



Hertfordshire

Adoption Annual Report

2023 - 2024

Hertfordshire Adoption Service

In Alliance With Adopt East



Adoption Service Core Services and Purpose

The Adoption Service provide the following core services in accordance with statutory requirements:

- Recruitment and assessment of prospective adoptive parents.
- Matching of children for adoption.
- Oversight of the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) functions and adoption panel for both children's adoption plans and matching of children to adoptive parents.
- Adoption support services both pre-and post-adoption.
- Financial support for adoptive families.
- Inter-country adoption services through the Intercountry Adoption Centre.
- Assessment, supervision, and family court reporting for non-agency adoptive parents (stepparents, parents who already have the child in their care).

Adoption England Strategy

Hertfordshire, alongside the region, engage in key activity to develop the modernisation agenda. This is in line with the Adoption England Strategy 2024-2027 with 5 goals identified :-

1. Children are found permanent and loving homes in a timely way
2. Children have good quality care, a good understanding of their identity, a sense of belonging and stability within their adoptive family
3. Adopted children and families get help and support when they need it
4. Children, adoptive and birth parents have an influence in the services provided nationally and regionally
5. Professionals understand the profound impact that being in care and adoption has on children's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/Adoption%20England%20Strategy.pdf>

Regional Arrangements

Hertfordshire Adoption Service works in partnership with the following agencies to form the Adopt East Regional Adoption Alliance:



All agencies work in alliance under a collaboration agreement to work together for the communities that we serve whilst maintaining a close connection with our children's service departments within our Local Authorities.

Service Structure & Individual Team Functions

The Hertfordshire Adoption Service has 5 teams which divides the adoption statutory responsibilities as follows:

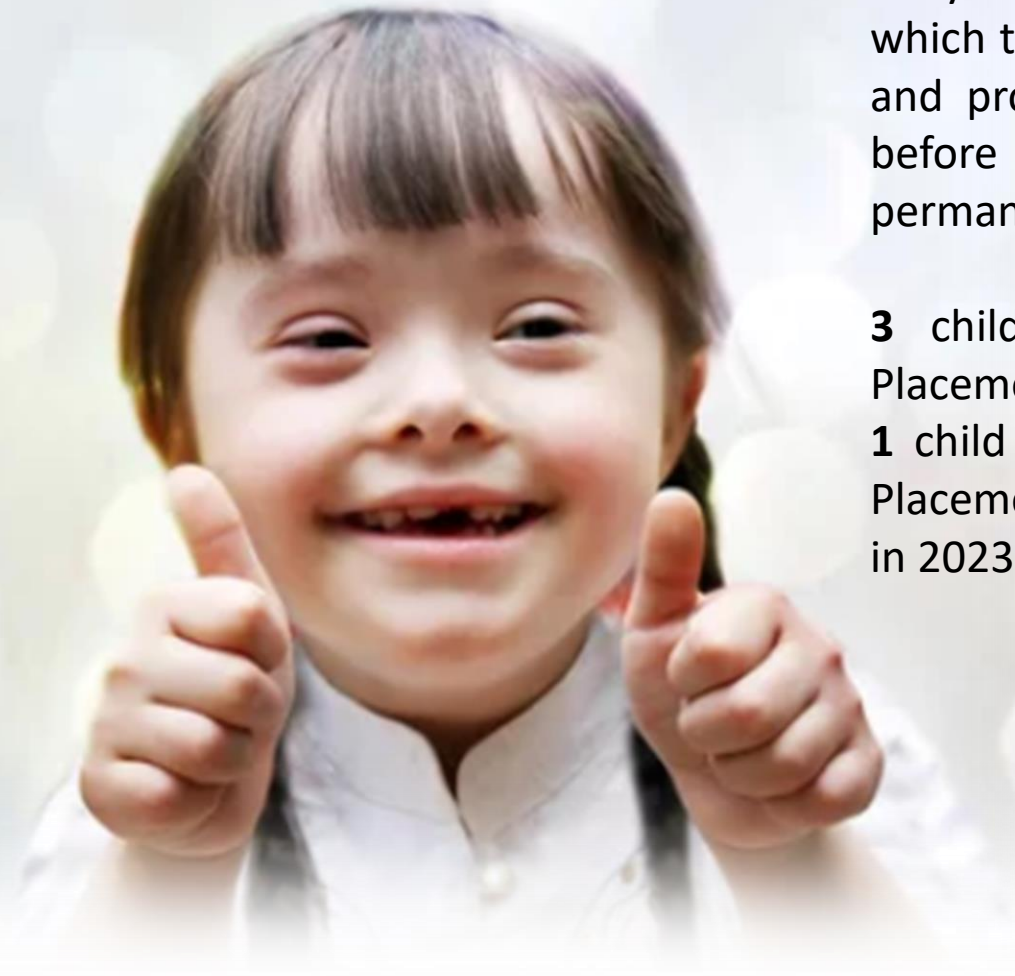
- 1 Combined Adoption & Fostering Recruitment Team
- 2 Assessment Teams
- 1 Family Finding Team
- 1 Adoption Support Team



Other Permanency Arrangements



Early Permanence



Early Permanence, also known as fostering to adopt, is the process by which those who wish to adopt can be approved as both foster carers and prospective adopters. Children can then be placed with them before the decision has been made by the court that their permanency plan is adoption.

3 children were placed by Hertfordshire in Early Permanence Placements over 2023-2024.

1 child from out of Adopt East was placed in an Early Permanence Placements with Hertfordshire dually approved prospective adopters in 2023-2024

Permanence through Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) and Child Arrangement Orders (CAO)

- Special Guardianship provides a permanency option for children and young people unable to live with their birth family.
- Special Guardianship confers legal Parental Responsibility on the Special Guardian which is expected to last until the child becomes 18 years old.
- In 2023-2024 **38** Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's) were granted where Hertfordshire County Council were in care proceedings and **7** SGO's were granted for private applications. Private applications are where the family member or connected person take a private law application to obtain Parental Responsibility for the child.
- A Child Arrangement Order (CAO) is an order from the Court which details the arrangements for a child, including where the child will live and how they will spend time with each parent.
- In 2023-2024 **22** Child Arrangement Orders were granted

Permanence with Friends & Family including Special Guardianship Orders Support (Kinship)

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

The Government funded Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) has been established because many families need some kind of therapeutic support following the granting of Adoption, Special Guardianship and Child Arrangement Orders . The Fund enables them to access the services they need more easily in future.

During 2023-2024 **34** applications to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Fund and **622** special guardians were supported by the service .





New Kinship Strategy 2024

The Government has published the new Kinship Strategy
There is an increasing drive to keep children within their family network

- The aim of the strategy is to enable more children who cannot live with their parents to stay with people who are known to them and love them
- Recommendations for
 - Improved financial reward including proposal to pay carers with Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) equivalent to foster carer pay. Currently this a means tested allowance
 - Support
 - Training

Hertfordshire's Response to the Strategy

Key Actions;-

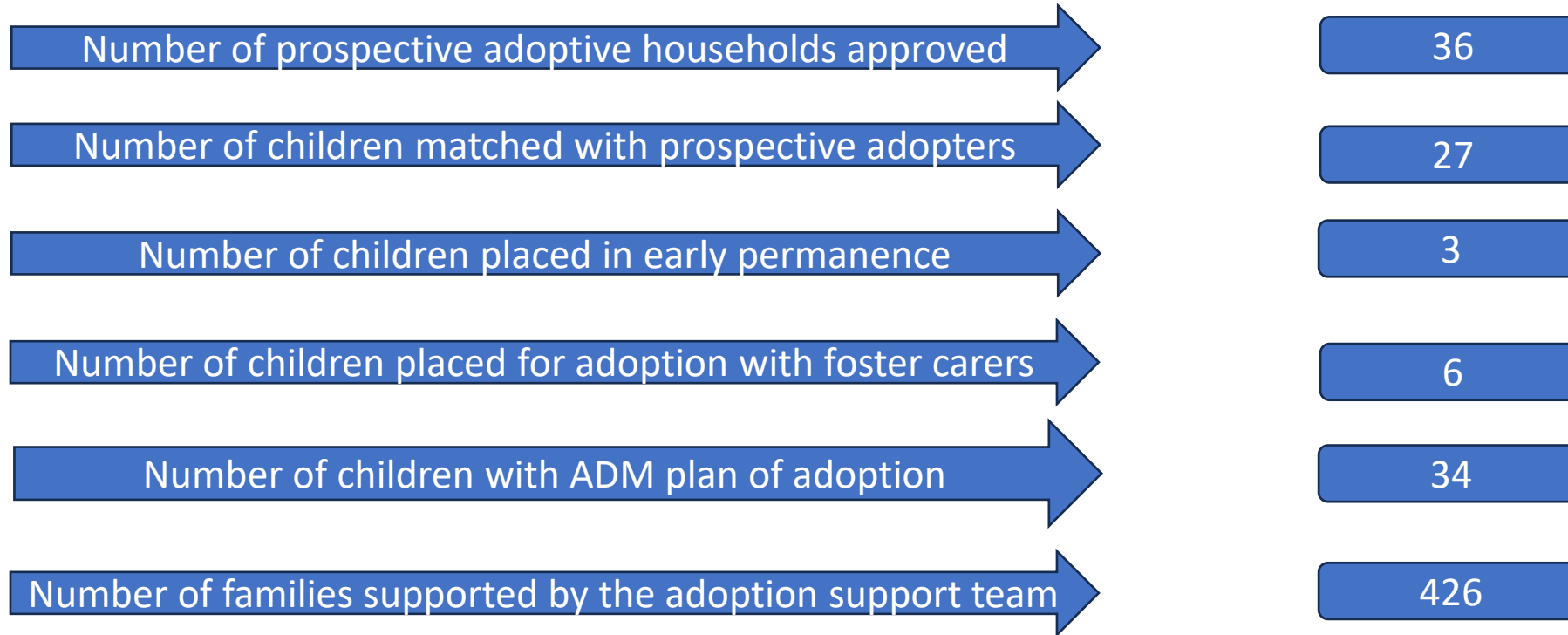
- ❖ Application for DfE Pathfinder to pay SGO carers the equivalent of the fostering allowance
- ❖ Virtual school support to SGO carers
- ❖ Change the service name to Kinship
- ❖ Continue to develop support and training offer
- ❖ Early involvement in permanency planning to ensure children live in a home that will meet their needs



Data



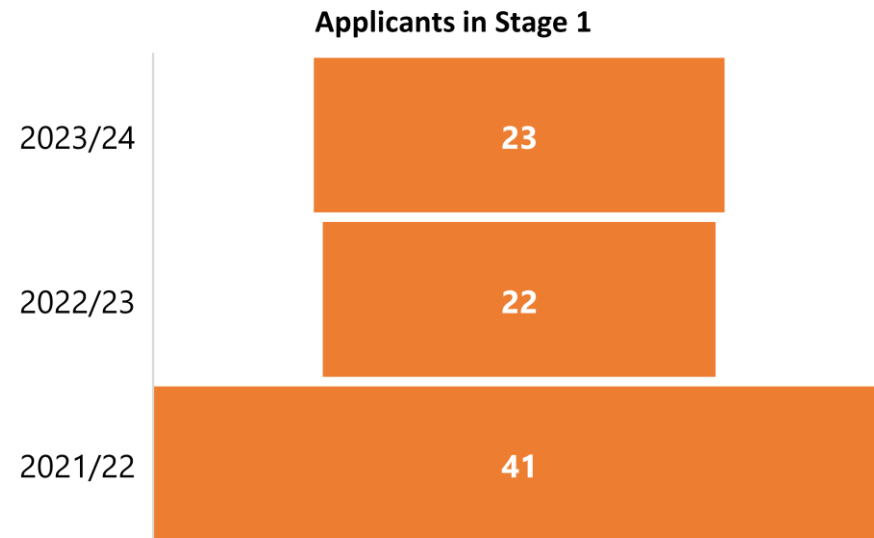
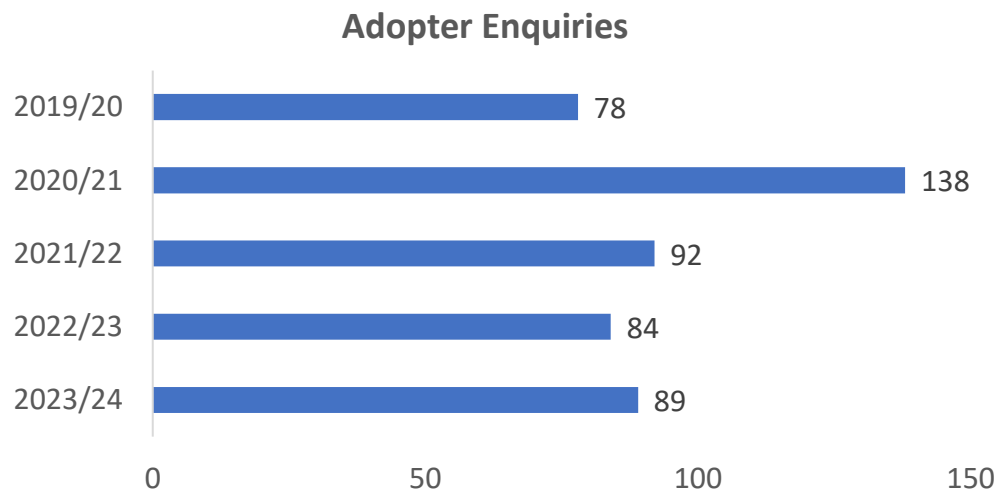
Hertfordshire Data For 2023-2024



- Hertfordshire compares well within the region and nationally with an average of **400** days from the child coming into care to granting of Adoption Order and is the only local authority below the national average of **459** days.
- Hertfordshire and Norfolk compare favourably in the region for early permanence placements.

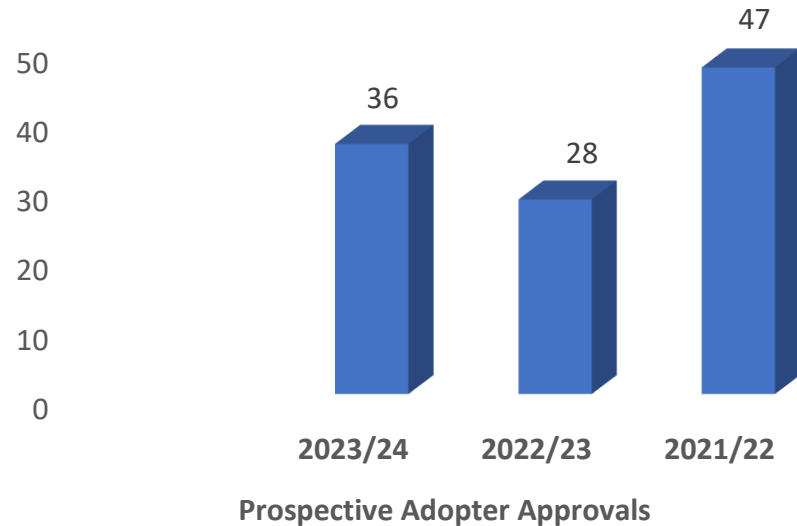
Our Prospective Adopters

During the year we continued to actively recruit and assess our prospective adopters. The following activity outlines the work undertaken in this area of practice:



In 2023 – 2024 there were **5** more adopter enquiries compared to the previous year. There were **23** households who completed Stage 1 which is an increase of **1** from the previous year. In addition there were 5 adoption assessments fast tracked (second time adopters and foster carers).

Our Prospective Adopters continued

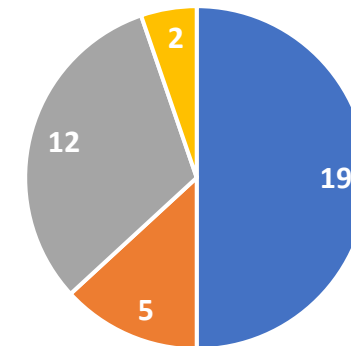


In 2023-2024 **36** prospective adopter households were approved which is an increase of 8 from the previous year.

Adoptive Households Waiting for children to be placed

On the 31st March 2024 **7** approved adoptive households were waiting for more than one year – reasons being matching criteria is limited in terms of the age, ethnic background, religion and background characteristics of the child they wish to adopt.

Breakdown of assessments undertaken



■ 1st timers ■ 2nd timers ■ Dual Approval ■ Withdrawn

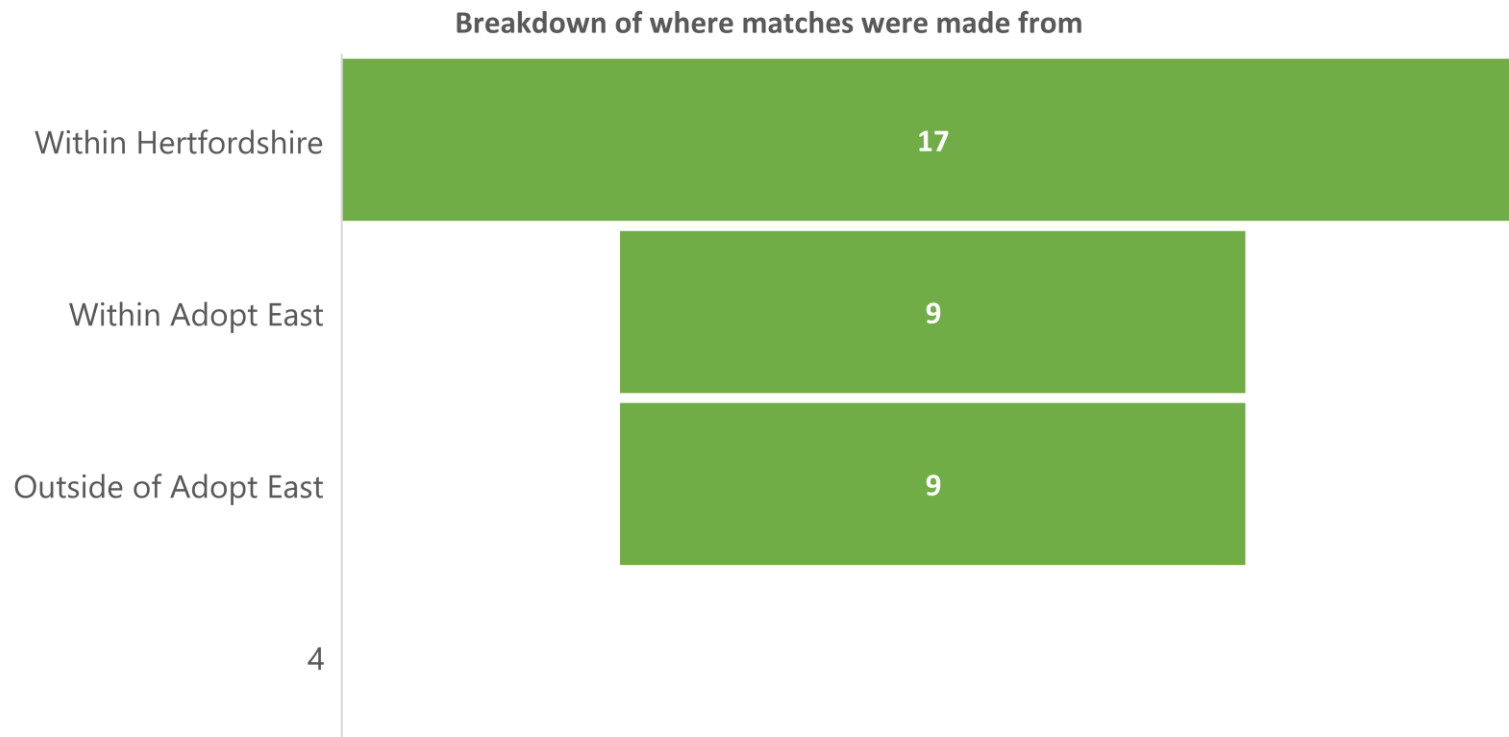
Our Prospective Adopters Continued

Matches Outside of Adopt East

The majority of Hertfordshire's prospective adopters take children from within the Adopt East region.

The breakdown below shows the children that were matched with our prospective adopters:

Over 2023-2024 17 Hertfordshire approved adoptive household was matched. In 2023-2024 there were

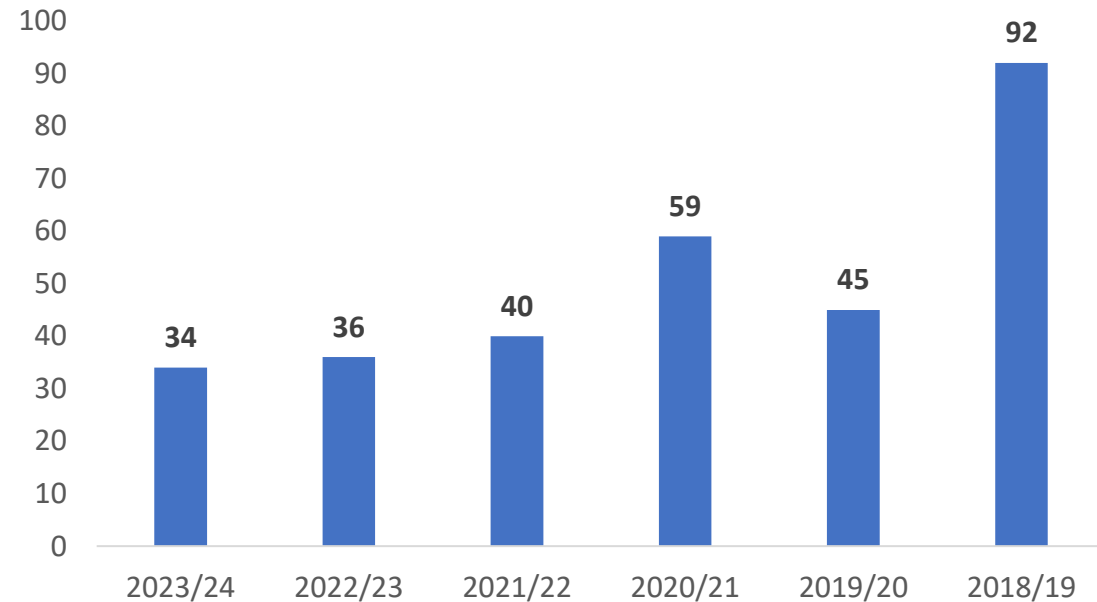


Our Children

During 2023-2024 **34** children had a best interest decision by the Agency Decision Maker for adoption. This is a decrease of 2 children from the previous year. Since 2020-2022 there has been a gradual decrease in the number of children being presented to the Agency Decision Maker for a Best Interest Decision of adoption.

2 Children were placed with consent of their birth parents (relinquished children)

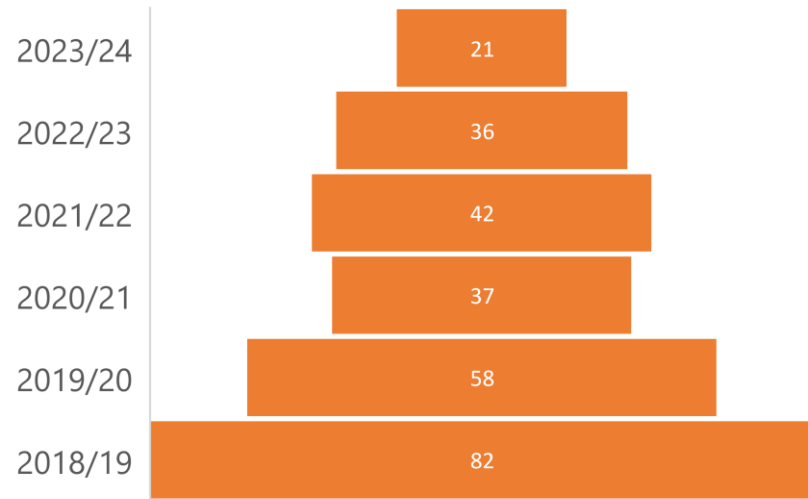
Children with a plan for adoption decisions



The Service continued to support birth parents from the point where their child has a plan for adoption throughout the adoption process. Birth family members also have access to counselling from Adoptionplus, which is funded by the adoption service.

Our Children continued

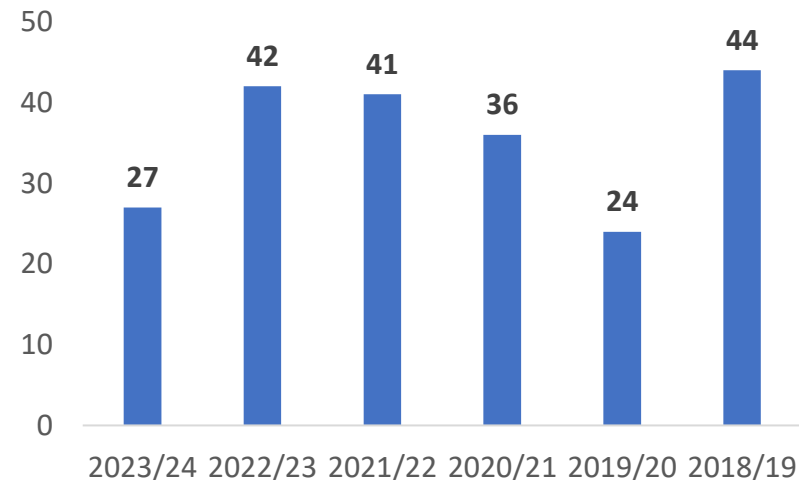
Placement Orders Granted - permission to place



During 2023-2024, **21** children received a court approved Plan for Adoption (Placement Order). This is a decrease of **15** children from the previous year and indicates a decreasing trajectory in the number of children being placed for adoption over the past 2 years.

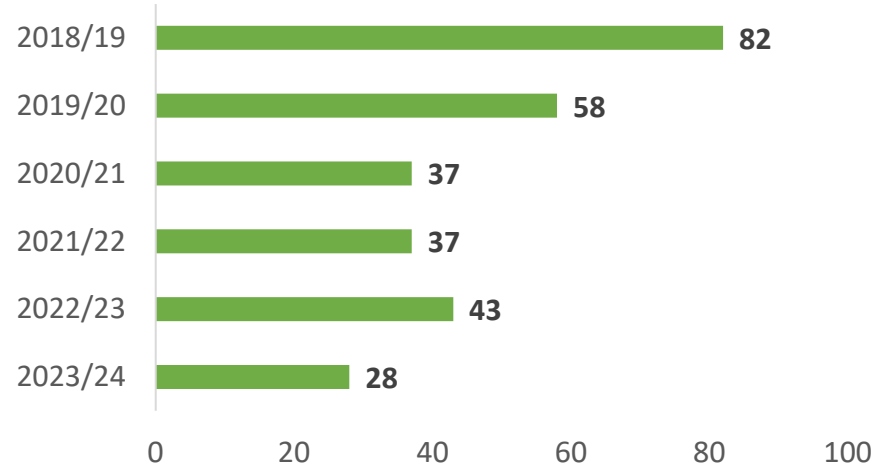
During 2023-2024, **27** children were matched and subsequently placed for adoption. This is a decrease of 15 children from the previous year and is the lowest it has been in the last 4 years.

Children Matched



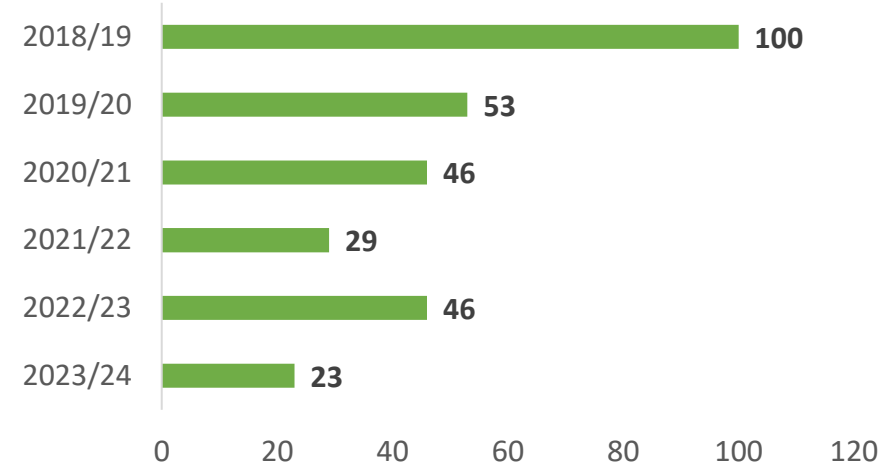
Our Children continued

Children Placed



The number of children placed in an adoptive household in 2023-2024 is 28 which is the lowest it has been for the past 6 years.

Children Adopted



2 children were adopted by their mainstream foster carers (not including early permanence carers).

The number of children being legally adopted in 2023 – 2024 is at the lowest it has been over the past 6 years.

Our Children continued

Over 2023-2024 a programme of regional Adopt East matching events took place. **2** Regional Profiling events were held as well as **7** Craft & Play events. Adopt East also attended **3** National Exchange Day events to profile children.



8 children from Hertfordshire attended were matched with prospective adopters that they met at the event.

Pre-Adoption Order Disruptions

Disruption is the term used for the breakdown of an adoptive placement prior to an Adoption Order being granted. Hertfordshire Adoption Agency has historically had low disruption rates.

During 2023-2024 there was 0 Disruption/s.

- During 2022-2023 there was 0 Disruption/s.
- During 2021-2022 there were 2 Disruption/s.
- During 2020-2021 there was 1 Disruption/s.
- Over 2019-2020 there was 0 Disruption/s.

Disruptions meetings are used to scrutinise cases and learn from a disruption as a group of multi-agency professionals.

Following any disruption, a disruptions meeting is held to consider the circumstances and any learning shared across the agency, with the Adoption Panel and across Adopt East.

Non-Agency Adoption



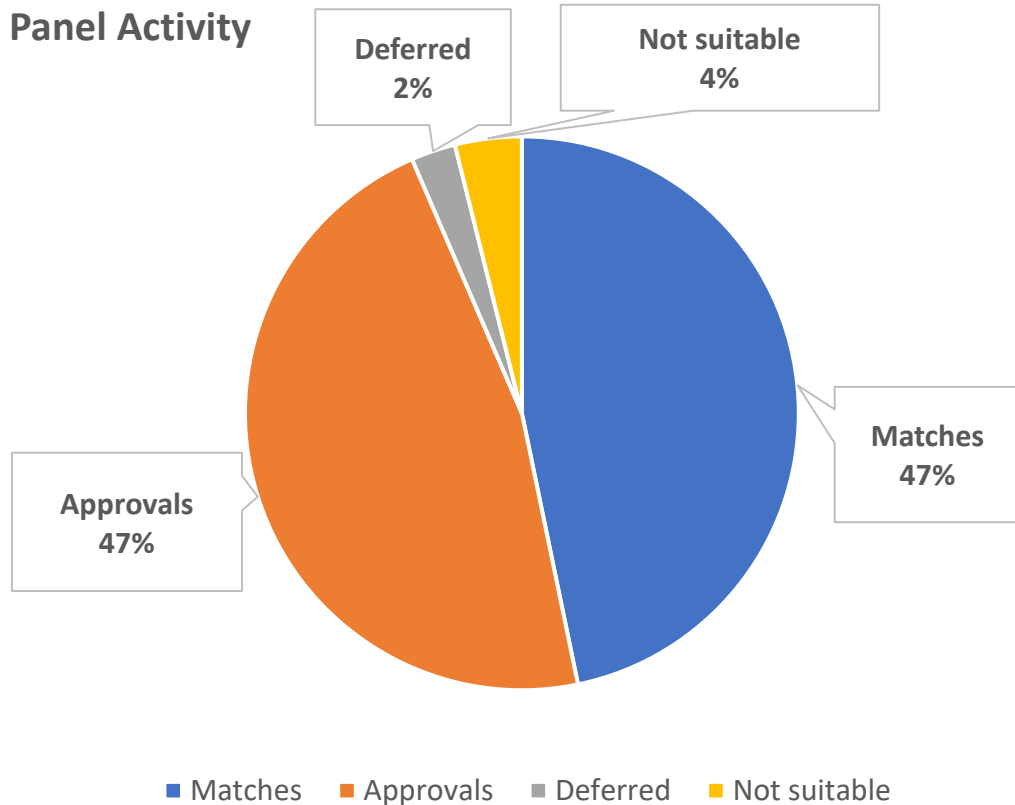
Non-Agency Adoption is managed by the Adoption Service and refers to adoption assessments which involve families whose children are not in the care of the local authority such as an adoption undertaken by a step-parent or where a foster carer applies directly to the court to adopt a child in their care.

Similarly to agency adoption assessments, a two-stage process is followed and robust monitoring through supervision and tracking meetings takes place to ensure a timely service is delivered. In 2023-2024 **17** Non-agency Adoption Applications were received and **6** households were progressed. **3** Non-agency Adoption Orders were granted during 2023-2024.

Adoption Panels

Panels continued to be chaired by an independent chair. In 2023-2024 Panel heard the following:

Panel Activity



The Panel Chair's report is in the link below for additional information on panel activity

https://hertsc365-my.sharepoint.com/personal/lynn_knowles_hertfordshire_gov_uk/Documents/Documents/FINAL%20Adoption%20Annual%20report%202024%2009%2005%2024%20v3.docx?web=1

Inclusivity across Children & Prospective Adopters

LGBTQ+ Children & Prospective Adopters

During 2023-2024, the Adoption Service worked effectively to ensure that our services continue to welcome children and adopters from the LGBTQ+ community.

LGBTQ+ support groups
running across the region



Active LGBTQ+ community
throughout our training and
events



Global Majority Children & Prospective Adopters

During 2023-2024, the Adoption Service worked effectively to ensure that children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds did not experience any undue delay in matching due to their ethnicity, or any other protected characteristics.



The Adoption Service continued to welcome prospective adopters from all communities. 2023 – 2024 was the year for reflection and action with regards to how we engage with our global majority communities with the launch of Anti-racist strategy covering all aspects of adoption practice.



Black Adopters group now running regular with great engagement. Looking forward to a member of the group joining our Adopter Voice group in 2024 -2025.

The Modernisation Agenda

Adoptees are giving clear messages about the importance of connection with birth family as well as adoptive family

This helps to strengthen an adopted child's sense of identity, reduce any sense of rejection, and enable them to thrive into adulthood.

Birth relatives and adoptive parents are encouraged to meet and develop a culture of seeing them both as being part of a child's family for life.



90% of adopted people feel that adoption should be more open

Over **70%** of adopted people state there is not enough information about why they were adopted and about their birth parents

85% of adopted people had attempted contact with birth parents after reaching 18 and **92%** were glad that they attempted contact

76% of adopted people said that direct contact with birth parents should be standard practice

"How can I know who I am when I don't know where I'm from."

J, 14 Adopted age 5

"Growing up adopted was very difficult. I had no information about my birth family and tiny snippets leaked out over the years that should have been mine to know all along. My education really suffered as when I was a teenager, I was so concerned with finding people to belong to as I did not feel that I really belonged to anyone."

Adult adoptee adopted in 1962

The Voice of Adoptees -
PAC-UK Big Consult (2023)
and Adopt East feedback [link](#)

Safe and Meaningful Contact (SaMC)



Safe and Meaningful Contact guidelines were introduced in 2021 by clinical psychologists, Chris Burke and Anne Woodhouse who regularly provide expert witness psychological opinion within child and family law.

SaMC guidelines are intended to enable trauma informed decision making about contact arrangements for looked after children and/or those in permanent care arrangements.

SaMC guidelines provide a framework to organise thinking about contact arrangements around the developmental needs of children and young people no longer living with their birth family

79 staff in Hertfordshire are trained to use the SaMC tool

“The key aim of the Safe and Meaningful Contact Guidelines is not to determine whether direct contact should take place or not but to determine how contact can be supported to meet the child’s recovery needs, provided it is safe”

Purposes of keeping in touch

Permission to settle in their adoptive family without having to struggle with feeling of guilt

Integrate past

Coherent narrative of their story

Understanding their family background

Making sense of being part of two families

Identity

Avoiding the stress of searching for their birth family later on

Understand why in care

Manage loss and separation

Promote placement stability

Keeping in touch for adopted children

Adoption Support Services

The teams provide a range of adoption support services to adoptive parents, adopted children, adult adoptees and birth relatives of children and adults who have been adopted which include:



- Assistance in relation to arrangements for contact with birth families
- Letter box and post adoption contact service.
- Financial support.
- Therapeutic services
- Adult access to records
- Counselling, advice and information
- Access to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF).
- Peer support and group work.
- Activities and events for adoptive families
- Services to support adoptive families and adoptive placements.
- Expert advice and facility for discussion about all matters relating to adoption
- Match funding for complex packages of interventions (including sensory attachment therapy, therapeutic life story, 'TheraPlay').

Adoption Support Services



134 adoption support assessments
were requested

As of 31st March 2024, **426** adoptees
and their families actively accessing
adoption support.

59 referrals accepted for Access to
Records during 2023-2024.

Over 2023-2024 the following courses and groups have taken place:

- 'Adoptees' - programme for adopted young people
- Life story work training for adoptive parents
- Therapeutic parenting courses – both virtual and face to face
- Working in partnership with our Virtual School to provide a telephone helpline for education related queries.
- Talking Education and Adoption co-facilitated with the Educational Psychology Service
- Non-Violent Resistance therapeutic group programme for Adopters
- Training for Prospective Adopters who already have a child
- Foster carers during children's transition to adoption
- Approved adopters in the process of being matched with a child.
- Self Esteem Training for Adopters

Adoption Support Services continued

Adoptive families have continued to have access to therapeutic support funded through the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund. 454 **applications** made to the fund in 2023-2024. 7 of which were withdrawn leaving a total of 447 successful applications. A total of **£1 362603, 72** was drawn down from the fund. These funded therapies included a range of specialist support and assessment. These therapies included Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), Sensory Integration Therapy and Play Therapy. Hertfordshire also match funded **7** packages of support in 2023 - 2024.



Adoption Support Services continued

Adopters Together Community Hub

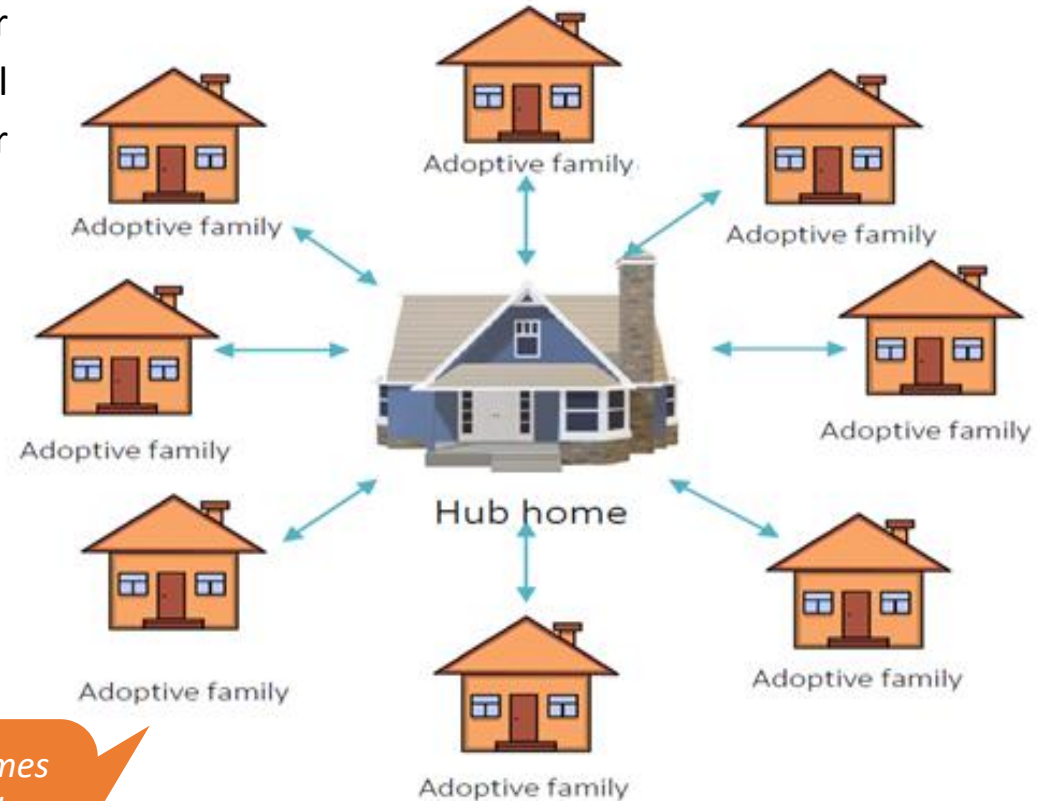
6 Hubs now running across the region. 2 of which is operational in the Hertfordshire area with another one planned to be rolled out. The hubs are a creative way of providing peer support with a lead adopter trained to deliver the Enhanced Adoptive Parenting Programme as well as providing social activities for the hub families. The hub lead adopter is now funded through Adoption and Special Guardianship Fund.

56 families have been supported across the hubs during 2023-2024.

"Being a member of the Hub made me feel less lonely throughout the journey, it was nice to meet new people and good to chat to others going through the journey at the same time."

"The online meetings worked well in terms of times and it was nice to see people. The themes for the calls was helpful as it gave them more of a direction to start of conversations."

"The Hub hit and surpassed expectations."



Commissioned Services

Inter-Country Adoption

A Service Level Agreement is in place with the Intercountry Adoption Centre (IAC) to facilitate assessment for all people in Hertfordshire wishing to adopt a child from overseas as an 'Inter-Country Adoption.'

We joint commission the Inter-County Adoption Centre (IAC) together with our partners in Adopt East and continue to provide this service.

Independent Support to Birth Relatives

Since April 2020 we have commissioned Adoptionplus, a voluntary adoption agency to provide independent counselling support for birth relatives where a child has a plan of adoption and to provide support for adopted adults who have contacted Hertfordshire for support accessing their records where they would benefit from counselling. Ove the past 4 years 96 referrals have been made to the service and 61 people have attended at least one session of counselling. **Over 2023-2024, 23 referrals have been made to Adoptionplus.**

Voice and Influence

Adopter Voice is embedded throughout our services with feedback regular received through Board meetings and engagement events with our adoption community. The chair of Adopter Voice provides regular feedback and challenge at our Adopt East central meetings.

We are particularly proud of our ADOPTTEENS support group for young people who have been adopted as well as our YOUTH PANEL. Both of these groups have different purposes for the adopted young people who attend but both group continue to work well and supports us to think about our practice and influence the service.

Embedding the voice of birth families and adult adoptees within our services is an area for development in 2024-25.



Voice and Influence

“Thank you for all you have done in running the toddler group over the last few months. It is something we have always looked forward to”

“Toddler Group has helped me enormously by helping me build connections and friendships particularly when I’ve found things difficult”

“I like the activities and I get to see my friends”

“Thanks to Adoption Support for creating a safe environment that the YP could participate in.”

“Staff are always very welcoming and have a good rapport with the kids”

“My daughter has loved this group!”

Financial Outturn

The budget for the Adoption Service in 23/24 was £9.193m and the outturn was £9.017m.

As the modernisation agenda develops and birth family links increase there will be resource implications for supporting the birth family as well as adopters and children in facilitating face to face time and family communications .

Complaints, Feedback and Compliments

Compliments are received from adopters, birth family members and multi-agency colleagues and are always very welcome.

During 2023-2024, **8 compliments** in relation to the adoption service were formally logged with the Complaints Team.

The Adoption Service received **0 informal complaints** during 2023-2024 which were responded to and resolved.

The Adoption Service received **2 formal complaints** at stage 1 during 2023-2024, which was responded to and resolved.

The Adoption Service had **0 LGO decisions** during 2023-2024.



Key Priorities for 2024-2025

Continue to work with Adopt East partners to develop practice across the alliance to ensure the best possible outcome for children requiring adoption and adoptive families.

Continue to focus on the planning activity that delivers timely matching for all children with a plan for adoption.

To continue to review and develop the current services in line with modernising adoption. This is twofold, firstly to ensure children are able to understand their identity and maintain connections with their birth family and secondly adapting services in line with digitisation and social media.

Roll out of the Safe and Meaningful Contact assessment tool to ensure that all Keeping in Touch (Contact) arrangements are assessment and supported where necessary.

Continue to develop our peer support offer with the roll out of a new adopter helpline offering a creative and innovative first offer to our adoption community

Build upon the great practice in working with adolescents, birth families, adult adoptees and adopters .