young people are ready for adult life.

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

Progress on Development Goals identified in 2019/2020 Annual Report

Early Intervention and Prevention

The use of the Signs of Safety model has continued to be embedded into practice, with all of 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 and 'group's supervision' and 'problem solving circles' have become part of the day to day work.

There was continued high performance on the adoption scorecard performance against key threshold measures. We continue to perform well in this area, which means that wherever possible Lincolnshire children are placed with their adoptive family as quickly as possible, many within the government timescales.

There has been a consistent increase in the number of families who we have been able to help through the Adoption Support Fund, and there has been a notable increase in demand for support throughout the period of Covid. The government provided additional funds through the Adoption Support Fund, which we have accessed to provide an on-line therapeutic parenting service for adopters and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) carers, and an advice line for SGO carers. Both of these services have been well used by adopters and SGO carers.

Adoption Scorecard

The most relevant indicators refer to the years ending 31st March 2017, 31st March 2018 and 31st March 2019.

There are 3 main indicators pertinent to adoption performance:

- (A1) Average time between entering care and being placed for adoption is 421 days. The all England average and statistical neighbour average remain higher. Lower is better.
- (A2) Average time between gaining authority to place and achieving a match is 131 days, significantly lower than the all England average of 201 and the statistical neighbour average of 203. Lower is better.
- (A3) The percentage of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family is 75% in Lincolnshire, slightly down on last year but still well above the all England average.
- Adoptions as a percentage of children leaving care remain strong at 12%.

These remain to be strong figures compared to both statistical neighbours and the national average, and the challenge going forward will be to remain 'on target'. The increase in the A1 is indicative of the length of care proceedings becoming longer, due to court delays during 'lockdown', but the A2 remains the same, and indicates that Lincolnshire children are being placed in a timely way wherever possible. There continues to be a small cohort of

children 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 has been a cause for delay. This year has seen an increased number of children with a plan of adoption, from 43 to 49. The trend for high numbers of children placed on Special Guardianship Orders has reduced. The number of children coming into care following a marked increase last year, has levelled. The number of adoption orders granted this year has gone down significantly from 53 for 2019, to 29 for 2020. This reduction reflects an average over the 2 year period of approximately 40 a year which is on target.

Regionalisation Agenda

Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Leicester City and Rutland have formed an RAA, continuing to work as a partnership, planning and work on the various different 'work streams' continue, as we develop the work of the region as a whole.

A governance structure has been established with representatives from across the region forming the Project Governance Board.

Safeguarding

Over the course of the year 'Signs of Safety' has continued to be incorporated into the adoption process wherever possible as a model for assessing matches, adoptive placements and for risk assessments, and in direct work with children whilst preparing them for placement. Staff members in the team have been actively involved in developing 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 now completed their adult attachment style training and are using this alongside 'mapping' as a way of analysing their initial assessments of adopters, in order to ensure that we are assessing and approving adopters who will be able to manage the needs of the children who require adoptive placements .

Aspiration and Well-being

Maximise the benefits to adoptive families in Lincolnshire arising from the Adoption Support Fund. There has been an increase in the number of families who have been provided with therapeutic support via the Adoption Support Fund to assist families in utilising therapeutic parenting techniques in their family life.

Over the course of 2020/21 there have been 262 applications to the Adoption Support Fund in order to provide therapeutic input for adopted children and families. The amount of funding granted from the fund to cover these was £620,023. The number of referrals and the amount of money granted this year was almost double that of the previous year so this has placed significant pressure on the team with most of their focus being on adoption

support assessments and arranging the therapeutic packages. This total also included the on line support packages provided through the ASF Covid fund.

There were cases where individual therapy was delivered by therapeutically trained staff who are external providers. In many of the cases there were individual sessions delivered remotely due to Covid, using Theraplay, therapeutic life story work, Dyadic Developmental PsychoTherapy (DDP) or Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT). There was also a number of cases where there was a detailed assessment of therapeutic needs, followed by an intensive period of therapeutic input and attachment focussed therapy, again delivered remotely by external providers. All of the families in receipt of these services have reported them to be positive in helping them to meet the challenge of parenting their adopted children.

Learning and achievement

Maintain strong links with the virtual school and ensure adopted children in schools receive the full benefit from initiatives including the Pupil Premium. Through the period of the Covid pandemic there has continued to be liaison with the virtual school, and we have been able to make sure that where it was important there have been school places provided for children in order to reduce the stress in the adoptive or foster home.

During 2020/21 the majority of adoption staff have continued to use Theraplay theory and methods, albeit 'on line', so that they can support adoptive families with children newly in placement to use therapeutic parenting models in order to enhance the building of positive attachments in the early stages of placement. Unfortunately it has not been possible to deliver this face to face through Covid owing to the constraints relating to close contact. There are three clinicians within the Adoption Support Team who are trained in DDP Therapy, Filial Therapy and Family Therapy; thus creating a flexible and sustainable adoption service.

Staff have learned new skills and have been extremely creative in planning and managing introductions using virtual contact as much as possible, particularly where there were foster carers who were 'shielding'. They have also developed the use of comprehensive 'Covid risk assessments' to ensure that transitions have been well and safely managed in all cases; to enable children to move to their adoptive families in a timely manner.

The Team was able to continue to provide some post-adoption activities for children during school holidays, but these had to be for a reduced number of children and be risk assessed in accordance with social distancing and Covid rules. There were forest schools for the younger children to promote awareness of nature and give them new skills and two photography workshops which provided new skills and creativity. All of these activities enabled adopted children to meet one another and provided an environment in which the children could talk about being adopted as well as increasing self-esteem.

Best use of Resources

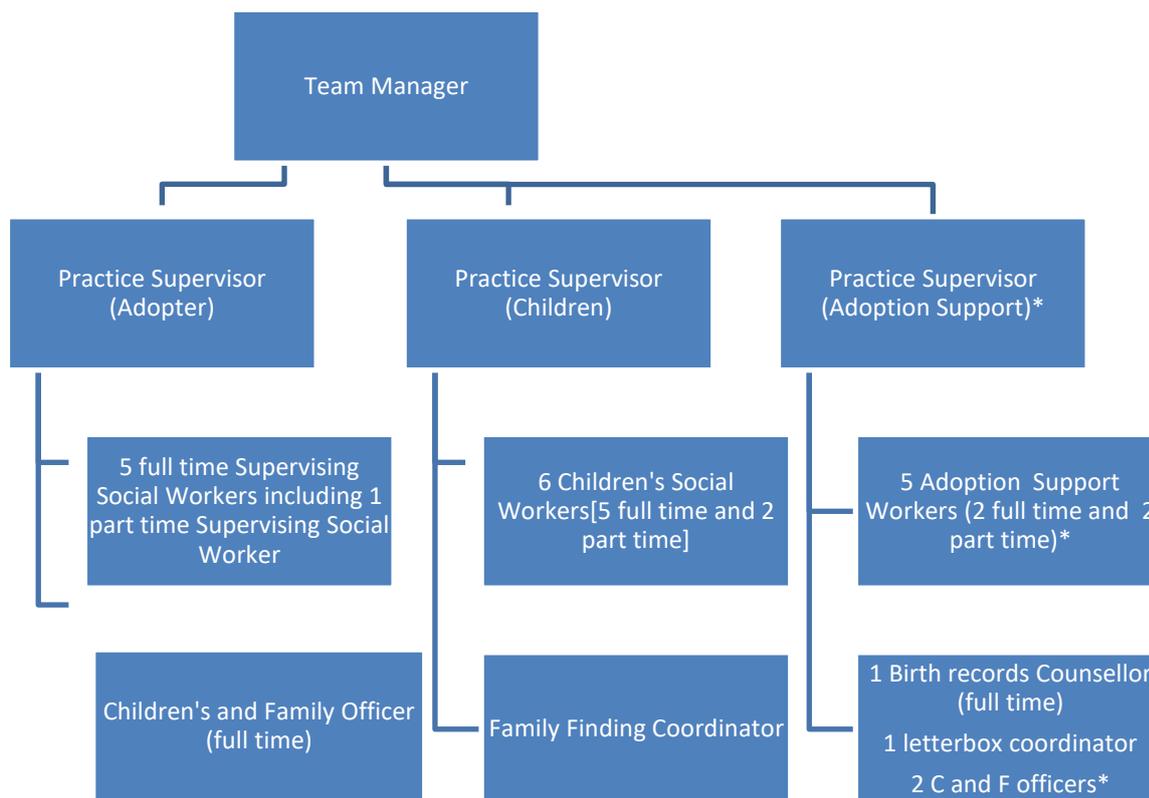
Staff in the post adoption team have been involved in rebuilding the Mosaic system so that it is now a useful and effective recording system which is being used by all team members. The final part of the build was to ensure that the adoption support workflows are correct and effective. This has now been completed so that the system can be used effectively throughout the service.

The post adoption team have begun to develop a range of services for SGO support, to enable them to have access to training, support groups, and advice and guidance. Support proposed will be two-tiered, with the FAST Teams completing the formal reassessment of SGO support plans. The Adoption Support Team has developed an information leaflet and helpline for Special Guardians. Guardians will be granted access to the e-Learning currently available for foster carers and a quarterly newsletter is being developed. Applications to the ASF will be managed through the adoption service.

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 from home, with access to the office when this is necessary. All staff continue to be employed by Lincolnshire, but the adopter's team and the adoption support teams are now part of the Regional Adoption Agency.



The Adoption Service is staffed by a Team Manager, three Practice Supervisors, six Children's Adoption Social Workers and six Supervising Social Workers. The Adoption Support Team has one Birth Records Social Worker, two full-time and two-part-time Adoption Support Social Workers, a Children and Families Officer who manages the 'letterbox' and an adoption support worker who supports adoptive families in the community. At the end of the year a new Early Help Worker was appointed to focus on the needs of SGO carers and provide them with support and assessments.

The Children's Adoption Social Workers progress children's plans for adoption. The Supervising Social Workers recruit and assess prospective adopters, as well as completing step-parent adoption assessments. Supervising Social Workers also deliver preparation training courses for adopters. A qualified Social Worker in the Adoption Support Team carries out the agency's statutory duties of birth record counselling for adopted adults.

Lincolnshire does not provide intermediary services but does provide limited assistance in tracing where it is able. 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. In addition they organise groups and activities to support adopters and adopted children. The Children and Family Officer co-ordinates the indirect contact arrangements for adopted children and birth relatives together with the completion of life story work for the preparation of children placed for adoption.

Adoption Performance

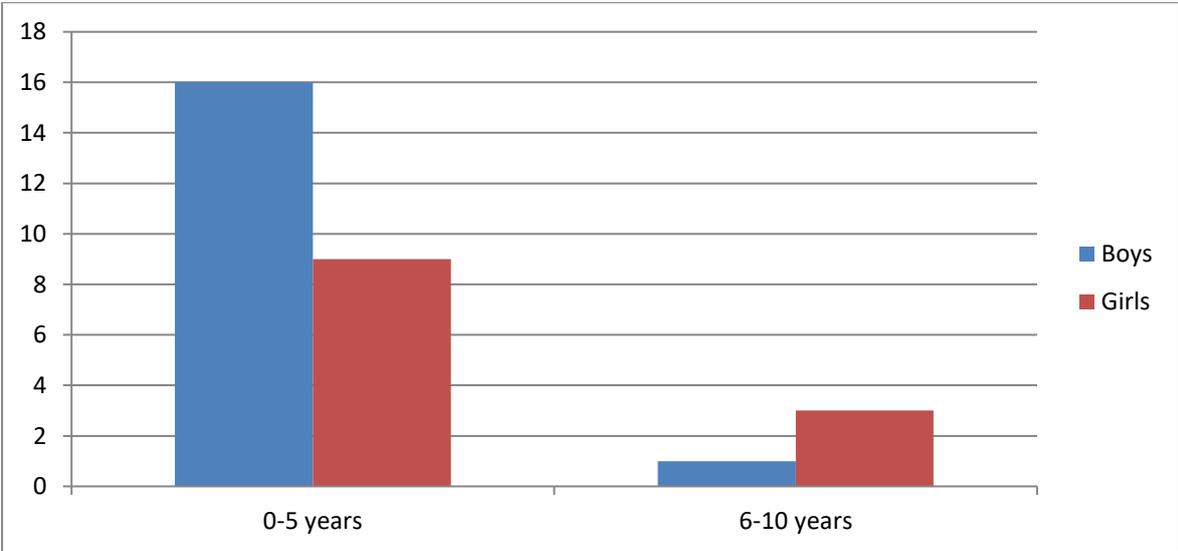
Adoption Orders granted April 2020– March 2021

- In the year to March 2021, 29 adoption orders were granted
- In addition 41 Special Guardianship Orders were granted.

This year has seen a decrease in the number of adoptions in Lincolnshire with 29 adoptions this year. This balances with the increased numbers [53] in the preceding year. Through the Covid period there have been delays in the court process, particularly for 'contested' adoption cases as these have had to be hybrid hearings to allow for birth parents to attend court in person. The number of children being placed on SGOs has increased again to 41 as compared to only 33 in 2019/20. Performance against the Adoption Scorecard has already been discussed in detail above with performance against all three threshold measure continuing to show good performance which is consistently better than the statistical neighbours, and the England average.

Adoption Activity for 2020/2021

Profile of children adopted 2020/2021:



Lincolnshire County Council achieved twenty nine adoption orders during 2020/2021, a decrease of 24 from the previous year and taking the figure well below the average number for Lincolnshire. The demographics were proportionally similar with more boys [17] than girls [12]. The previous year had seen a number of cases, which had been delayed in the courts for many months due to contested hearings, being granted. Contested adoption cases have become a common theme, as more adoptions are being contested by birth parents, and the court is giving birth families every opportunity before making the final decision .

This year there has been delay in the courts owing to the Covid situation. This has been due in part to the need to have 'hybrid' hearings for contested adoptions, so that the birth parents were able to attend court and be heard, and also due to the increased pressure on the courts owing to an unprecedented increase in care proceedings during this time.

Despite all of this Lincolnshire has continued to achieve high performance levels for the timely placement of children. There are fewer children waiting and many of the children are pre-matched prior to the court granting the Placement Order. In addition to this, 41 Special Guardianship Orders were granted and these are counted by the DFE as part of the adoption performance measure.

In addition to the 20 singleton placements there were only 4 sibling groups this year. There were three sibling groups of two and one sibling group of three. In terms of a profile of ethnicity, there were five children of Eastern European heritage. All other children were recorded as White British.

Profile of children with a best interest plan of adoption 2020/21

During April 2020 to March 2021 49 children had an agency decision of adoption, of which 38 went onto being subject to a Placement Order. This was slightly more than the previous year's figures.

Of the 49 children there were the following groups of siblings:

- 0 groups of 3 children
- 6 groups of 2 children
- 37 single children.

This is a decrease in the numbers of sibling groups as compared to last year, with no sibling groups of three. There continued to be use of kinship placements and Special Guardianship Orders throughout the 2020/21 performance year, and the numbers increased to 41.

Age ranges of children with a best interest plan of adoption 2020/21

- 0 - 5 years = 40 [38]
- 6 -10 years = 2 [5]
- 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 was one child of dual heritage.

Children under 5 years remain the largest age group placed for adoption. These children sometimes come as part of a sibling group with older children and 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 29 children were placed; the same number as the previous year. Of these, 22 were singleton placements, 4 children were placed in 2 sibling groups of 2, and one group of three was placed. Of these sibling groups, one of the groups had two children over five. All of the other children placed were under five with 22 of them being placed before they were 2 years. There were 19 boys placed and 10 girls, so a similar proportion to last year.

Overall, with some variation in the numbers of sibling groups, this is similar to the previous year as approximately 25 under 5s a year seems to be fairly constant. There has been a significant increase in the number of cases which are delayed in court awaiting placement orders and were not placed within NMS 17.7 as they waited several months to be made subject to a placement order.

Children Awaiting Placement at the close of 2020/21.

At the end of March 2021, there were 21 children whose plans were not agreed by the court and who did not yet have a Placement Order. This is twice as many cases as in the previous year, so indicative of court delays due to Covid, and the increasing number of contested cases. There were a further 4 children whose plans were changed by the courts and who either returned home or were placed with relatives on an SGO.

There were 3 young children who have special needs or complex health/development issues, and had therefore waited a long time to get a placement. There was one older child who will be difficult to place and whose legal position is complex. In addition, there were 6 children who were provisionally linked but not yet formally matched.

Adopters approved as suitable to adopt during 2020/21

A total of 25 adoptive parents were approved to adopt during 2020/2021, with no adopters approved for inter-country adoption. 8 of these were also approved for Foster to Adopt. This is a decrease with 3 less adopters than last year's figures and this was mainly down to the impact of Covid 19 upon the assessment and training of prospective adoptive parents.

We ended the year with adopters awaiting placements so were able to meet the needs of children with adoption plans coming through the system. The focus of the work during this year was to match the children waiting and place them into adoptive families at the earliest opportunity whilst ensuring that we remained Covid secure.

The trend continues to be that there are more adoptive parents than children waiting for a placement within the county. As there have been significant delays in children's court proceedings, we have always had approved adopters waiting to ensure choice when making matches. At 31/03/2020 there were 14 [10] adopters approved and waiting; two of which

were being considered for possible links. In addition there were three adopters fostering children with a view to adoption.

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

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

	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16
White British	22	25	40	21	29
Asian/Asian British – Indian	1	0	1	1	2
Other white background	2	1	1	0	1
Mixed White/Black Caribbean	0	0	1		

In order to reflect the government's aspiration to encourage foster carers who then go on to adopt we supported four foster families with children in placement to apply directly to the courts for an Adoption Order. There have been a much higher number of these applications than last year reflecting the amount of time that children are remaining in a task centred foster placement.

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 which are Covid related. We 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.

Recruitment

During this period, the recruitment of adopters was assisted by the recruitment staff.

Their role was to take calls from prospective adopters and make the initial response to enquiries via the website, giving information about adopting, coordinating the provision of further information, completing initial enquiries, and passing the information onto the adoption team.

The Adoption Service continued to undertake its own initial visits to determine the suitability of prospective adopters up to the approval stage.

Recruitment Statistics

From 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021:

- 208 Initial Expression of Interest forms (IEIs) were received
- 23 households were newly approved (17 for Adoption and 6 for Foster to Adopt).

Despite the unprecedented Covid-19 epidemic changing the way people across the UK live and work throughout 2020-21, enquiries were higher than they had been in previous years as demonstrated below:

Financial Year	Number of IEIs received
2020 / 2021	208
2019 / 2020	186
2018 / 2019	198

There is evidence that with so many people living in lockdown during this period and being unable to physically go to work, that more people considered if they can adopt, which could be a contributing factor to the increased number of enquiries received this year.

Advertising

There was not a great need to spend money on advertising during this financial year due to the high number of enquiries already coming through and the number of approved adopters already waiting for a match in Lincolnshire.

Therefore the only advertising campaign for Lincolnshire during 2020/2021 was during National Adoption Week in October as follows:

- Advert and editorial in Lincs and Wolds Scene magazines

- Paid-for targeted Facebook campaign
- Adverts running on Lincs FM
- Advert and editorial in Lincolnshire Today
- Advert and editorial in Lincolnshire Life
- Advert & editorial in Primary Times
- Event advertised in the prospective adopter newsletter
- Press release to local media
- Virtual information evening on Tuesday 13th October, 6:30pm – 8:00pm.

One of the drawbacks to the virtual event is that it is not possible to engage with attendees as much as it is at face-to-face events to ensure those who are suitable and keen to progress are actually filling out an IEI (at face-to-face events you can have one-to-one conversations with applicants and physically fill out the IEI with them there and then). This is not possible virtually and so is arguably not as effective.

YouCanAdopt Campaign

The national YouCanAdopt campaign ran from 16th September – 8th December 2020 and Lincolnshire Adoption Service took part in this digital campaign the week prior to and during National Adoption Week through engaging posts supplied by the national project via Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Adoption Panel Activity for 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021

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

“Adoption Panels to provide a 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.”

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 available 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. This process allows for a rigorous cross-agency check to ensure that 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 (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 will collectively scrutinise each report to ensure that in their opinion the Welfare Check list has been addressed and that, if any expert reports have been requested in Care Proceedings, these are available. This is particularly important in order to ensure there is a balanced approach and that key points raised have been considered fully within the Childs 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 Welfare Check List in particular

“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 (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. They are written in a style which is easy to read and consideration is made to how the views of children who are nonverbal can still be included 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. It would be beneficial to see further evidence of how workers have utilised restorative/relationship based practice tools to engage with the birth family and how this can be evidenced more fully at the point of a link panel. This may have a bearing on a number of outcomes for both the parents and how many contested cases are addressed.

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 consider fully the lifelong impact of adoption and are mindful in addressing matters around contact 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.

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 2020 and March 2021, the following children have had a decision to support a plan for Adoption made by the Agency Decision Maker compared to the previous year.

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

Between April 2020 and March 2021, 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 particular adopters within 6 months of the Adoption Agency Decision Maker deciding the child be placed for adoption.

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

Suitability of Prospective Adopters

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

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

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

	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2016/17	2015/16
White British	22	25	40	21	29
Asian/Asian British – Indian	1	0	1	1	2
Other white background	2	1	1	0	1
Mixed White/Black Caribbean	0	0	1		

% reports meeting the National Minimum Standard 10.6 timescale 88%

Again 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 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 adequately 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 child care 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 quality of Prospective Adopters Reports 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 Advisor and Chair have required additional work to be completed prior to formal consideration by Panel however this is rare.

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 PS 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 us with panel members who have the experience and understanding of the adoption process in order 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 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 contact 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

The Advisor quality assures all the reports to ensure that a full assessment is provided with a clear analysis as to why this particular 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 also 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.

Adoption Support

The period covered by this report has seen further improvements to the range of adoption support services which are provided within the framework set out within the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005. The majority of the support is now provided through the Adoption Support Fund, but the therapists within the team still provide packages and there is a limited commissioned service through independent providers. The service is provided on a tiered basis dependent on assessed need.

Tier 1	Wide universal support to adopters includes: 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 and some general training for adopters and SGO carers.
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. This tier also includes additional training for adopters/SGO carers.
Tier 3	Previous tier support plus specific adoption support include assessment of need, individual adoption support packages, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Theraplay, Eye Movement Desensitization Reprogramming , Non Violent Resistance, and Extended Life Story Work. This tier also includes access to primary mental health services and CAMHS. Since the spring of 2015 with the introduction of the Adoption Support Fund, government funding has been made available to provide for therapeutic input to adoptive children and their families in recognition of their lifelong needs.

Tier 1

The Lincolnshire Adoption website remains the first point of support for adopters and adopted children and during the period covered by the report all written and web materials are in the process of being revised in line with the Family Adoption Links RAA. The site advertises adoption activities and groups and enables the Adoption Service to consult users about planned future services. Links to services from Children's Centres and a range of education services are also available from this site. In addition to the website service users can contact the Adoption Helpline for advice and guidance. Adopters and SGO carers can also access a range of e-learning modules.

Adopters/SGO carers can sign up to receiving a regular electronic newsletter which provides information on forth-coming activities, useful short articles offering advice, and encourages contributions from both adoptive parents and children.

In 2020/21 the service received 46 referrals for birth records counselling, which is slightly less than last year. Callers enquiring about tracing relatives were signposted to other agencies as Lincolnshire does not provide intermediary services. Twenty five people were provided with counselling services and regular sessions and there were 21 requests from out of county where the file information was summarised and provided to the other authority.

The birth families service is still provided by PAC UK who took the contract from After Adoption and provides counselling to birth relatives who have lost their children to adoption. The contract is at capacity and provided counselling to 40 birth parents /relatives during this year, although with the reduction in numbers of birth parents in care proceedings the nature of the referrals has changed with more of the work now being focussed on birth relatives at a later stage in the process who may have been self-referrals or referrals through the 'letterbox'.

Contact

Indirect Letterbox contact activity

April 2020 – March 2021

As of 31st March 2021 there were 660 children on the letterbox.

For the twelve month period there were 31 new children added and 35 children removed as they turned 18.

Access to birth records counselling – 25 referrals for counselling.

Plus 21 requests from other agencies for summaries and documents from files we hold.

Birth relative enquiries – not recorded as we only signpost people to intermediary agencies.

There are 13 letterbox arrangements for families who hold Special Guardianship Orders and 2 where children are not adopted but letterbox was felt appropriate.

Direct Contact

- 15 children have direct contact with one or both birth parents
- 12 have direct contact with siblings in foster care or not adopted
- 5 have direct contact with grandparents.

Tier 2

At the core of provision in this Tier is the offer of adoption support groups across the county co-ordinated by adopters supported by the service. Attendance by adopters at these groups continues to vary but those who attend report they are appreciated. In addition there have been courses delivered on line this year through a membership to a therapeutic parenting organisation using ASF monies, as it was not possible to provide therapeutic training remotely, due to increased pressures on the service this year. Adopters and children have continued to meet and network, when it has been possible to do so, within the government guidance, and have also made use of remote contact using Zoom. We have provided funding to these Localised Adoption Support Groups.

Again, due to Covid, and the need for social distancing and risk assessments, the number of children's activities were reduced this year but we were able to offer the following;-

Woodland Adventure Days for primary age children – 3 days in July 2020 – 9 children attended (4 groups of siblings so they could be socially distanced)

Woodland Adventure Day for primary age children – 1 day event in October 2020 – 9 children attended

Music Tech Workshops for secondary age children – series of one-day events with the same group of children – only two events were able to go ahead in August 2020 and October 2020 with 5 children

Photography workshop – also run by Soundlinks for secondary age children – 4 children attended this one day event in August 2020.

Tier 3

This Tier provides specialised therapeutic support to those families who require direct adoption support with tailored plans of support intervention. All adoption support referrals are now completed by the Adoption Support Team. Safeguarding Referrals continue to be assessed by the Family Support and Assessment Teams. Over a hundred adoption/SGO support assessments have been completed and the majority indicated some form of therapeutic intervention was required. Cases can be allocated to Post Adoption Support workers who are trained to provide specialist therapeutic input across a range of therapeutic models including Dyadic Therapy, Theraplay, Psychotherapy, Eye movement desensitization

reprogramming and Non Violent Resistance, but the vast majority are commissioned using the adoption support fund grants .

In addition to the above services, we provided direct financial support through allowances for over 100 adoptive families through the period 2019-2020. This totals £750,000 over the year, and the demand for adoption/SGO support has increased significantly throughout the pandemic.

During 2020/21 the support service received 262 new referrals that became support cases under Tier 3. This was an increase in referrals of almost 100% as compared with the previous year. The requests for support covered the following areas, but there was a general increase in requests for adoption/SGO support in relation to the Covid situation with carers struggling to manage children, particularly those who were unable to attend school:

- Attachment difficulties
- Behaviour management /special needs
- Life Story work
- Contact issues
- Requests for funding for support
- Requests for respite care.
- Request for therapeutic or Theraplay input
- Mediation for adoptive families to maintain the adoptive placement.
- Child on parent violence.

It is clear that the service is trying to manage some extremely complex cases with children who have significant difficulties. There has been delay in the system during Covid, with many of the therapeutic providers being at capacity, and having waiting lists for intervention. The significant support from the Adoption Support Fund has made a positive difference to the range of services which can be offered to adopters/SGO carers, but has not always been able to provide this in a timely way owing to the high demand. 262 applications were made to the fund and all were successful. A total of £620,023 was claimed from the fund in 2020/21.

The Local Authority continues to invest in the on-going training of Adoption Support staff ensuring that Clinical supervision is available to therapists within the Team and that staff participate in on-going therapeutic training to ensure that the needs of families can be met.

National Changes for 2021/22

Family Adoption Links launched in October 2020. This is a 'partnership' with Leicester, Leicestershire, Rutland and North Lincolnshire who joined us in January 2020.

It is essential that going forward the agency has a clear focus on how best to deliver services in a way that maximises the impact of limited resources and that will include looking at efficiencies which can be delivered through the regionalisation agenda.

Service planning

Our 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.

We will aim to learn from changes in practice and plan to move forward using more virtual meetings, and continuing to be creative in developing new ways of working where appropriate.

Children and young people are healthy and safe.

To continue to develop the 'Signs of Safety' model, and restorative practice in the adoption process, and as the framework for preparing children for placement. Plans are in place for the children's social worker to undertake 'restorative' work wherever possible in their work with birth parents.

Maintain and consolidate progress on improving adoption scorecard performance against key threshold measures to minimise delay for children requiring adoption placements.

Ensure that placements are timely either through placing children as soon as they are subject to a Placement Order or through an early placement scheme, in order to promote positive attachment and making best use of in-house, regional and national family finding.

To maintain focus on children's health checks.

To extend the range of training available to adopters; to provide them with therapeutic parenting skills.

To plan and implement training for 'family and friends' of adopters, and enable them to support families in their role as adopters.

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

- Extending the Adoption Support Service to include intensive support at the early stage in placements for sibling groups, in order to promote therapeutic parenting, and attachment work early in the placement, so that children are 'ready for school'.
- Making use of the Caring 2 Learn approach with adopters.
- Support and develop 'play and stay' adoptive family groups to promote social learning
- Making good use of nursery provision for adopted children.

Learn and achieve.

- Maximise the benefits to adoptive and SGO families in Lincolnshire arising from the Adoption Support Fund
- Continue to make best use of the pupil premium to support adopted children in school
- To be creative and innovative in terms of developing children's activities to include a 'Talk about Adoption' workshop.
- Continue the 'Transitions' training course for adopters and foster carers together.

Children and young people are ready for adult life.

- Increase the link with the 'leaving care service' to ensure smooth transitions for adopted/SGO young people into independent living
- To continue to provide activities for adopted children which build their skills, recognise their achievements, and build their confidence.
- Support adopted young people who are in full time further education.

Best use of Resources

- Explore options to broaden Adoption Support Model to other permanence options starting with Special Guardianship Orders.
- Through the regional lead, to continue to participate and support the emerging regionalisation agenda, positioning Lincolnshire at the forefront of any development.
- To work towards further development of adoption support/SGO support services

Summary

The challenge for 2020/21 was to adjust services in line with the Covid epidemic in order 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 court process, again due to Covid, which has created delay for some children, and made the government timescales more challenging to achieve. Also, as more birth parents are contesting adoption orders, this increases the period of time that the cases remain open. In general the service has been very successful in attaining these goals and continues to show good levels of performance and excellent outcomes for children.

The caseloads for the adoption social workers have increased, as there have been unprecedented numbers of prospective adopters coming forward alongside high numbers of foster carers who wish to adopt children in their care, so all have worked hard to manage this. Throughout the year there have been approved adopters waiting for placement, so there has been placement choice for many children, although there has also been a residual group of children who are 'difficult to place' due to their age, special needs, or the fact that they are part of a sibling group.

There has been significant increased demand and activity in post adoption/SGO services, and it has been difficult for the team to manage the increased workload. The team 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 ASF has had an impact on the ability to deliver some of the other services which are needed.

Performance in 2019/20 against the key threshold measures in the adoption scorecard has remained high both for the single year and for the three year rolling average. The number of adoptions completed this year was less than the average but the timescales have consistently improved. The number of children waiting at the year-end has decreased due to the team continuing to be proactive in family finding.

The Adoption Service was subject to scrutiny by Ofsted along with the rest of Children's Services in April 2019. The inspection was undertaken using the new ILACS Framework with a clear focus on outcomes for children. To again achieve a judgement of 'Outstanding' was a strong endorsement of the professionalism and expertise within the team and the confidence shown to it by senior managers and the council as a whole.

Going forward the Service will look to respond positively to the challenges presented through austerity and the regionalisation agenda and, in so doing, maintain its strong focus on delivering excellent outcomes for the children of Lincolnshire who have a plan for adoption.



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