



Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel

2020-2021
Annual report



*“sometimes superheroes
reside in the hearts of
children fighting huge battles”*



Bath & North East
Somerset Council



Wiltshire Council



Foreword by the chair of Adoption West Board

Although the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel does not fall under the banner of 'Overview and Scrutiny' as defined by the Local Government Act 2000, it clearly still provides a needed and valued scrutiny function, as evidenced in its first annual report.

The scrutiny arrangements as described in the terms of reference were thoroughly reviewed by each local authority and unanimously agreed by the Adoption West Board.

There is a strong belief, shared by the overview and scrutiny councillors involved at the time the panel was first thought of, and members of the Adoption West Board that more and better can be achieved through this joint approach; more depth to the joint scrutiny as it benefits from each local authority's councillor representative's skills, knowledge and input, better use of the finite time available to Adoption West's management to meaningfully engage with independent scrutiny of the Regional Adoption Agency's work.

I have no doubt that members of the joint scrutiny panel have been on a very steep learning curve in this first year, but I can also see that they have engaged with enthusiasm and really committed to developing their knowledge and understanding of Adoption West and its work, which I feel will be even further supported by developing the membership of the panel.

Looking at the joint scrutiny panel's forward work programme, I see a busy year ahead! It will be particularly interesting for the Adoption West Board to see the outcome of the review of adoption support and the review of the evaluation of the Regional Adoption Agencies.

I am also pleased to see that a key area of work for the panel in 2021-22 will be to work with all six local authorities to develop a process to ensure that reporting on adoption is co-ordinated as best as possible.

Much of my work over the past 15 years has been in building and sustaining partnerships and strategic relationships, so it is naturally important for me that there is a clear line of sight between the joint arrangements and local scrutiny functions and that the Adoption West Board remains open to enhancing those links as we move forward, albeit without creating parallel or duplicate processes.

As chair of the Adoption West Board, I am looking forward to engaging with the joint scrutiny panel in the year ahead to carry on developing robust and effective oversight and scrutiny of the work and management of Adoption West, whilst ensuring it remains an independent and democratically-led scrutiny process.

Andy Dempsey

Director of Partnerships and Strategy, Gloucestershire County Council

Chair of the Adoption West Board of Directors

Foreword from the chairman of the scrutiny panel

Right from when the plans were first spoken of for the new Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption West, it was my strong personal belief that any new body should include an effective overview and scrutiny involvement provision, and I could not have wished for it to go any better than it has for its first year (2020-21).

The panel members have seen real commitment and willingness to learn from the scrutiny panel's input from all six Local Authorities and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all for their engagement with this work.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the panel who have demonstrated a keen interest in the issues we have addressed and a willingness to learn and participate. I would especially thank Alana Buckingham, the chair of the Adoption West Adoption Advisory Board, who recently joined the scrutiny panel. There is incredible value in bringing in the voice of people for whom adoption is a day-to-day reality, not just a data-set. There are further ambitions for the scrutiny panel to develop its membership to include representatives from the "adoption triangle" (e.g. adoptive parent, adopted young person, adopted adults, birth family member, etc.) and I dare say this would bring invaluable strength and depth to the scrutiny panel's work.

I am pleased that Adoption West recognised the benefits that come from scrutiny by lay members and the value that can be added, and committed to openness and transparency. As a scrutiny panel, we have seen this at every meeting through the cooperation and engagement from Alison Lewis, Service Director for Adoption West. The scrutiny panel would like to recognise Alison's commitment to this process, but furthermore her evident commitment to adoption and making Adoption West a success – for the right reasons!

May 2021 elections notwithstanding, I believe there is great work to be achieved by the scrutiny panel and a key piece of work for 2021 could be the review of adoption support. I believe this is an area of work where the scrutiny panel could add so much, by reviewing support offers across the country and helping create a clearer picture of the support that would be most beneficial for families supported by Adoption West.

I'll conclude with a wish. I hope the work of the scrutiny panel will carry on improving, for all councillors in all six Local Authorities, their understanding of the importance of Adoption West and the role it plays in the adoption journey, but never forgetting that adoption remains an integral part of all our Children's Services.

I wish that in time this scrutiny panel is seen as a natural extension of the overview and scrutiny we all undertake of our Children's Services.

Cllr Jon Hubbard, Wiltshire Council

Chair of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel (2020-2021)

Purpose of the report

1. This report is written to:
 - a. publicly present the work undertaken by the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel (thereafter referred to as the “scrutiny panel”) from May 2020 to March 2021 to the following committees:
 - Children, Adults, Health & Wellbeing Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel, Bath and North East Somerset Council
 - People Scrutiny Commission, Bristol City Council
 - Children and Family Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Gloucestershire County Council
 - Children and young people’s services policy and scrutiny panel, North Somerset Council
 - Scrutiny Commission, South Gloucestershire Council
 - Children’s Select Committee, Wiltshire Council
 - b. enable the Adoption West (AW) Board to monitor the efficiency of the scrutiny panel.
 - c. invite suggestions from the scrutiny committees (as listed in a. above) and the AW board on:
 - areas of focus for the scrutiny panel in 2021-22;
 - the contents that should be included in the scrutiny panel’s annual report in future; and
 - formatting and presentation of the information to ensure ease of reading for future reports.

Background

2. Adoption West (AW) started operating on 1 March 2019, as a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) created by Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Wiltshire Council as a response to the government’s plans, published in June 2015, to regionalise adoption services across England and Wales.
3. Adoption West is a local authority trading company which is owned by the six local authorities and commissioned by them to provide adoption services. Adoption West is registered with Ofsted as a Voluntary Adoption Agency. Further information can be found on its [website](#).
4. The primary aim of this regionalisation was to deliver an adoption service which offer improved outcomes for both children and those who want to adopt.
5. The scrutiny panel (Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel) has been created to act as a critical friend, providing independent scrutiny of the work of AW and

making constructive recommendations to ensure that AW meets its performance targets and expectations. The terms of reference for the scrutiny panel are included as Appendix 1.

6. The scrutiny panel is an essential element of assuring democratic accountability for the use of public funds; although it does not fall under the banner of 'Overview and Scrutiny' as defined by the Local Government Act 2000 in that it is not a body jointly formed by the six participating councils.
7. The scrutiny panel reports directly to the AW Board. The AW board will monitor the efficiency of the scrutiny panel, including through this annual report.

Membership

Elected Voting Member

Cllr Michelle O'Doherty, Bath and North East Somerset Council
 Cllr Carole Johnson, Bristol City Council
 Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Vice Chairman), Gloucestershire County Council
 Cllr Wendy Griggs, North Somerset Council
 Cllr Nic Labuschagne, South Gloucestershire Council
 Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman), Wiltshire Council
 Cllr Suzanne Wickham, Wiltshire Council

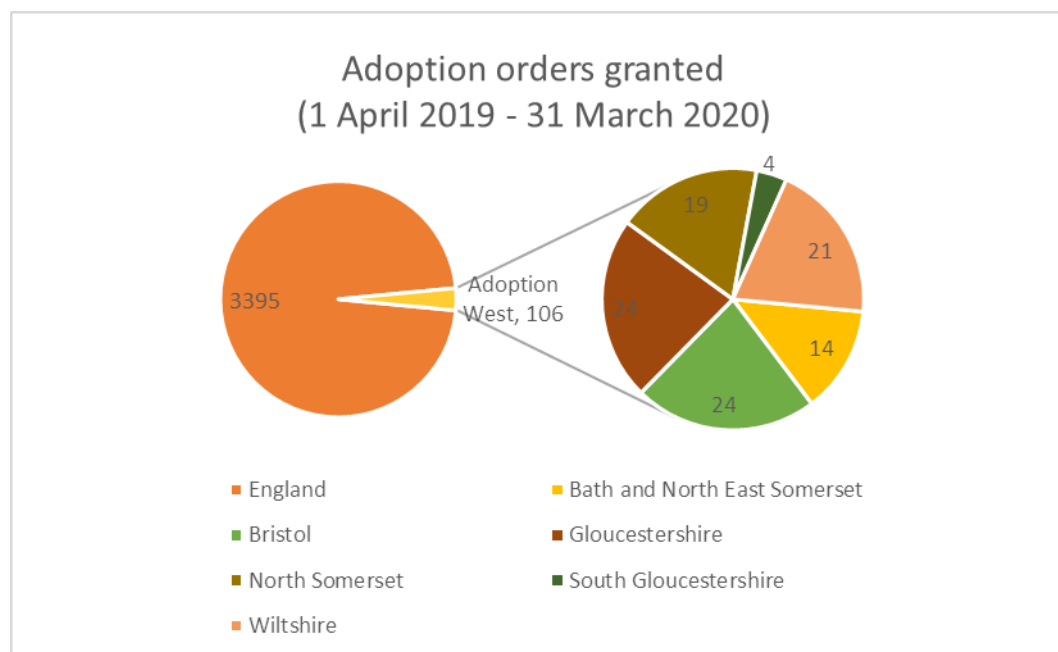
Advisor (non-voting)

Alana Buckingham, Chair of Adoption West Adopter Advisory Board, Adoption UK

Snapshot

	Looked after children (as at 31 March 2020)	Number of children adopted (1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020)	Adoptions as % of average number of Children Looked After between 2016 and 2019
	<i>(per 10,000 children and young people)</i>		
Bath and North East Somerset	181 (50)	14 (4)	22.58%
Bristol	623 (66)	24 (3)	10.72%
Gloucestershire	731 (57)	24 (2)	15.02%
North Somerset	230 (53)	19 (5)	17.70%
South Gloucestershire	210 (35)	4 (<1)	11.11%
Wiltshire	458 (43)	21 (2)	20.53%

Number of Adoption West children adopted - within a national context



Work undertaken

8. Between May 2020 and January 2021, the scrutiny panel held four meetings (virtual meetings to comply with Covid-19 regulations).
9. From the time the scrutiny panel was created, it was accepted that its first year would be a steep learning curve for its members as the world of adoption is often shrouded in mystery or media and movie-led misconceptions for anyone but those either working in that field or personally touched by adoption.
10. It was therefore also accepted that a significant portion of its work, in the first year, would be gathering knowledge and developing an understanding of both adoption and the implementation of the RAAs (regional adoption agencies).

May 2020 meeting - Understanding "Adoption West"

11. At its first meeting the scrutiny panel reviewed the process that led to the establishment of AW, AW's purpose, structure and current governance.
12. The scrutiny panel also established which elements of the adoption process were within its remit, as each Local Authority retains responsibility for the permanence planning for looked after children and continues to report to Government on performance in that area. Appendix 2 illustrates the split of responsibility between AW and the local authorities.

13. Finally, the scrutiny panel focused on performance monitoring by considering the October 2019 to March 2020 6-months performance report for AW, as well as the Scorecard data for 2015-2018.

14. The scrutiny panel resolved that some of the priorities identified by AW would also be areas of focus for its work:

- Adopter sufficiency (also a national focus) – having the right number of adopters, but also adopters matching the children awaiting adoption (e.g., sibling groups, older children, BAMES (black, Asian, and minority ethnic), etc.);
- Adoption support - developing clearer adoption support that engages with families as early as possible (rather than at crisis point) and with a focus on preventative actions.

July 2020 – performance monitoring

15. The scrutiny panel considered both the AW annual report (2019-20) and development plan (January-March 2020).

16. The scrutiny panel suggested a number of additions to the AW annual report to enable easier and more robust comparison of data (either against national figures, with statistical neighbours or for “year on year” comparison).

November 2020 – performance monitoring and reporting

17. The scrutiny panel focused its third meeting on understanding the performance monitoring process followed by AW. This included finding out what data is collected, how it is collected, who it is reported to, and how AW compares nationally (RAA scorecards).

18. The scrutiny panel also reviewed performance monitoring reports previously taken to each of the local authorities forming AW, to consider how this can best be undertaken to develop consistency across AW members.

19. The scrutiny panel resolved to consult with officers in each of the local authority to develop a common “core” report template, which each authority could then expand upon to include information that may be specific to that authority, for processes within adoption that remain the responsibility of the local authorities (Appendix 2 refers).

20. Developing a common template as described in the above paragraph remains an area of work for the scrutiny panel; it is also hoped that the pattern / timing of reporting to each authority could be aligned to ensure that all information on adoption is presented in / around May to all local authorities forming AW, including:

- Local authority’s performance report with regards to adoption;
- AW’s annual report;
- This scrutiny panel’s annual report.

21. This would ensure consistency across AW members, which in turn would enable robust year on year performance monitoring and more robust scrutiny of adoption performance by having all relevant information available at the same time (enabling triangulation of evidence).

January 2021 - performance monitoring and adopters' views

22. At its January 2021 meeting, the scrutiny panel considered the April to September 2020 AW's report and made recommendations on content to be included to ensure that effective scrutiny could be carried out (e.g., identifying trends, including comparator data, etc.); although it was recognised, and appreciated, that earlier recommendations made by the scrutiny panel on the format and contents of the AW's reports had been integrated in this report.
23. The scrutiny panel also considered the Adoption UK Adoption Barometer (2020) which offered an insight into the issues faced by adoptive families and how they were feeling with regards to processes and support offered to them.
24. The scrutiny panel noted that adoptive families reported increasing difficulties in adolescence and early adulthood and resolved to focus some of its work on this area (support for adolescent and young adults) in 2021-22. Adoption UK would focus some of its 2021 Adoption Barometer survey on the same topic.
25. The panel then considered this annual report and funding arrangements and resolved to develop its working relationship with AW Board in 2021-22.

Covid-19 impact

26. At each meeting throughout the year the scrutiny panel monitored the measures put in place to comply with government's guidelines with regards to Covid-19, whilst enabling delivery of services.
27. The scrutiny panel would like to express its recognition of the work undertaken by AW officers to ensure that after an initial (and understandable) short period of delays (March to May 2020), services have carried on being delivered at a high standard and with minimum delays.
28. It was also noted that AW had made the decision to maintain its quoracy for its adoption panels, wherever possible, which the scrutiny panel felt demonstrated a commitment to quality, and AW quickly implemented and supported online meetings to avoid delays in the adoption panels work.

Ambitions for 2021-2022

29. There were a number of membership changes before the third meeting of the scrutiny panel, and with three of the local authorities within AW holding elections in May 2021, there could be a further significant change in membership.

30. This reinforces the scrutiny panel's commitment to developing its membership to include up to five stakeholders within the "adoption triangle", such as (but not limited to) adoptive parent, adopted young person, adopted adult, birth family member. This would have the dual benefit of deepening the scrutiny panel's understanding of adoption and, hopefully, enable continuity of work through continuity of membership.
31. Having developed an understanding of both adoption and Adoption West over its first year, the scrutiny panel has set its work for 2021-2022 (Appendix 3 – forward work programme). Significant changes of membership could make it difficult for the scrutiny panel to complete its forward work programme (as new members would likely need time to develop their understanding of adoption and Adoption West).
32. A key area of work for the panel in 2021-22 will be to work with all six local authorities to develop a process to ensure that reporting on adoption is co-ordinated as best as possible to enable robust scrutiny (paragraphs 21 to 25 refer).

Conclusion

33. The establishment of the joint scrutiny panel itself is an achievement for 2020-21 and reflects the commitment from the AW Board and from each local authority within AW to independent, and democratically led, scrutiny of the use of public funds.

Proposal

For the scrutiny committees (as listed in paragraph 1.a. above) and the AW board to:

34. Note the annual report 2020-21 of the scrutiny panel and make suggestion on contents to be included for future annual reports, and formatting and presentation of the annual report to ensure ease of reading;
35. Note the forward work programme for the scrutiny panel for 2021-22 (Appendix 3) and suggest any amendments or additional areas of focus for the scrutiny panel in 2021-22;

For the scrutiny committees (as listed in paragraph 1.a. above) to note that:

36. The scrutiny panel would like to invite all councillors to read the Adoption Barometer 2020 to gain some understanding of the difficulties and issues faced by adoptive families, as this is likely to inform the support offered, and financed, by adoption agencies (including AW). The Adoption Barometer 2020 can be accessed here, alongside information on the 2019 and 2021 surveys: [Adoption Barometer](#).

Cllr Jon Hubbard, Wiltshire Council, Chairman of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Committee

Date of report: 11 March 2021

Report author: Marie Gondlach, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Wiltshire Council

Appendices

Appendix 1 – terms of reference of the Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel

Appendix 2 – Split of responsibilities between Regional Adoption Agency and Local Authority

Appendix 3 – forward work programme