

# **Adopt London North Annual Report**

## **April 2023 – March 2024**



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## **1. About Adopt London North**

### **Context and responsibilities**

Adopt London North (ALN) is a Regional Adoption Agency partnership formed in October 2019 between the six London boroughs of Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, and Islington. The boroughs previously worked together successfully for over a decade as the North London Adoption & Fostering Consortium.

The adoption functions of the six boroughs officially became part of Adopt London North on 1st October 2019, hosted by the London Borough of Islington. The ALN Partnership Agreement covers the legal and financial terms of the arrangement. There is shared oversight of the RAA through a Governance Board and Quality Assurance Board.

Adopt London North has responsibility for all adoption led services, delivering these on behalf of the local authorities. These include:

- Recruitment and assessment of adoptive parents
- Family finding for children in need of adoptive parents
- Adoption support to adoptive families, adopted adults, and others impacted by adoption

Responsibility for the child (including corporate parenting responsibilities) remain with the local authority. The borough is therefore responsible for the progress of the child's case through the court system and for decisions in respect of care and adoption planning.

### **Governance arrangements**

The ALN Governance Board meets every 2 – 3 months and has Director level representation from each of the six partner boroughs. This Board has responsibility for all partnership decisions that need to be made above Head of Service level, and for monitoring the performance and budget of ALN. Thanks to the commitment of partner boroughs, the Board has been effective in jointly making critical resourcing decisions and agreeing priorities.

The Quality Assurance Board (QA Board) has membership at Head of Service and / or Service Manager level from each partner borough. The QA Board has responsibility to monitor and improve partnership working across the boroughs and ALN, including making decisions and proposals about practice and procedures that relate to adoption work across the agencies. The QA Board also considers emerging information about differences in practice between the six boroughs, and where best practice can be implemented across all partners. During 2023/24 some of the areas of focus for the QA Board have been:

- Evaluation of ALN training programme for children's social workers.
- Effective information and records sharing processes.
- Development of early permanence processes in boroughs.
- Disruptions review processes and learning.
- Developing knowledge of adoption in MASH / front door services.
- Sharing best practice in permanency planning.

## **Staffing**

ALN employs 40 members of staff who work across specialist teams focused on the different practice areas within the service. The service is managed by a Head of Service, Service Manager, and Adoption Business Manager. We have a stable staff group, with the only leavers during 2023/24 being several retirements. We are usually able to fill roles quickly when these become available, although this year have found it more challenging to recruit to roles in adoption support services and have carried one permanent vacancy. We have just one agency staff member who is covering this adoption support social worker vacancy until recruitment is successful. In addition to our core staff, we manage a small pool of specialist sessional social workers who increase our casework capacity in a flexible way.

## **Inspections**

ALN support and participate in the adoption elements of any partner local authority inspection including ILACS and focused inspections looking at permanency or children in care. In 2023/24 no ILACS inspections took place in our partner authorities however ALN worked closely with Hackney, Enfield, Islington, and Barnet around preparations for their imminent inspections.

Adoption inspection regulations have not been updated to reflect the creation of RAAs and local authority inspections only look at some areas of adoption work, therefore in 2023 the Secretary of State for Education directed Ofsted to undertake a series of pilot inspections of Regional Adoption Agencies across England. In September 2023 a pilot inspection framework was published which identified these five inspection domains:

1. The effectiveness of the RAA's recruitment, assessment, family-finding and matching practice in providing safe, child-focused and timely adoptive placements for children.
2. The effectiveness of adoption support for adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults.

3. The extent to which the RAA leader understands the service’s strengths and areas for development and is able to take decisive and effective action for improvement.
4. The extent to which the views of those with a lived experience of adoption inform service delivery and improvement.
5. The extent to which the RAA’s governance arrangements enable the RAA to deliver effective services and provide the necessary assurance to member local authorities and other RAA partners.

Between October and December five unannounced inspections took place, including one with our partners Adopt London West. A themed report was published in March 2024, which can be found [here](#). The report notes key themes identified across the country and highlighted examples of good practice, with some general recommendations for future development. The Department for Education have said they plan to consider learning from the pilot and work with Ofsted to develop proposals for the future of RAA inspections.

## 2. Outcomes

Adopt London North aims to improve outcomes for children who have a plan for adoption and those living in adoptive families in the following specific ways. The linked sections in this report provide more information about the work that is happening in these areas.

Finding prospective adoptive parents
Increase the proportion of prospective adopters who are of Black and mixed Black ethnicity, in line with the needs of our Black and mixed Black ethnicity children in north London.
Preparing and approving adoptive parents
Improve timeliness and effectiveness in matching in-house approved adopters with children.
Assess, prepare, and support prospective adopters to a high standard so that they are fully equipped to successfully parent an adoptive child.

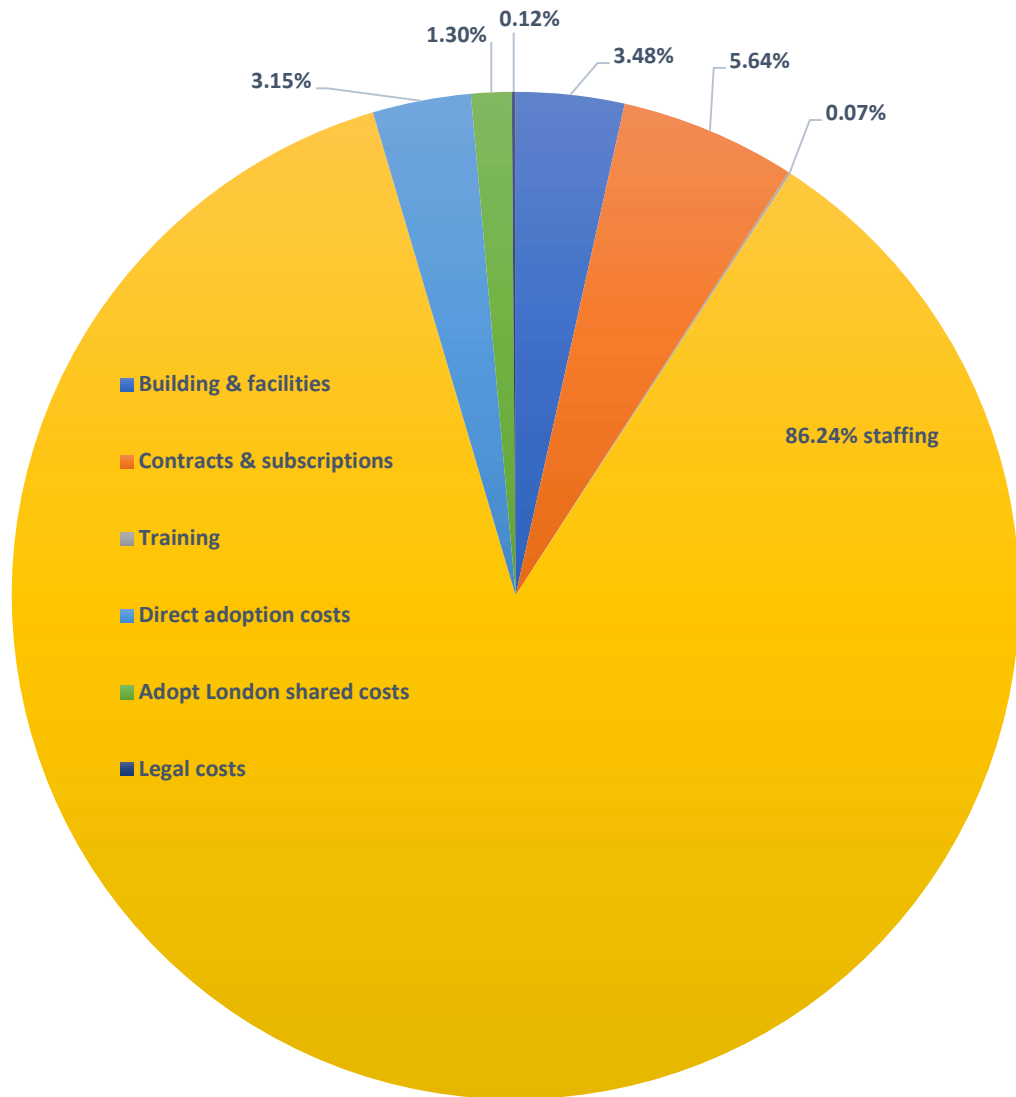
Planning for children
Ensure all children who would benefit from adoption are identified appropriately during permanency planning processes.
Ensure that children who would benefit from an early permanence placement are identified early and matched with adoptive parents who have been prepared for early permanence.
Placing children with adoptive parents
Ensure effective and time-sensitive family finding for children with a plan for adoption.
Increase the proportion of in-house and local adoptive placements.
Providing support to adoptive families and others
Improve consistency and timeliness in providing support for adoptive families.
Increase awareness and uptake of support services amongst adoptive families to build resilience and reduce the need for crisis support.
Provide specialist and targeted support to adoptive families with the most acute needs to reduce family breakdown.

### **3. Financial spend 2023/24**

The total core budget for ALN in 2023/24 was £2,856,848. Of this, 86.24% was spent on staffing costs – including permanent and agency staffing, sessional workers, Adoption Panel members, and maternity costs.

An equal split financial contribution model was implemented in 2023/24 for the ALN core budget.

## Areas of spend 2023/24



## **4. National adoption landscape**

### **National RAA Leaders Group**

There are 32 Regional Adoption Agencies in England working together to strengthen the sector under the umbrella of Adoption England. Through Adoption England, the Department for Education work with RAA leaders to implement the strategic priorities of the [Adoption England Adoption Strategy](#), launched in April 2024. These priorities build on the original strategic priorities in the earlier Department for Education strategy 'Achieving Excellence Everywhere' which had a focus on developing national standards across key adoption practice areas, exploring alternative models to service delivery, increasing the use of Early Permanence, developing multidisciplinary support and scoping models for national and pan-regional commissioning in adoption support.

The Department for Education has provided funding to Adoption England with a view to ensuring that focus is on progressing the five key priorities identified in the strategy which are as follows:

1. Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and supported to meet children's needs.
2. Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.
3. Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.
4. Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.
5. Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.

The priorities of Adopt London and Adopt London North are aligned to these key priorities and progress is being made in some of the areas through the delivery of short-term projects funded by Adoption England.

### **Public Law Working Group consultation on adoption**

In September 2023 the adoption subgroup of the Public Law Working Group published an interim report for consultation, 'Recommendations for Best Practice in Respect of Adoption', which can be found [here](#). The consultation period ran for two months to provide an opportunity for a sector-wide response. The report focused on key areas including:

- *Contact in adoption*
- *Access to records*
- *Practice and procedure*



- *Adoption with an international element*
- *Adoption by consent*

Recommendations ranged from detailed court procedural and administrative issues, to substantive practice change recommendations with significant implications for Regional Adoption Agencies and local authorities. Most significantly the report recommends that the court take a lead in driving forward moves towards the 'modernisation of adoption' by requiring agencies to consider, arrange, and support direct contact in far more adoption cases. Whilst the move towards direct contact for more adopted children is welcomed, safe implementation of all the recommendations in this report would require new contact services being resourced and developed in Regional Adoption Agencies across England. Responses to the consultation have been submitted and a final report is expected in 2024/25.

## **5. Adopt London**

### **Adopt London structure**

Four RAAs continue to work closely together under the Adopt London umbrella covering the different geographic regions in London, and providing services to 24 boroughs in total. Adopt London are unique nationally in working in such a close partnership across a large number of local authorities.

Through this partnership we aim to develop a London-wide profile for the recruitment of adoptive parents, improve services that benefit from economies of scale, and share and standardise best practice. The host boroughs for Adopt London are Islington, Southwark, Havering, and Ealing. Heads of Service, Service Managers, Team Managers, Panel Advisors, and Marketing & Communications leads all work closely with their peers across Adopt London to develop shared services and practice standards.

Heads of Service and the host borough Directors and Directors of Children's Services meet quarterly as the Adopt London Executive Advisory Board chaired by a non-host partner DCS. The Executive Advisory Board oversees the joint project work of Adopt London, supports with problem solving, and considers Adopt London issues that need the support of other senior leaders to resolve. The Adopt London Heads of Service work towards a strategic work plan that is supported by the Executive Advisory Board. The plan covers governance and commissioning arrangements; operational and practice development of priority areas including opportunities to access national funding; marketing and communications arrangements; and the voice of adopters, adopted children, adopted adults, and birth family members. A pooled budget is held to fund shared activity. These were some of our shared areas of work in 2023/24:

- Conversations for change
- Adopt London staff conference
- Adult adoptee support
- Matching project

- Early permanence project
- We Are Family peer support
- Adopt London choir
- Adoption support commissioning
- Black Adoption Project

### **Conversations for change**

Conversations for change is an initiative developed this year to capture and respond to the views of London adoptive parents. This work is led by Richard Orchard Rowe, an adoptive parent with experience in delivering 'adopter voice' work.

Since being launched in October 2023 there has been one parent survey completed, which sought the view of adopters on their key areas of concern. The top three areas shared by parents were:

- Managing challenging behaviour
- Education
- Accessing adoption support

The initial survey will be followed in 2024/25 by a more in-depth examination of these three key areas in order to identify how parents' experiences can help us improve services, and in the long-term we hope to deeply embed 'conversations for change' in our service delivery.

### **Adopt London staff conference**

Our annual Adopt London Staff Conference was held in February 2024, bringing together all staff across Adopt London in an event that provided an opportunity to share best practice and seek innovative ways of working together to improve our service delivery, taking account of the economies of scale the Adopt London partnership offers.

The conference provided an opportunity to consider the journey of Adopt London to date and to think about next steps and priorities, exploring how best to harness innovative ideas. Sarah Johal (National Strategic Lead for Adoption) spoke about key national priorities for Adoption England. Updates and progress from all the Adoption London projects were shared, and the day concluded with a workshop-style session encouraging innovation across Adopt London. The opportunity to work across teams and regions added a depth and richness to the experience enabling staff in all roles to contribute their input and creativity.

### **Adult adoptee support**

We have continued to develop our network of peer support groups for adult adoptees across London and have further embedded our group for transracial adoptees offered in partnership with the Transracial Adult Adoptee Network (TAAN).

### **Matching project**

The Matching project has been supported by funding from Adoption England and focuses on improving and strengthening the matching process for children within Adopt London so that they can move to live with their adoptive families as soon as possible. Funded until March 2025, the project has delivered training, reshaped profiles for adopters and children, and delivered successful 'stay and play' events held at London Zoo, which provide prospective adopters with an opportunity to meet children who have a plan for adoption and their foster carers.

### **Early permanence project**

The London Early Permanence project is delivered in conjunction with 'Coram Ambitious for Adoption RAA' as well as our Adopt London partners. With Adoption England funding awarded until March 2025, the project aims to strengthen early permanence practice across the RAAs, local authority partners, and partner agencies working within the courts. Specific goals are to:

- Increase the pool of approved early permanence carers.
- Increase the number of children who are appropriately referred for early permanence planning by local authority partners.
- Challenge misconceptions that create legal barriers to early permanence by increasing awareness with local authority legal teams, Cafcass, and the judiciary.

### **We Are Family peer support**

We Are Family is an independent peer-to-peer support charity that was founded and is run by adoptive parents for adoptive parents. Adopt London support We Are Family through an annual grant, to provide formal peer support to adopters along with access to a range of expert resources. All prospective adopters are encouraged to join We Are Family for free during stage 1 of their assessment, and the range of support available increases as they progress through to approval and have their adopted child/ren placed with them.

In addition to locality-based support groups and specialist groups for single adopters, early permanence carers, and parents of teens, We Are Family regularly support family meet ups, summer picnics, and access to cultural events.

In partnership with Adopt London, We Are Family provide a programme of around 20 expert webinars per year for adoptive parents to join live or watch back on demand, and 4 series of specialist podcasts, designed to everyone's understanding of the lived experience of adoption.

### **Adopt London choir**

Adopt London established a choir during the pandemic as a way of increasing well-being and connecting adoptive families together. The choir has continued to thrive since 2020, providing an accessible and fun way to build social connections with other adoptive parents.

This year the Adopt London choir featured on BBC Breakfast during National Adoption Week in October 2023, drawing important attention to the need for more adopters, and the necessity of adoption support. The full excerpt can be viewed [here](#).



Adoption London Choir on BBC Breakfast



### **Adoption support commissioning**

Adopt London have been awarded funds to explore opportunities around joint commissioning of services pan-regionally. This project has been funded through a grant from the Department for Education to explore the opportunity to make better use of access to services. This is a phased project and it is currently in phase one which is undertaking a needs assessment to get an understanding of the providers that are used across the region and the services that they offer so that scoping activities can begin in earnest to explore regional commissioning arrangements.

## The Black Adoption Project

Adopt London in partnership with Laurelle Brown Training and Consultancy are delivering the Black Adoption Project, aiming to reduce disparities for Black children in the adoption system.

The Black Adoption Project is a long-term project focused on creating change across all aspects of the adoption system, to create services that are designed to meet the needs of Black prospective adopters, families, and children.

The project has been awarded some short-term funding from April 2024 to help us mobilise a range of pilot projects that have been developed in response to our [phase 1 research](#), and in partnership with those with lived experience of Black adoption. Some of the pilots planned for 2024/25 include:

- Increasing the retention of Black prospective adopters in the assessment process through provision of confidential peer support and mentoring.
- Social and educational groups for Black adopted children and young people.
- Offering specific adoption information events to Black prospective adopters.
- Research into the family finding journeys of Black children and Black prospective adopters, and how these may differ from other groups.

A key project principle is to support wider change through dissemination of learning, and therefore regular webinars are being held and are available after the event online to [watch on demand](#).

Alongside the delivery of pilots to children and families, support and development of the workforce is acknowledged as a critical element to the success of the projects. Over the lifetime of the Black Adoption Project to date, whole staff learning and development opportunities have led to more open conversations about the impact of race in all aspects of our service delivery, and 'Safer Space' sessions have been provided for Black staff to have an opportunity to reflect on the impact of the work.

To find out more about the Black Adoption Project, please [follow this link](#).

### Black Adoption Project goals

- Levelled playing field for Black **families**.
- Reimagined **system** for Black children.
- Black **communities** understand and care about adoption.
- Black adopted **children** have the support they need.
- Confident, anti-racist and culturally-competent **workforce**.

## **6. The Adoption Panel**

### **Structure of the Adoption Panel**

Adopt London North run one central Adoption Panel which oversees all:

- Matching decisions relating to the choice of adoptive family for a child
- Best Interests Decisions for voluntary adoption (relinquished babies)
- Approval of prospective adoptive parents
- Review or rescindment of approval of prospective adoptive parents

Panel recommendations relating to individual children are presented to the Agency Decision Maker in the child's borough for a decision. Prospective adopter approval and review of approval decisions are presented to the Agency Decision Maker in ALN.

The ALN Panel meets twice per month, with capacity to run additional meetings if required. There is one independent Panel Chair and central list membership to ensure consistency of decision making and robust oversight of the work of ALN. The independent Panel membership is diverse in terms of their experiences of adoption, their age, gender, relationship status, and ethnicity. Social workers from ALN and partner boroughs also sit on the Panel regularly. The Panel have regular training and there is a programme of annual appraisals. The Panel provide quality assurance feedback to ALN and the relevant local authority for every case they consider.

### **Views of the independent Adoption Panel Chair**

The Panel Chair, Josephine Scorer, provides a report of panel business every six months. The report covers the activity of the panel, a summary of quality assurance feedback, and areas for improvement and development. In her most recent report covering the period September 2023 – March 2024, she provided the following conclusion:

*The adoption panel is settled and stable, and the panel membership is diverse and well balanced, containing broad and wide ranging personal and professional expertise. Panel members are focused, collaborative, and mutually respectful, and clearly able to use critical thinking to robustly scrutinise cases being presented to the panel, make safe recommendations, and to feedback on and appropriately challenge standards of practice. Gaps in panel membership identified are being addressed, particularly in relation to increasing the number of independent members and recruiting an additional vice chair to the central list.*

*The working relationship between the panel chair, panel advisor, and panel coordinator continues to be strong. There is a clear training program for the panel with future training dates and themes under discussion.*

*Annual reviews of panel members are up to date with no major concerns identified so far.*

*Panel business remains steady overall, and the quality assurance process is effective.*

*The strengths across Adopt London North are also clearly apparent. Standards of practice are very high, with robustly analysed assessments, and strong well evidenced matches being consistently presented to the adoption panel. Although CPRs in particular still need some work the overall standard of reports is extremely high. The presentation from social workers is also consistently high, and social workers are well supported by team managers who attend every panel.*

Recommendations arising from Panel Chair reports are reviewed in quarterly meetings between the Panel Chair and Head of Service.

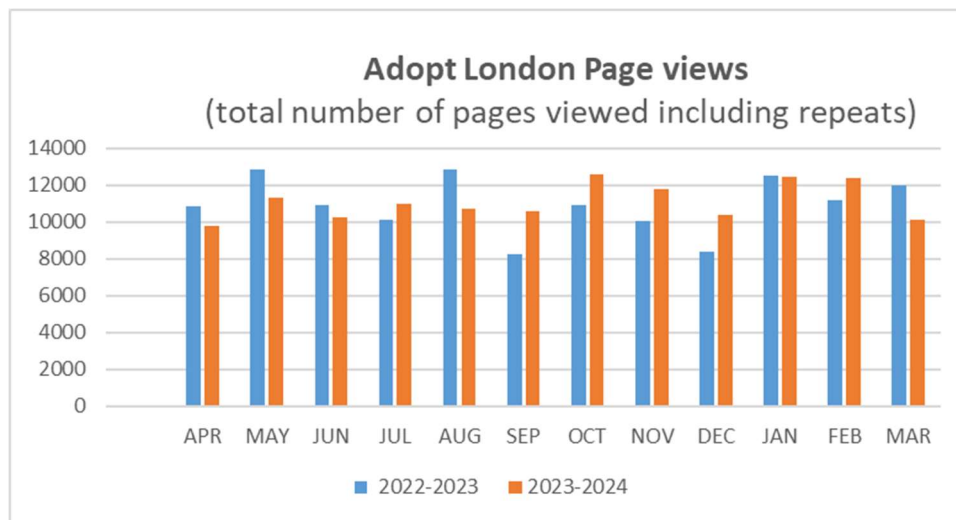
## **7. Finding prospective adoptive parents**

### **Adopt London brand**

Our single Adopt London presence on the web maximises opportunities for anyone considering adoption in London to easily find us. Our professional and creative online presence is spearheaded by the Adopt London [website](#) which provides rich information for people considering adoption in a range of formats, from frequently asked questions to lived experience case studies and relevant news items.

Adopt London have a shared recruitment and communications strategy which focuses on recognising and championing the diversity of the London region and the needs of London children. The website has been reviewed this year to ensure it aligns with accessibility standards and a further phase of development is planned next year to reorganise the layout of the site to ensure it provides an intuitive customer journey for all those impacted by adoption.

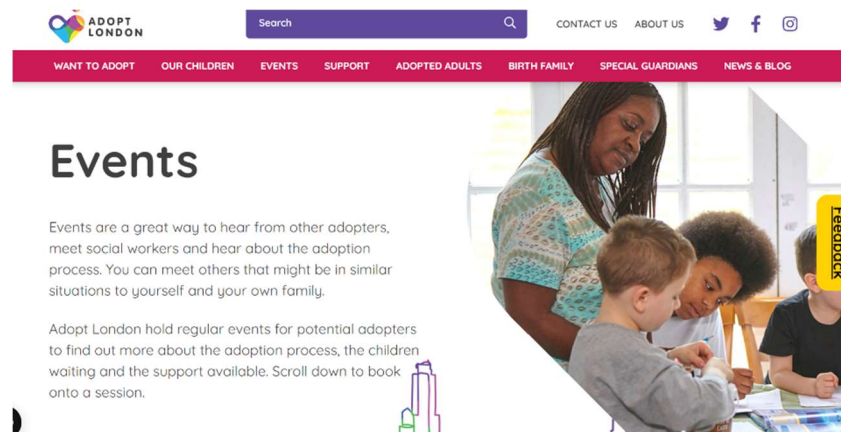
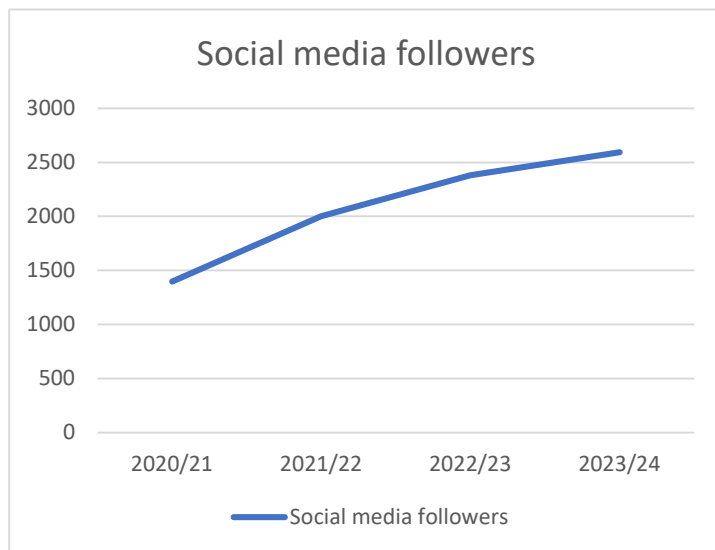
Website metrics are tracked to gain an understanding of how people are making use of the site and areas to develop targeted content to support the recruit of prospective adopters. A comparison of the Adopt London website page views over the past 2 years evidences a relatively consistent picture of high usage, with peak period across the year including in October, reflecting increased interest in adoption during National Adoption week.



recruitment driven by the ‘cost of living crisis’. From those who provided feedback after attendance at an Information Session this year, 49% said they chose to attend an ALN session because they live in one of the partner boroughs, and 39% said they made the decision after searching online – emphasising the importance of a strong website presence.

The Adopt London social media channels post regularly to communicate and inform a range of audiences impacted by adoption. Our social media followers continue to organically increase and using these channels can be an effective way to engage and support people in London who are considering adoption but not yet ready to begin an assessment.





## Enquiries and providing information

During 2022/23 we paused our information sessions and acceptance of new applications to adopt because we had built up a long waiting list of those ready to start assessments and lacked staffing capacity to clear this. Following a decision by the ALN Governance Board to pilot increased staffing in the recruitment team, information sessions restarted in September 2023 and have run on a monthly basis with strong attendance through the rest of the year.

From those who attended and provided feedback after an information session, 98% rated the session as highly informative, and 95% would recommend the session to a family or friend who was interested in adoption.

*“I have been to many other sessions before, but this was by far the best!”*

*“[The presenters] were extremely caring and open with the group, which made everything feel very human and real – thank you, we felt we could trust you throughout the process.”*

*“The session was super informative and questions other attendees asked were very well thought out. The content was super easy to digest and this session has definitely guided us in the right direction.”*

*“Although we knew it, it was useful to hear that whilst the experience can be seen by the adopter as a scrutinising process, it was made clear that this is done as the social worker is looking after the well being of the child, and even of the adopter, so nothing personal.”*

*“This was the third information session we attended [with different agencies] and this one was definitely the most informative and the information was the most well explained. We walked away feeling informed of the process.”*

*“It felt like you were very passionate and cared so much for the children and adopters.”*

*“You balanced the difficult but rewarding message very well.”*

*“We loved how much attention you paid to the questions. How you worked together and the warmth of the tone. It felt like an honest and supportive space.”*

*“It was nice to see how passionate and friendly the team is. Eased a few anxieties I had about beginning the process.”*

*“Great communication, the tone of the presentation was a great balance between educational, inspiring, and realistic.”*

We have also continued to deliver our popular monthly Meet the Adopter sessions virtually this year, with 271 households attending a session compared to 201 households in 2022/23. The virtual delivery means that it is possible for us to have a wide range of diverse adoptive parents speaking about their experiences, as childcare demands would limit speakers if sessions were delivered in person. Our adoptive parent speakers have a wide range of experiences including those who have adopted younger and older children, had siblings placed at the same time and siblings who have joined the adoptive family separately; some have adopted through early permanence, as a single parent, or as a couple in a same-sex or heterosexual relationship, or as an older parent; some have adopted in the last few years and others now have young adult children. Two or three speakers attend each session and questions are thrown open to those considering adoption. Due to the wide range of speakers, these sessions highlight to prospective adopters that there is not just one valid ‘adopter experience’ and provide a balanced view of the joys and challenges of adoption, with very realistic experiences shared of the hardest parts of adoptive parenting. Some of our prospective adopters have attended sessions regularly throughout their assessment and this has enriched their preparation.

*“It was wonderful how open and honest the parents were.”*

*“I was grateful for the event and that I can attend more of these sessions if I want to. It helped to alleviate any fears of judgement e.g. if a person will be a single parent.”*

*“These sessions are so honest, they show the good the bad and the ugly but all your speakers come back to how adoption has changed their lives for the better and that they are capable of dealing with the situations as they arise.”*

*“This was incredibly informative and REAL and we appreciated the honesty. [Adoptive mum] was particularly great, this has answered a lot of questions and cleared up some concerns, and was not off-putting AT ALL – quite the opposite.”*

*“The session was fantastic and surpassed by expectations. Timing was a good length. The environment (despite being on Zoom) felt a safe space to speak freely and honestly.”*

*“It gave me hope and made me realise it is possible as a single woman.”*

*“It made me feel really confident about adopting.”*

*“It was very helpful, very informative and allowed me to realise I need to get a few more life things sorted before I embark on the assessment process.”*

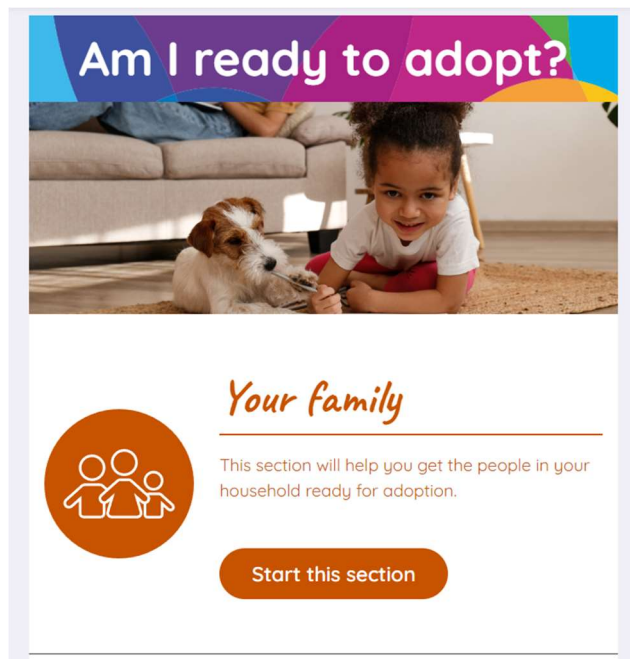
*“We really appreciate the [adoptive parents] openness, it was very clarifying and has given us lots to think about.”*

55% of information session attendees, and 65% of attendees at Meet The Adopter sessions live in one of the six ALN boroughs, whilst other households attending live in neighbouring London boroughs and bordering areas such as Essex and Hertfordshire, which is a positive indicator of ALN being an attractive adoption agency to approach.

Due to our pause in running Information Sessions and accepting applications between April – September 2023, there were many households who made an enquiry with us but were unable to take the process further. Overall enquiry numbers were exceptionally high, which is likely to reflect the ongoing difficulty many prospective adopters have experienced in finding an adoption agency in London who has capacity to recruit new families. Of those who attended an information session, 20% went on to submit an Expression of Interest application compared to 35% in 2022/23.

Prospective adopter enquiries				
Number of households who...	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Made an enquiry	714	827	873	993
Signed up to an information session	493	516	214	311
Attended an information session	351	349	143	205
Submitted an Expression of Interest application	128	136	50	40
Started Stage 1 assessment	26	18	14	16

We aim to increasingly offer different ways for prospective adopters to engage with Adopt London and to be able to understand the preparation they may need to undertake and our eligibility requirements, and this year we designed and launched a new digital tool which helps people who are considering adoption. The '[Am I Ready To Adopt](#)' tool is an online questionnaire which helps prospective adopters to begin early preparation. The tool provides on-the-spot information, advice and guidance to people considering adoption and also provides a bespoke action plan based on the individual's responses as to how best to prepare.



## **8. Preparing and approving adoptive parents**

### **Approval of prospective adopters**

After an increase in 2021/22, the number of approvals of new adoptive families has been very low for the last two years primarily due to capacity challenges within the Recruitment & Assessment Team and the need to suspend recruitment. Capacity has been particularly impacted by an ongoing trend seeing increasing numbers and complexities in non-agency adoption applications (more information provided later in this section of the report).

We have also continued to observe an overall increased complexity in assessments which mean that applicants more often need their assessment to be slower, might need to take a break or drop out of the process, or that professional counselling support may be needed before an assessment can progress.

Adoptive household approvals								
2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
41	31	27	33	19	12	24	13	9

Assessments have continued to be of a high standard as evidenced by the quality assurance feedback from our Adoption Panel, and most adoptive parents are matched soon after approval. At the end of March 2023, only 8 approved adoptive households were not yet matched with a child, and 7 of these were in discussions about a potential link. This shows that the adopters who are approved are usually suitable for the needs of our North London children, and where it is necessary for them to consider children from outside the ALN partnership, they are still able to be successfully matched.

The ALN Governance Board have closely monitored and reviewed levels of approvals and capacity of the Recruitment & Assessment Team and as a result have agreed to pilot increased staffing capacity, which is already having a significant impact on adopters progressing through the early stages of the process. We are therefore expecting significantly higher levels of adopter approvals in 2024/25.

### **Assessments of foster carers and connected people**

Referrals from boroughs for adoption assessments of foster carers and connected people (who wish to adopt children known to them or already in their care) have reduced this year after high levels in the past 2 years. A process for referral and joint decision making between the borough and ALN for foster carer assessments has been well embedded, reducing the number of full referrals that need to be considered. Foster carer assessments tend to be particularly complex and often encounter delays, but can be positive care plans for some children in specific circumstances.

Referrals for foster carers & connected people to be assessed as adoptive parents					
Borough	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Barnet	1	1	2	3	2
Camden	0	0	1	1	1
Enfield	0	3	4	3	0
Hackney	1	2	3	2	1
Haringey	0	0	2	2	0
Islington	0	0	5	6	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>

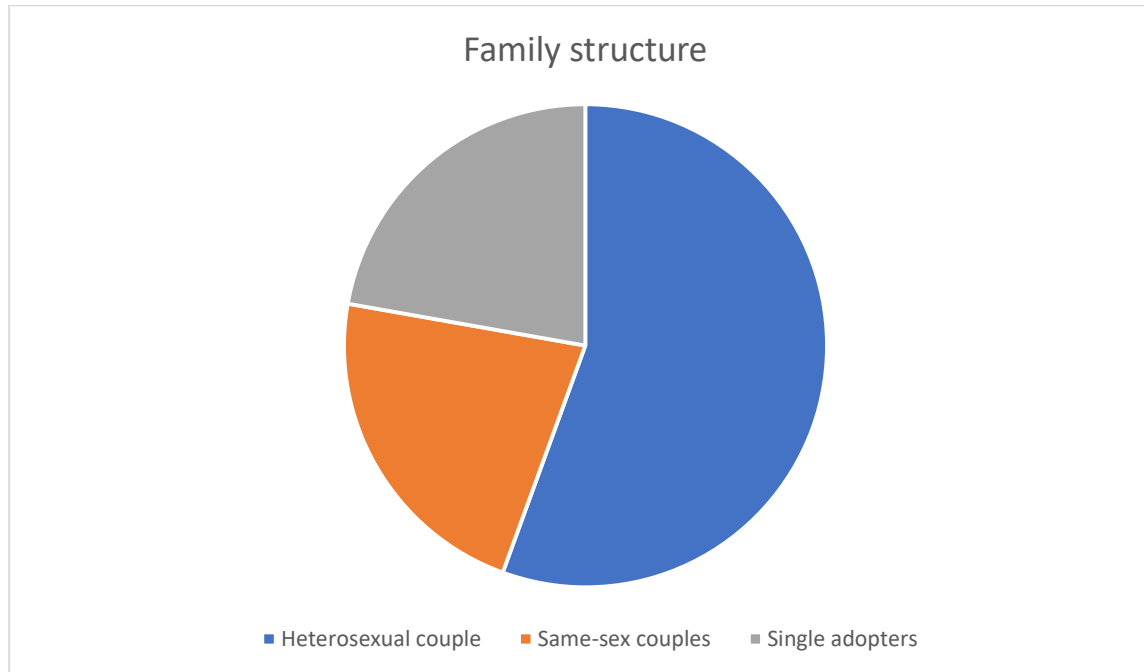
## Non-agency adoptions

On behalf of partner local authorities, ALN are legally required to provide advice and assess any resident who wishes to privately apply for an adoption order for a child in their care (non-agency adoption), and can be directed by the court to complete an assessment within a specific timescale. ALN offer meetings with those who enquire about non-agency adoption to advise on the suitability of an adoption application and in many cases to suggest alternative ways of gaining the legal security needed.

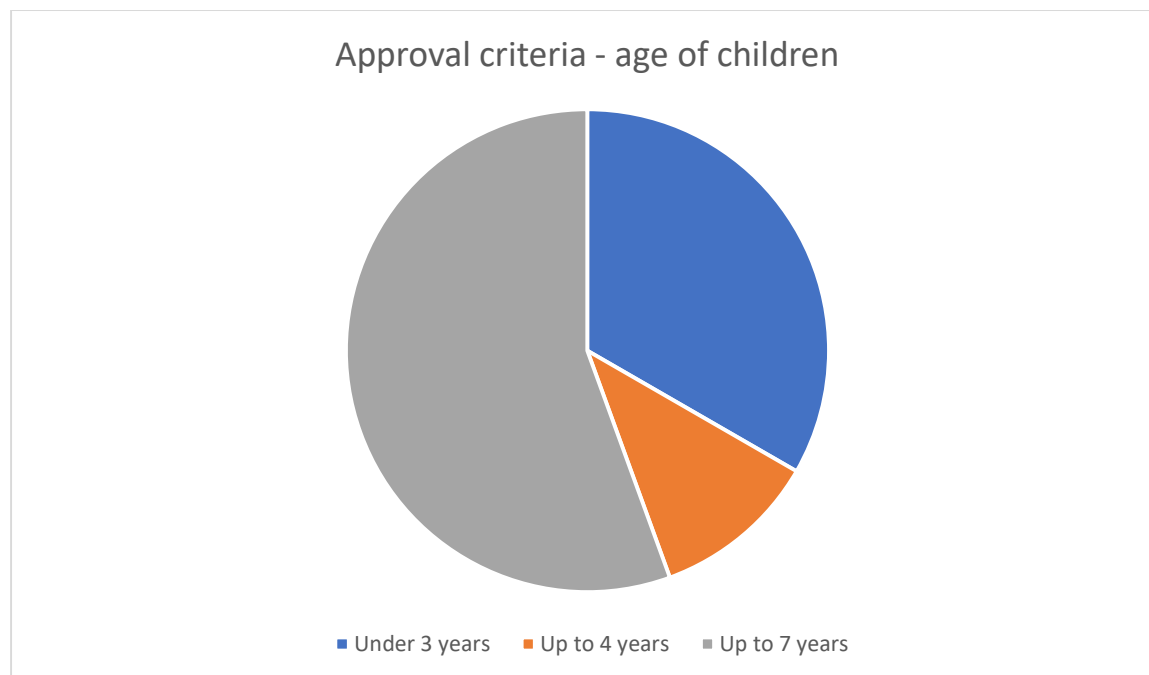
In the past these cases have most often been same-sex female couples who had a child before the law was changed to allow both parents to have their name on the birth certificate; step-parents where the second biological parent is either unknown, deceased, or not participating in parenting; and special guardians of teenagers who want an adoption order to ensure the parental relationship is legally permanent (a special guardianship order ends when a child is 18 and after this point there is no legal parental relationship). In the last few years however, these applications are being used for many complex international cases including surrogacy involving nationals of multiple countries; recognition of adoption orders made in a third country to a UK national so that the child may receive UK citizenship; and complex IVF arrangements which have taken place abroad. As ALN are legally required to complete these assessments within specific timescales, these assessments have to often be prioritised over prospective adopter assessments for looked after children. This year, ALN undertook a detailed audit to evidence and understand the changing demands in this area of work. With the support of the Governance Board, the audit findings will be presented to a national RAA Leaders meeting in September 2024 with the aim of raising the issue with the Department for Education.

### Characteristics of approved adopters

Approved adoptive households continue to be diverse in terms of family structure, with 56% being heterosexual couples, 22% same-sex couples, and 22% single adopters.



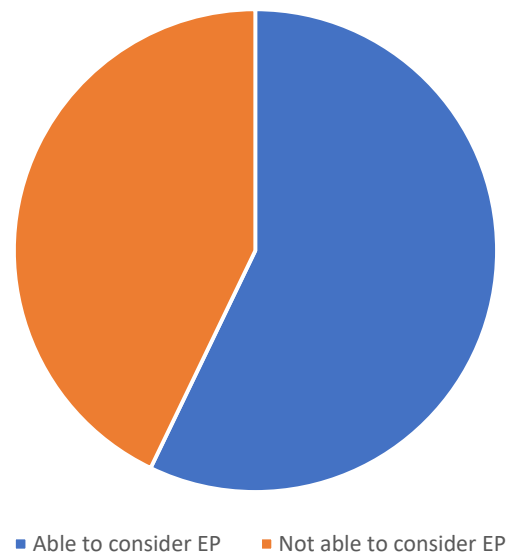
The proportion of approved households considering children up to the age of 7 years was higher this year, with 57% of approved households wanting to consider children up to the age of 7 years, 11% up to 4 years, and 33% under 3 years.



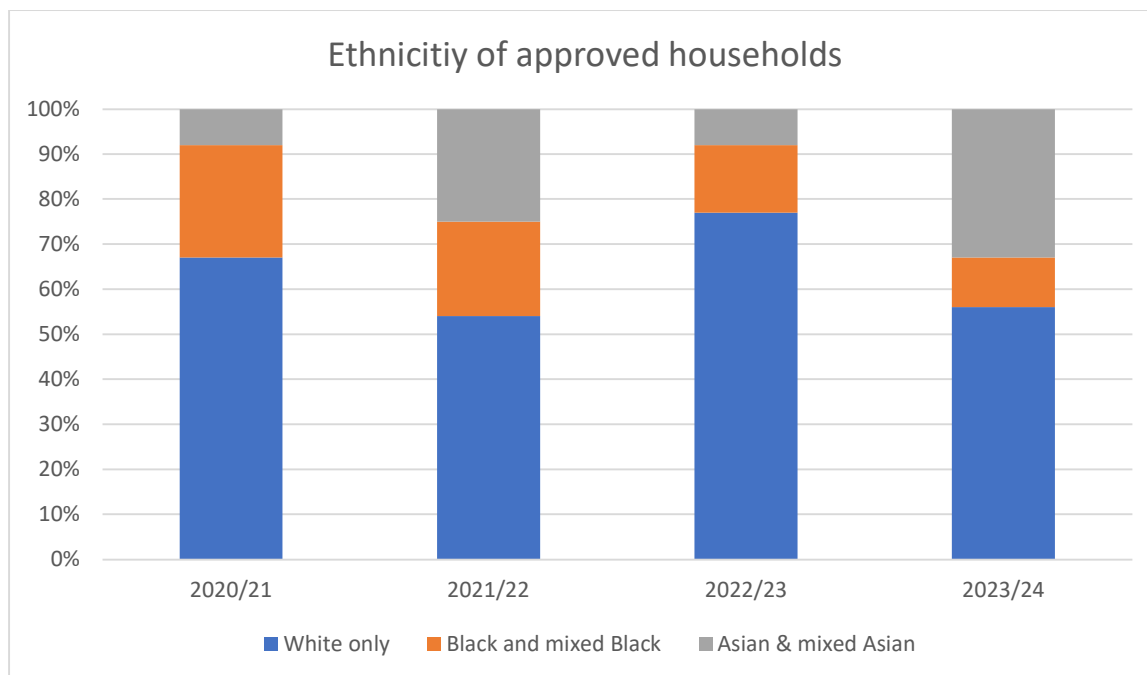
2 of the approved households were foster carers for the child they hoped to adopt. When these households are taken out of the figures, 57% of approved households were able to consider an early permanence placement (an increase from 40% in 2022/23).



### Approved adopters able to consider early permanence



This year 44% of approved households had at least one person of a global majority ethnicity and 56% of households had adopters only of white British or other white ethnicities. Whilst increasing the overall numbers of approved adopters remains essential, it is critical that we use the learning and pilots from the Black Adoption Project to ensure the proportion of approved Black adopters increases significantly in coming years.



## **9. Planning for children**

### **Adoption permanency planning**

Each partner borough is responsible for permanency planning and tracking of their children. A Family Finder from ALN attends planning meetings and is able to provide advice and guidance about adoption plans. Referrals for children are made to ALN when the plan is likely to be adoption and the case is allocated at the point that early Family Finding work can begin, usually around the time the Best Interests Decision is made by the borough Agency Decision Maker.

## Children with a plan for adoption

After a significant drop in 2021/22 in the number of adoption plans being formalised by the borough Agency Decision Makers (ADM), the last two years have been consistently high and increasing, suggesting no overall drop in the number of adoption plans being made across ALN boroughs. Placement Orders have also increased again but placements are slightly lower than last year. In all cases some time lapses between the Best Interests Decision, the Placement Order being made, and the child being placed for adoption; therefore it is possible that the increasing level of Best Interests Decisions is an indicator of increased Placement Orders and adoptive placements in 2024/25.

The ASG national adoption data collection has provided data showing the proportion of children taken into care before turning 5 who go on to have a Best Interests Decision made (this data is not yet available for 2023/24). These figures suggest that the proportion of children within ALN who come into care under the age of 5 and go on to have a Best Interests Decision had been reducing annually, but has increased slightly this year, however with wide variation between boroughs, ranging from Barnet with 41% to Islington with 11%.

Best Interests Decisions – data provided by borough’s own ASG national returns									
	Total ADM Best Interests Decisions					% children taken into care before turning 5 with a Best Interests Decision			
Borough	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Barnet	27	13	5	14	18	47%	24%	24%	41%
Camden	9	5	4	11	12	38%	12%	22%	27%
Enfield	13	15	11	16	22	29%	23%	24%	25%
Hackney	18	12	2	4	12	32%	12%	5%	17%
Haringey	13	16	7	14	2	33%	44%	19%	16%
Islington	5	4	7	9	11	26%	22%	23%	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>24%</b>

Placements and Placement Orders – data provided by borough’s own ASG national returns										
	Total adoptive placements					Total Placement Orders				
Borough	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Barnet	15	2	8	5	9	11	10	5	2	13

Camden	4	8	3	5	3	7	2	5	5	4
Enfield	7	3	12	14	6	11	9	11	10	12
Hackney	9	5	10	2	3	14	9	3	2	7
Haringey	9	8	10	5	11	9	17	8	15	5
Islington	6	3	3	5	1	2	1	2	3	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>45</b>

## **10.Placing children with adoptive parents**

### **Family finding**

Strong connections between the Recruitment & Assessment team and the Family Finding team mean that by the time a Placement Order is made we can establish whether there is a potential in-house adoptive family available. If an in-house family may be a good match for a child, they will be considered initially before the search is broadened to look for prospective adopters from other RAAs and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs).

Within the Adopt London matching project we have now established stronger and quicker family finding links between the four RAAs – this includes Adopt London play sessions where prospective adopters can informally meet and play alongside children and their foster carers, and enhanced Adopt London profile booklets to ensure information about potential Adopt London adopters is readily available to family finders.

Regular family finding review meetings are held between the family finder and the borough social work team after a Placement Order is granted to monitor and progress family finding decisions.

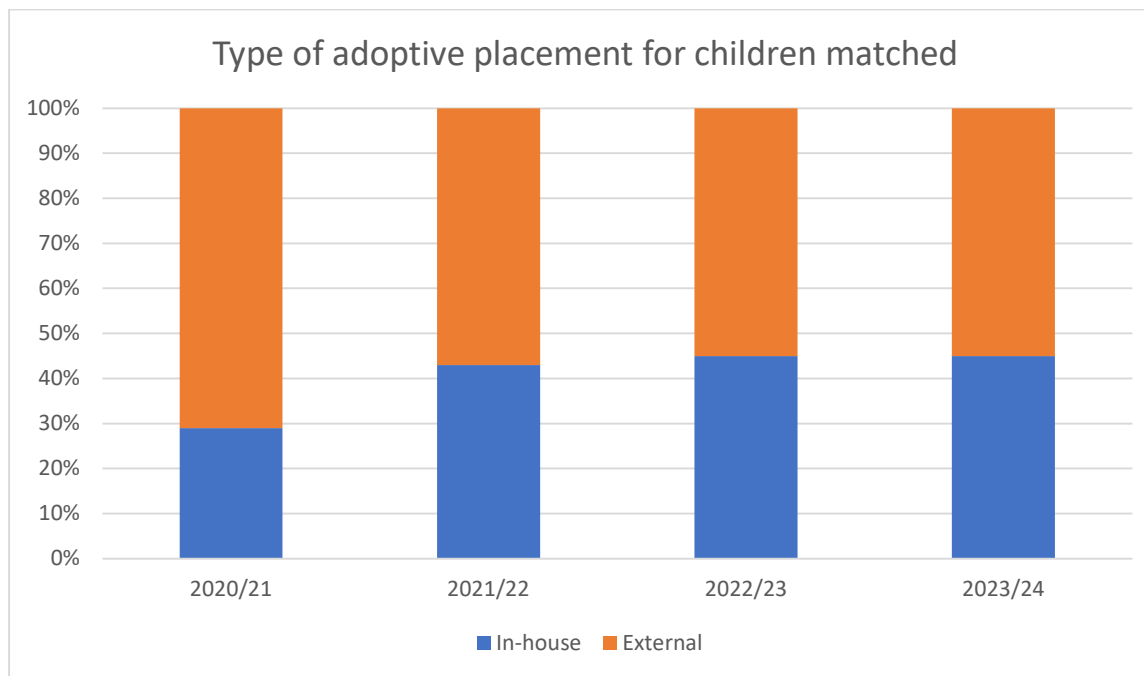
### **In-house placements**

There are a number of strong reasons why it is a priority for ALN to place as many children with our own adoptive parents as possible and these have been identified in previous reports. We continue to find that in-house placements are more stable and less likely to experience early disruption, and that it is easier to quickly establish robust and appropriate support to in-house placements when difficulties arise.

We have been successful in maintaining a high proportion of in-house placements this year, despite adopter approval levels being low. 45% of children matched during 2023/24 went to live with an in-house family. This compares to 45% last year, 43% in 2021/22 and 29% in 2020/21.

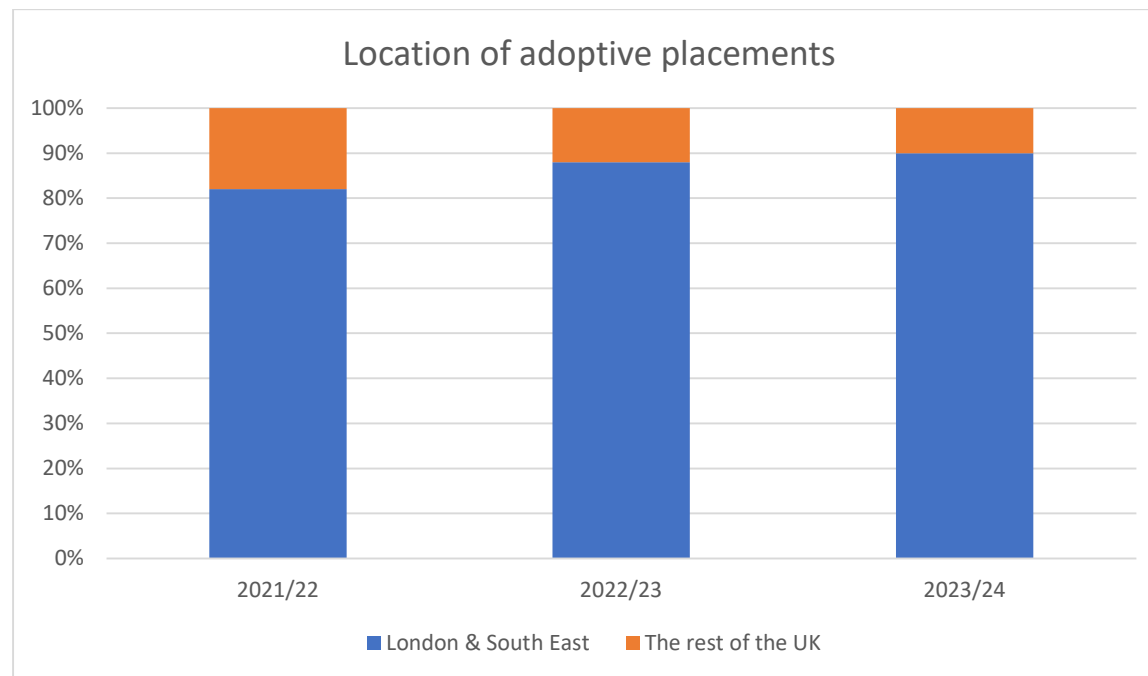
To increase in-house placements further we need to ensure we assess the adopters who are most likely to be matched with our children and talk to them from the earliest stages about the benefits of waiting for a link internally. We know that not every adopter will be matched in-house and we therefore support adopters who are ready to begin family finding on a wider basis, particularly where they have very specific matching requirements. However the majority of adopters appreciate the benefits of an in-house placement and are prepared to wait.

It is likely that in-house placements will drop in 2024/25 due to the very low number of available in-house adopters in the first half of the year before approvals start to increase, however we would hope to see the proportion of children placed in-house increase beyond 2025 if approval levels are able to be maintained at a higher level.



## Location of placements

Regardless of whether an in-house placement is possible, we aim to place as many children as we can within London and the South East as this enables ALN and the child's social workers in the borough to provide the best possible support and to quickly pick up any difficulties that arise post-placement. We do not create delay for children by only considering local placements before looking at placements further afield, however we consider the location of a placement as an important factor when weighing up the strengths or vulnerabilities of potential adoptive families. This year 90% of children matched for adoption went to live with adoptive families in London and the South East.



## Disruptions of adoptive placements

None of our adoptive parents have been involved in a disrupted placement since ALN began in 2019. In 2023/24, 1 child (from Enfield) experienced a disrupted adoptive placement soon after moving into the adoptive family who were approved by a Voluntary Adoption Agency. A detailed disruptions

meeting took place chaired by an Independent Panel Chair and this provided some useful learning and recommendations for all involved in the case. The number of children whose placements disrupt prior to an adoption order remains extremely low.

### Children waiting for an adoptive family

The family finding team and children's social work team in the borough meet regularly for Family Finding review meetings for each child to closely monitor progress, provide updates, and to ensure the plan for adoption remains right for the child. ALN are also invited to attend tracking meetings in the borough to provide information for senior managers who are monitoring permanency planning. ALN and borough senior managers speak regularly to escalate delays or concerns.

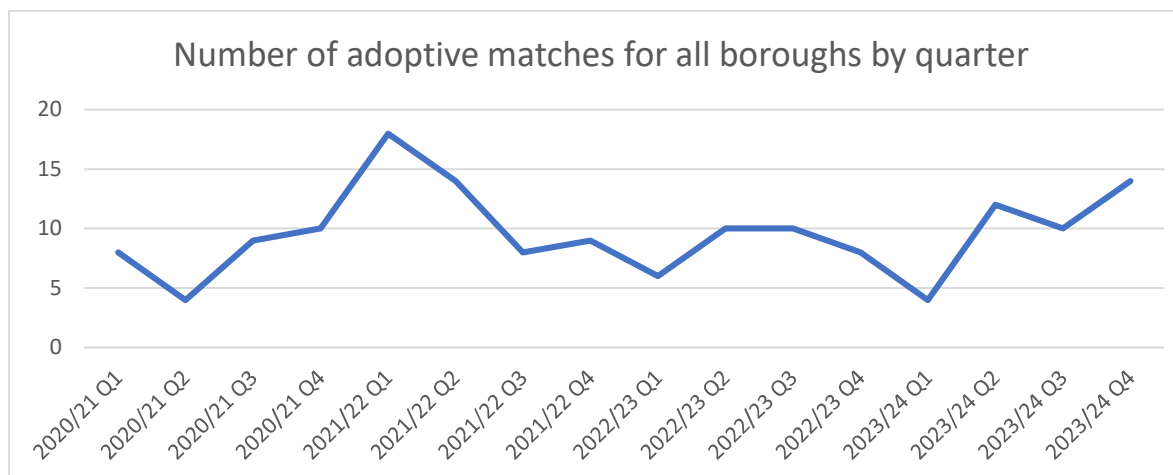
This year due to an increase in placement orders there were a higher number of children waiting with active family finding at the end of March 2024. These figures exclude children who are already linked, whose foster carers are being assessed as adoptive parents, and whose plan for adoption has been changed or put on hold). Of all 45 children with active family finding, 58% of children had a placement order very recently or within the last 6 months, and 42% of children had a placement order longer than 6 months.

Children with a Placement Order where there is active family finding taking place on 31 March				
Borough	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Barnet	2	1	1	11
Camden	4	1	2	3
Enfield	8	0	4	11
Hackney	11	1	1	6
Haringey	11	6	10	13
Islington	1	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>45</b>

### Adoptive matches made

The number of matches has risen again this year, indicating that although there are annual variations and volatile quarterly variations, overall the number of children being placed for adoption across the ALN partnership is reasonably consistent and is not in decline. As there has been another increase in Placement Orders this year, it is possible that the number of matches will be higher in 2024/25.

Number of adoptive matches for all boroughs						
2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
55	50	29	31	49	34	40

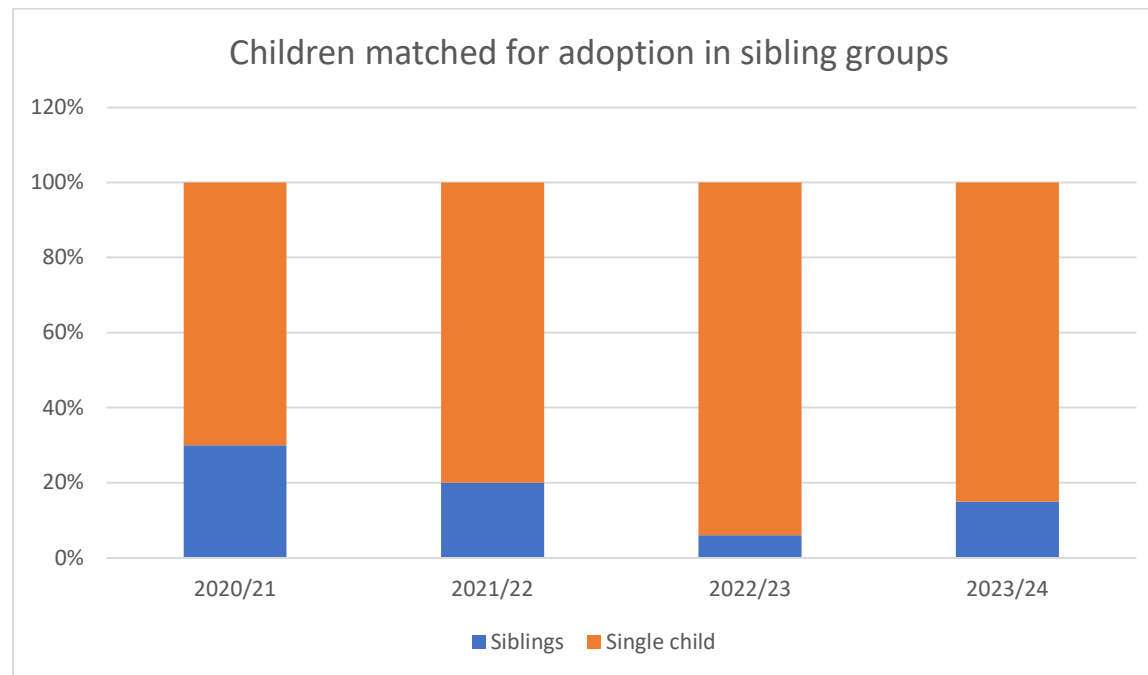


Number of adoptive matches				
Borough	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Barnet	2	10	4	8
Camden	7	4	6	6
Enfield	4	12	14	7
Hackney	8	8	2	4
Haringey	6	13	5	12
Islington	4	2	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>40</b>



### Characteristics of children matched for adoption

The number of children placed for adoption at the same time and in the same placement as their sibling has risen slightly this year from a particular low last year, but overall remains a small proportion of all children placed for adoption (3 sibling groups containing 6 children in total compared to 34 children not placed in a sibling group). These figures do not include children who were matched with the adoptive parents of a sibling who had already been earlier placed for adoption. There are also a higher number of children in sibling groups waiting for a placement this year, suggesting that there have been more placement orders for children in sibling groups than last year, and that there are some difficulties identifying suitable adoptive families for them. However many of the sibling groups have had placement orders granted recently (50% within the last 5 months). ALN will continue to closely monitor and track children on placement orders.



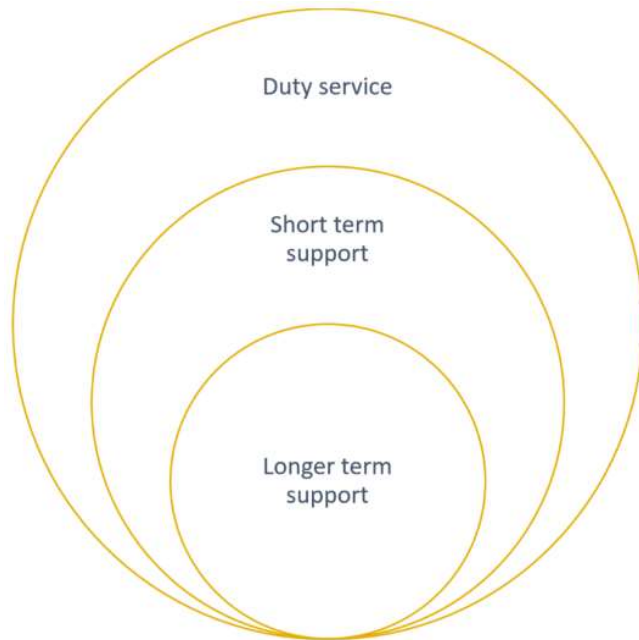
## Early permanence placements

There were 12 children placed for early permanence with prospective adoptive parents during 2023/24, which is double the number from previous years. For the first time every borough had at least 1 child placed through early permanence, showing an overall increase in awareness of the benefits of this type of placement. All of the early permanence placements that have concluded their court processes have resulted in the children remaining with their early permanence carers for adoption. However all adoptive parents are trained and prepared for the possibility that the outcome of care proceedings may be for the child to return to live with birth parents or a connected person.

Early Permanence referrals and placements, by borough				
	Early Permanence placements made			
Borough	Placed for EP in 2020/21	Placed for EP in 2021/22	Placed for EP in 2022/23	Placed for EP in 2023/24
Barnet	0	0	6	3
Hackney	2	0	0	1
Camden	1	2	0	3
Enfield	0	2	0	1
Haringey	3	1	0	2
Islington	0	1	0	2
TOTAL	6	6	6	12

## **11. Providing support to adoptive families and others**

### **Support to families and adopted adults**



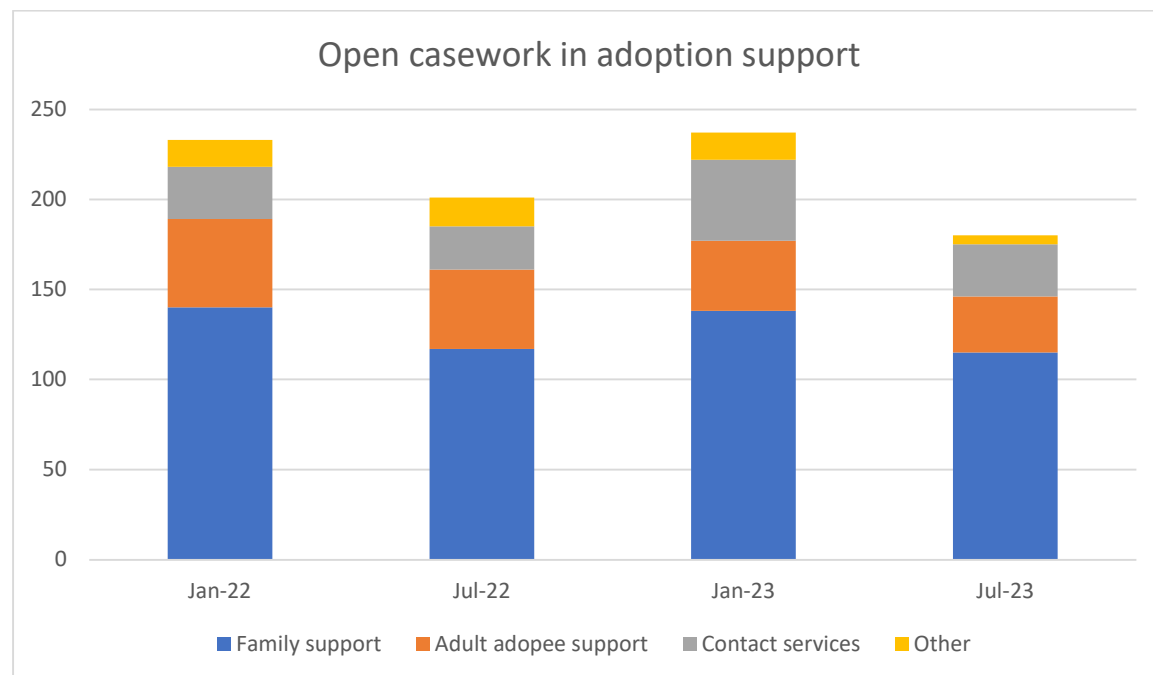
The Adoption Support team provide support to adoptive families and adult adoptees living in our boroughs, and provide contact support between adoptive families and birth families for all adoptive children and young people that were previously placed by one of our boroughs. Access to support is through the duty service who are also able to offer short-term support such as standalone applications to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) and access to specialist training. Families requiring longer-term or more complex social work support are allocated to a social worker who completes an assessment of their needs and recommendations for support. Many of the situations requiring longer-term social work support and coordination are at risk of family breakdown.

Demand for support has been consistently high since over the last 3 years, with an increasing level of need and complexity in adoptive family's lives. Families continue to be impacted by pressures on other specialist services such as CAMHS and specialist mental health support, which means that they are increasingly dependent on the support they can access through ALN and the Adoption Support Fund. As a result of the level of demand, there is a waiting time for families to have an assessment of need completed by a social worker which is constantly monitored, and we have created waiting lists for non-urgent types of support including reviews of contact and access to records for adult adoptees. Every attempt is made to prioritise responding to adoptive

families with immediate support needs as quickly as possible to prevent family breakdown, which means that waiting lists for adult adoptees (access to records requests), and contact support are hard to reduce. Family in urgent need of support are also referred to the relevant borough where appropriate. Waiting lists and demand levels are monitored by the ALN Governance Board and we are undertaking work to reduce the need for cases to remain open over a long period of time.

Despite pressures facing our Adoption Support Team many families value having an adoption-informed approach to support, and the team work hard to build supportive, trauma-informed relationships with families that increase their ability to manage the difficulties they face.

We currently use a snapshot audit monitoring system to understand the level and types of adoption support casework in the service and this has provided us with greater insights into the types of need that are most prevalent.



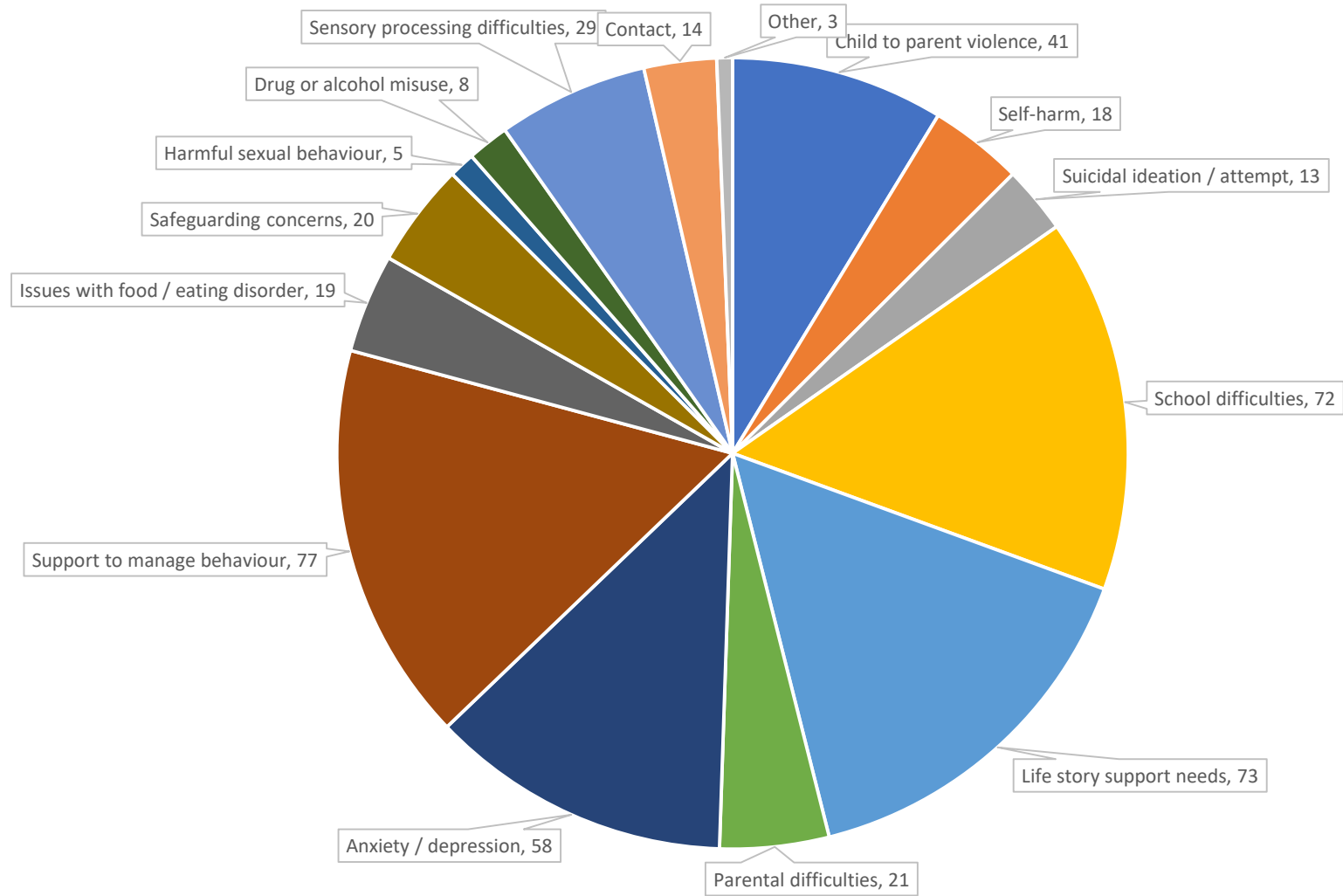
Open casework in adoption support					
Type of support	January 2022	July 2022	January 2023	July 2023	January 2024
Family support	140	117	138	115	122
Adult adoptee support	49	44	39	31	24
Contact services	29	24	45	29	17
Other	15	16	15	5	4

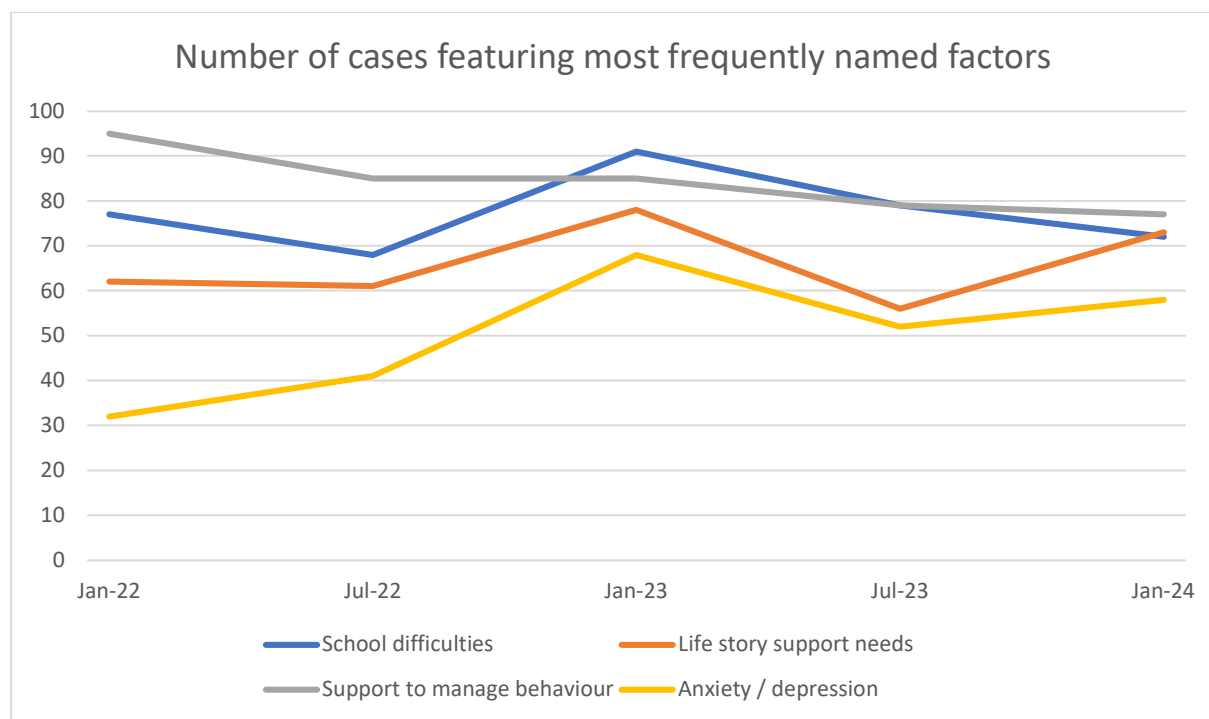
At the time of the most recent audit in January 2024, 40% of family support cases required significant social work support in addition to ASF therapeutic provision and signposting – this proportion is lower than in January 2023 when it was 52%.

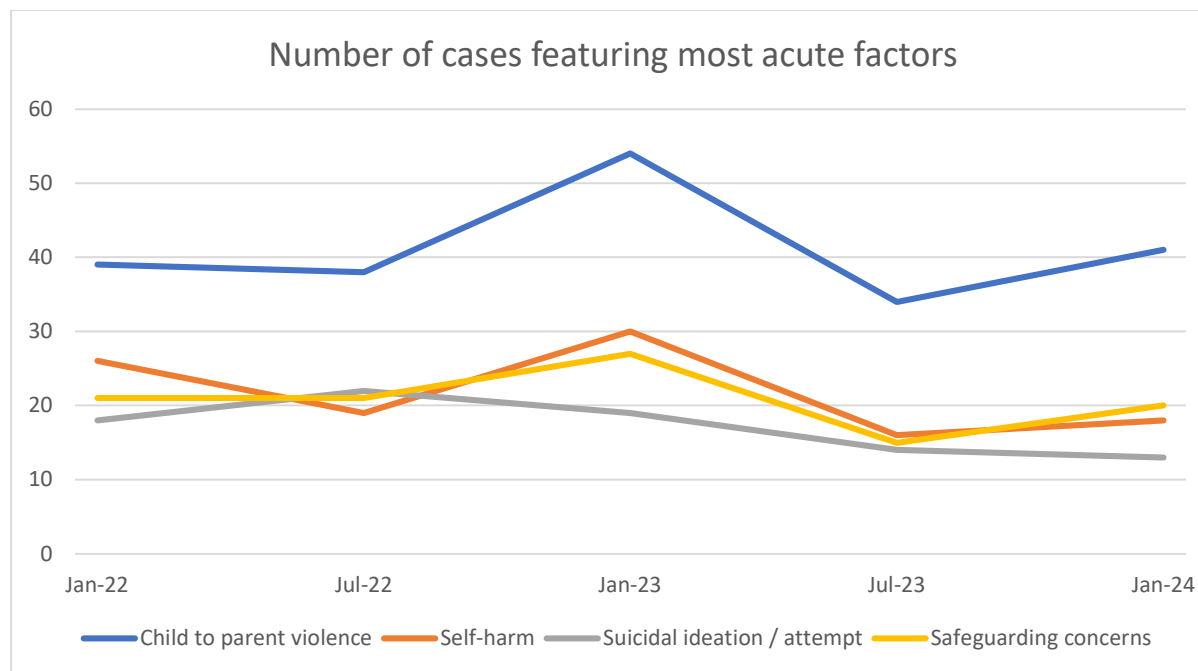
The reasons for involvement reveal a wide range of complex difficulties that adopted children and their families are facing, and their reasons for asking ALN for support. The most frequently identified factors are school difficulties, life story support needs, support to manage behaviour, and anxiety or depression in the young person. All of these factors have remained very high over the 2 year period of monitoring and are being used to support decisions about services offered. Concerningly, the most acute factors of child to parent violence, self-harm, and safeguarding concerns have remained high over the period of monitoring, with only suicidal ideation / attempt seeing a sustained reduction in the last few years.

The information identified in these snapshot audits support decision making about areas for service development, such as the provision of a life story advice service, and highlight the need to develop clear referral pathways with specialist organisations such as CAMHS who need to be involved in cases with the most acute difficulties, where needs or risk levels cannot be managed through the ASF.

Reasons for involvement - all significant factors selected (Jan 2024)







### **Adoptive parent training**

We provide expert webinars to our adoptive parents twice per month through our partnership with We Are Family. Adoptive parents can choose whether to attend webinars live and have the opportunity to ask questions, or whether to watch on demand in the member hub for up to a year after the event. This way of offering learning, development, and support has been popular with adoptive parents who need flexibility to manage childcare demands. In 2023/24 we provided 22 expert webinars on a wide variety of topics. Over 350 adoptive parents attended webinars live this year, and since the programme started over 7000 webinars have been watched on demand.

- A trust-based approach to parenting
- Trauma-informed schools
- How family & friends can support parents
- Life story books



- Contact and the benefits of openness
- Practical measures to keep everyone safe
- Advocating for your child in secondary school
- Separation anxiety
- Adoptee voices – what we wish you knew
- Executive functioning

### **Parents of adopted teenagers therapeutic group**

This group was created in the North London Adoption Consortium around 13 years ago and continues to be run through ALN. The group supports adoptive parents with the impact of parenting teenagers who have experienced trauma. It provides an opportunity for parents to reflect and gain support from those with similar parenting experiences, and is co-facilitated by ALN social workers and an independent therapist. The group meets monthly on a Saturday for three hours and discussions follow themes agreed by the group. In the last year some of the topics covered in the group have been:

- How children moving towards adulthood impacts parents
- The emotional impact of your child's life story
- Interplay of child and parent identities
- Experience of being in a family that is 'different'
- The impact of adoption on couple relationships
- Emotional impact of contact with birth families
- Adoptive parents' feelings about birth parents

The group has proven to be effective at helping families sustain relationships through some of the most complex adolescent challenges, and therefore reduce the likelihood of family breakdown. As support is needed for a reasonably long-term period for many of the attendees, spaces within the group are not frequently available. A challenge for ALN is therefore how to ensure this support is available to more families in the future.

### **Adult adoptee peer support groups**

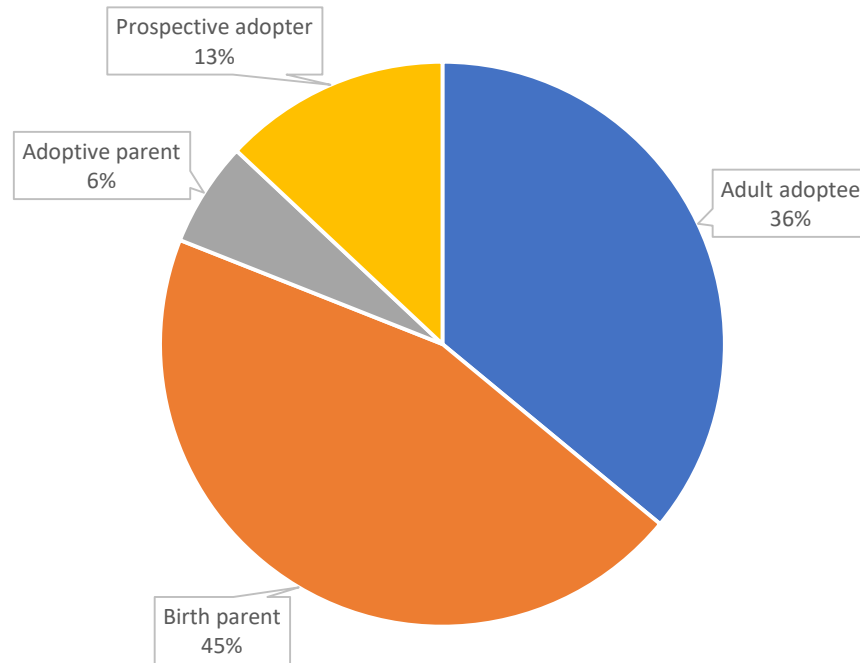
ALN are now supporting three adult adoptee groups across north London, working in partnership with different adoptee-led organisations, with the aim to provide a variety of different group structures and times to suit every adoptee who would like to be part of a group. Adoptees attending are different ages from mid-20's to 70's and have a wide range of experiences of adoption. Adoptees highly value having a space where they can meet with other adoptees and share experiences without judgement. The groups are facilitated by adoptees and supported by ALN social workers, who provide coordination and take responsibility for supporting anyone in the group who is vulnerable or needs additional assistance outside the group meeting. Some meetings are left open for group reflection whilst others are led by a speaker of the group's choice.

### **Specialist counselling support for adult adoptees and birth family members**

ALN have a long-standing contract with [PAC-UK](#), a specialist adoption and permanency support agency, to provide an advice line and independent counselling on our behalf. This contract is used to provide counselling services to prospective adoptive parents, adult adoptees, and birth family members impacted by adoption. The contract currently offers 6 sessions of counselling to an individual, although where there is a high level of need and a good use of counselling, ALN can agree to a second set of 6 sessions. Many clients find the counselling sessions supportive and helpful, although some feel that the limited number of sessions is not adequate to meet their need. Effective use of the contract is reviewed quarterly by ALN and PAC-UK.

PAC-UK also runs two birth parent support groups, one virtually and one in person. Birth parents who access support from PAC-UK advice line or counselling service are invited to join one of the groups and this can become a more sustainable form of support for individuals.

### Clients referred to the PAC-UK counselling contract in 2023/24



*"I did not know what to expect from sessions, however, was put at ease and felt understood during a very difficult time. The sessions helped me to work through my feelings and concerns about my situation and move forward positively. It was especially helpful to have someone talk to who had a wealth of understanding around adoption."*

## **Recommendations**

<b>Review of 2023/24 recommendations</b>
Finding prospective adoptive parents
<p>1. Continue to progress the aims and objectives of the Black Adoption Project, including implementation of new pilot projects to improve services to Black prospective adopters.  <i>The Black Adoption Project has grown and progressed significantly in the last year and has now secured funding to be enable the launch of a range of pilot projects.</i></p>
<p>2. Re-establish strong adopter information sessions and enquiry processes as the capacity in the assessment team increases.  <i>The growth of the recruitment team has been established and information sessions and enquiry processes are now functioning at full capacity again, with high numbers accessing the information provided and positive feedback.</i></p>
<p>3. Implement new local communications plans to test the impact on awareness of ALN and adoption in borough areas.  <i>This has been tested with Barnet but has been hard to establish across all boroughs. Further work is planned on this area in 2024/15.</i></p>
Preparing and approving adoptive parents
<p>4. Through greater capacity in the assessment team, increase the number of approvals whilst maintaining high standard of assessments.  <i>Although numbers of approvals did not increase in 2023/24, recruitment capacity has now increased and approvals are expected to be significantly improved in 2024/25.</i></p>
Planning for children
<p>5. Implement recommendations from the early permanence research report into barriers to early permanence in London.  <i>This work has been led by the Early Permanence lead for London through our funding from Adoption England. Part of this work includes engagement with the judiciary, Cafcass, and local authority teams to address misconceptions identified as barriers in the research report.</i></p>

Placing children with adoptive parents
<p>6. Continue to focus on the number of children who move to in-house and local adoptive families.  <i>This focus has been maintained throughout the year and we hope to be able to increase in-house placements further once approvals increase.</i></p>
Providing support to adoptive families and others
<p>7. Implement changes to the website which make it more accessible to all those accessing support, including adult adoptees, birth parents, and families with adopted children.  <i>Although this work has begun this has not been fully implemented to the need to change website hosting provider, however this work is well planned out and due to take place soon.</i></p>
<p>8. Begin to use audit data for Adopt London to compare and understand different levels of demand and models of adoption support to improve services across Adopt London.  <i>This information has begun to be mapped out across Adopt London and workshops are planned with Adoption Support managers to compare and discuss differences further.</i></p>
Working as part of Adopt London
<p>9. Strengthen arrangements through a legal partnership agreement for Adopt London.  <i>This has not progressed this year due to staffing difficulties in Ealing, who were leading on this piece of work. This is being monitored by the Adopt London Executive Advisory Board.</i></p>

<b>Recommendations for 2023/24</b>
Finding prospective adoptive parents
1. Establish the identified range of pilot projects within the Black Adoption Project, with the aim to provide services that better meet the needs of Black children and families.
2. Manage enquiry numbers effectively to ensure waiting lists do not develop again, whilst maintaining a strong pipeline of prospective adopters for assessment.
3. Further test our local communications plan with ALN boroughs.
Preparing and approving adoptive parents
4. Through greater capacity in the assessment team, increase the number of approvals whilst maintaining high standard of assessments.
Planning for children
5. Embed work through the Early Permanence Project to build better relationships with local authority legal teams and others involved in court proceedings for children.
Placing children with adoptive parents
6. Continue to focus on the number of children who move to in-house and local adoptive families.

Providing support to adoptive families and others
7. Implement changes to the website which make it more accessible to all those accessing support, including adult adoptees, birth parents, and families with adopted children.
8. Develop use of audit data for Adopt London to compare and understand different levels of demand and models of adoption support to improve services across Adopt London.
Working as part of Adopt London
9. Consider sustainable arrangements for the end of some Adoption England project funding in March 2025 so that the best parts of practice development can be maintained.