



Report title: **Adoption Service Report**
01 April 2021 to 31 March 2022

Date of report: 10 June 2022

To: **Dudley Council**

Produced by: Mark Tobin
Head of Service

Service: Adoption@Heart

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Report:

This report fulfils the obligations in Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002, to report to the “executive side” of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in the report below.

The report jointly covers the full year 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2022.

Adoption@Heart is a Regional Adoption Agency, providing adoption services on behalf of Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton Councils. The service is hosted by City of Wolverhampton Council and became operational 1 April 2019.

2. Number, type and age of children waiting for adoption and length of time waiting:

As at 31 March 2022:

There were 14 children subject to placement orders, but not yet placed for adoption. Out of these three children were linked provisionally to adoptive parents but awaiting formal match and placement. 11 children were subject to active family finding and these include a sibling group of three, who have waited five months since Placement Order. Only two of these 11 children have waited longer than six months. All other children who have waited longer than six months are subject to a provisional link with adopters.

The timescales for the 14 children waiting on Placement Orders are:

Less than 3 months:	3
Between 3 and 6 months:	6
Between 6 and 12 months:	4
Between 12 and 24 months:	1
Children waiting over 2 years:	0

2.1 Children Made Subject to Placement Orders

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
0	1	0	0	4	3

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
6	2	3	1	3	0	23

2.2 Children Subject to Should be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decisions as at 31 March 2022 (without Placement Order)

10

2.3 Number of Children who had a SHOPBA during the period

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
3	0	2	0	1	4

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
0	2	3	0	1	3	19

2.4 The Numbers of Children with PO who had a Change of Plan (away from adoption) in the Period

0

2.5 Number of Children Placed for Adoption during the period.

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
4	0	2	5	0	1

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
1	3	2	0	0	4	22

3. Number of Children Adopted (April 2021 - March 2022)

Number of children – 23

In year average timescale for children adopted.

A10 = 577.3 days

A2 = 273.2 days

Adoption numbers have significantly increased this year following the delays in the previous year caused by Covid-19 and the impact on the courts. This factor together with the low number of children placed (14) in the year 2020/21 has led to the low number of children adopted in the reporting year.

The higher number of children adopted in the reporting year evidences the process of recovery in the courts, following the pandemic and the number of children placed has also increased from 14 to 22 in the reporting year.

The numbers of children leaving care nationally via adoption has reduced continuously since 2017.

Financial Year:	18/19	19/20	20/21
Children Adopted:	36	34	7

Adoption Scorecard Performance:

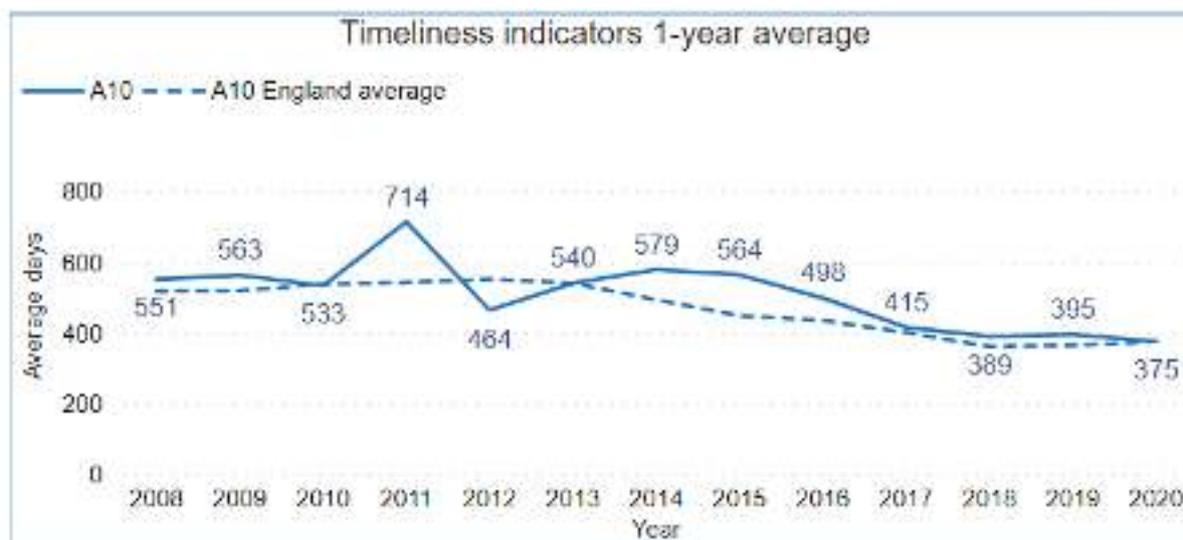
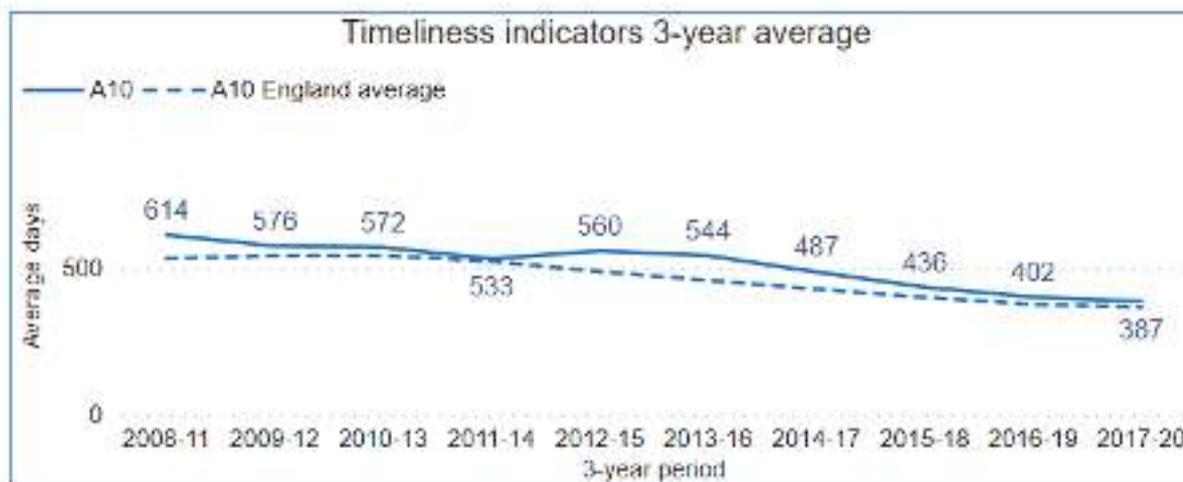
In 2014, as part of its' Adoption Reform Agenda, the government introduced Adoption Scorecards to track local authority performance and to tackle delay in the adoption system. Scorecards are produced for a 3-year rolling average, with the latest data being published for April 2018 - March 2019 (Published April 2020 as below).

The current indicators are:

A10 – number of days between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. The current threshold is 426 days.

A2 – the number of days between receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and the Agency decision about a match to an adoptive family. The current threshold is 121 days.

A10



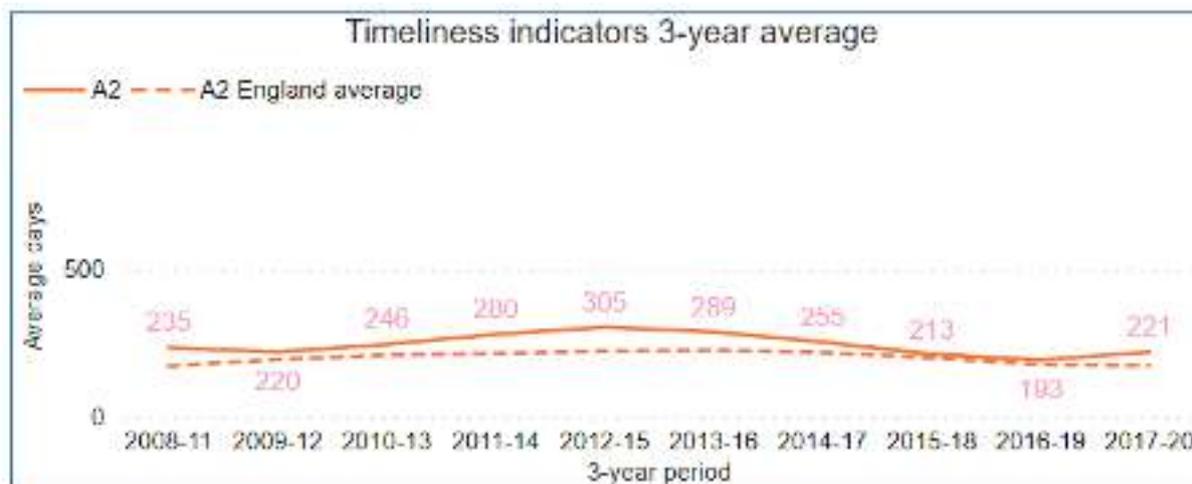
A10: Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster care adoptions:				
2020 average days: 375	2020 England average: 375	Average time in 2020 was shorter than in 2019	2017-20 average days: 387	2017-20 England average: 367

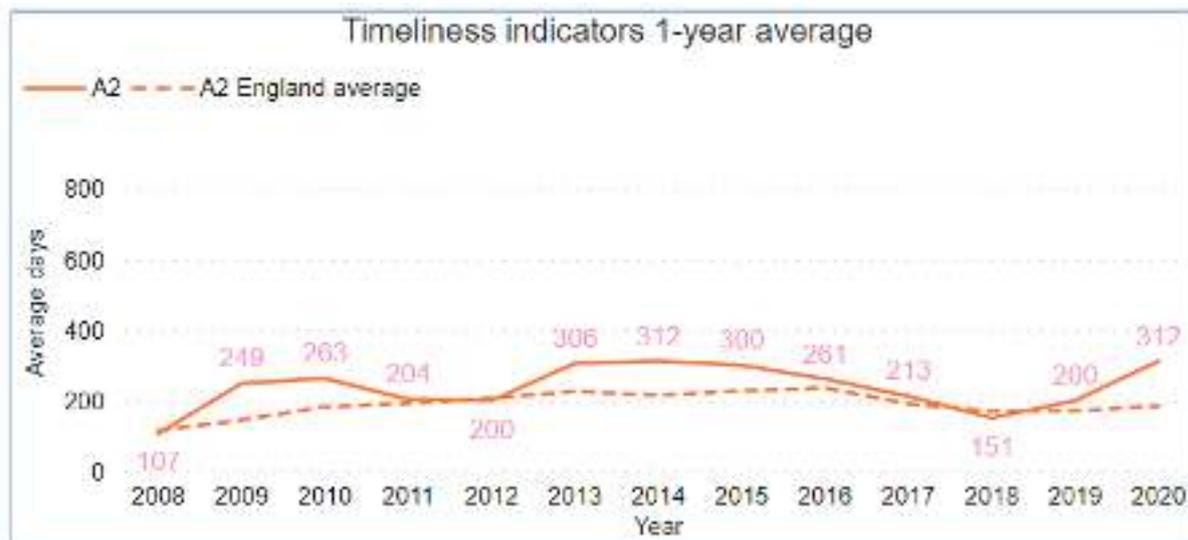
A10 performance for both single year and three year average is below threshold (426) and close to or consistent with the England average (375).

The single year performance is 51 days below threshold and nine days above England average.

The three year average is 39 days below threshold and 59 days below national average.

A2





A2: Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family:

2020 average days: 312	2020 England average: 185	Average time in 2020 was longer than in 2019	2017-20 average days: 221	2017-20 England average: 175
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Performance for A2 is significantly above threshold for both three year average and single year. it is also above England average for both indicators.

The three year average is 100 days above the threshold (121) and 54 days above the national average.

The single year performance is 191 days above threshold and 64 days above the national average.

Please note that published scorecard data incorporate average performance over 3 years up to and including the year 2019/20. Adoption@Heart provided adoption services for Dudley Council from April 2019, so currently the published scorecard data includes the 2 previous years.

3.1 Early Permanency

There were three children placed in year in early permanence placements via Foster for Adopt.

4. Recruitment of Adopters:

4.1 New Enquiries

For the period from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022, 609 new enquiries were received by the Adoption@Heart Recruitment Team.

This is in comparison to 638 enquiries received last year.

4.2 Information Events

22 virtual information events took place with 311 people attending (262 units) and six phone consultations (mix of single and joint applicants). Therefore, 44 percent of people who made an enquiry went on to receive information.

5. Marketing Report:

Marketing figures for this period are:

- 609 enquiries
- Six phone consultations and 311 people attended virtual information events
- Between 1st April 2021 and 31 March 2022, we had a total of 20,656 website visits – made up of 15,503 unique visits
- 457 Twitter followers
- 2,142 Facebook likes
- 286 Instagram Followers

Marketing brief

The beginning of the year saw the launch of the national 'You Can Adopt' sibling campaign. Along with local PR, social media posts and a targeted Google Ads campaign, Adoption@Heart placed digital adverts on screens across the region including a digital screen on the M6 (both directions).

In September and October, Adoption@Heart took part in a black adopter's campaign, a national campaign to encourage black people to find out more about adoption. Using a toolkit of messages and artwork, Adoption@Heart ran a campaign including targeted Google Ads, PR to regional media, digital 'page takeovers' on the Express & Star website, a sponsored

story and Facebook post with the Express & Star, plus, a schedule of co-ordinated social media posts across Adoption@Heart's and partner social media channels.

In December, Adoption@Heart shared a story of two adopted brothers that wanted to donate their Christmas presents to children that go without during the festive period. The gifts were donated to Graiseley Strengthening Families Hub, which coordinated a donation drive for children in need and refugee families who had recently arrived in the city. Adoption@Heart helped coordinate the donation and shared the story with local press and via social media channels.

LGBT+ adoption and fostering week took place in March 2022 which saw the launch of the 'Be the Change' campaign, a recruitment campaign to encourage those from the LGBT+ community who are considering adoption or would like more information to come forward. Adoption@Heart had support from LGBT+ adopters to share their stories across multiple platforms including video, social media, blog posts, news articles and at a virtual information event.

Adoption@Heart has continued to offer virtual information events for prospective adopters using Microsoft Teams. These events have continued to work well and were attended by an average of 14 people per event across the year. Events are hosted by Social Workers, the Marketing Executive and an adopter, where possible. The format of video, a presentation plus Q&A session continues to provide an interactive and engaging session. Conversion from attendance to submitted EOI, continues to remain high.

Regular meetings continue to take place with the Communications Leads across the three local authorities and the Trust. The meetings are used to discuss both national and regional marketing campaigns and activities, the marketing and communications support given to Adoption@Heart by the other comms leads (utilising the knowledge of their areas and resources) and what future support is needed and how the partnership can work going forward. Ongoing plans include the possibility of a joint campaign for adoption and fostering plus working more closely together on community event attendance across the Black Country.

This year will see the launch of a further national 'You Can Adopt' campaign aimed at increasing awareness of the types of children that wait the longest for a family. The new campaign is due to launch late June 2022. Adoption@Heart also aims to make improvements to its website and grow its social media channels in order to increase reach and impact.

6. Requirements on the Preparation of Adoption Report Regulations:

6.1 Complaints

There were three formal complaints about the service during the twelve month period.

One related to adopter applicants who were not recommended for approval by the agency. This is delayed in stage one due to a pending IRM hearing which found in favour of the service

and a subsequent review by the Local Government Ombudsman also support decision making in the service and did not uphold the applicant's complaint.

A further complaint related to delayed applications to the Adoption Support Fund as well as a delayed later life letter (for a child placed by Wolverhampton prior to April 2019). An LGSCO referral has found against Adoption@Heart and the Council and resulted in financial compensation to the complainant.

Additionally, an adoptive parent has made a formal complaint about the level of support provided to her teenage adoptive daughter, who is estranged from her care with no plan of rehabilitation. The young person concerned does not live in the A@H region and the complaint is still in process of investigation.

7. Staffing:

The service employs 32 qualified Social Workers on a permanent basis, along with six agency Social Workers, who are providing additional capacity due to vacant posts, sickness, maternity leave and additional demand created by Covid-19. Two agency Social Workers have been funded by the partner agencies for twelve months, to provide additional family finding capacity.

There are three Team Managers, with one each covering the thematic service areas. The panel team have two Panel Advisors along with a Panel Co-ordinator and three Panel Administrators.

Management capacity has been increased with the addition of a Service Manager, funded within the existing budget. A successful applicant was appointed internally and started in post 1 March 2022.

The recruitment vacancy rates have remained low since the service went live and despite Covid-19, sickness and absence rates have been minimal during the full year period of 2021/22.

8. Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM):

There has been one referral to the IRM in the period and this has not yet been heard by the IRM panel. It relates to a non-approval of an adopter application.

9. Children's Family Finding Activity:

The tables below contain the total numbers of children placed by the service during the year 2021/22.

Children placed 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022

LA/Trust	Inhouse	Interagency	Total Placed
Dudley	12	10	22
Sandwell	17	12	29
Walsall	13	5	18
Wolverhampton	22	12	34
Total	64	39	103

Inter-agency usage for full year is 38 percent, thus 62 percent of children were placed in house.

Children Placed Foster for Adopt

LA/Trust	FFA Inhouse	FFA Interagency	Total
Dudley	2	1	3
Sandwell	9	3	12
Walsall	8	1	9
Wolverhampton	8	0	8
Total	27	5	32

Inter-agency usage for FFA placed in full year is 15 percent.

Analysis – Children Placed

The number of children matched and placed with adoptive families in the full year is 103. This is less than the number placed in the previous year (124).

38 percent of children placed to 31 March were placed inter-agency and this represents a significant improvement on end of the previous year performance (56 percent).

The spread of children placed/matched across the four partners is closer in consistency than in previous years, albeit numbers are higher for Wolverhampton and lower in Walsall. There has been a significant increase in children placed for Dudley.

More children have now been placed in house than inter-agency for all partners, without such significant variation as was evident in previous quarters.

It is very positive that 32 children have been placed via Foster for Adopt (31 in previous year) and that 85 percent of these were placed with in house adopters. Early Permanence practice in the partnership continues to improve and has significantly increased since the establishment of Adoption@Heart.

10. Adoption Panels:

During the year all adoption panels met virtually due to the constraints and restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has continued and it is not likely that panels will return to a face to face format.

Virtual panels have been largely well received by adopters who have indicated that they feel more comfortable in their own homes. There have also been benefits for Social Workers and panel members who have not had to travel.

Panel activity approvals & matches per month 2020/21 & 2021/22

	2020/21	2021/22	2020/21	2021/22
	Approvals	Approvals	Matches	Matches
April	5	5	7	10
May	4	4	16	10
June	5	8	11	13
July	7	7	8	8
August	8	3	12	5
September	7	7	19	6
October	5	3	20	11
November	7	5	7	12
December	4	3	6	3
January	6	3	6	5
February	3	10	8	6
March	6	7	11	14
Total	67	65	131	103

Panel membership

The Panel continues to function and is well supported by its committed members and support staff. We currently have 36 panel members on the central list who can sit on the Adoption panel. In addition, six medical advisors for the three Local Authorities and the Children's trust sit on panels on a Rota basis. There are four Panel Chairs, following the recruitment of an additional chair.

The central list offers a good representation of members who have either been adopted or have adopted and this is seen as very positive in terms of the perspective they bring. Whilst a number have been recruited since last year, there is still further need to increase the number of males on the panel and people who are representative of the community we serve. The increase in the central list offers the opportunity to have a panel which reflects a professional perspective, independence, skill, knowledge and experience.

Panel training

In the period 21/22 panel members have had the opportunity to attend the following training event:

A@H Panel Development Day 02/02/2022. With the agenda items including, A@H performance, a legal update, learning reviews & disruptions, examples of matching done well and keeping in touch (KIT).

Panel business

Panel met on 53 occasions during 2021-2022, there are 50 panels a year for adoption matters to be heard. There is also flexibility within the panel system allowing for extra and special panels to be arranged in order to enable additional cases and emergency matters to be heard, as and when directed by the courts. This means that children do not wait and matters are dealt with in a timely manner.

The Agency Decision Makers from Dudley make all the decisions regarding the suitability for approval of all prospective adopters. The SHOBPA decisions remain in the three Local Authorities and the Trust. Agency Decision Makers are very flexible regarding early decisions in relation to matches, in order to enable transitions that work best for the child/ren for example, using school holidays.

Approvals

A@H is welcoming of adopters from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, those in same sex relationships, single applicants and those with disabilities.

62 adopters were approved in this reporting period reduction of seven from the previous year. Not all adopters recommended for approval at panel were subject to Agency Decision in the year, thus 57 were formally approved in the year.

Feedback from Adopters about their experience at panel

Feedback from Adopters is sought after every panel. 32 responses were collated from adopters who had attended panel.

Of those who responded, 100% said that they had received enough information about panel beforehand, felt they were given enough notice, found panel members friendly, were given opportunity to express their views, felt they were treated fairly and found the questions they were asked relevant.

94% rated their overall experience as excellent. 6% rated their overall experience as good.

Quotes from adopters include

- *'We both felt really nervous about panel beforehand but was made to feel less nervous by the friendly panel team. Was really helpful speaking to chair beforehand too.'*
- *'Despite feeling nervous before hand, the panel was a really positive experience and we felt at ease answering questions.'*
- *'We have now experienced a face-to-face and online panel. Doing it online was extremely convenient second time around and still had the same impact as face-to-face.'*
- *'Our meeting was online and although everyone was introduced to us, when we were told that individuals were going to ask us questions it was difficult to identify them on the screen which could detract a little from the question being asked. It might be helpful for the person who is going to speak to put their hand up or wave for a very short period before starting the question, just so that we can identify the person speaking.'*
- *'Panel was an extremely positive and truly amazing experience.'*

11. Inspections:

Two of the local authorities (Walsall and Wolverhampton) in the Adoption@Heart partnership were inspected in the year within the Ofsted ILACS framework. The first in Walsall was a full ILACS inspection and very positive feedback was provided by the inspectors about Adoption@Heart service and its effectiveness in meeting the needs of children and adoptive families. Inspectors in Wolverhampton, within a brief inspection process, raised no concerns about the effectiveness of the service.

12. Adoption Support:

The team continues to provide all aspects of pre and post order adoption support on behalf of each of the four local authorities and now supports families pre and post order. The team commissions therapeutic services via applications to the Adoption Support Fund, plus post adoption contact, access to records and birth parent support.

It is recognised that early life adversity impacts children developmentally, emotionally, cognitively and socially and requires therapeutic support in order for children to thrive. Adoption@Heart operates a graduated approach, offering universal access to an adoption training programme and support groups delivered by staff; enhanced support includes an assessment of need and parenting support, individually or in groups and targeted support includes commissioning of specialist therapeutic intervention. We utilise the service of an Adoption Support Therapist employed by Adoption@Heart, as well as commissioning private and independent therapeutic services.

The starting point for accessing the Adoption Support Service is an Assessment of Need. The team undertook the following number of these in the twelve month period.

Dudley	69
Sandwell	43
Walsall	51
Wolverhampton	63
Total	226

The Adoption Support Fund was established in 2015 by the Government to help adoptive families access support and settle into their new lives following adoption. The Government committed ongoing funding for 2020-21 financial year in advance of the spending review settlement.

ASF Applications completed in the year

Sandwell	43
Walsall	51
Dudley	69
Wolverhampton	63
Total	226

Post Adoption Contact

Adoption@Heart is responsible for post adoption contact arrangements on behalf of Dudley Council. There are three full-time Family Support Workers who are responsible for administering the service. They offer support to adoptive parents and birth relatives. The service has continued remotely during Covid 19, albeit there has been delay in the exchanges at this time as access to post is limited to once a week.

Dudley	425
Sandwell	598
Walsall	826
Wolverhampton	367
Total	2216

Access to Records

The provision of birth records counselling and access to information is of vital importance in enabling adopted adults to understand the circumstances of their adoption and enhance their sense of identity. The team supported the numbers of requests below within each area.

Dudley	20
Sandwell	12
Walsall	10
Wolverhampton	10
Total	52

Birth Parent Support

The team also provides support to birth parents affected by adoption and the following numbers were supported by the service in the twelve month period.

Dudley	2
Sandwell	5
Walsall	7
Wolverhampton	4
Total	18

13. Accountability:**Management board**

The service has continued to have in place two key layers of governance with a Management Board attended by Assistant Directors and a Strategic Commissioning Board attended by Directors of Children's Service.

The Strategic Commissioning Board has continued to meet quarterly, supported by the commissioning lead from Dudley. The chairing of this board has remained with Dudley Council during the year 2021/22.

An Operations Group was established in the previous year, with a view to increasing engagement, oversight and operational involvement of Heads of Service and other Managers from each partner service. This group has continued to meet monthly, chaired by the Head of Service for Adoption@Heart. The Management Board has met bi-monthly.

Management Board is chaired by the Deputy Director for Children's Social Care in Wolverhampton, as host Local Authority for Adoption@Heart.

With effect from autumn 2022, it has been agreed that the governance arrangements will change with the establishment of a new board which will be titled the Strategic Partnership Board (SPB). This will replace both Management Board and Strategic Commissioning Board and representation will be from Assistant Directors, with a Director of Children's Services chairing. This decision to streamline the governance arrangements has been made in light of the continued positive progress of the service in becoming an effective and high performing Regional Adoption Agency for the region. The legal agreement and related documents supporting the current governance arrangements are being reviewed to reflect this change.

Report completed by:



Mark Tobin
Head of Service