



Aspire Adoption Services Annual Report

1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024

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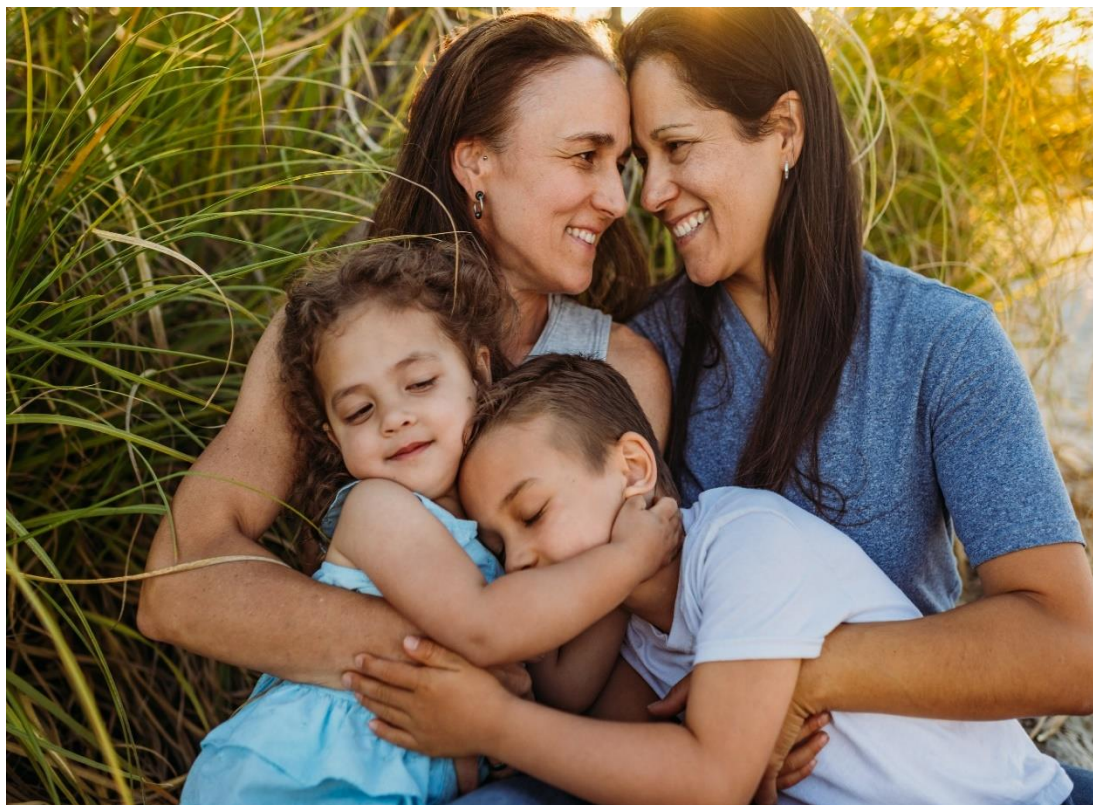
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is the 7th Annual Report for Aspire Adoption Services (Aspire).
- 1.2 Aspire is the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) which undertakes the adoption functions on behalf of Dorset Council and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council.
- 1.3 The provision of an adoption service is a statutory requirement. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 provides the structure for an adoption service. Under the Adoption Act 2002 s3, each Council must continue to maintain within its area an adoption service designed to meet the needs of children who may be adopted, their parents, their natural parents and former guardians. These services are referred to as the Adoption Service, (Adoption and Children Act 2002 s2 (1)). An Adoption Agency refers either to a Local Authority or to a Registered Adoption Society under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 s2 (1).
- 1.4 On 17 July 2017 Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset Councils combined their adoption services to form Aspire Adoption Services (Aspire) This changed in March 2019 with a Local Government Reorganisation to create a new council of Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Council (BCP) and Dorset Council.
- 1.5 The Councils chose a 'hosted model' as their delivery model for the RAA. BCP Council act as the host for Aspire.
- 1.6 Whilst each Council retains overall responsibility for their adoption services and continues to retain overall responsibility for their cared-for children, most adoption functions are delegated to Aspire. The detail of this is outlined in our Schedule of Responsibilities.
- 1.7 Aspire has responsibility for recruiting, assessing, and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and for inter-country adoptions. Aspire is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans in the Dorset region. Aspire provides support to all parties affected by adoption; including adopters, adoptees, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives.
- 1.8 An Inter Authority Agreement sets out the terms and conditions for the establishment and operation of Aspire between the parties, including the key objectives of Aspire; the principles of collaboration; the governance structures for Aspire; and the respective roles and responsibilities the parties have during the currency of the agreement.

- 1.9 It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2024. Plans for children are dynamic and develop every day and the picture will have changed at the point this is read. Our task has been to place children promptly in adoptive families that have been robustly assessed and are well-prepared for the challenges of adoption. We support children and their families throughout their childhood and adolescence.



2. Partnership Working

- 2.1 Aspire has the responsibility to discharge the two local authorities' responsibilities as an Adoption Agency. The working relationship between the local council (local authority) and Aspire is fundamental to the success of the partnership working.
- 2.2 Aspire Strategic Partnership Board is chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services for Dorset Council. The Board consists of the Lead Member for Children's Services from each Authority, the Director of Children's Services of each Authority, a representative from a Voluntary Adoption Agency, Parents and Children Together (PaCT), the Designated Doctor for Children in Care (pan Dorset) and Parents and Carers Together, the Service User Consultative Forum.
- 2.3 The Service Directors/Heads of Service for each of the Local Authority Children's Services attend the six weekly Operational Board Meetings. In broad terms, the Operational Board has day-to-day operational responsibility for Aspire. This Board is chaired by the Director of Corporate Parenting and Permanence for BCP Council.

- 2.4 Aspire works closely with both BCP and Dorset councils; these are our Local Authority (LA) partners. We attend LA Tracking and Legal Planning Meetings with both LAs to progress as promptly as possible where children are unable to live with their birth families and need an adoptive family.
- 2.5 Aspire act as the allocated Social Worker for all BCP children once a Placement Order is made, and for those aged 2 and under for Dorset children.
- 2.6 For children within Dorset aged 2 and over, Aspire provide a comprehensive Family Finding Offer and support colleagues within the Children's Services teams to progress plans in a timely manner to achieve permanence through adoption.
- 2.7 In all children's cases Aspire co-allocate a Family Finding Social Worker from the point of a Should Be Placed for Adoption Decision being made and remain involved until the making of an Adoption Order. This is unique as the other 31 RAA's cease their Family Finding involvement either at the point of the child being placed with their prospective adoptive family, or at the first Adoption Review.
- 2.8 With regards to the provision of Adoption support, Aspire are a small co-located RAA; we know our adoptive families well and offer a bespoke wrap around support package from pre-match to post Adoption Order, resulting in fewer placement breakdowns. We have developed close working relationships with children's social work teams, Early Help and both Virtual Schools to ensure that families get the support they need.
- 2.9 Aspire also work closely with Adoption England, The Southwest Adoption Consortium (SWAC) and the Southwest Permanence Project. The Service Manager for Aspire sits on the Governance boards for all three.



- 2.10 Adoption England is a collaboration of Regional Adoption Agencies working together, with a small central team working nationally aiming to improve adoption practice and develop support and services to better meet the needs of children and families.
- 2.11 Aspire has been directly involved in National projects such as the Early Permanence Project, promoting the use of Early Permanence (EP), and providing training to both

our partner LAs and to the Judiciary, local solicitors, Barristers and Cafcass to improve the use and understanding of EP.

- 2.12 Aspire has also been involved with a recent research project into RAA's case holding from Placement Order, as Aspire are just one of 5 RAA's that undertake this work. This work was commissioned as many other RAA's are considering taking on this role, but there was no evidential base to identify whether this was beneficial for children. This research is due to be published in May/June 2024. However, initial findings are thought to indicate that a better service is provided to children where the RAA acts as the main case holding agency.
- 2.13 Work is being undertaken at a National and Regional level to explore improvements in the commissioning of adoption support services. Aspire is piloting a new Support Plan designed by Adoption England and Coram, as the information from the Adoption Barometer shows many adoptive families do not believe they have an easily accessible Support Plan.



- 2.14 Aspire are members of SWAC which consists of our regional partner RAAs Adoption West and Adopt Southwest, and the regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies; Clifton Childrens Services, Parents and Children Together, Action for Children and Barnardo's. All agencies work in partnership to support the development of practice through workshops and training events.
- 2.15 SWAC run 3 Adoption Exchanges a year, either virtually or in person.
- 2.16 At these exchanges Family Finders for children profile the children they have waiting. Social workers supporting adopters waiting also attend, as do prospective adopters themselves. All the SWAC Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) are invited to profile their children waiting, and neighbouring RAAs are also invited to these events.
- 2.17 There are also monthly profiling sessions held virtually where family finders in the 3 SWAC Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) can profile their children waiting. Workers in the RAAs and VAAs also attend virtually, to represent their adoptive families waiting.



- 2.18 Aspire is involved in the Southwest Permanence Project alongside all the Southwest RAAs. The area covered includes 3 Regional Adoption Agencies, 13 Local Authorities and 5 Voluntary Adoption Agencies. This project is a three-year research project looking into ways of ensuring permanence for children with complex health needs.
- 2.19 The experience of the RAA's in this region is that traditional approaches to adopter recruitment identify few adopters who feel they can provide a family for a child with a disability or complex health needs.
- 2.20 The project is funded for up to three years by the National Adoption Team as part of the National Adoption Strategy (July 2021) with progress reviews completed quarterly and learning shared nationally.

3. Children's Adoption Performance Data

3.1 Who are our Children?



3.2 As can be seen below in Fig 1. most children placed over the last year were male (61%), of which 69.4% were aged between 0-2 years old. Of the female children, the pattern is the same with the majority (60.8%) being aged between 0-2 years old. Of the children aged 3 plus, again the pattern is repeated with 60% of those children being male.

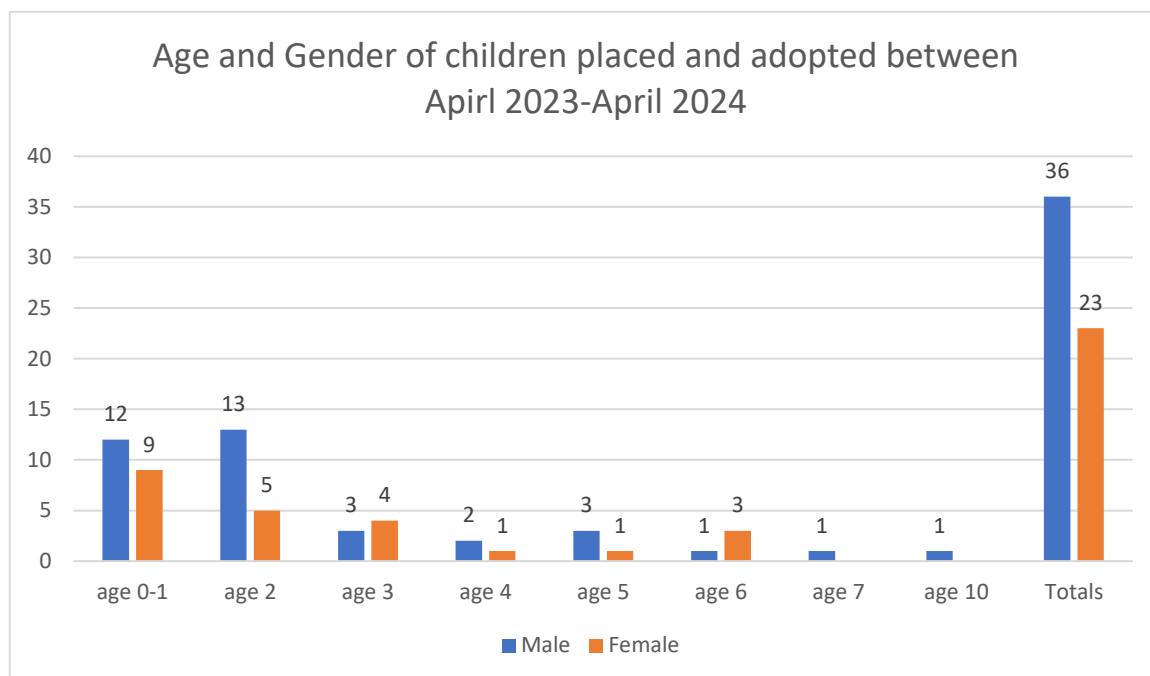


Fig 1

3.3 Aspire has placed 7 sibling groups within the past year. Except for one sibling group of 2 children, all were placed with Aspire adopters as can be seen in Fig 2.

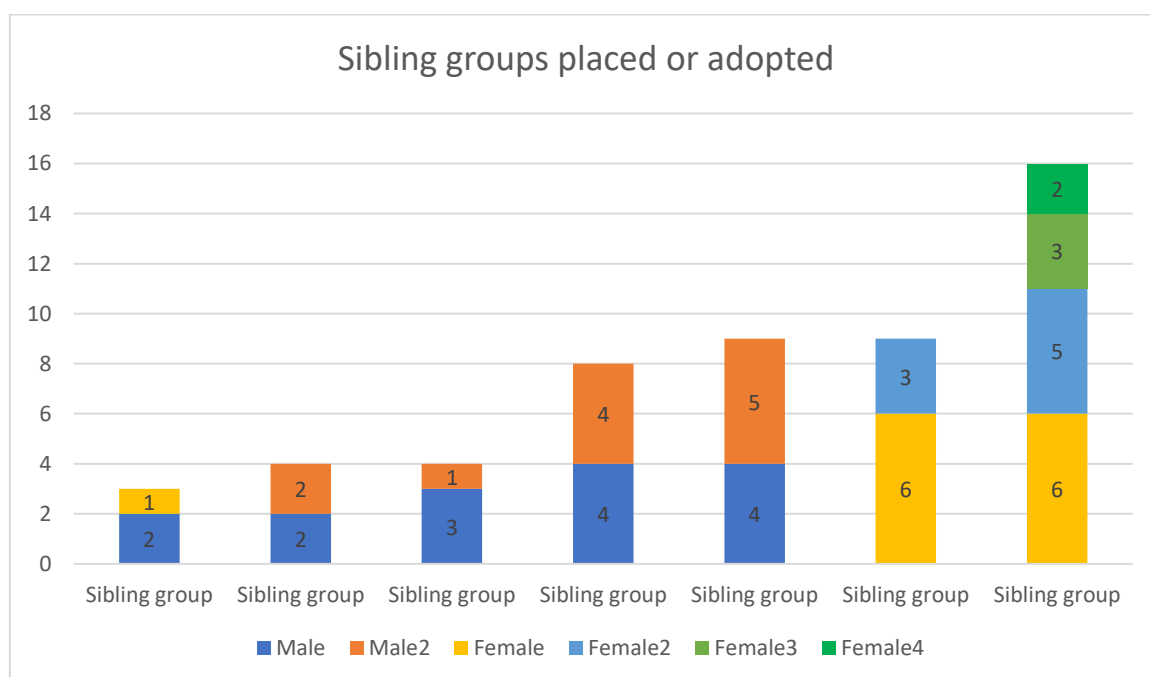


Fig 2

3.4 Fig. 3 below shows the combined numbers of children and the key stages of their adoptive journey for the RAA.

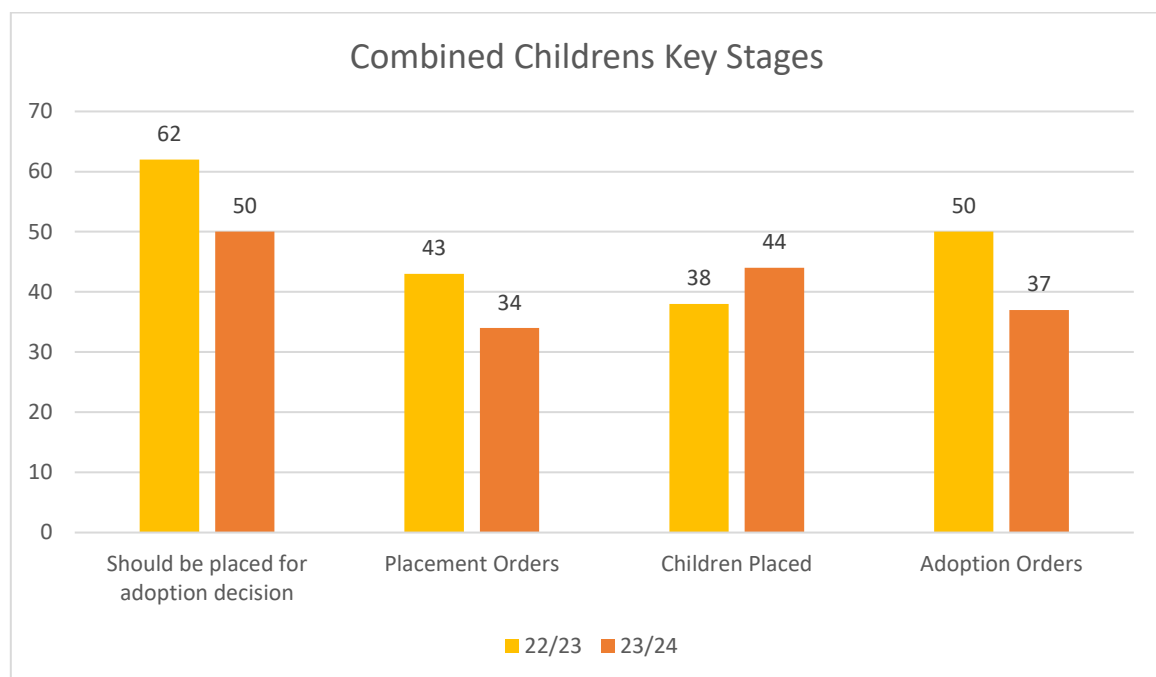


Fig 3.

3.5 There has been a reduction this year in the number of children with Should Be Placed for Adoption decisions (SBPA), Placement Orders and Adoption Orders. Key reasons for this include changes of plan, extended family or kinship carers being identified prior to the plan being Adoption, or birth parents making the necessary identified changes.

3.6 There has also been a reduction in the number of Adoption Orders made within the year. There are several Adoption Applications before the Court that carried into 2024/25 due to the parents seeking leave to oppose. This is a regular occurrence within the Courts in Dorset and leads to approximately 12 weeks additional delay to the making of an Adoption Order, even if the application to oppose is denied. This is due to the additional time for statements, hearings, and a period of 21 days to enable birth parents to appeal the decision.

3.8 Fig. 4 shows the individual data for Dorset, and Fig. 5 shows that for BCP. Fig. 6 shows the number of children for each LA placed with Aspire adopters or within Inter-agency Placements.

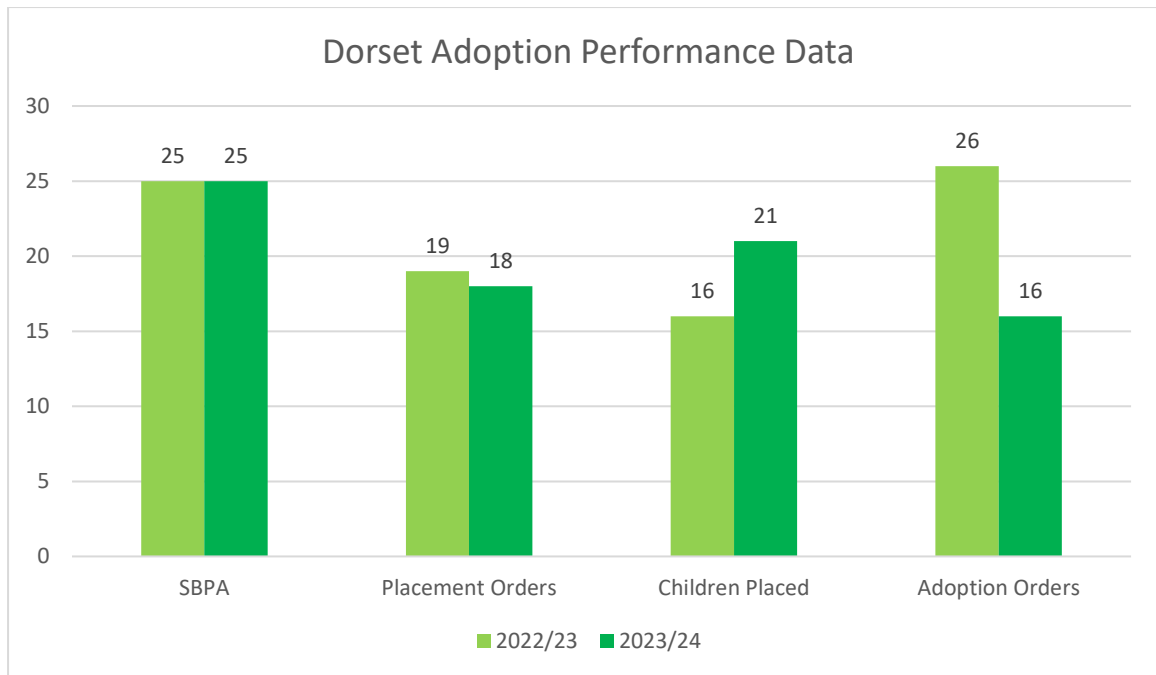


Fig 4

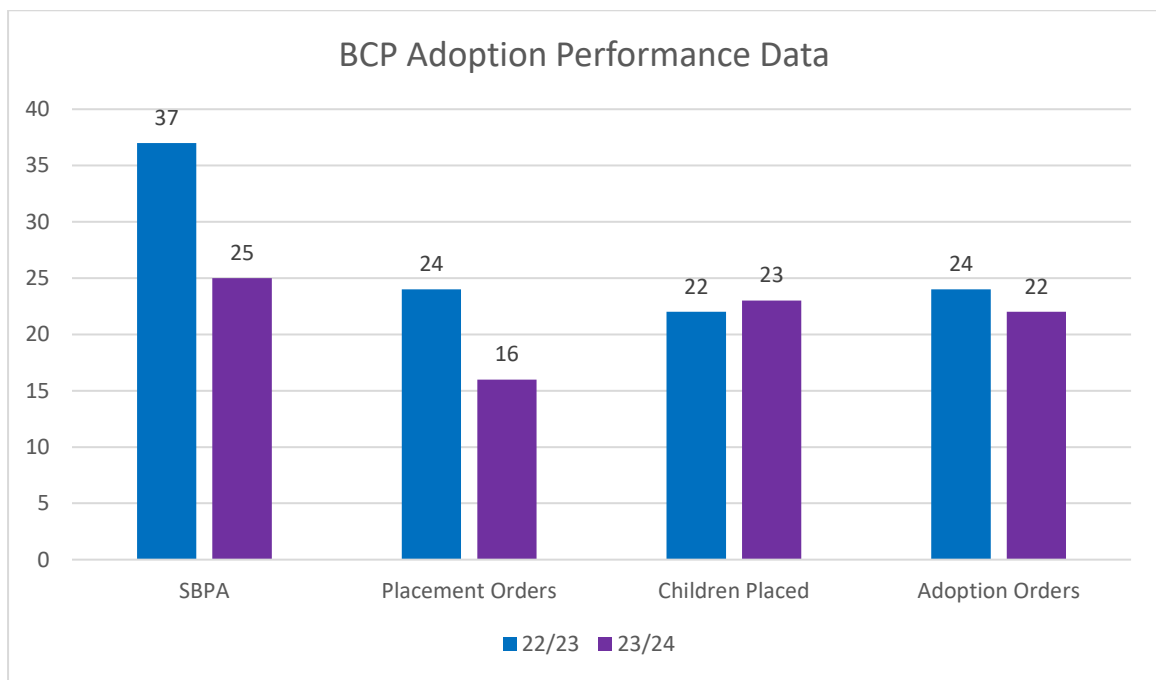


Fig 5

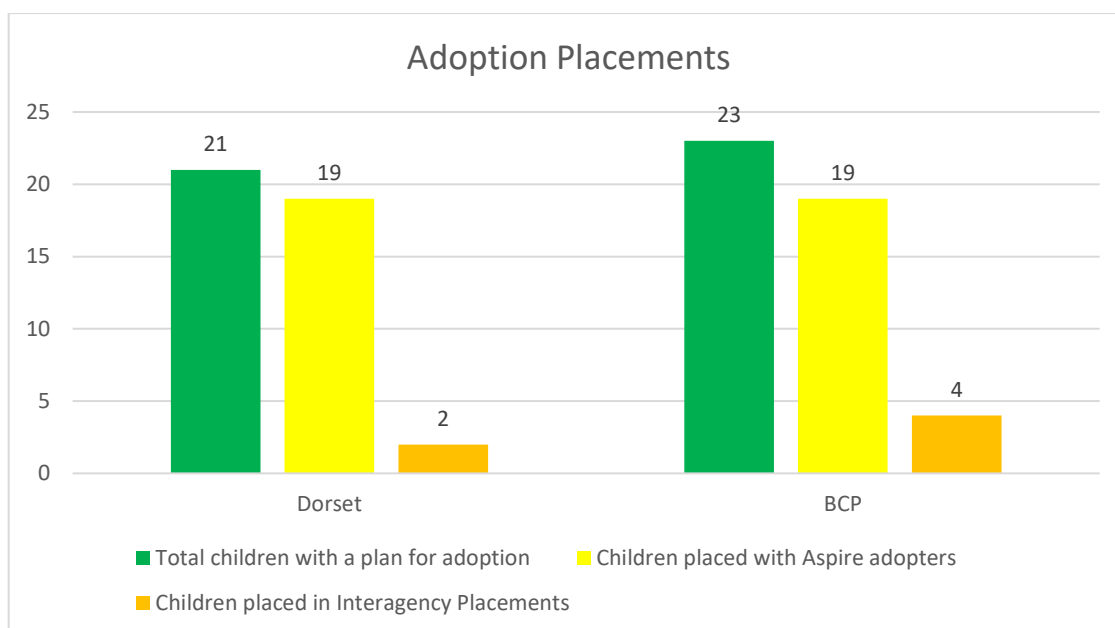


Fig 6

3.8 Should be Placed for Adoption Decisions (SBPA)

Dorset

- 3.9 Dorset have made the same number of SBPA decisions this year as they made in 2022/23, totalling 25.
- 3.10 Of the total SBPA decisions made, 13 were for boys and 12 for girls. There were 8 sibling groups, 4 of which were groups of 2 siblings, 4 of which were groups of 3. 11 children were below the age of 2, and the remaining children were aged between 2 and 7 years old at the time of the SBPA decision.
- 3.11 All but 3 children were White British, those not, were a sibling group of 3 of White and Black Caribbean heritage.

BCP

- 3.12 BCP made significantly fewer SBPA decisions in 2023/24 than the previous year; 25 in 2023/24 compared with 37 in 2022/23. Several SBPA decisions were deferred as additional assessments of family and friends were required, and as such some of those decisions are likely to be made within 2024/25.
- 3.13 Of the 25 SBPA decisions made; 11 were for boys and 14 for were girls. There was 1 sibling group of 3, and 2 sibling groups of 2. 13 children were aged below 2, and the remaining children aged between 2 and 8 years old at the time of the SBPA decision.
- 3.14 Similarly to Dorset Council, all but 3 children were White British. Those not, were a sibling group of 3 with White and Black Caribbean heritage.

3.15 Placement Orders

Dorset

- 3.16 There has been a decrease by 1 in Placement Orders granted this year, from 19 in 2022/23 to 18 in 2023/24.

BCP

- 3.17 There has been a significant decrease in Placement Orders being made this year. In 2022/23 there were 24 Placement Orders granted, compared to 2023/24 where there were 16 granted. This is a decrease of 33%.
- 3.18 Delays with Placement Orders being made by the Court have increased, resulting in Care Orders being granted at the conclusion of Proceedings and Placement Order applications being filed at a later stage. This is a recent development following changes to legal aid in March 2023, enabling birth family to seek legal aid for the Placement Order application. This enables the Court to make a Care Order without delaying this for the Placement Order application.
- 3.19 There were also changes of Care Plans for 7 children following the SBPA decision being made, and these children returned home.

Children Placed

- 3.20 There has been a slight increase in children being placed within 2023/24. Of the children placed 90% of Dorset Children and 82% of BCP children were placed with Aspire adopters. Overall, 86% percent of children placed were with Aspire adopters.
- 3.21 Those children that were placed Inter-agency were for Dorset, a child aged 7 and another aged 9, and for BCP a sibling group of 2 where one sibling had significant complex needs, 1 child aged 5 with complex needs, and 1 child who required a specific religion.

3.22 Adoption Orders

- 3.23 50 Adoption Orders were granted in 2022/23, a decrease of 35% compared to 37 in 2023/24.

Dorset

- 3.24 Of the 25 adoption Orders made in 2022/23, 5 related to Adoption Order Hearings that were adjourned from 2021/22 due to the Somerset Ruling.
- 3.25 There are also 4 children whose Adoption applications were made within Quarter 4 of 2023/24 however, Leave to Oppose was granted in 1 child's circumstances and

this is now a contested Hearing. There is also a sibling group of 4 which has been, so far, delayed by 4 months from the initial application due to the Court process.

- 3.26 If the figures are adjusted to discount those Adoptions Order that were delayed due to the Somerset Ruling or actively being opposed, then Dorset are broadly speaking in line with the number of Adoption Orders made in 2022/23.

3 BCP

- 3.27 BCP had 1 less Adoption Order made in 2023/24 than in 2022/23. This is due to the application being made in quarter 4 2023/24 but the parents seeking Leave to Oppose, and the Adoption Order being made in Quarter 1 of 2024/25.

We met our new granddaughter for the first time yesterday and what a little poppet she is. Such a beautiful smile and laugh. She really took to her new cousins and both boys loved her. It's amazing to see our L with her own child and how well they are doing after only one week, they seem to have really bonded already. We really want to thank you for the help and support you have given L and for finding the perfect little girl for her. I'm sure you've gone above and beyond. We can't wait until the adoption becomes official and she is truly part of our family in every way. With very best wishes from both of us, Grandma and Grandpa

3.28 Children waiting for a match.

- 3.29 BCP, Dorset and Aspire are ambitious for their children and strive to seek placements for all children, no matter what age, level of need or sibling group size.
- 3.30 For the children currently waiting for a match, Aspire has worked hard to increase the range and diversity of adopters, enabling children labelled 'hardest to place' find loving adoptive families by prioritising the assessment of those families wishing to consider sibling groups and older children.
- 3.31 Aspire have also attended matching events both Regionally and Nationally, linked with our SWAC Partners, and have used Link Maker, a national matching tool to link with external adopters. There are currently 11 prospective adopters who will consider older children and sibling groups, and 2 would be happy to explore older children with additional needs.

Children with PO
waiting for a
match

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
BCP	11	13	11	15	10	16	12	7	7	10	5	5

Children with PO waiting for a match

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Dorset	10	13	8	7	6	5	6	2	5	4	5	8

Children with PO linked to adopters

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
BCP	5	6	5	6	4	10	8	2	4	5	2	2

Children with PO linked to adopters

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Dorset	7	8	3	4	4	3	6	0	3	2	1	1

Children with PO not yet linked

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
BCP	6	7	6	9	6	6	4	5	3	5	3	3

Children with PO not yet linked

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Dorset	3	5	5	3	2	2	0	2	2	2	4	7

Dorset

- 3.32 Of the 8 Dorset children waiting for a match, 6 children had their Placement Orders made within 4 weeks of the end of Quarter 4 2023/24. 1 child had links with adopters but had not been formally matched at Matching Panel. Of those 8 children, there were a sibling group of 3, two sibling groups of 2, and a younger child. 7 children are deemed harder to place (sibling groups and health needs).

BCP

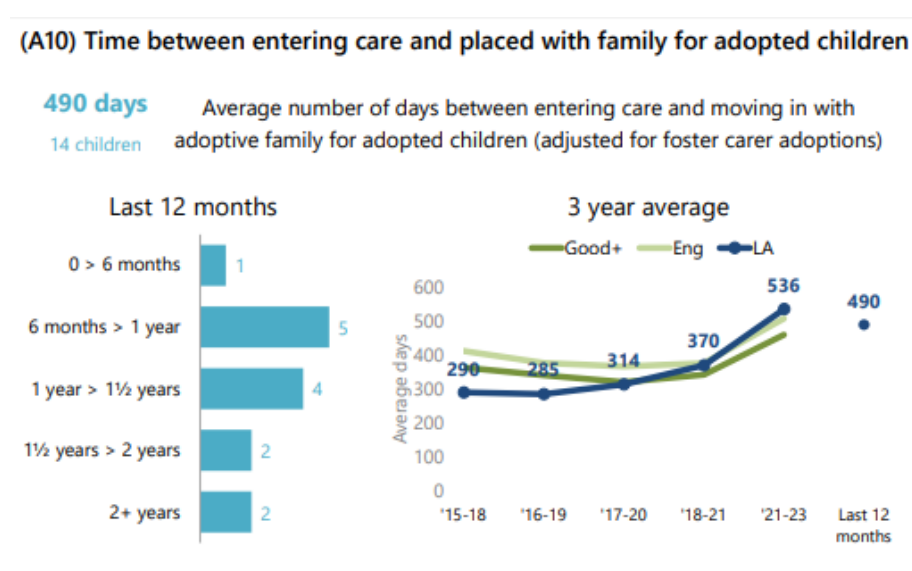
- 3.33 Of the 5 BCP children waiting for a match, 2 children had been linked to adopters but not formally matched at Matching Panel. The remaining 3 children were a sibling group of 2, and a child with significant complex health needs. These 3 children are deemed to be harder to place (sibling groups and health needs).
- 3.34 As a general principle siblings will be placed together; however, due to the individual needs of children this is not always appropriate and cannot always be achieved. It is essential that sibling assessments are carried out to ensure good quality decision making and support plans are evidence based if children are placed together or apart.

3.35 Timeliness of adoption

- 3.36 There has been a decrease in both the time between entering care and being placed for adoption, and the time from Placement Order to be matched with adopters. It must be remembered that lower is better for these figures as this indicates minimum delay in children achieving permanence.

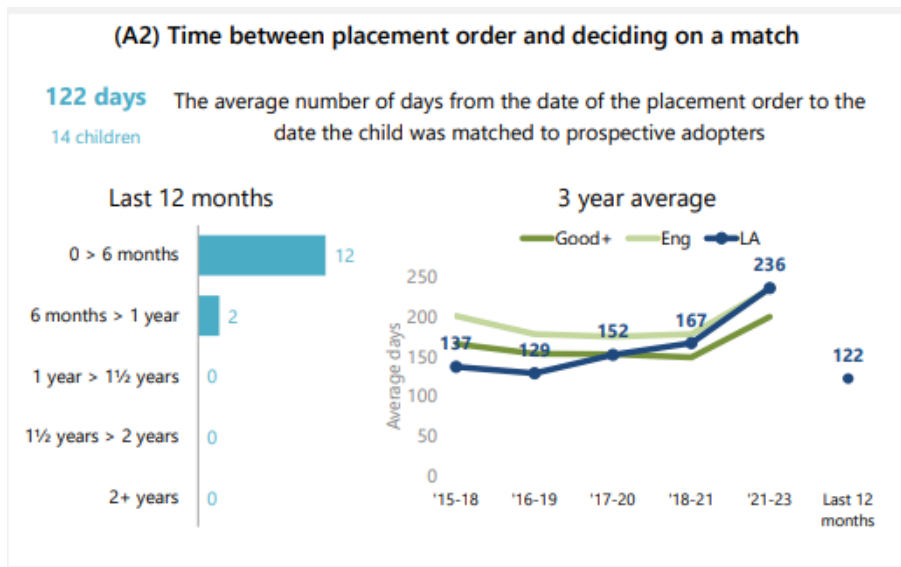
- 3.37 This is attributable to the close working partnerships between BCP, Dorset and Aspire. There has been a sustained improvement in tracking the children's progress throughout their adoptive journey.
- 3.38 In May 2023 Aspire reviewed and implemented a consolidated and updated offer of family finding support to provide a more consistent service for the children where they do not hold case responsibility.
- 3.39 Aspire implemented a tracking process from when the child was placed with their adoptive family and the 10 week point when the adoption application could be made. The aspiration is to file an Adoption Order application within 2 months of the second Adoption Review, following multi-professional agreement.
- 3.40 This consolidated joint working, and targeted recruitment of adopters for our children has resulted in a timelier process, enabling children to be with their families sooner.
- 3.41 The most up to date scorecard data provided at the time of writing this report is the ASGLB RAA Dashboard Q3-2023/24 - A1, A2, A10 and A20 timescales for children adopted in the year to 31 December 2023.
- 3.42 The England average for A10 was 505 days, and 196 days for A2 . Both Dorset and BCP are performing better than the England average in both measures.

3.43 Dorset Timeliness



- 3.44 Dorset are performing better than the England and Good averages in this area. However, this data does include the time taken from entering care to the making of the Placement Order, and there can be delays within the Court process, such as

multiple assessments at a late stage, which can and do impact upon these timescales.

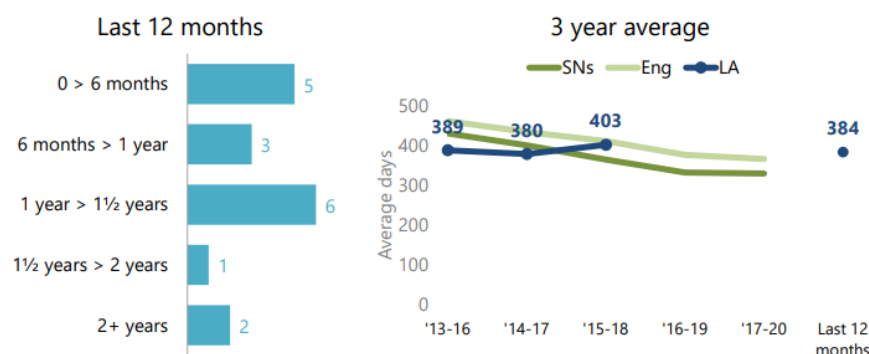


3.45 The timeliness between authority to place and deciding on a match has significantly improved over the last 12 months. Dorset are performing much better than the England and Good national averages. There has been much earlier tracking of children deemed harder to place and targeted recruitment, and in some cases fast tracking of the assessment of the adopters for those children to enable them to achieve permanence.

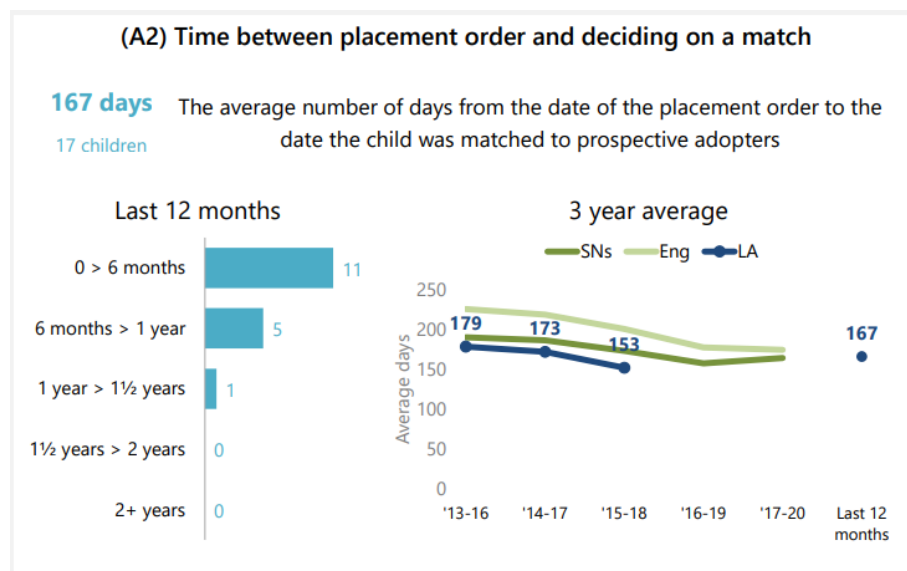
3.46 BCP Timeliness

(A10) Time between entering care and placed with family for adopted children

384 days Average number of days between entering care and moving in with adoptive family for adopted children (adjusted for foster carer adoptions)
17 children



3.47 BCP are performing better than the England and Good averages in this area. However, this data does include the time taken from entering care to the making of the Placement Order, and there can be delays within the Court process, such as multiple assessments at a late stage which can and do impact upon these timescales.



3.48 The timeliness between authority to place and deciding on a match has improved over the last 12 months. BCP are performing much better than the England average. There has been much earlier tracking of children deemed harder to place, and targeted recruitment. In some cases fast tracking of the assessment of the adopters for those children has enabled them to achieve permanence.

3.49 Early Permanence

3.50 Early Permanence(EP) is an umbrella term for two main placement types where children have been placed with approved adopters who are also approved as foster carers. These placement types have previously been known as Concurrent Placements and Foster to Adopt placements.

3.51 EP is seen to be win-win for a child, either they stay with the family they know and feel safe with, or they return to the care of their birth family who they also know and feel safe with. It is the adults who need to manage the uncertainty and challenges.

3.52 Aspire facilitated an EP workshop at the Family Justice Conference in March 2023 to raise awareness and 'myth busting'; this was well attended and received positive feedback from those attending and the designated Judge for Dorset. Aspire have a rolling EP training/workshop offer with our partner LAs.

3.53 This has resulted in an increase in the confidence and use of EP, which is extremely positive for children as they have fewer placement moves, and as above, either go on to

be adopted or return to birth family. Fig. 7 shows the number of children placed within EP placements in 2023/24.

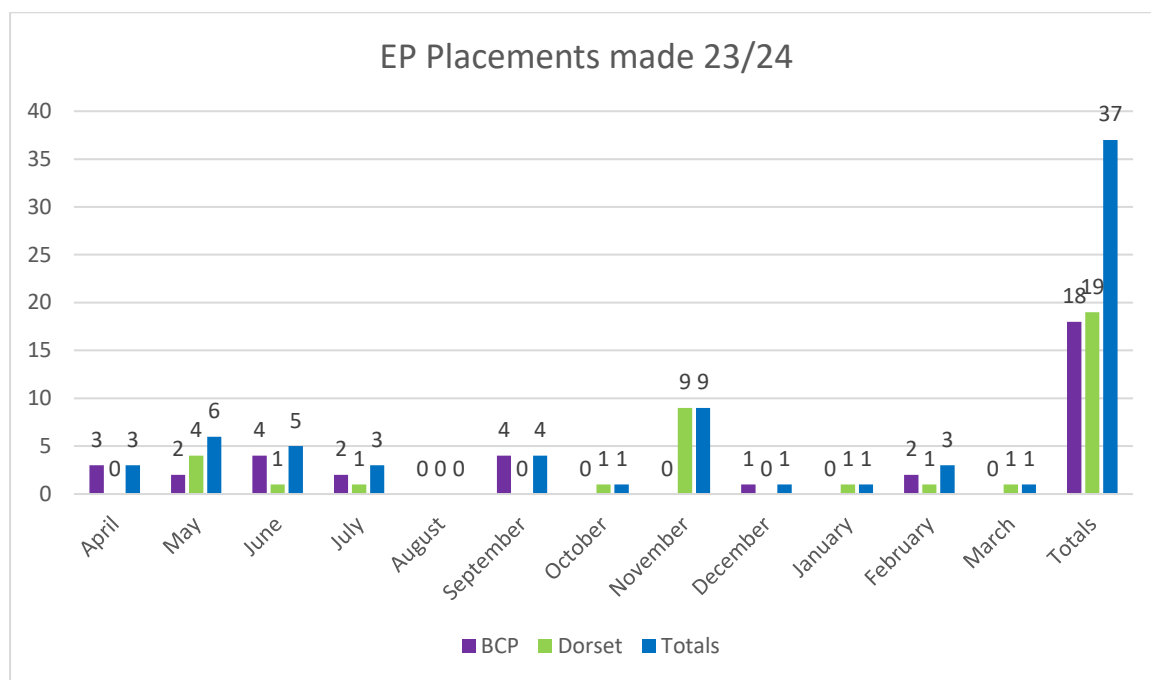


Fig 7

3.54 This is the highest number of EP placements made in a year since Aspire was formed. To compare these figures, Fig. 8 shows the total historic use of Early Permanence.

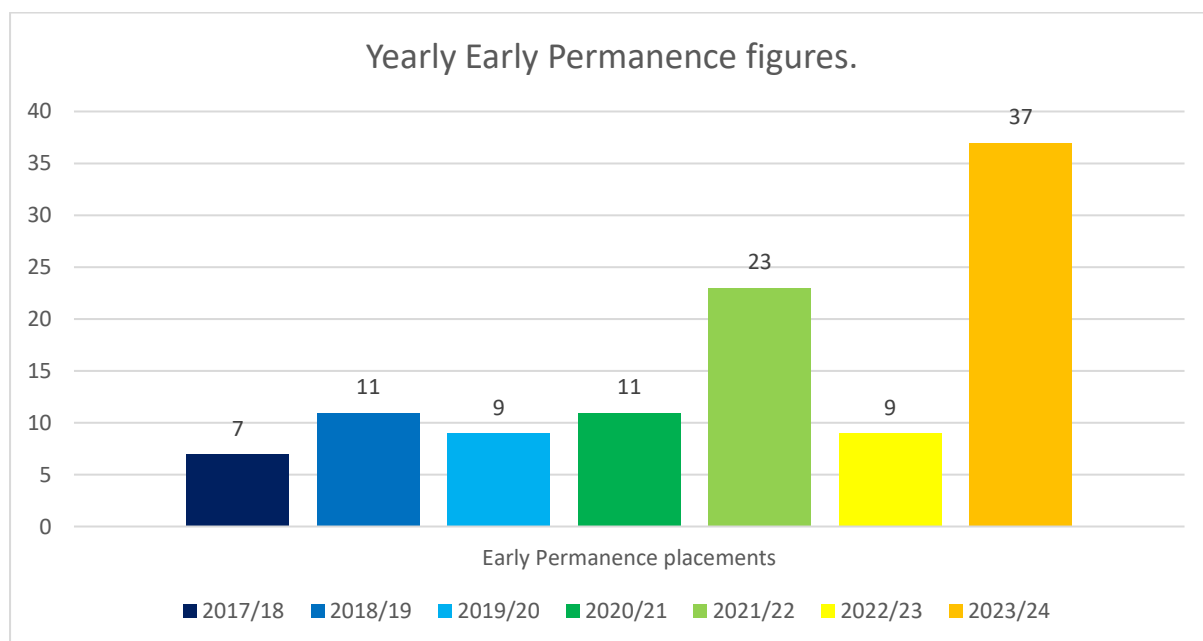


Fig 8

3.55 The increase in 2021/22 was due to the Somerset Ruling, and the use of Early Permanence whilst the decision making was scrutinised to ensure that the SBPA decision was compliant with the adoption regulations, whilst avoiding delay for children.

3.56 Aspire have been able to place babies directly from hospital with EP carers, so there are children who have only known one carer. We have also been far more creative in our use of EP with older children and sibling groups to reduce placement moves and avoid delay.

3.57 Our adopters have proven that with the right support and information they can manage a high degree of risk, uncertainty, and contact. In one scenario 2 children were returned to their birth families and the EP carers worked incredibly hard to make it a smooth transition for the children.

4. Adopter Recruitment

4.1 Aspire recruits a range of adopters. At any one time we try to have around 25 - 30 families available to meet the needs of Dorset and BCP children.

4.2 Targeted changes to our social media messaging, induction programme and preparation training have helped attract adopters for older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs that we require.

4.3 We continue to fine-tune our messaging and work with adopters to flex around the needs of our children. We do place some babies, but we are mainly looking for adopters who will consider older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs. If adopters are not matched with Dorset or BCP children, we support them to explore children nationally.

4.4 There has been a significant decrease in the number of approved adopters within this year, which is a national trend. Fig 9 shows the steady decline over the previous three years for Aspire approvals.

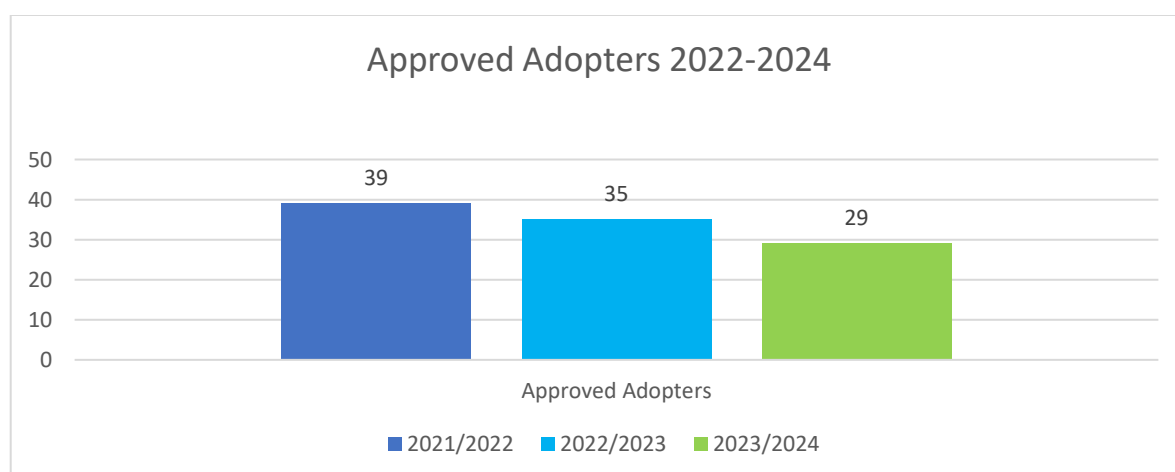


Fig 9

4.5 Whilst our approvals are reduced in-line with the England national average, we have still approved adopters for our children and have a much bigger adopter gap i.e. more adopters than children.

Agency	Families approved			Families available	Families needed	Adopter Gap*
	1-Jul-20 to 30 Jun-21	1-Jul-21 to 30 Jun-22	1-Jul-22 to 30 Jun-23			
Aspire	45	40	32	38	20	90%
ENGLAND	3199	2818	2253	2121	1684	26%

Fig 10 ASGLB RAA Dashboard Q3-2023/24

4.6 In respect of recruitment Fig 11 shows enquiries over 2023/24 increased compared to data from 2022/23. However not all of these converted to Registrations of Interest or progressed to stage 1 or 2. This is despite having no Marketing, Media and Monitoring Officer during this period; this is an area we further need to understand.

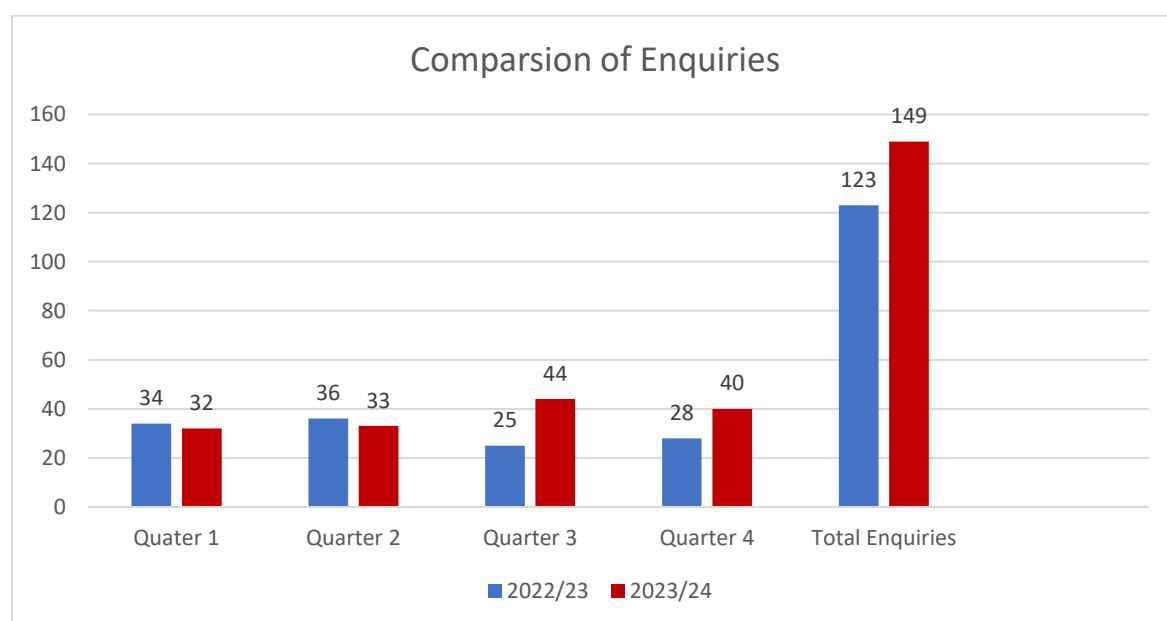


Fig 11

4.7 Some points of discussion for the coming year:

- Those who make an initial enquiry but don't attend an information session?
- Those who attend an information session but don't request an initial visit?
- Those sent a Registration of Interest but don't return it?

4.8 Over the coming year, using data collected from people who make an enquiry but 'drop out' of the process we can target these three groups to identify areas we may can make

changes and improve. i.e. is there a reason they did not convert to a Registration of Interest with Aspire?

4.9 To further understand this increase of enquires a dip sample of 104 enquiries from April 2023 to April 2024 was undertaken; the results are in Fig 12. The highest percentage of enquiries (62.5%) came through a Google search for local adoption. The second highest (23%) was due to word of mouth. In 7 enquiries the prospective adopter had searched online for their local adoption agency, then spoken to other adopters who had adopted through Aspire. The lowest enquiries came through Dorset (2.8%) and BCP's (0.96%) websites. 9.6% of the enquiries were from adopters who had previously adopted through Aspire.

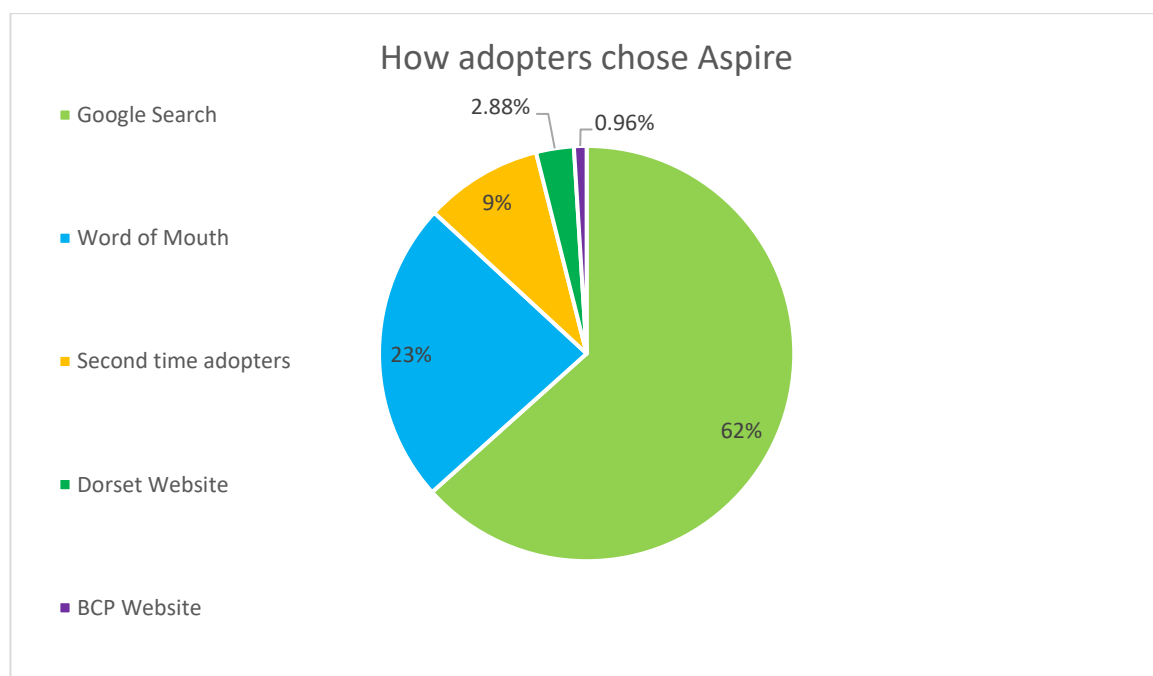


Fig 12

4.10 This would indicate that a larger online presence is required, with marketing and recruitment taking place through social media. Aspire had a significant increase in online presence in 2023/24 due to the Support Team posting over 3 times a day on social media advertising their support services, which resulted in more enquiries being made than the previous year.

4.11 Aspire is developing its 2024-2026 Marketing Policy, informed by feedback from those that have progressed their adoption journey with us.

4.12 There are currently 10 adoptive families with EP placements. Whilst this is extremely positive for those children, it does impact on the availability of adoptive families for the

more traditional route to adoption. This has, in effect, reduced the pool of available adopters from 26 to 16.

4.13 Interagency adoptions

4.14 Aspire supports national adopter sufficiency .

4.15 Aspire purchased 6 inter-agency placements in 2023/24 at a total cost of £221,000 and provided 6 adoptive families nationally generating £193,000 income.

4.16 There is a disparity of charges for adopters when sourced from Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs). The cost for 1 child placed with a VAA adoptive family is £35,565 whilst for RAAs this is £27,000.

4.17 There is proposed national work being considered to review this, as it is believed that the true cost of an adopter is the VAA's figures.

4.18 The close relationship and tracking we undertake with BCP and Dorset means that by the time the Placement Order is made, we will know whether Aspire has suitable adopters or not and can immediately look elsewhere to avoid delay for children.

4.19 Our relentless focus on finding families for children means that almost all children with a plan of adoption are found families.

5. Post Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Services

5.1 There is national work taking place across all RAAs regarding Adoption Support to produce practice standards, so there is a national defined core offer of support and a shared understanding of practice

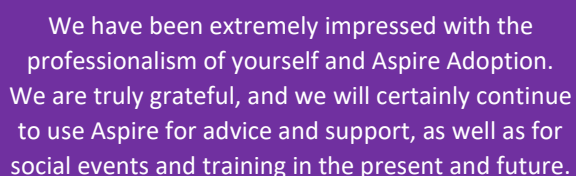
5.2 As part of this, Aspire is piloting the new Adoption Support Plan and has implemented the Adoption Support Transfer Process which enables a seamless transfer of support should a family move from the area they are receiving support, or reside in an area where the post 3 year support has ceased.

5.3 Aspire offers support to all Adopters and Special Guardians pan Dorset, until their children reach legal adulthood (age 18). Support is also offered to all Adopters and Special Guardians whose children come from other LA's once the support provided by their own LA ceases 3 years post Order.

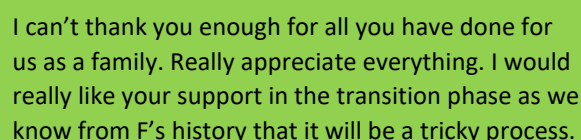
5.4 As most children from BCP and Dorset are placed with Aspire adopters this means the support is provided throughout the child's minority and into further education.

5.5 The cumulative increase in the number of Adopters and Special Guardians eligible for this support continues to be a challenge. This is a small team consisting of just under 3 FTE Social Workers and 3.5 Family Support Workers. We have maximised capacity by reducing bureaucracy.

5.6 The support team have worked closely with our host LAs Management Information Teams to have dedicated workflows implemented on the electronic case management system. This will make collecting information and data far easier and enable a standardised approach to recording the work and support undertaken with families. These are due to be fully implemented at the end of May 2024.



We have been extremely impressed with the professionalism of yourself and Aspire Adoption. We are truly grateful, and we will certainly continue to use Aspire for advice and support, as well as for social events and training in the present and future.



I can't thank you enough for all you have done for us as a family. Really appreciate everything. I would really like your support in the transition phase as we know from F's history that it will be a tricky process.

5.7 The Core Offer of Support

5.8 Following a full-support service review in March 2023 the tiered approach to support services, which consists of a duty system, universal support, and targeted Intervention, was implemented.

5.9 Aspire worked hard over the year to eradicate the waiting list and offer an immediate response to families at the lower tiers through a daily duty system.

5.10 The duty system is managed by experienced Family Support Practitioners who can give advice and guidance and signpost to other services. This includes but is not limited to; meetings with Clinical Psychologists, bespoke training packages, therapeutic input delivered by Aspire staff, individual membership of Children and Trauma Community Hub (CaTCH), a dedicated web-based support service providing online training, workshops, advice etc for Adopters and Special Guardians.

5.11 The service has formed strong links with Virtual Schools, Early Help and universal services, and have developed bespoke services for our families.

5.12 The duty system receives approximately 300 enquiries a month, which vary dependant on the time of year i.e. holidays and Christmas seeing an increase in enquiries.

5.13 The universal support offer which is inclusive and provides regular newsletters and information via the mailing list, workshops/training, social events and support groups.

Universal Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to Duty system for advice and guidance • Support groups for adults only • Support groups with children • Regular Newsletters • Access to workshops/training • Social events SG and Adopter specific • Coffee mornings/Drop ins in a school setting SG only • Children and trauma community hub membership log ins.

5.14 A targeted support offer for those families needing more than universal services. An assessment of need will be carried out. This will be undertaken in consultation with one of the experienced social workers.

Targeted Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short term intensive support from a social worker/ family support practitioner • Direct work with children/family around therapeutic parenting • Continued advice/guidance to parents/carers • Continued advice and guidance to education settings where necessary • Access to therapy funded through the ASF (if eligible) • Referral to Psychological support via Dorset/BCP referral process

5.15 For those families that require targeted support, a worker will be allocated to the family to carry out the identified work, an exit strategy will be developed within the plan.

5.16 This is not an exhaustive list as bespoke services and workshops/training can be tailored to individual family's dependant on need.

5.17 Allocations are on a short-term basis (approx. 3 months) to provide an intensive package of support, to build a parents/carers skills, resilience, and confidence to parent the child/ren in their care.

5.18 As well as the more traditional support, there are monthly social walks and coffee mornings for SG and Adopter groups, and regular monthly support groups, stay and plays, summer picnics and Christmas parties. These provide those families the opportunity to have a reflective space to discuss their circumstances and build up peer support. There is an adult adopter group held 6 times a year.

5.19 Fig 13 shows the attendance of those families at the main holiday social events held throughout the year.

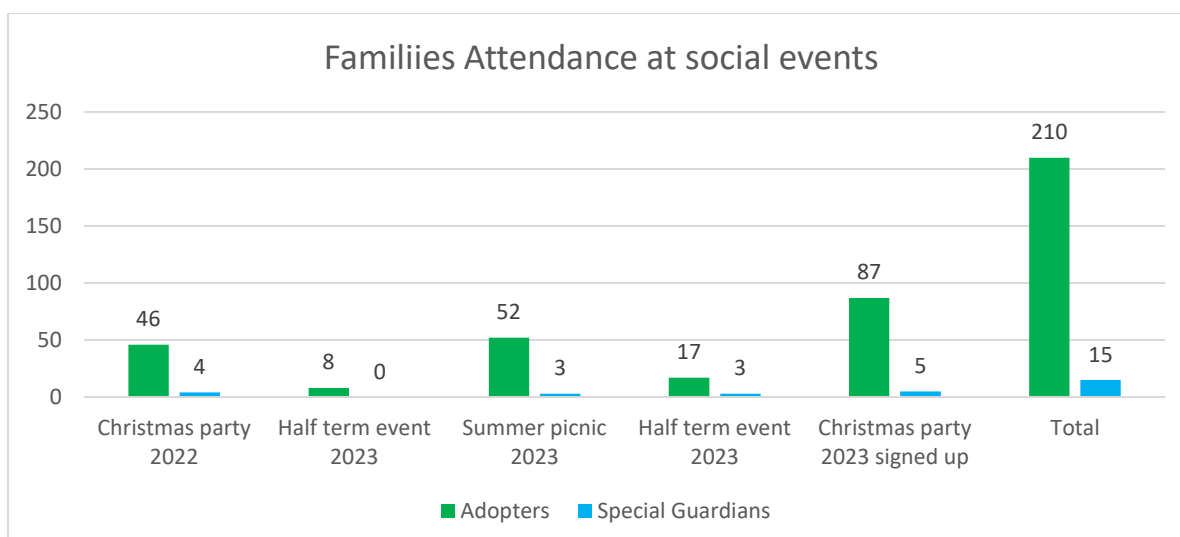


Fig 13

5.20 Aspire noted that attendance has been low at all events for Special Guardians, therefore started targeted and focussed activity, through social media, aimed at engaging more special Guardians at an earlier point to avoid a crisis led service where support is required from the statutory services to prevent breakdown.

5.21 This resulted in coffee morning drop-ins run by one Family Support Practitioner during term time. However, despite focussed and targeted publicity via the newsletters, within schools and on social media sites, the take up has remained low. These are generally the same Special Guardians who attend. (Fig 15)

Date	School	Attendance	BCP/Dorset
21/04/2023	Haymoor School	4	BCP
24/04/2023	Atlantic School	1	Dorset
16/05/2023	St Andrews School	1	Dorset
17/05/2023	Emmanuel School	2	Dorset
23/05/2023	Damers School	5	Dorset
24/05/2023	Hamworthy School	4	BCP
22/09/2023	Damers School	3	Dorset
03/10/2023	Christchurch Junior School	4	BCP
17/10/2023	St Andrews School	4	Dorset
17/11/2023	Damers School	2	Dorset
24/11/2023	Bayside School	5	BCP
05/12/2023	Winton Primary	4	BCP
23/02/2024	Bayside School	3	BCP

20/03/2024	Winton Primary	3	BCP
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Fig 15

5.16 The Department for Education Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

5.17 The ASGSF provides funds to local authorities and regional adoption agencies to pay for essential therapeutic services for eligible adoptive, special guardianship order and child arrangement order families.

5.18 The Post Support Team enable adopters and special guardians to access the ASGSF by completing the required assessment and sourcing the therapists using our procurement framework. This has become increasingly important for our families. and the current service, has meant we have been able to support significantly more families to access therapeutic services.

5.19 There were 965 applications made to the ASGSF fund in 2023/24 which relates to £730,525.60 of funding for therapeutic input for those Adoptive and Special Guardian's within the area. This is an increase from the 369 applications made in 2022/23. Fig 14 shows the breakdown by Local Authority and Adopters and Special Guardians.

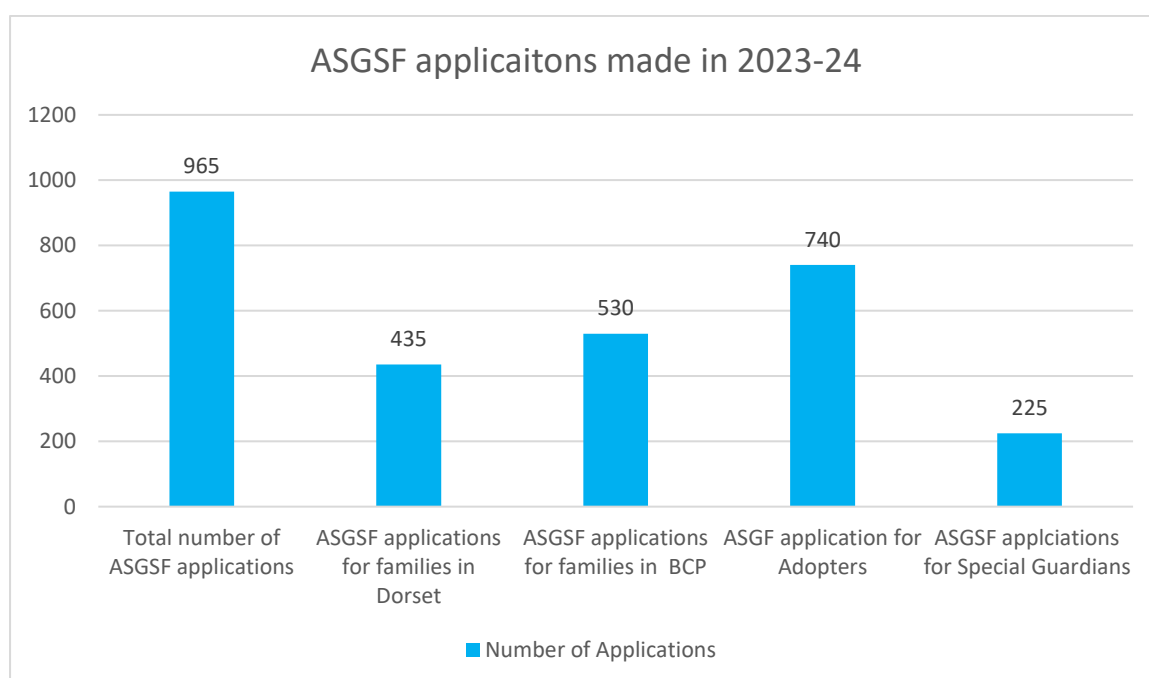


Fig 14

5.20 Have the changes to the post support service had a positive impact for families?

5.21 Changes were made, and implemented as detailed previously, at the beginning of 2023/24 following consultation with the Adopter and Special Guardianship Forum. While they understood what the service wanted to achieve, there was some anxiety that moving away from a mainly allocated service would reduce the support available to families.

5.22 There are workshops provided to Special Guardians and Adopter; these are the Great Behaviour Breakdown, Foundations of Attachment, and Non-violent resistance.

5.23 In total throughout 2023/24 117 families have been supported through the groups, workshops and social events provided by the Support Team.

5.24 There are now Special Guardianship Support Groups arranged in schools throughout Dorset to enable the special guardians to meet up and form links within their local area.

5.25 There has been positive feedback received from the Adopter and Special Guardianship Forum relating to the Support services within Aspire, and from individual adopters and Special Guardians.

5.26 A further indicator of a positive impact is that there have been no complaints relating to Aspire support services since September 2023.

5.27 These are a selection of the compliments the service has received during 2023/24

*“The level of support for SGs has improved significantly in the years that Aspire has been in existence, and Aspire should be applauded in offering similar support to both SGs and adopters - in a way that has not happened in most of the country, as far as I'm aware
“Adopter and Special Guardianship Forum*

“Dear x

I would like to sincerely thank you for supporting immensely in advocating for the boys to access support at today's meeting.

I am hopeful that CAMHS will come up with some support given you were so brilliant. I must point out that had I been on my own outcome would have been otherwise.

I remain hopeful that B and J will be given some clinical treatment and appreciate your support” Adoptive parent

“Dear x,

We have received the completed document from H as a part of the EHC Needs Assessment statutory requirement. Following this morning's audit of social care statutory advice, I am pleased to share that H's advice was graded as 'Good' with Outstanding elements. The outstanding areas covered aspirations, day to day impact and impact on access to learning. We would like, therefore, to commend H for her exemplary advice that will contribute to the outcomes for this young person”. BCP SEND Improvement and Quality Assurance Officer

'I just wanted to say thank you so much for everything that you have done. It's given me a sense of peace and knowing that I was wanted. Which means a lot. We are aware that there is a time scale for us what with the cancer and it has given us all something to enjoy learning about. We will keep you updated of any other news 😊. Once again thank you and we are so lucky to have met you' Adopted Adult on receiving birth records and counselling

5.28 Demand for post support services

5.29 This service has seen a continued increase in uptake over the year, and this is expected to continue. The service had in quarter 4 of 2023/24, 1133 enquires for support, these can be via the enquiry telephone line or through the dedicated email address. In the same quarter in 2022/23 the service received 870 enquiries. This is an increase of 30% of family contact requesting various levels of advice and support.

5.30 Many of these enquiries are dealt with as advice and signposting, or the provision of CaTCH membership. however, as can be seen from the data, there has been an increase in the number of referrals for support via the ASGSF throughout the year more than trebling 2022/23's applications.

5.40 The main issues raised by the Adopter and Special Guardianship Forum have been to have more activities taking place at weekends and groups for older children.

5.41 Whilst these have been requested, the issue remains the capacity of the team. They already provide support services in the evenings and social events at the weekends, such as Christmas parties, summer picnics, and holiday specific events such as easter egg hunts.

5.42T here is also a renewed view of more open adoptions, with work being undertaken on a National level, by Adoption England, and the Judiciary relating to the expectation of direct contact between children and their birth families post adoption. This is currently in its infancy, however, the support team, would need to be involved with this in the initial stages.

5.43 Aspire currently support 6 direct contacts between children and their birth parents. There is an expectation that this will rise in the coming years.

5.44Aspire also provide the indirect contact between birth parents and the children through the 'letterbox' system. Aspire currently support 576 letterbox contacts, usually involving 2 parents.

5.45Whilst much of the Support Teams work is providing support post order, the team are also involved with the completion of the Adoption Support Plans, and the Special Guardianship support plans to enable a realistic and needs led approach.

5.46There have been no family breakdowns, either Adoptive or Special Guardianship families when the support services have been involved

5.47 The challenge for the Post Adoption and Special Guardianship Service

5.48 It is important that Aspire continues to review post support services closely with the Forum to ensure they continue to be accessible, timely, relevant and have impact. But it is clear that an increasing cohort and increasing demand is the greatest issue for the service.

5.49 However, we do need to be mindful for the potential increase in the more 'open' style adoption with direct contact post adoption order potentially becoming the norm. This would require all those involved, Birth parents, Adopters and Children to be prepared and supported through this process in the initial stages.

5.50 At present the current change in systems are proving beneficial and are manageable by the Team, meaning more families are being supported.



6. Aspire Adoption Panel

6.1 The Adoption Panel has continued to meet virtually twice a month.

This year the panel made: -

29 Approvals

35 Matches

7 De-Registrations

6.2 Matches of children with adopters.

6.3 The statistics for Adoption Placements show the number of matches to have returned to pre-pandemic and Somerset Ruling levels.

6.4 Only 1 match was deferred; due to medical concerns about 1 of 2 siblings being matched coming to light as part of the conversation with the Medical Advisor during the preparation of questions prior to speaking with the prospective adopters. Further investigations were carried out and information provided which confirmed the situation and quantified the risk for the adopters, allowing them to return to Panel a month later to confirm the match

6.5 Adopters

6.6 The number of adopters approved fell slightly this year. Panel considered 29 cases, approving 29 immediately with no cases deferred.

6.7 The number of de-registration's of adopters has reduced, although Panel have found a common theme this year which would appear to be a lack of resilience amongst those de-registering. Many had been put forward for children and found the sense of rejection of not being the preferred adopters for that particular child too difficult to overcome.

6.8 Feedback from Panel

6.9 The Adoption Panel has been operating a RAG rating system for social worker reports since early 2021. This has been generally well received and has improved the consistency and quality of feedback. The process has enabled an objective and measurable assessment of the direction of travel of reports which has in large part been positive as most reports are given a 'green rating'.

6.10 The only area of vulnerability remains CPRs, where the quality can vary but has shown a continuing and accelerating upward trend. The match of 3 siblings with adopters approved recently showed a particular example of good practice in this area.

6.11 Having been identified as needing improvement, the analysis in PARs has become uniformly good, leading to no deferrals of adoption approvals this year. Joint social worker and Panel training was held last summer where Panel and the workers were able to discuss and allow each to articulate directly where they feel additional information would be of use. A further joint training day is scheduled for July this year.

7. Birth parent services

7.1 It is a requirement that birth families are offered independent support when a Placement Order is made in respect of their child. Aspire commissioned an independent agency, Parents and Children Together (PaCT) following the service ceasing with Families for Children. This had been recommissioned from April 2022 to 31st of March 2024 with an option to extend for a further 2 years.

7.2 The service consists of 15 hours a week of an experienced social worker, management oversight and agency support. The social worker had at times gained additional external charitable funding to support activities.

7.3 Following concerns expressed by PaCT, regarding the ability to meet need within the current constraints of the post, they provided notice on the 30th January 2024 that they were not renewing the contract on the 31 March 2024.

7.4 This left a challenge regarding the provision of the service. There was not enough time to source an external provider, and arrange TUPE for the current worker, alongside the due diligence and negotiation of terms and conditions, Service Provision, and agreement, that would be involved within a 6-week period.

7.5 The proposal by Aspire, and agreed by BCP and Dorset Councils, was that the work transferred directly into Aspire including the worker. TUPE was applied and the worker joined Aspire as a direct employee of BCP Council on 5 May 2024.

7.6 The service remains under the name of Birth Family Matters and has its own Email address and contact number, and sits within the Aspire support services, offering independence from the line management of children's cases.

8 Special Guardianship Assessments

8.1 Transitioning of Services

8.2 Aspire is the only Regional Adoption Agency in the country which undertakes Special Guardianship Assessment work. It has responsibility for undertaking all Special Guardianship Assessments required by both Dorset and BCP Councils and for the assessment for, and provision of, all Special Guardianship support services (except financial allowances which remain the responsibility of the relevant local authority).

8.3 When Special Guardianship Orders were first introduced it was felt they offered a legal permanence option only just short of adoption, and in that respect they were felt to be very similar.

8.4 However, time has shown that the cohort of adults obtaining Special Guardianship Orders is very different from the cohort of adults who seek to adopt, and that Special Guardians are mostly kinship carers, and often Connected Persons Foster Carers, and that Special Guardianship work aligns much more closely with Connected Persons Fostering and other kinship care arrangements than it does adoption work.

8.5 It was agreed at the Strategic Partnership Board in December 2023 that the Special Guardianship work should transition back into the respective Local Authorities and align within the Fostering/Kinship Care Services. This work commenced in January 2024 and is in progress at the time of writing.

8.6 This is an exciting opportunity for BCP and Dorset councils to collaborate with colleagues and the SGO carer network to rethink how best children and their connected/SGO carers, can be supported, through the assessment process and promote the National Kinship Strategy across the wider Councils.

8.7 Special Guardianship Work

8.8 For the first time in 5 years there has been a decrease in the number of referrals to the Special Guardianship Assessment Team (fig15). This is still above the 120 referrals that Aspire were funded to undertake.

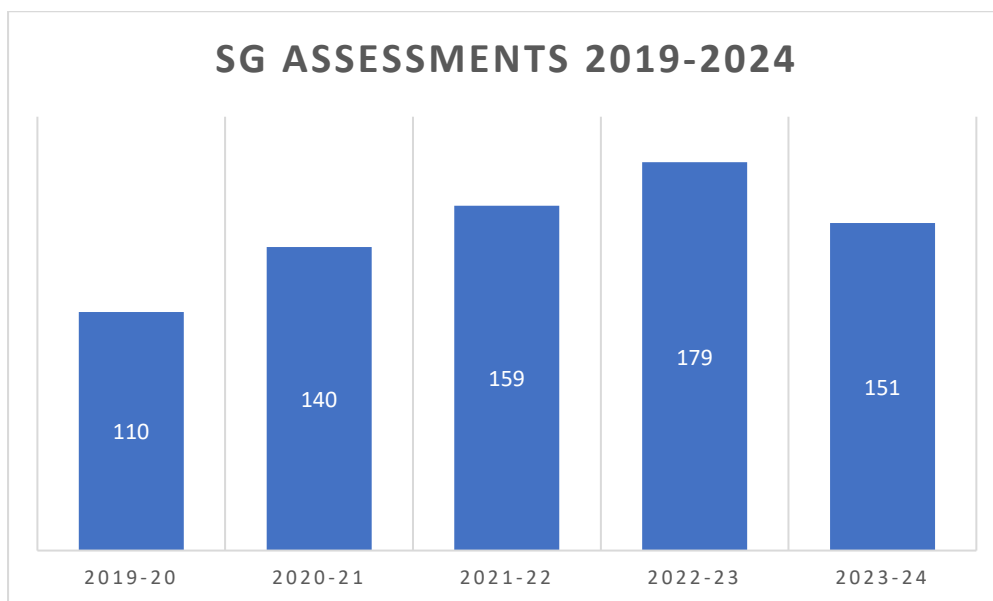


Fig 15

8.9 Dorset

8.10 For Dorset, the details relating to the Special Guardianship Assessments are shown in Fig 16.

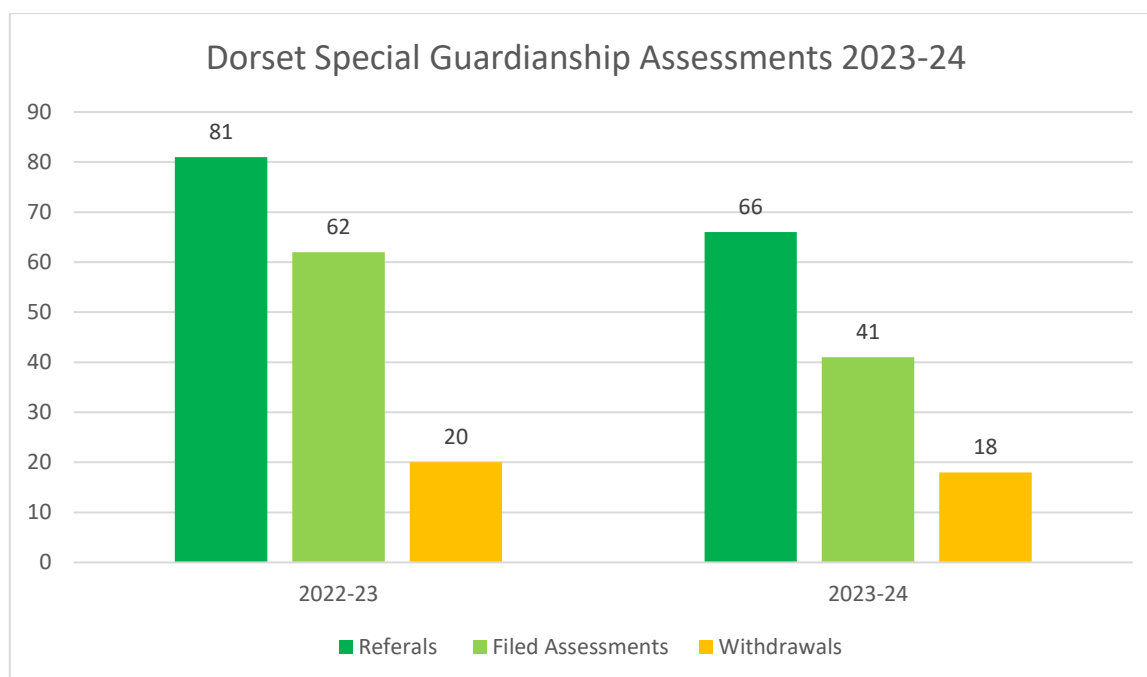


Fig 16

8.11 The number of special guardianship referrals from Dorset has decreased since 2022/23 by 18 %. During 2022/23 there were 62 Special Guardianship assessments filed with the Court compared to 41 in 2023/24 for Dorset, a decrease of 33%.

8.12 However, the completion of the Special Guardianship Assessment takes 12 weeks from commencement to completion and filing with the Court, there were 12 assessment being undertaken in March 2024, that were from referrals made in Quarter 4 of 2023-24 that will be potentially filed within the 1st Quarter of 2024-25.

8.13 Approximately 27% of the special guardianship referrals received did not result in a full assessment being completed.

8.14 This dropout rate is to be expected for a variety of reasons. For example, the family may decide that they cannot offer permanence, they chose to remain as Kinship/ foster carers, more than one family member is being assessed, issues arise during the assessment or the child's plan may change.

8.15 For Dorset the reasons for the withdrawals are as follows

Number of withdrawals	Reason for withdrawal
1	Safeguarding allegations made
1	Withdrew for personal health reasons
1	Withdrew as they felt the assessment was to intrusive
2	Wished to support the family
3	Wished to remain connect person carers,
4	Changes of plan from SGO
6	They couldn't commit to the child

8.16 Dorset's withdrawal rate has remained reasonable static, with a reduction of 10% from the previous year.

8.17 The withdrawal reasons would indicate that Dorset's referrals are good quality and except for 4 changes of plan, all the applicants gave valid reasons for withdrawing.

8.18 BCP

8.19 For BCP, the details relating to the Special Guardianship Assessments are shown in Fig 17.

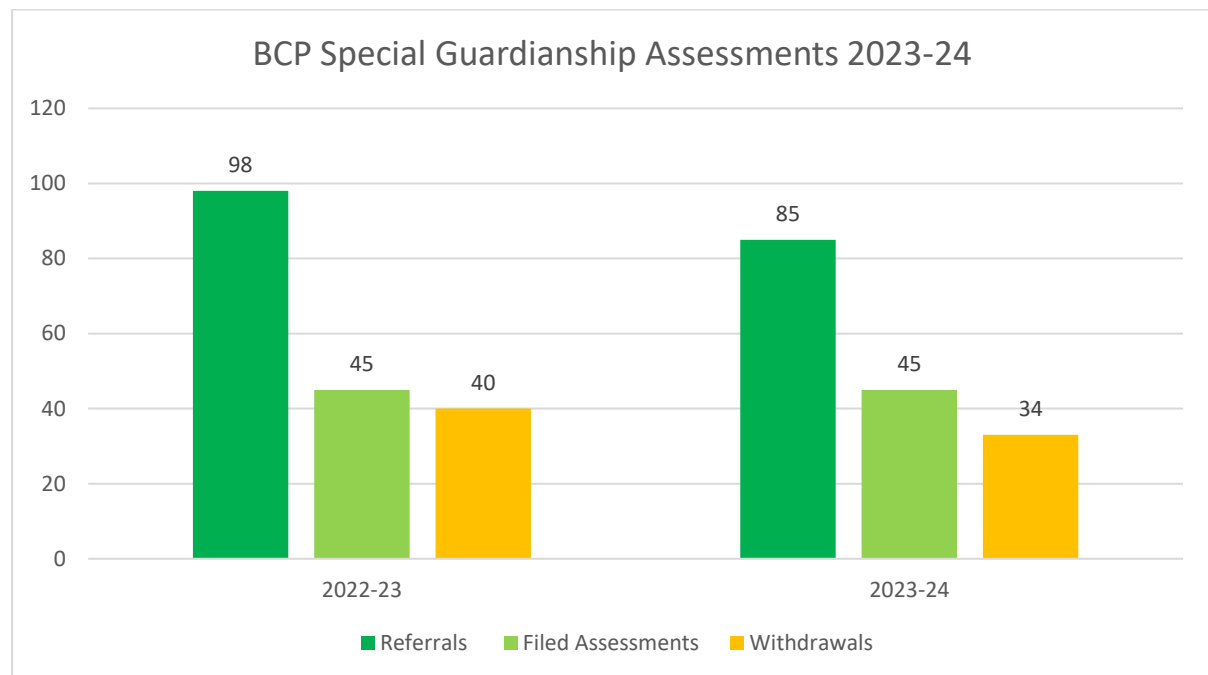


Fig 17

8.18 The number of special guardianship referrals from BCP has decreased since 2022/23 by 13 %.

8.19 The number of assessments filed with Court has remained static with the same number being filed in 2023-24 as were filed the previous year.

8.20 However, the completion of the Special Guardianship assessment takes 12 weeks from commencement to completion and filing with the Court, there were 9 assessment being undertaken in March 2024, that were from referrals made in Quarter 4 of 2023-24 that will be potentially filed within the 1st Quarter of 2024-25.

8.21 Approximately 40% of the special guardianship referrals received did not result in a full assessment being completed. This dropout rate is the same percentage as the previous year.

8.22 For BCP the reasons for withdrawal are as follows.

Number of Withdrawals	Reason for withdrawal
1	Withdrew as they were the 'second applicant'
1	Did not engage in the process
1	Safeguarding concerns
2	Assessment was too intrusive
2	Withdrew following negative outcomes to the assessment
5	Couldn't manage the family dynamics
5	Preferred to remain as connected carers
17	Not feel able to commit to the child

8.24 There was a high number of applicants (50%) that, during the process felt unable to commit to the child for BCP Council. There is further work being undertaken to understand this.

8.25 Dorset and BCP agreed to expand the service by 1 social worker at the May 2021 board. To increase capacity from 100 to 120 pa for both authorities. The Team continues to be under pressure when the referrals increase.

8.26 There were 52 withdrawals of Special Guardians throughout 2023-24, however, these assessments had commenced and as such workers time was used to complete them.

9 Finance

9.1 Aspire is funded 49% by Dorset Council and 51% by BCP Council. Considerable work took place to agree a 3-year budget for Aspire from 2022 to 2025.

9.2 In 2023/24 the forecast position for Aspire's operational budget was an overspend of £185,00. This overspend mainly arose due to a higher-than-expected staff pay award and included the unfunded element of the 22/23 pay award of £63,000.

9.3 In addition to the potential forecast pressure of £185k it must be remembered that each local authority is responsible for the costs relating to interagency expenditure. The current projection of interagency expenditure is a total of £221k. Each placement is agreed with the appropriate Director/Service Manager prior to the placement being made.

9.4 The net operational overspend of £185,000 was shared proportionately among the two councils according to the funding percentages. The Interagency fees were met by each council based upon the cost of the placements for their children.

9.5 Looking forward to 2024/25, the budget for the Operational Budget has not been agreed at the time of writing this report and therefore under the inter-authority agreement the budget currently remains the same as it was for 2023/24.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

1. Local authority statutory responsibilities

- 1.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 sets out the duty all Local Authorities to establish and maintain an adoption service, to meet the needs in relation to adoption, of children who have or may be adopted, of adults who have been adopted, parents and guardians of such children and persons who have or may adopt a child in their area
- 1.2 On the 1st July 2017 Dorset County Council delegated most of those functions, along with some statutory responsibilities in relation to special guardianship, to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). The division of responsibilities is detailed in Appendix 1.
- 1.3 Aspire (RAA) is funded by Dorset County Council and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council to deliver adoption and special guardianship services.
- 1.4 Each local authority retains overall responsibility for their adoption and special guardianship services, continuing to have parental responsibility for their own Children in Care, but delegating most adoption and some special guardianship functions to Aspire Adoption.
- 1.5 Aspire works closely with colleagues in the voluntary adoption sector, Parents and Children Together (PACT) are represented on the Aspire Partnership Board.
- 1.6 It is a requirement that elected members satisfy themselves that the Local Authority and the Regional Adoption Agency are working together to meet the needs of children requiring permanence through adoption as laid out by the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013 and the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014.

The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336069/Adoption_NMS_July_2014_for_publication.pdf

The 2013 Statutory Adoption Guidance can be accessed at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270100/adoption_statutory_guidance_2013.pdf

Appendix B

1. Division of roles and responsibilities between Aspire and the local authorities

- 1.1 Aspire has been delegated all of the local authority statutory responsibilities for adoption, other than the court work leading to Care and Placement Orders.
- 1.2 Aspire has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and intercountry adoptions.
- 1.3 The local authorities retain overall responsibility for their Children in Care, but have delegated case responsibility for the majority of children with adoption plans to Aspire following the granting of a Placement Order.
- 1.4 Aspire is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans. The RAA is also responsible for preparing children for a move to adoption, for preparing moving calendars or diaries, undertaking life story work and creating life story books.
- 1.5 Aspire undertakes special guardianship assessments for court on behalf of the local authority as part of care proceedings, or in private law applications.
- 1.6 Aspire provides support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives, and also to special guardians, families created through special guardianship, and to the birth families whose children are subject to SGOs.
- 1.7 The table on the following page sums up the division of responsibilities between Aspire and the local authorities.

Function	Regional Adoption Agency	Local Authority
RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT		
Marketing and Recruitment Strategy	✓	
Adopter Recruitment and Enquiries	✓	
Assessment of Prospective Adopters – all Stage One and Stage Two functions	✓	
Completion of Prospective Adopter Report	✓	
Agency Decision Maker for approval of adopters	✓	
Post approval training	✓	
Matching	✓	
Post Placement training for Prospective Adopters	✓	
PERMANENCE PLANNING		

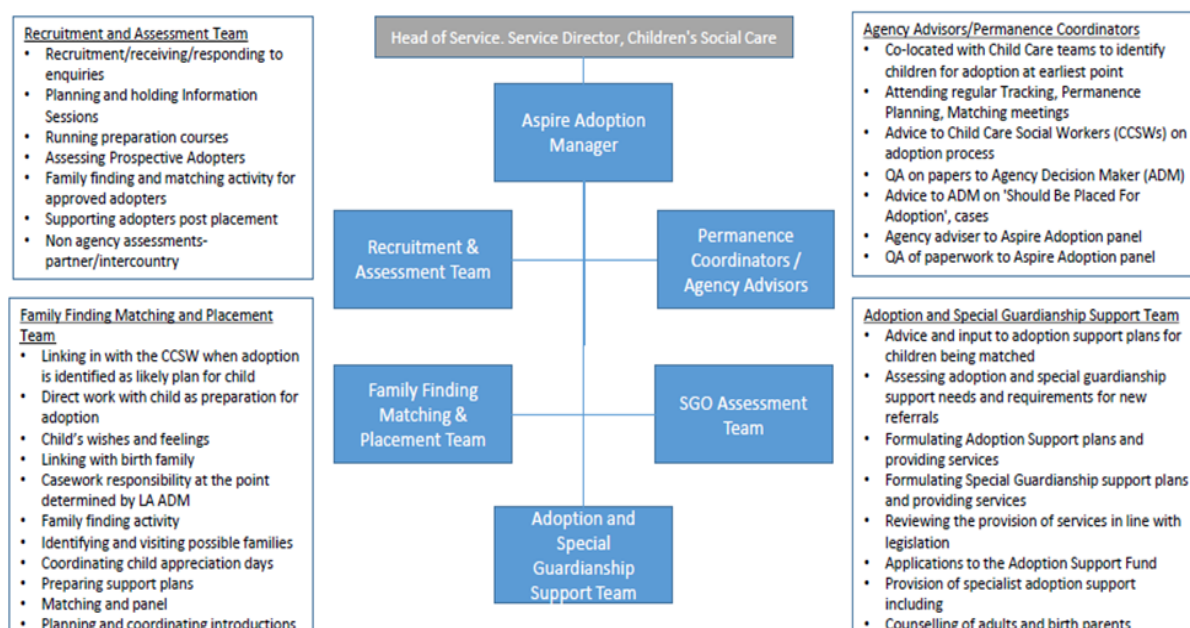
Early identification of a child possibly requiring adoption		✓
Tracking and monitoring the child possibly requiring adoption	✓	✓
Support and advice to child care social worker on the adoption process	✓	✓
Sibling or other specialist assessments if commissioned by LA	✓	
Direct work to prepare child prior to placement	✓	✓
Preparation of the Child Permanence Report		✓
Agency Decision Maker for “Should be placed for Adoption” decisions		✓
Case management prior to the point agreed by the LA ADM		✓
Case management from point agreed by the LA ADM	✓	
MATCHING AND PLACEMENT		
Family finding	✓	
Looked After Child reviews	✓	✓
Shortlist and visit potential families	✓	✓
Organising child appreciation day	✓	
Ongoing direct work to prepare child prior to placement	✓	✓
Adoption Panel administration and management	✓	
Agency adviser role	✓	
Agency Decision Maker for Matching prospective adopters and child		✓
Placement Planning meeting administration and management of introductions	✓	
Support to family post placement and planning and delivery of adoption support	✓	
Ongoing life story work and preparation of Life story book	✓	
Independent Review Officer monitoring of quality of child’s care and care plan		✓
Support prospective adopters in preparation and submission of application for Adoption Order – including attending at court	✓	
Preparation of later life letter	✓	✓
ADOPTION AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP SUPPORT		
Assessment for adoption or special guardianship support	✓	
Developing and delivering adoption and special guardianship support plans	✓	✓
Agree and administer financial support to adoptive families pre and post Adoption Order		✓
Adoption and special guardianship support delivery including:	✓	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support groups • Social events • Post adoption/special guardianship training • Independent Birth Relative services • Support with ongoing birth relative contact • Specialist Life Story practitioners • Adoption counselling and training 		
Financial support to adopters and special guardians including adoption and special guardianship allowances		✓
SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS		
Receipt of application or court request for special guardianship		✓
Assessment of applicants for Special Guardianship	✓	
NON-AGENCY ADOPTIONS		
Step parent/partner adoption assessments	✓	
Intercountry adoption assessments and post approval and post order support	✓	

Appendix C

1. Aspire Organisational Structure and Staffing

Aspire Adoption - Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) – Organisation Structure



2. Staffing

- 2.1 There are 43.54 permanent full -time equivalent posts in Aspire with the permanent staffing establishment supplemented by those on casual contracts to increase capacity where needed. Many of the staff work part time, with the total number of staff comprising of social workers, support workers, and business support staff totalling about 56.
- 2.2 The service is led and managed by the Aspire Adoption Service Manager, Allan Charlton, Allan Charlton is a qualified social worker, has a management qualification and is registered with Social Work England.
- 2.3 The Recruitment & Assessment Team comprises of a team manager, practice manager, and 7.44 social workers. There is included within this one 30hr vacancy. All are registered with Social Work England
- 2.4 The Family Finding, Matching and Placement Team comprises of a team manager, 1 FTE practice manager and 4.3 FTE social workers, all of whom are registered with Social Work England, and 3.64 FTE family support workers.
- 2.5 The Special Guardianship Assessment team has a team manager, practice manager and 5 social workers. All are registered with Social Work England.

- 2.6 The Adoption & Special Guardianship Support team consists of 1 Team Manager, 1 Assistant Team Manager, and 2.75 FTE Social Workers, all of whom are registered with Social Work England, and 4.5 FTE Family Support Practitioners. The Team has a social work vacancy of 18.5 hours following a full-time worker taking flexible retirement. One part time FSP is currently absent, one fulltime FSP will be leaving the service on the 28th April 2023.
- 2.7 There are 2 FTE Permanence Coordinators, who also act as Agency Advisers to the Aspire Adoption Panel and Aspire Agency Decision Maker, and to the Agency Decision Makers in the local authorities in relation to decisions as to whether a child should be adopted.
- 2.8 The service is supported by 7 FTE business support staff including a senior business support officer, a panel administrator, and a marketing, media and monitoring officer.
- 2.9 All of the social workers employed by Aspire are registered with Social Work England, and many of the staff, including support workers, have additional qualifications including skills in a variety of therapeutic interventions such as theraplay, Therapeutic Life story work, sensory integration, mindfulness and DDP (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy).
- 2.10 Aspire also has access to dedicated clinical psychology support for staff and service users.
- 2.11 No agency staff are employed, and any vacancies attract a high standard of applications across all areas of the work undertaken by Aspire. Casual staff add capacity for one off pieces of work in the Recruitment and Assessment Team and the Special Guardianship Assessment Team.

3. Staff training and development

- 3.1 Staff in Aspire have access to training and courses run by Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole Council as the host authority paying for these from the Aspire training budget of £8,000 a year. They have access to external courses, but only dependent on budgetary restrictions. In 2022/23 6 members of staff attended Dyadic Developmental Parenting training stage 2.
- 3.2 Staff have monthly supervision and annual appraisals, and regular team case and practice reflection sessions are facilitated by the clinical psychologists.
- 3.3 A staff forum for all staff in Aspire is held every 6 months to update on Aspire performance data, local and national issues relating to the service and to develop the team service plans.

Appendix D

Governance

The following is taken from the Inter Authority Agreement

SCHEDULE 2 – TERMS OF REFERENCE

Governance Structure



Part 1 – Strategic Partnership Board

1 Name:

The name of the Board for Aspire Adoption shall be the **Strategic Partnership Board** which is established pursuant to an Inter Authority Agreement between Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council and the Borough of Poole ("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

2 Role:

The Board will provide advice, oversight and endorsement of the strategic direction of Aspire Adoption.

3 The Board will:

- 3.1 Provide and review the strategic direction of Aspire Adoption;
- 3.2 Oversee, review and endorse budget setting and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption;
 - 3.2.1 Oversee, review and endorse the Business Plan annually and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption;
 - 3.2.2 Attempt to resolve disputes between the Councils under the terms of the Inter Authority Agreement.

4 Accountability and Responsibility:

- 4.1 Each Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that their nominated representative(s) (or named substitute) are available to attend all Board meetings, which will be scheduled in advance.
- 4.2 All members of the Board will be in a position to make decisions within their respective organisation, where appropriate.
- 4.3 All members of the Board will be responsible for reporting to their organisation, through their respective governance arrangements.

5 Meetings of the Board

- 5.1 The Board will meet every six months or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.
- 5.2 The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.
- 5.3 The Chairperson will agree the dates, times and venues for the meetings of the Board. The meeting timetable will be scheduled over the year, to reflect both planned monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- 5.4 The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.
- 5.5 The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.
- 5.6 Agendas and papers for the meeting will be sent out at least five working days prior to the meeting in order to provide time for members of the Board to read them and identify actions for their own organisations.
- 5.7 Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

6 Membership:

- 6.1 The Board will consist of:
 - 6.1.1 Portfolio Holder and Executive Director for Children's Services for Bournemouth Borough Council;
 - 6.1.2 Cabinet Member for Learning, Skills and Children's Safeguarding and Corporate Director for Children's, Adults and Community Services for Dorset County Council;
 - 6.1.3 Portfolio Holder and Strategic Director for Children's Services for the Borough of Poole Council.

- 6.2 The Board will consult (so far as it considers proper and appropriate to do so):
 - 6.2.1 Representatives from local Voluntary Adoption Agencies/Families for Children; and
 - 6.2.2 A representative from Stakeholders.
- 6.3 Members of the Board should:
 - 6.3.1 Commit to attending the majority of meetings or nominate a suitable substitute who can attend in their place who will be expected to exercise the powers of the Member for whom they are substituting. Only Board members or their named representatives can attend Board meetings;
 - 6.3.2 Uphold and support the Board decisions and be prepared to follow through actions and decisions for the Board proposals and declaring any conflict of interest should it arise;
 - 6.3.3 Be prepared to represent the Board at stakeholder events and support the agreed consensus view of the Board when speaking on behalf of the Board to other parties.

7 Voting – Quorum

- 7.1 No quorum is necessary for the routine business and the receiving of reports. However where the Chairperson determines that a critical decision is required there must be a representative from all the Councils.
- 7.2 In the spirit of effective collaboration and partnership working, the Board will always seek to come to agreement through consensus and unanimity following debate and discussion where all the members will be encouraged to participate.
- 7.3 The Members of the Board will be expected to subscribe to the seven principles of public life in their work and decision making. The principles are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- 7.4 Members will be expected to declare any personal interests in the business of the Board and to withdraw from participation where such interests are prejudicial or pecuniary.

Part 2 – Operational Management Board

1 Name:

The name of the Board for Aspire Adoption shall be the **Operational Management Board** which is established pursuant to an Inter Authority Agreement between Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council and the Borough of Poole ("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

2 Role:

The Board will provide support, advice and management to Aspire Adoption to ensure that statutory requirements and the Business Plan is delivered effectively.

3 The Board will:

- 3.1 oversee the implementation of the Aspire Adoption Budget and Business Plan;
- 3.2 oversee the commissioning arrangements and operational performance against agreed local priorities and targets and in line with national priorities and targets.

4 Accountability and Responsibility:

- 4.1 Each Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that their nominated representative(s) (or named substitute) are available to attend all Board meetings, which will be scheduled in advance.
- 4.2 This Board will report to the Strategic Partnership Board.

5 Meetings of the Board

- 5.1 The Board will meet quarterly or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.
- 5.2 The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.
- 5.3 The Chairperson will agree the dates, times and venues for the meetings of the Board. The meeting timetable will be scheduled over the year, to reflect both planned monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- 5.4 The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.
- 5.5 The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.

- 5.6 Agendas and papers for the meeting will be sent out at least five working days prior to the meeting in order to provide time for members of the Board to read them and identify actions for their own organisations.
- 5.7 Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

6 Membership:

- 6.1 The Board will consist of:
 - 6.1.1 Service Director for Children's Social Care for Bournemouth;
 - 6.1.2 Assistant Director – Care and Protection for Dorset;
 - 6.1.3 Head of Children & Young People's Social Care for Poole; 6.1.4
Childrens Services Commissioners from each of the three
Parties;
- 6.1.5 Adoption Aspire Manager.
- 6.2 Members of the Board should:
 - 6.2.1 Commit to attending the majority of meetings or nominate a suitable substitute who can attend in their place who will be expected to exercise the powers of the Member for whom they are substituting. Only Board members or their named representatives can attend Board meetings;
 - 6.2.2 Uphold and support the Board decisions and be prepared to follow through actions and decisions and declaring any conflict of interest should it arise;
 - 6.2.3 Be prepared to represent the Board at stakeholder events and support the agreed consensus view of the Board when speaking on behalf of the Board to other parties.

7 Voting – Quorum

- 7.1 No quorum is necessary for the routine business and the receiving of reports. However where the Chairperson determines that a critical decision is required there must be a representative from all the Councils.
- 7.2 In the spirit of effective collaboration and partnership working, the Board will always seek to come to agreement through consensus and unanimity

following debate and discussion where all the members will be encouraged to participate.

- 7.3 The Members of the Board will be expected to subscribe to the seven principles of public life in their work and decision making. The principles are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- 7.4 Members will be expected to declare any personal interests in the business of the Board and to withdraw from participation where such interests are prejudicial or pecuniary.

Appendix E–

1. Aspire Adoption Panel

- 1.1 Aspire Adoption operates an Adoption Panel, constituted in accordance with legislation, regulations and guidance. The panel has an independent chairperson, and 22 members on a Central List from which each panel is drawn. There is no legal maximum number of panel members at each panel but in practice, a maximum of 6 or 7 attend each panel, including the panel chair and a social worker. The designated doctor for looked after children in the local authorities funding Aspire is also the agency medical adviser and is a full member of the panel.
- 1.2 The panel is serviced by a panel administrator and has access to legal advice if needed. The professional advice to the panel is provided by the two FTE Agency and Panel Advisors, one of whom attends each Panel to ensure the smooth running and to advise on policies and procedures.
- 1.3 Current membership includes individuals with personal experience of adoption as adopters and adopted adults. It also includes experienced social workers with direct experience of adoption work, a psychotherapist with experience of working in a child and adolescent mental health setting, and panel members with experience of working in an educational setting.
- 1.4 Members of the Central List from which individual panel membership is drawn reflect the diversity of modern society as far as possible, and include those who are

single, in heterosexual and same sex relationships. One panel member on the Central List has personal experience of disability. There is some diversity in terms of age, with panel members in their 30s and others who are retired. Although most panel members are of white British ethnic origin, one panel members is of black African ethnicity and another is of Indian descent.

- 1.5 The functions of the panel in relation to adoption matters are.
 - to recommend whether prospective adopters are suitable to adopt a child.
 - to recommend whether a proposed match between a child and prospective adopters is a suitable one.
 - In circumstances where a child is relinquished for adoption and no Placement Order is applied for, the panel will recommend whether the child should be placed for adoption.
- 1.6 The panel can also give advice about the numbers and ages of children in relation to prospective adopters, also about post adoption contact, delegated parental responsibility and adoption support. The panel has a consultative role regarding the agency's policies and procedures, and a monitoring role regarding quality assurance and ensuring that the time scales set out in the Adoption & Children Act 2002 are met.
- 1.7 The Aspire Adoption Panel makes recommendations based on detailed written reports prepared by the child's social worker and adoption social worker, and the social worker and team manager's attendance at panel to clarify points if needed.
- 1.8 When considering the approval or deregistration of prospective adopters or a match between prospective adopters and a child, adoptive applicants have the option of attending panel in person, to provide scope to discuss and clarify any issues relevant to the application. Applicants who decide not to attend in person are not disadvantaged in any way and no judgement is made from their decision not to do so although every effort will be made to assist their attendance.
- 1.9 The recommendations and advice of the panel are referred, along with the final agreed minutes of the meeting, to the Agency Decision Maker, for a decision to be made and conveyed to all parties within the time scales laid down in the Adoption & Children Act 2002.
- 1.10 The Panel chair is independent, is an experienced chair and an adopter of 2 children. He attends the Aspire Strategic Partnership Board and presents a report to the Aspire Operational Management Board and Strategic Partnership Board every 6 months in line with standard 17 of the Adoption Minimum Standards, on the quality of reports being presented to the panel. This includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the

suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement. His most recent report is included as Appendix 5.

- 1.11 In 2023/24 the Adoption Panels have all been held virtually to enable full participation of members and adopters.