



Adoption
East Midlands

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ANNUAL REPORT 2025-2026

This was the seventh year of operation for Adoption East Midlands...

Adoption East Midlands

Annual report 2025-2026

Introduction

This was the seventh year of operation for AEM.

The aims of the Regional Adoption Agency, as recorded in the business case.

- Provides all children with an adoptive family that meets their needs.
- Ensures that those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand their adoption journey.
- Ensures that RAA families are well prepared, enabled and supported to care for the children with plans for adoption.
- Delivers improved outcomes for children for whom adoption is the preferred plan for permanence.
- Delivers the new service at no additional cost to the partner local authorities.

We continue to be proud of our achievements, our growth in areas of service, and developing services. We are a learning organisation and seek to continually improve.

Adoption practice is a continuously developing area of work, responding to changes in society and currently modernising adoption practice in line with these changes. We work closely aligned with Adoption England seeking to progress the priorities of the strategy. (www.adoptionengland.co.uk)



Outcomes for 2024-2027

In the next 3 years, 2024 -27,
Adoption England will prioritise
supporting the delivery of the
following outcomes:



We have innovative practice and continue to be invited to present at focus groups and webinars, for example on the Anti Racist Framework for Decision Making (AFDiT) work, keeping in touch work, adoption support, education, delivering preparation learning, young people's voice, peer network.

The multi-disciplinary approach in adoption support enhances our work throughout the service and continues to be funded by DfE grant.



Our adopter preparation and support in the early months of placement is now refined, bringing together all our learning about therapeutic parenting, modern adoption and our service is making strides to being one service for all families impacted by adoption, listening and learning all the time. We offer learning in making connections and parent and child sensory, parenting with theraplay early after families are formed, and we are reviewing our pathway, to make this more accessible to all.

We regularly have approved adopters willing to offer early permanence; however, the lack of adopters generally means they are often matched with children already waiting.

Nationally there are not enough adopters, with many factors influencing family choices, such as demographic, socio economic, and improved access to fertility treatments.

We have had a budget overspend this year and have used reserves to cover this.

Increasing costs in line with inflationary costs indicate further budget uplift is necessary.

The area which overspends is interagency fees, due to a continuing high volume of children becoming subject to Placement Orders, and a decline in numbers of adopters approved. In addition, this year three quarters of the children we have placed have been single children, meaning the total number of adopter households needed, is higher.

There has been a pay rise for all staff, met from the existing budget, using reserves.

Working Practices

We regularly meet in person for team and service meetings, in this way the staff are all together at a variety of times, we rotate venue around the geography. This year we have introduced regular huddles, which are short staff and team meetings, to discuss work, and maintain connections.

We also have regular virtual staff events, focussed on a learning activity.

Our adopter preparation sessions are in person, enabling supportive relationships to develop. These run every month; however we may reduce frequency in the coming year.

Our adoption panels are virtual, as are most meetings with other professionals.

We no longer use the Derby office with any frequency and have moved space within Matlock again.

AEM staff are regularly in West Bridgford, Nottingham City, Arnold, Sutton in Ashfield, and Mansfield offices.



Staff Development

We have had further retirements, leavers, and part time arrangements, with no difficulty to date in recruiting.

We review the needs of the service at every vacancy and consider what type of role would best meet the needs.

We are growing our pool of independent social workers, able to undertake assessments for us, to maintain workflow. These workers are invited to our training events.

We continue to use some vacant hours, for others to temporarily increase hours, in this way staff can increase or reduce hours, to fit with family needs.

Our internally earned income stream has been reduced this year due to national changes in the adoption support fund; we have rethought our spending of this income going forward.

We are working collaboratively with Family Adoption Links, which is the other East Midlands RAA. We are undertaking an adoption support needs assessment on this footprint. This is the same footprint for RCCs in the future.

We also work more closely with the East Midlands fostering hub, which is the same 4 partner LAs as the RAA, we share some recruitment activity and are thinking about future opportunities to work together.

The agency supported some student social work placements last year, contributing to workforce development and professional learning within the agency.

Staff Learning and Development

Our three Advanced Social Work Practitioners have continued to support staff learning and development across AEM which has included facilitating regular Reflective Practice sessions on a range of themes, as well as leading bi-monthly whole service virtual learning events. These virtual learning events share internal developments and showcase best practice but through the year we've also welcomed some external speakers: Rossi and Jan Griffin talking about FASD and sharing Rossi's recent book and staff from Nottingham's Children's Hospitals BRILL team (Brain Injury Living Life) sharing information on Acquired Brain Injury in Childhood.

Learning opportunities continue to be both well attended and positively received, and where possible we include our local authority colleagues in learning events.

Our Advanced Practitioners also offer a quarterly 'Welcome to Adoption East Midlands' webinar for all new staff within AEM as well as in our partner agencies.

Within the Recruitment assessment and family (RAF) team, our Advanced Practitioner (AP) shares learning in team meetings as well as at staff development



days, with team managers and other teams in AEM. This year, that has included sharing learning in relation to adult attachment, assessing neurodivergent adopters and safeguarding in adoption assessment and early support. The AP has also supported the development of best practice guidance in RAF in relation to Family Network meetings, linking practice with learning from disruptions locally and nationally and with national safeguarding learning.

The AP offers staff consultations to assessing social workers and supports direct work with families when an additional perspective would be helpful for families, social workers or team managers.

AFDiT – Anti-racist framework for decision-making and transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups into transracial adoptive families.

We continue to embed AFDiT principles and practice across our work in AEM. We have AFDiT champions across the service.

There has been an ongoing commitment to embed the framework into all areas of practice which has involved incorporating practice tools from the framework into paperwork and assessment forms at all stages as well as developing our learning and development and our support offer to prospective adopters and those who have adopted transracially. AFDiT is being used in assessment, linking and matching as well as in adoption support. One development has been that a transracial support group has been started to provide a welcoming space for adoptive families to connect and share their stories and celebrate their diverse experiences. The group aims to explore identity, race and culture in parenting and build connections for children and parents.

Additional learning events for AEM staff have been provided within individual teams, as well as for permanence teams across the four local authorities and a workshop with panel chairs and vice-chairs. Our AFDiT champions are part of a national AFDiT champions group which meets monthly and they have shared some of our good practice at online events as well as an in-person event. We're continually looking to evaluate the impact AFDiT is making and to see how we can better support positive identity outcomes for all adopted children.

This year we have worked in partnership with Proud 2b Parents, a service for LGBT parents and their children and LGBT parents to be. Over the course of our work together, we have benefitted from consultancy support, specialist LGBTQ+ inclusive training, and staff practice support, all aimed at strengthening inclusive recruitment, assessment and post-adoption provision. (AE Outcome1)

Leading on from this we have now established a co-production group with LGBTQ+ adopters and professionals along with our PRIDE working group. These groups will continue to drive forward key learning and actions from the work we have done together. We also plan to further embed key learning within our assessment processes and will plan further reflective practice sessions for staff.

We received the following feedback from Proud to be Parents, 'We have appreciated Adoption East Midlands' openness to learning, reflection and continuous



improvement. That shared commitment to inclusive practice is what makes this collaboration meaningful.'

Learning from Disruptions

AEM's disruptions rate remains broadly in line with the national average, however we continue to be committed to ongoing learning and therefore we continue to review all the learning from disruptions, to produce a thematic overview and to and share this with staff and partners. Recent webinars were attended by well over 100 staff from AEM and partner agencies and were a useful forum for sharing this learning and encouraging greater reflection. Moving forward this will be an annual overview.

Our work was recognised within recent national work on disruptions we're now involved in developing national practice in this area in partnership with Adoption England, as well as reviewing local practices and procedures in relation to disruptions meetings and meetings to reflect and learn after a breakdown in introductions or Fostering for Adoption.

Local Authority Partnership working

The operations meeting which involves service managers from fostering and children's permanence teams, Kinship managers, and lead IROs in the Local Authorities (LA) is a regular meeting. We have worked together to produce a work plan, which captures all the areas of joint work, with leads for each area.

The operations meeting is now used to review progress on the work plan and remove any blocks. In addition, we meet every 2/3 months with each LA leads for permanence. These additional meetings ensure we remain connected, and have a forum to problem solve, but the benefit of services across all 4 LAs coming together to problem, solve, are sometimes lost.

We continue to work with the 5 RAAs across the Midlands and 3 VAAs operating in the same area. This is with the aim of placing children as locally as possible, recruiting adopters to meet children's needs, and offering a consistent adoption support service. Again, best practice is shared, plus collaborative problem solving.

The family finding activity has been enhanced by DfE grant, to dedicated time, for promoting the region working together.

Recruitment, Assessment and Family Service

Adopter Recruitment

During the past year, we have restructured the way we deliver services at the front door of our adoption service. This has included a comprehensive revamp and strengthening of the Enquiry and Stage One elements of the adopter journey. The aim of these changes is to embed high-quality adopter recruitment and to provide



more enhanced, consistent, and timely support for families at the very beginning of their journey.

Dedicated staff are now allocated specifically to front door and Stage One work, ensuring greater continuity, responsiveness, and support from the point of first contact onwards.

Information Events and Early Engagement

We continue to deliver monthly Information Events, both online and in person. We have four In-person events scheduled for this year and are held on a rota basis across all four Local Authorities. These events provide an accessible opportunity for people to learn more about adoption, and individuals can book directly onto events themselves. We have also formed a working group to update the content of our information events.

As part of the front door revamp, we have introduced First Steps Calls for people considering adoption and making initial contact with the service. These informal conversations allow prospective adopters to speak directly with adoption staff and can be booked via a link to our newly implemented Microsoft Bookings page (accessible via website and Instagram page).

Communication and Digital Engagement

Our social media working group continue to meet regularly to schedule content and our creative skills in content creation and audience engagement are growing. We are focusing on maintaining a consistent visible presence across platforms and communities, with diverse representation of imagery and to represent ourselves as an inclusive and approachable agency. Last year, the AEM Instagram account was launched and is now fully embedded as an integral part of our communication and recruitment strategy. We are prioritising extending our reach and growing our followership on social media channels; we currently have around 200 followers on Instagram and our Facebook following has continued to grow, increasing from 632 followers last year to 783 followers (this is a 24% increase)

We have recently launched a new adoption awareness campaign themed 'Home and Belonging'. This campaign is both digital and community-focused and aims to broaden engagement and raise awareness of adoption.

We are holding a balance between posts aimed between recruitment and support services, we continue to do series like myth-busting and national campaigns as well as promoting our support offer and recruitment events, with a growing focus on featuring the lived experience of adopters to showcase storytelling and built trust and connection.



Community Outreach and Recruitment Activity

Our Recruitment Team continues to play a vital role in raising awareness of the need for adoptive families and in providing clear, accessible information and support to those considering adoption. Across the four counties, the team has attended a wide range of local community events, including Pride celebrations and carnivals, as well as pop-up events in diverse venues such as shopping centres, sports facilities and libraries.

People considering adoption consistently value the opportunity to meet staff in person. Attendees range from those who have already booked an Information Event and wish to make initial face-to-face contact, to individuals at the very early stages of exploring adoption. These events provide valuable opportunities to challenge common misconceptions about who can adopt, to showcase what modern adoption looks like, and to encourage people to take the first steps in finding out more.

The restructuring of the front door has further strengthened this approach, enabling a smoother and more supported journey from initial contact at recruitment events through to the commencement of Stage One of the adoption process.

Over the past year, significant learning has been gained regarding which events, locations, and timings are most effective in engaging potential adopters. We have continued to strengthen relationships with local communities, including LGBTQIA+ groups, faith organisations, health providers, and community radio stations.

Kemet FM supported our first in-person Information Event aimed at global majority communities. This event provided valuable insight into barriers faced by people considering adoption and will inform our ongoing work to improve accessibility and engagement. We plan to deliver a further event focused on reaching global majority families later in the year, hosted in a different part of the region. (AE Outcome 1)

We also continue to work closely with colleagues across Foster for East Midlands, delivering joint information and community events.

Adopter Approvals and National Context

This year, we approved 61 adopter households, representing a slight decrease compared to previous years but remaining in line with national trends. The decline in adopter numbers continues to be a national challenge, and while local figures remain relatively steady, we anticipate ongoing recruitment challenges in the year ahead.

There are multiple complex and external factors contributing to fewer people coming forward to adopt, including changing family choices, ongoing economic uncertainty, and concerns around the cost of living. Adoption assessments also continue to be complex; last year, five Stage Two assessments did not proceed to approval. We continue to have ongoing steady number of enquiries. We had 183 households attend our Information Events over the year.

National data continues to show a very low number of approved waiting adopters, alongside an increasing number of children waiting longer for permanent families.



We continue to review and strengthen our internal processes and guidance to ensure they remain current, robust, and responsive to best practice. During the reporting year, a significant piece of work was completed to update Mosaic adoption workflows across Nottinghamshire's electronic systems, improving consistency and efficiency in practice.

The Stage One workbook was revised to align with the Adoption Assessment Report (AAR) framework and to reflect current guidance. This included strengthened content relating to child safety and pet safety. In addition, the Safe Care Family Plan was reviewed and relaunched, incorporating updated safeguarding advice, recommended reading, and essential resources such as infant CPR guidance.

Social Workers continue to embed the Adoption Assessment Report (AAR) and related assessment tools. AEM is part of focus groups with Barnardo's for ongoing development of the AAR.

This year, we also introduced Family Network Meetings, supported by newly developed guidance. The purpose of these meetings is to share information with the wider family and friends network and to clarify and agree the support available to adopters. Family Network Meetings can take place at different stages of the adopter journey and are designed to strengthen support planning.

The Recruitment, Assessment and Family Team's Learning and Development programme remains a central pillar of the Adoption Agency's commitment to delivering high-quality, inclusive and trauma-informed learning and development for children, adopters and staff. The programme spans both Stage One and Stage Two of assessment, with strong links into family finding, matching, transitions and adoption support. (AE Outcome 4)

Each workshop is delivered on a rotation by the Lead Social Worker for Learning and Development alongside a cohort of Adoption Social Workers linked to each workshop.

Over the reporting year, the agency has continued to strengthen its preparation and training offer to prospective adoptive families, respond to emerging practice needs, and contribute to both regional and national developments in adoption learning.

AEM's designated Learning and Development Lead Social Worker is now permanently embedded and continues to oversee the coordination, delivery, quality assurance of the adoption training programme. This role includes curriculum development, trainer support, incorporation of adopter feedback, and alignment with regional and national priorities, ensuring continuous improvement and practice relevance.

Importantly the role helps to ensure consistent oversight of the family's learning journey, ensuring preparatory foundations and links with AEMs early intervention offer and peer community, ensuring that our core messages are woven throughout our training offer and that lived experience is to the forefront.



The Lead Social Worker is supported by a Social Work Support Officer who has a key role in supporting the administration and co-ordination of RAFs Learning and Development programme. A monthly review now takes place.

We continue to deliver a comprehensive Prepare to Adopt programme, held face-to-face over four days each month, with venues rotated across the region to promote equity of access. The Prepare to Adopt programme remains the foundation of adopter learning.

The programme continues to evolve to reflect adopter diversity and emerging practice priorities. Content includes:

- Safeguarding and child protection
- Identity
- belonging and life story work
- Therapeutic and trauma informed parenting
- Keeping in touch after adoption, Direct contact and maintaining birth family relationships
- Understanding the lifelong impact of adoption.

Course content is routinely reviewed by our Lead Learning and Development Adoption Social Worker and delivery staff groups to ensure it reflects current research, evolving practice and the diverse needs of applicants, including those with additional needs.

Diversity, equity and inclusion are embedded throughout preparation training, most notably through the Introduction to Transcultural Adoption session. (AE outcome 1) Applicants from global majority backgrounds are proactively contacted by two global majority practitioners to offer individualised support and scaffolding around this workshop. Feedback indicates this approach enhances applicants' confidence and sense of psychological safety in engaging with complex material.

A significant focus this year is strengthening learning related to transcultural adoption and identity and our direction of travel includes Further embedding AFDiT across preparation and assessment, Broadening learning around identity, heritage and inclusion. Developing a standalone transcultural adoption course for adopters caring for, or wishing to care for, a child of a different heritage

Draft proposals are being progressed by a diverse staff working group, with plans for delivery by practitioners and experienced adopters with lived experience of transcultural adoption. This development will link to a new Adoption Support group for transracially adoptive families, strengthening continuity beyond approval.

Supporting identity and relationships is also a consistent thread throughout preparation training. (AE Outcome 2) The Keeping in Touch After Adoption session explicitly focuses on: The importance of maintaining meaningful relationships, Understanding the lifelong impact of adoption on identity, Developing empathy for the experiences of birth families

The Preparing to Adopt Handbook - A Preparing to Adopt handbook has been recently developed to complement and sit alongside our Prepare to Adopt training.



Stage 2

The agency continues to offer a range of foundational learning opportunities for adopters as the progress through Stage 2, including:

- Therapeutic Parenting
- Parenting Brothers and Sisters
- Early Permanence (Fostering for Adoption)
- Linking, Matching and Transitions and Moving In
- Coming Home sessions, delivered by Peer Mentors

The Therapeutic Parenting course forms a core component of Stage Two of the adopter journey and is delivered through nine cohorts per year across the region. The programme builds on earlier learning relating to trauma, brain development, PACE and therapeutic re-parenting.

Following adopter feedback, the course has been revised to include a virtual theoretical session followed by an in-person practical day where applicants can practice therapeutic techniques such as sensory regulation and PACE, enabling clearer progression from theory to application. Practical learning is supported through the use of therapeutic toys, games, sensory materials and VR clips to embed understanding of trauma and its impact on the developing brain.

Content has been strengthened to include more applied learning on PACE, natural consequences and everyday parenting scenarios. Feedback indicates adopters value the balance of theory and practice and report increased confidence in applying therapeutic parenting approaches. (AE Outcome 4)

All these workshops are regularly reviewed to ensure relevance, clarity and consistency, with improvements made in response to feedback and emerging practice themes.

All prospective adopters continue to be provided with access to CATCH (The Children and Trauma Community Hub) to support independent learning throughout both Stage One and Stage Two of the adoption process. Learning is recorded within the Learning and Development Journal, including engagement with CATCH and other self-directed resources. (AE outcome 5)

Since 2024, our Lead Learning and Development Adoption Social Worker has worked with Adoption England to support the development of a learning programme aligned to the National Adopter Journey Practice Standards. This has included membership of the working group piloting the Preparation to Adopt Framework. A draft proposal has now been developed for national introductory training for prospective adopters, with commissioning and delivery decisions awaited. The programme aims to establish a consistent introductory framework and agreed national learning standards. This work has strengthened collaboration with regional adoption agencies and informed further development of our adopter preparation training.



Feedback

Adopter feedback continues to evidence the positive impact of learning and training delivered by the Lead Social Worker for Learning and Development and the team of experienced Adoption Social Workers who support delivery. (AE Outcome 3)

Examples of recent feedback: -

- The staff are a real credit to the organisation. They made it fun, informative and serious all at the same time.
- Our social worker has been amazing and the staff on the training course just continued the same level. So really well done.
- I thought the training was absolutely fantastic thank you.
- This training has been outstanding! It has been well paced, really well delivered.
- I really appreciated [staff] checking in on me after the first session about racism; I felt very seen in that moment.
- The training was informative, well-paced and we were kept engaged throughout.
- I am really grateful for the opportunity for such high-quality training, thank you, as the best possible preparation.
- I feel like CATCH will become our best friend for further information and help.

Family Finding

The family finding team have remained stable throughout the year, where established and positive working relationships with the four Local Authorities has enabled positives matches for most children with an adoption plan from across the region. Each of the Local Authorities have two linked family finders, who are available to offer advice and guidance from the start of the care proceedings journey, around a plan of adoption, right through to the time that a child is moves to their adoptive home. The feedback from adoptive families, both those from AEM and from outside our agency, regularly give lovely feedback around the quality of the information shared and about the timely and transparent communication from the family finders in relation to discussions around children.

The decrease in adoptive families being available nationally has remained, which is meaning that some children from across the region are waiting longer to be matched with an adoptive family. There have also been some children where their care plan has changed, either that where the decision is made to seek separate adoptive families for a sibling group after a period of family finding for the children together, or children with complex health needs where their plan has been changed to long-term fostering after a period of unsuccessful family finding.

The team continue to develop and maintain positive relationships with other local RAAs and VAAs, which have supported some positive matches for children where interagency adopters are being considered.



Family finding support has also been offered to some AEM adopters, such as support in identifying opportunities to learn about children, how to confidently link with a child and what needs to be considered when a family is expressing interest in a child, which has resulted again in some positive matching for children and families from across the region.

During the last year the team have hosted two well received family finding events, where adopters in assessment and those that are approved but not matched, could come and meet the family finding team, ask questions and learn about the process, as well as learn more about the children from across the region who the team were actively family finding for.

We have also had several children attend in person events to support with family finding, which have included some children going to national Adoption Activity Days or stay and play events hosted by our partner Family Adoption Links RAA. - (AE Outcome 4)

The family finding team have continued to be involved in many regional and national areas of development work, such as learning from disruptions, embedding the use of AFDiT throughout adoption, and supporting pan-regional family finding

There have been 111 children's placement orders this year; this is less than last year and is the lowest year since AEM started.

The average over the 7 years is 135 placement orders a year.

117 children have been matched, this is a lower number than other years, however numbers alternate by year, from higher, to lower range, the average per year is 130.

120 adoption orders were granted, with the average per year being 125, adoption orders per year is the figure with lowest variation, usually being between 120 and 130, regardless of changes in placement order numbers.

Derbyshire has the highest level of activity in all areas,

There have been 12 sibling groups of 2 matched this year, and two groups of three. The eldest child was over 7, 17 children were under a year old, and 70 under two. Three quarters of all children are single children.

There have been 25 early permanence arrangements this year.

19 per cent of children are not white British, with all of those children being of mixed ethnicity and heritage.

We continue to review all the learning from disruptions and share this both with partners, and nationally. We are represented in national work on disruptions, and lead a local all partner group, aimed at embedding learning. We have held large seminars to share the learning. The national research on disruptions is due to report in 2025. The rate remains stable at around 2% of all placements, pre order, both for AEM and nationally.



Adoption Support

Demand for adoption support services, both locally and nationally, remains high. Children and families are presenting with increasingly complex needs, and more families are seeking support earlier in their adoption journey, often when children are at a much younger age.

Alongside this, there is a growing understanding of the pervasive and long-term impact of developmental trauma on children placed for adoption, throughout the life course. This, coupled with rising demand and increased parental expectations of adoption support services (which include Health and Education related needs), has created a highly challenging operating environment at both local and national levels. Despite these pressures, we continue to adapt and innovate in order to meet families' needs, in co-production with our lived experience groups, and feel that we are in a positive position to respond to future changes and challenges in the adoption space.

Early and continued Adoption Support therefore continues to be a key priority and area of development for AEM, with the aim of providing a range of services for adoptive families, adopted adults and birth families, designed to offer the right level of support at the right time whether that be during preparation to become adoptive parents, in the early days of becoming an adoptive parent or at key points during a child's development as they come to terms with what it means to be adopted.

This year we have aligned our core aims and objectives with the five strategic outcomes from Adoption England and have anticipated and been mindful of the current DfE consultation: 'Adoption Support that works for all. Reimagining adoption and kinship support: making it fit for the future'). to support the future proofing of our service offer:

- We will develop and improve our support for those living in diverse communities (Outcome 1)
- We will ensure that adopted young people are supported to maintain relationships with those identified as important to them, and are supported to understand why they are adopted (Outcome 2)
- We will continue to work in co-production with adopters, adoptees and birth families to understand their lived experience, what support can make a difference and ensure their inclusion in practice design and delivery (Outcome 3)
- We will work with local partners and adopters to ensure that children's needs are understood and met prior to moving to their adoptive family, and then proactively throughout the life-course. To achieve this, we will provide informed and timely support for adoptive families from the start of their adoption journey and through all stages of development post order which is focused on early intervention and improved outcomes (Outcome 4)
- We will ensure adopted people and their families know how to and can access tailored help and support when they need it which is proportionate to the level



of need and with the aim of empowering families and improving outcomes for all (Outcome 5)

Voice & Influence: Learning from lived experience and co-production (Outcome 3)

Co-production and the value that this approach realises is now a firmly embedded part of our practice supporting understanding, development and feedback back into the service, as well as the co-delivery of learning opportunities for professionals as well as other adopters.

Our **Peers4Peers co-production groups** are a collaborative space where people come together as equals to talk about issues and create services that work for everyone involved. All groups take place monthly on-line and continue to be well attended. Groups have been established around key areas of support need:

- Parents together in adoption (formerly the Complex trauma group)
- Parents of Teenagers
- Education

In addition to these groups, we have also established and completed a number of time limited co-production groups over the last year to support with service development:

- Adopted Adults – hearing from adopted adults about their adoption journey including how and when they started to recognise and understand their trauma, enabled us to jointly develop a ‘Young adoptees care pathway’ – a transitional support system for young people approaching 18 who historically drop out of services.
- Family Activity breaks – following a successful bid to receive innovation funding from Adoption England, we worked in co-production with a group of adoptive parents and young people to design two separate weekend family breaks for families to strengthen family connections, to enable and build the opportunity for peer support and to provide opportunities for young people to develop friendships with other adoptees, support their identity needs and have an opportunity to succeed. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive:

“I feel that the positive impact on X will be huge, she loved the activities, it has boosted her confidence, she had fun and she was able to see (in contrast to her prior belief) that adopted children are not all 'weird'. I think it will really help with her own adopted identity. Some of these things will transpire over time and can't quite be captured in the days following the event.”

“I think that the transformation in [child] was just magical. I'll just never forget it, as you say, to go from a young person that wasn't able to communicate verbally but was still empowered to have his voice heard and to engage in all



the activities to just seeing him set up the silent disco with the other teenagers and just take part in all of it. It was a phenomenal, phenomenal change.”

“There was so much to be shared, you know, so many good hints and tips and things like that. You were absorbing them all weekend”

It is now our aim to make these breaks a sustainable part of our service offer in collaboration with a local charity and as such we were able to support a series of Dance Breaks for a cohort of young people towards the end of this year. The young people thrived in this space building relationships over a 6-week period which also gave parents the opportunity to spend time together in peer support.

In addition to these groups, our regional peer support network ‘**Peers4Peers**’ has continued to grow in number and strength this year and is now a fully established part of our service offer. This year we have recruited an additional 18 mentors from across the region, taking our current total to 56. Our mentors bring with them valuable knowledge, skills and lived experience to share and support others, whether that be through bespoke / area specific support groups, working with prospective adopters, delivering training and workshops alongside social workers (pre and post order), or providing a structured programme of 1:1 support. This year our network has successfully established a peer support group in the High Peak in Derbyshire which currently has 22 members, and one of our male mentors has set up a ‘Dad’s group’ that regularly meets face to face. More recently a mentor has set up a support group for parents whose children are transgender with four parents already feeling positive about the support this offers them.

Attendance at our regular Saturday coffee morning and planned events continues to increase (regularly 60+ adopters and their children) and we have opened events up to prospective adopters as well as post order families. This year’s Peers4Peers Christmas meet up saw 118 adopters with their children come together, building friendships, a feeling of community and improved support networks.

This year we are pleased to have established our first Voice & Influence Participation Strategy for the region. Using a youth work approach, our aim is to strengthen youth voice and participation for adopted young people across the East Midlands. It builds on our existing Voice of Adoption framework and our MDT Youth Connect offer, expanding opportunities for engagement, consultation, and co-production and developing regional and national representation opportunities for our young people. We have further developed our comprehensive youth offer in consultation with young people; this year we have added to our Youth forums and Youth Connect Club by introducing two new opportunities for young people to come together:

- Our Base Connect Youth Group offers an inclusive group for young people who are currently receiving less than 25 hours of education per week or home schooled and;
- Our Gen Connect Youth Group has been designed specifically for young people aged 11-18 whose gender identity differs from the one assigned at birth and offers support whether in the early stages of questioning their gender, actively exploring what it means to them, or enabling a confident

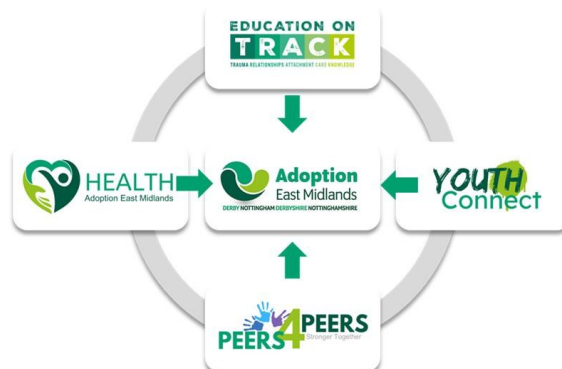


affirming of their identity, Gen-Connect is a space where young people can feel seen, heard and supported.

Multidisciplinary Support (Outcome 4/5)

In April 2025, we were pleased to receive additional funding from Adoption England to support the sustainability of our MDT given the strong evidence base of success we have had to date in improving knowledge, services and outcomes for adoptive families and young people. During the last 12 months we have continued to build our evidence base whilst continuing to work with Adoption England and strategic partners to identify future collaboration and funding opportunities to ensure the sustainability of the team within our Adoption Support service. Evaluation evidence being collated by the Institute of Public Care points to a strong evidence base for MDTs within Adoption Services which is currently being further explored in the current DfE adoption support consultation.

This year the MDT has become fully embedded into our adoption support practice across the service with interventions and internal processes being adapted to enable the inclusion of specialist knowledge and skills in all areas of our service.



The team incorporates specialist, trauma informed knowledge & practitioners from education, health, youth work, therapeutic social work and representatives from the adoption community. These roles within the MDT offer consultation, group interventions and 1:1 consultations but also come together as a Reflective Team so enabling a more holistic understanding of need, both pre-placement and post order, and therefore the most effective planned support at any given time for young people and their families.

This year we have taken steps to fully integrate MDT knowledge and skills into our wider practice to provide a more informed and proactive approach to meeting need, All referrals into our service (Helpdesk) are now triaged by the MDT reflecting team at the point of entry, ensuring a more holistic assessment of need is achieved and early intervention opportunities captured and support offered in a more timely way, including from a peer mentor if there is a delay in accessing appropriate support.



Analysis of data captured as part of our MDT work has enabled us to identify key life stages and ages where the level of adoption support need increases, how this escalates and the wider impact on young people and their families, and capturing feedback has allowed us to ensure we are continuing to use resources effectively and efficiently to improve outcomes for as many families as possible across the region.

Multi-disciplinary Adoption Support Helpdesk

This year we have continued to review and further develop how our Helpdesk operates and how it feeds into our MDT and wider support team. As referrals into the service continue to increase it has been essential for us to effectively triage and meet need in the most timely and proportionate way. Families complete a Pathway for all new need referrals which allows the reflecting team to start to identify key areas of challenge and need and what can best be supported by a Helpdesk social worker or the MDT and where a more in-depth holistic assessment may be required. This year, almost half of all referrals into the service have been supported by our Helpdesk team offering a short course of 'listening conversations' and signposting to our core offer (see Table below). Only 14% of all referrals are now required to be allocated a social worker in the wider team for a holistic assessment and a support plan to meet more complex and high challenge needs. which means we are now able to support many more families in a more timely and effective way.

Period (Apr 25 – Mar '26)	Total Pathways (referrals)	No. closed following up to 6 'listening' conversations or signpost to Universal services	No. of referrals having a Helpdesk Assess	No. Allocated to Team following Helpdesk intervention
Quarter 1	60	39	13	8
Quarter 2	62	30	22	10
Quarter 3	37	15	20	2
Quarter 4	42	11	22	9
Total	201	95(47%)	77 (38%)	29 (37%) <i>NB: 14% of original referrals</i>

Early Intervention: Outcome 4

This year we have sustained a strong focus on early intervention, embedding adoption support throughout adopter preparation and beyond matching to maintain a consistent, trusted relationship with our service and reduce the likelihood of future crisis. We recognise adoption as a continual learning journey across the life course,



with families accessing support at the right time and at a level proportionate to need. Our approach prioritises building strong foundations through work on attachment, safety and connection, and addressing sensory and developmental needs early, enabling children and families to feel secure and supported before more intensive or specialist therapeutic interventions are introduced at a stage that is right for the child. We have strengthened our early intervention offer by establishing a clear process for professional consultation between Recruiting Social Workers and Adoption Support to discuss families who have previously adopted and also foster carers who are seeking to adopt a child in their care. This has enabled shared reflection and a deeper understanding of the potential challenges and strengths involved when families are adopting again (or where the family may have a birth child), including the needs of the whole family. Ongoing, robust discussions throughout assessment then ensure that support planning is proactive and purposeful, with a comprehensive plan in place from the outset. This joined-up approach has helped set realistic expectations, has built resilience, and will also ensure timely, proportionate support is in place so reducing the likelihood of difficulties escalating and enabling more positive, sustainable outcomes for children and families.

Education on TRACK

The Education on TRACK team continues to be a vital part of the multidisciplinary team (MDT), providing dedicated educational support for adoptive families and schools; 25% of all referrals into the MDT are specifically related to an Education need, with 226 touchpoints overall being recorded for children requiring support within education, with the cohort displaying a near-even gender distribution and a noticeable concentration of referrals at age 13. Persistent challenges continue to affect educational stability, with 35.9% of the 64 families supported experiencing at least one suspension, including cases involving very young children and repeated suspensions for older pupils. The data highlights well-being and mental health concerns as the primary driver of educational referrals, followed by gaps in educational progress and issues relating to school attendance. Additional patterns emerge across school types, with the majority of children educated in mainstream settings.

Taken together, the Education data demonstrates the complex interplay between emotional needs, behaviour, and educational participation, and underscores the continuing demand for targeted educational support through the MDT and with an holistic understanding of the child and their trauma history.

We now know that supporting individual pupils in isolation often has limited impact. Instead, the Education on TRACK team has found that a collaborative, **whole-school approach**—working alongside the full MDT—offers more sustainable and meaningful support. This integrated approach allows professionals to view challenges through multiple lenses and provide tailored interventions not just for one child, but for the wider adoption school community. Insights and strategies developed can then be applied to benefit all pupils with attachment and trauma needs, not just those who are adopted. This year we have implemented our ‘Whole



School Approach' intervention in three secondary schools in the region. This initiative has involved key MDT professionals, including Occupational Therapist, Youth Workers, Speech and Language Therapist, Education Support Workers, Adoption Education Champions Peer Supporters and therapeutic social workers.

Working collaboratively with schools, parents, and young people, this expanded approach has fostered environments where education staff have a better knowledge and understanding of the needs of adopted children through bespoke training and consultation, and children and families feel supported and understood.

The Education on Track team have continued to develop and deliver workshops and resources for families, with positive uptake this year as interventions become more embedded.

Summary of Interventions and Engagement (April 2025 – March 2026)

Area of Practice	Intervention Type	Purpose / Early-Help Focus	Sessions Delivered during Year	Total Attendees (all sessions)	Contribution to Impact & Outcomes
Early Intervention Outcomes 3, 4 & 5	Education Solution Circles	Reflective, strengths-based group support enabling parents to problem-solve early educational challenges	10	96	High engagement evidences effectiveness as early intervention reducing escalation
Co-production & Family Voice Outcome 3	Education Co-production Group	Collaborative learning and service development informed by lived experience	8	64	Ensures services remain responsive and trauma-informed whilst providing a space for peer reflection and support
Transitions & Educational Stability/ EI Outcomes 4 & 5	Primary Transitions Workshops	Support for primary school transitions	4	19	Reduces transition-related anxiety and supports stability whilst providing early intervention support
SEND Understanding & Advocacy Outcome 4 & 5	Introduction to SEND Workshops	Building knowledge of SEND pathways and rights for parents	4	12	Strengthens informed, proportionate advocacy and early intervention support



Transitions & Educational Stability Outcomes 4 & 5	Secondary Transitions Workshops	Support for complex secondary transitions	3	10	Enables timely engagement, planning and collaboration with schools, empowers parents and supports young people
Early Intervention Outcome 4	Reasonable Requests Workshop	Guidance on reasonable adjustments in education	1	2	Responsive, needs-led intervention

This year, Engagement levels indicate strong take-up of early-help and preventative support, which demonstrates how our **graduated, proportionate support**, is enabling families to build foundational understanding (attachment, sensory needs, emotional regulation) before escalation to specialist or statutory routes. Continue learning from feedback and attendance patterns has informed **service adaptation**, including timing of sessions within the school year, in line with a reflective and continuously improving service.

Keeping in Touch (KIT)

Our keeping in touch service offer continues to be highly sought by families and by Local Authority social workers requesting consultations. The offer continues to allow a more open and flexible approach to children and young people's keeping in touch arrangements which can be explored and revisited throughout childhood and adolescence as need and situation changes.

We have delivered a further 42 new KIT consultations (equating to 38 families) this year. In addition, 13 KIT risk assessments have been completed (equating to 10 families), 7 families have been fully supported to achieve alternative/new KIT arrangements and at present there are 9 ongoing pieces of KIT work, whereby children and families are being supported to achieve alternative, direct KIT arrangements with birth parents and/or family members. Most recently our dedicated KIT social worker supported a young person to meet with their birth parents, supported by their adoptive parents. This piece of work began with supporting the four adults to meet online and then in person, followed by an in-person meeting including the young person. This was a hugely successful meeting and given the preparatory work and support, adoptive parents now feel confident to support and manage more creative KIT arrangements between their young person and their birth parents, starting with a monthly Facetime call.



Birth family support.

It's been another busy year for the birth family support workers. We have received a total of 463 letterbox referrals, 208 were new support requests (including 48 re-engagement attempts, 17 have been successful or partly successful). We have then received 255 return requests for ongoing letterbox support, thus continuing to demonstrate a maintenance of letterbox exchange where previously it may have ended prematurely.

Given the ever increasing support needs around letterbox, since February 2026 we have dedicated time from a birth family support worker to support the social worker in facilitating letterbox exchanges. This has enabled queries to be dealt with more swiftly, avoiding the need for formal referrals to the team and to date 10 families have been supported, without the need for a referral.

In total, we have received 117 referrals for birth family support this year, coming from partner local authorities (social workers seeking support for birth parents), birth parents themselves making contact to request support, or from adoptive parents seeking support to reengage birth parents in letterbox exchange.

Our work alongside the keeping in touch (KIT) social worker continues, enabling both the birth parent/s, adopters and young people to be supported whilst exploring (in some cases implementing) more creative arrangements

Adoption Panels

Adoption East Midlands have five virtual panels during 8 months of the year and four panels in the remaining 4 months of the year, these are Chatsworth, Wollaton, Kedleston, Rufford and The Unity Panel. Panels are held on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

We continue to recruit to our central list of Panel Member and this year this has reached to 32 including 5 independent chairs and 6 independent vice-chairs, 10 Social Work Reps and 11 independent panel members. Some of our Chair's and Vice Chair's are also Social Work qualified. We additionally have 11 medical advisers. To continue our drive to improve the diversity of our panel members, we have left an open message on AEM's website to encourage anyone from any ethnic minority group to contact us, and this method of recruitment has been successful ensuring that all our panels

Panel development training

The subject of training during this review period was on managing risk and learning from disruptions. We also had an update on hearing the voice of the child at panel.

The managing risk training, focused on safe uncertainty. The disruptions session focused on the overlapping key themes that had been drawn out from the analysis of disruptions.

Training in October was delivered by the Peers4Peers service and Youth Service within Adoption Support. We heard from lived experience to enhance panel



members knowledge on what qualities they are looking for when considering applications to adopt or matches for children. We heard how youth voice is being strengthened in the East Midlands area and what support services are available for children and young people.

We ran a workshop with Chairs and Vice Chairs on the AFDiT framework (Anti Racist Framework for Decision Making and Transitioning). The aim was to standardise panels scrutiny and to highlight what evidence in applications and matches, especially for transracial adoption panel should be looking for. The discussion drew on short lived experience films and Dr Tam Cane's AFDiT explainer to recentre child identity, racial trauma risks, and parental racial intentionality as core safeguarding considerations rather than addons.

Activity and outcomes

Between April 2025 and March 2026 there have been 53 panels held which have welcomed 164 families, in which 157 recommendations have been unanimous positive recommendations. There have been 61 applications to adopt. There have been 102 matches, which has included 14 sibling groups. In total 118 children were matched with adopters.

Both AEM and interagency matches play a complementary role in securing appropriate matches for children, with interagency provision supporting more specific matching requirements. Interagency matches identified families for 10 of our Global Majority children, whilst another 6 were matched with AEM families. Two children received a similar ethnic match—one through AEM and one through interagency—but the remaining Global Majority children were matched with White families.

We also had 7 adoptive families approved by AEM panels who adopted children from outside the region. These included both single children and sibling groups of two. Of these, 6 families were able to provide an ethnic match for the children they adopted. The primary reasons for seeking matches outside AEM were specific criteria, including age, gender, and ethnic identity.

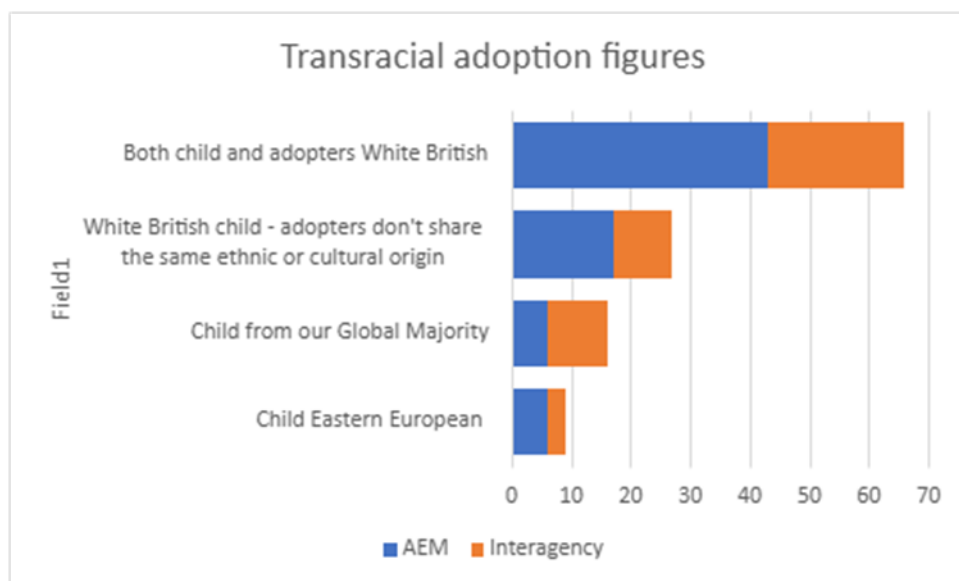
During this period, 9 Eastern European children were matched: 6 with AEM families and 3 through interagency families. However, none of these matches reflected the children's ethnicity.

In addition, there were 27 transcultural matches involving White British, Irish, or Scottish children placed with adopters who did not share their ethnic background. Overall, 66 White British children were culturally matched with their families. In total, 52 children were placed in families where there is a transracial and/or transcultural element.

These figures highlight the importance of consistently assessing and supporting children's identity needs throughout their lives. They also reinforce the value of using AFDiT in practice.

The Panel remains committed to ensuring that children's identity needs are fully considered and supported. We are passionate about maintaining diverse panels while also upskilling all members, recognising that this is a shared responsibility.





Voice of the child

In February 2026 we started using recorded video clips of young people who are adopted asking a question to prospective adopters during panel. These had previously been asked by a panel member. The young people did a lot of work to create these clips; they went through each question they had previously created and discussed which questions they wanted to keep and created some different ones that they felt were important and would want to know. They also worked with a digital creative designer to consider how to present the voice clips. They decided that they would record their own voices rather than using AI and they thought carefully about what background audio they should use. The voice clips have been very well received in panel; we've found that prospective adopters have answered them to the child and thought very carefully about how they will answer. It truly has brought the voice of the child to life within panel.

Complaints/ compliments/ data breaches

There have been 15 data breaches reported, managers are conscientious in reporting breaches, and none of these have been high risk.

However, a theme is selecting the wrong e mail recipient, accidentally copying people, and cut and paste of documents or not using blank templates.

There have been 4 complaints, 2 regarding decisions in assessment and 2 regarding support, and access to therapies. All of these have been resolved early, with managers always reaching out to meet with complainants, and actively listen.

We regularly receive positive feedback in forms following events, training and adoption panel, and we have also had direct e mails regarding specific workers.



Shelagh Mitchell

Head of Service

Adoption East Midlands

May 2026

