

<b>Item No.</b> 11.	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 7 December 2023	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Corporate Parenting Committee
<b>Report title:</b>		Southwark Adoption Performance in 2022-2023	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>From:</b>		Alasdair Smith, Director of Children and Families	

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The committee note the progress of children with a care plan of adoption during 2022-23.
2. The committee note the activity of the local authority working in partnership with Adopt London South (ALS) during 2022-23.
3. The committee note the Adopt London South Annual Report for 2022 – 2023.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

4. This report sets out how children in care of the council, with a permanence plan<sup>1</sup> for adoption have progressed during 2022-23. It gives an overview of all the key performance measures to achieve permanence for every child in the timescale that is right for them.
5. The council is host to Adopt London South (ALS) previously providing adoption services to nine south London boroughs. From the 1 April 2022 ALS has grown to ten boroughs with Greenwich joining.
6. ALS is one of the largest regional adoption agencies (RAA) in the country in terms of numbers of local authorities in a partnership. ALS is part of Adopt London, a group of 4 RAAs covering 24 London local authorities. Adopt London combines a wealth of expertise in the capital, bringing together children with safe, secure, loving and permanent adoptive families.

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<sup>1</sup>Permanence means making a long-term plan for how a child will be cared for which lasts throughout their childhood. There are a range of options for permanence, inside and outside of the care system. [Knowledge and Skills Statement: Achieving Permanence](#)

## KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

### Southwark Data – Children’s Activity

7. The chart below shows the key adoption activity for children in the council’s care in 2022-23, and the comparison data over the last four years.

Activity Overview - children	22-23	21-22	20-21	19-20
<b>Decision</b> a plan for adoption is in child’s best interests ( <i>Best Interests Decision or Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decision</i> )	7	15	11	9
Children with a <b>Placement Order</b> made ( <i>plan for adoption agreed by Court</i> )	8	13	8	9
<b>Children matched with adopters</b> at panel and agreed by Agency Decision Maker (ADM)	14	10	11	2
Children with an <b>Adoption Order</b> granted	9	9	4	5

8. Fourteen children were matched with adoptive families, an increase on the previous two year, sustaining higher activity from the low numbers in 2019-20. This high number of matches is reflective of the very proactive work by the ALS family finder with the Children’s Social Worker in Southwark including finding families for some children who had waited a long time for the right family for them.
9. There has been a decrease in the number Placement Orders granted in 2022-23 compared to the previous year and in part this has been due to delays in Court Hearing concluding so final orders have not been granted. The number of adoptions was the same as the previous year 2021-22, around double the number of the previous two years. The adoption performance in Southwark for 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 reflects 4% of children leaving care being adopted. This is low compared to statutory neighbours at 6% and the England average of 10% and we think this may be due to strong focus on supporting children to be cared for by their wider family networks in kinship care where possible.

### Early permanence planning

10. There continued to be a focus on achieving permanence for every child in the timescale that is right for them. At legal panels and the fortnightly pre-court proceedings meetings there is a continuous focus on planning for permanence as early as possible, including robustly considering all family options for children and consideration of whether an early permanence placement might be suitable.

11. Early permanence placements enable children to be placed with prospective adopters who are also approved as foster carers and who can, if the court agree an adoption plan, go on to adopt the children that they care for. Early permanence shifts the uncertainty away from children, to the adults that care for them, enabling children to achieve permanence more swiftly.
12. Excellent collaborative working together arrangements are in place with the Family Finding Team from ALS tracking children where adoption may be a possibility. There is good attendance at key permanence planning meetings. Permanence planning meetings ensure effective parallel planning, always considering if an early permanence placement may be appropriate, avoiding disruption and unnecessary moves for children.
13. In 2022-23 one child was placed in an early permanence placement and has since been adopted. Out of the nine children adopted in 2022-23, three had been placed in early permanence placements.

#### **Matches of children in care with adopters**

14. Fourteen children were matched with prospective adopters at Adoption Panels during 2022-23. The age range of children matched at panel in 2022-23 ranges from seven months to five years. Four of these children were part of sibling groups.
15. Of the fourteen children who were matched in 2022-23, five were recorded as being of White British heritage, two were recorded as being of Black Caribbean heritage, one child was recorded as being of Black African heritage, one child was recorded as being of an 'Other' Black heritage, one child was recorded as being from an 'Other' ethnic group heritage and four children were recorded as being of mixed heritage.
16. In 2021-22, 40% of matches were in respect of White British children and for 2022-23 this figure was 36% of children matched. 64% of matches in 2022-23 were for children who are from a Black background, which represents a continuous increase from 60% in 2021-22 and 36% in 2020-21.
17. For the 9 children adopted in 2022 – 2023 for White children the range of days from Placement Order to being placed for adoption was zero days (for a child placed via early permanence) to 570 days with an average of 239 days. For Black children the range was zero days (for a child placed via early permanence) to 755 days with an average of 357 days.
18. For the children matched and placed in 2022 - 2023 for White children matched and placed for adoption during 2022 -2023 the range was from zero days (for a child in an early permanence placement) to 298 days with an average of 204 days. For children from a Black children in the same period the range is 160 to 428 days with an average of 274 days.

19. The Black Adoption Project by Adoption London South showed that when other factors were held constant, Black children spent on average 6 ½ - 8 months longer in the adoption process before moving in with their adoptive family, and the most substantial delays occurred during the family finding process. The Black Adoption Project is actively seeking to address this disparity through a number of pilot projects.
20. The above data shows that in Southwark, Black children with a plan of adoption are still waiting longer than White children to be placed for adoption but early indications are there is some reduction in this disparity. Adopt London South set out in their Annual Report the work they are doing to address this disproportionality via their recruitment of London adopters to meet the needs of Black children. The other key factors that impact how long children wait is their age with older children waiting longer, whether the children are part of a sibling group and their needs including if they have a disability.

### **Adoption scorecard and timescales for children**

21. Adoption scorecards have been published by the Department for Education annually since 2012. They measure local authority performance against many adoption indicators but two are regarded as key indicators and these are set out in the table below

<b>Measure</b>	<b>2015-2018</b>	<b>2018-2021</b>	<b>2020-2021</b>	<b>2021-2022</b>	<b>2022-2023</b>
<b>A10:</b> Average time (days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, adjusted for foster carer adoptions	540	326	340	362	428
<b>A2:</b> Average time (days) between Placement Order and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family	231	162	111	206	223

22. The chart above shows a decline in timescale performance in 2022-23 compared to 2021-22 but still a better performance when compared to 2015 – 2018 (see paragraph 27 for further discussion of this point).
23. For children where adoption is the right care plan, ensuring children move without delay is absolutely essential. As had been predicted last year the A10 figure this year is impacted by an increase in the average duration of care proceedings significantly impacted by the pandemic in line with nationally identified concerns.
24. The A2 figures measures from when the Court grant a Placement Order to when a match is agreed. For 2022-23 the A2 figure is 223 days. The average for London is 233 days. The Southwark figure is quicker than similar local authorities and in fourth quickest of the ten ALS partners.

25. Although the performance in this area does not meet the Government threshold of 91 days, it is understood that this timescale reflects positively that for some children who had waited a long time families were found that are matched to their needs. For this measure excluding early permanence the quickest match was within 79 days from the Placement Order being granted. The longest match was for a child took 428 days but was an excellent outcome for this child who has thrived and has now been adopted.
26. For every child with a plan of adoption from the point of this plan being agreed by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) there is monthly scrutiny at the service Permanence Taskforce, chaired at Assistant Director level, on the family finding activity by ALS and progression to finding a match. The service has a culture of learning and for every child the reasons for any delay are well understood and there is challenge to consider what more can be done to overcome the barriers to every child achieving permanence in the timescale that is right for them.

### **Change of plan from adoption to reunification to the care of parent/s**

27. In 2022-2023 the council did not apply to the Court to seek to change the care plan from adoption to long term fostering for any children. The Court did however revoke a Placement Order for one child having received new information.
28. In 2022-23 nine children were adopted, the same as the previous year. The age ranged from under one year to five years old. One child adopted was of mixed heritage, three children were Black Caribbean and five children were White British.
29. As at October 2023 when writing this report there have been eight Adoption Orders granted since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023; there are four children placed for adoption. The current data is indicative that at least twelve to fourteen children will be adopted in 2023-24.

### **Reflections and Plans for 2023-24**

30. Timescales for achieving adoption have declined. This has been due primarily to the length of time that care proceedings have been taking to conclude. Senior managers have been involved in discussing this matter at the Inner London Family Justice Board and seeking constructive solutions through a dialogue with the Designated Central Family Court Judge for Southwark.
31. We have been informed that the cause of the increase in time that it is taking for many court cases to conclude relates to insufficient court and judicial availability. As a consequence the council has been advised to seek to use Magistrates Courts where appropriate. Recent use of this has been successful with concluded care proceedings this month in the Magistrates court for an infant in just four months.
32. We have been assured that the court will endeavour to prioritise care proceedings relating to babies so we should inform the court when a baby or

young child's case is 'Final Hearing ready' and the court will then aim to allocate an earlier date by utilising any vacant hearing dates due to cancellations.

33. Another urgent challenge in adoption remains the racial disparity in finding adoptive families. Addressing this is a key priority for the council and ALS. It remains very evident nationally and for children in the borough that Black children wait longer to find an adoptive family and they are statistically more likely for their plan to be reversed and adopters not found. The Adopt London communications team prioritise attracting more Black families and finding families for children with additional needs. Adopt London South have worked with We are Family, an adopter led support organisation, to produce a Podcast series entitled 'Adoption Shared' and the focus in 2022-2023 was the Black adoption from different perspectives.
34. The council offers packages of help and support to adopters to care for children who have additional needs and to ensure that for all children with a plan of adoption, finances for a potential family are not a barrier to being able to adopt. It is also recognised for some children being adopted by their current foster carer may be the best plan and in these circumstances bespoke packages of support are set out in the adoption support plan linked to children's needs.
35. In light of longer periods in Court proceedings, the service is exploring how more can be done to obtain permission for Court for sharing information so that greater proactive work can be done to identify a match prior to a Placement Order being granted.
36. The service and colleagues in the council's legal department have totally embraced early permanence for children and recognise that this offers the best experience of stability for children with a plan of adoption. In 2023-24 we will seek to challenge ourselves more to identify children who will benefit from early permanence and expand this option to sibling groups and consideration of this permanence option for older children.

### **Policy framework implication**

37. There are no policy implications

### **Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts**

#### **Community impact statement**

38. Southwark is committed to ensuring that children with an adoption plan, from all parts of the community, are enabled to live with families able to meet most of their needs as soon as possible. Although this is for a small number of children, good positive outcomes for them and their families has a positive impact on communities.

## **Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement**

39. Southwark are committed to working with ALS in addressing the inequality noted in this report in how long Black children wait for adoptive families. The Black Adoption project is seeking to address this inequality and this is set out in more detail in the ALS Annual report the key aims of the project are:

- To create a levelled playing field for Black families
- Reimagined system for Black children
- Black communities understand and care about adoption
- Black communities understand and care about adoption
- Black adopted children have the support they need.

## **Health impact statement**

40. Adopted children are more likely to have experienced abuse and neglect that can impact their health and well-being both physically and emotionally. Some children who are adopted are impacted pre-birth by drug and alcohol use. There is a dedicated Adoption Medical Advisor who writes a health report about all children before there is agreement for a plan of adoption. The Medical Advisor also meets all prospective adopters to share health information about children before they are placed with prospective adoptive families. Due to their past trauma, number of moves and some genetic risk factors adopted children can be of higher risk of developing mental health difficulties and adoptive families can access support via CAMHS and via the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) [ASFlink](#).

## **Climate change implications**

41. Adopt London South works across ten south London councils. As a service hosted by Southwark Council it maximises the use of technology to minimise travel so that there is maximum coverage across the region. This has a positive impact on efficient use of resources and reducing delay, but also importantly the climate as only necessary journeys are made by car or public transport.

## **Resource implications**

42. Adoption is a plan for a small number of children, yet they are perhaps the most vulnerable children who the council has responsibility for. Consequently the right level of resources are required to continue to give focus for these children so as many as possible can benefit from family life at the youngest possible age maximising the prospects for positive life outcomes. The resources in this area are sufficient to continue to give this focus.

## **Legal implications**

43. There are none.

## **Financial implications**

44. There are none.

**Consultation**

45. There are none.

**SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS**

**Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance**

46. There are none.

**Strategic Director of Finance**

47. There are none.

**Other officers**

48. There are none.

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
None		

**APPENDICES**

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Adopt London South Annual Report 2022-2023



## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Lead Officer</b>	David Quirke-Thornton, Strategic Director of Children's and Adults' Services	
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<b>Version</b>	Final	
<b>Dated</b>	29 November 2023	
<b>Key Decision?</b>	No	
<b>CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER</b>		
<b>Officer Title</b>	<b>Comments Sought</b>	<b>Comments Included</b>
Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance	No	No
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	No	No
<b>Date final report sent to Constitutional Team</b>		29 November 2023