

Scrutiny Board :	Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board
Report Title	Adoption@Heart Annual Report
Date of Meeting	Monday, 8 September 2025
Report Author	Mandip Chahal - Interim Assistant Director Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement Claire Tate – Interim Commissioning manager Children Services
Lead Officer	Executive Director Children and Education Sally Giles
Wards Affected	(All Wards);
Identify exempt information and exemption category	Choose an item. N/A
Appendices (if any)	1. Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2024/25

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Adoption@Heart (A@H) is the regional adoption agency for the Black Country and delivers adoption services on behalf of Sandwell Council working through Sandwell Children's Trust. This report presents the sixth annual report since A@H commenced operations.
- 1.2 Against a backdrop of national challenges in adopter recruitment and rising complexity in children's needs, A@H have achieved their highest number of adopter approvals to date alongside reduced assessment times for prospective adopters.
- 1.3 There was an increase in the number of Sandwell children placed with adopters in 2024/25, compared to the previous year with no placement breakdown for children following placement.
- 1.4 There was an overall increase in the number of children placed with adopters. Positively, there was a reduction in the number of inter-agency adopters utilised. This means more children were placed with adopters approved by A@H.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Board considers and comments on the information presented within the Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2024/25 and determines whether it wishes to make any recommendations to the Executive.

3. Background and Context

- 3.1 The provision of an adoption service is a statutory requirement. The government agreed that all local authorities (LAs) would be expected to deliver their adoption services through a RAA by 2020, and funding was provided by the Department for Education (DfE) to cover the costs of setting up these new arrangements. The Council is required to monitor these services.
- 3.2 On 12th December 2018, Cabinet gave approval to transfer adoption services to the new Regional Adoption Agency: Adoption@Heart. These arrangements were considered by the Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7th January 2019 when it was also agreed that the Scrutiny Committee would undertake the role of scrutinising these arrangements and report its findings to the Corporate Parenting Board, which is co-chaired by the Lead Member for Children and Families and a young person.
- 3.3 The arrangement is a 'hosted' model, whereby the adoption service is hosted by Wolverhampton City Council on behalf of the four Black County local authorities and commissioned on their behalf via Dudley Council. Contractual arrangements are in place for all partners. The adoption service has an operational interface with each local authority children's service; in Sandwell, this is Sandwell Children's Trust.
- 3.4 Adoption@Heart has now been operating for just over 6 years. Across the first six years of operation, Sandwell has accounted for approximately 26% of the adoptions that have taken place.
- 3.5 The number of children adopted in the 12-month period 2024/25 has increased compared with previous year's performance. 23 Sandwell Children were adopted in 2024/25 compared to 17 in 2023/24. The overall number of adoptions across Adoption@Heart has also increased compared to 2023/24, from 97 to 118 in 2024/25.
- 3.6 28 Sandwell children were placed with adopters in 2024/25 with no placement breakdown for Sandwell children following placement.
- 3.7 Following on from 2023/24, the number of adopters approved in 2024/25 has increased, with 77 approvals recorded in 2024/25 compared to 69 in 203/24.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Adoption@Heart engages with adopters, adopted individuals and families as part of its commitment to service improvement. This engagement is carried out through a range of feedback mechanisms and participation initiatives, which inform the development of adoption support services and recruitment strategies.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 At the inception of the Regional Adoption Agency, the financial contributions were based on the budgets already in existence in the four individual local authorities.
- 5.2 The contribution levels for each partner are based on an agreed formula and varies annually based on level of service provision and the number of children in care under the age of 10. Sandwell's budget contribution for 2024/25 was set at £1.418,811m. This was an increase of £89k on 2023/24.

6. Legal and Governance Implications

- 6.1 A contract is in place between the four Black Country local authorities Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Wolverhampton to commission Adoption@Heart, which is hosted by Wolverhampton Council.
- 6.2 There is a Management Board in place, which is currently chaired by Walsall, comprising representatives from all four authorities including Sandwell. This Board meets quarterly to monitor the contract and oversee strategic delivery.
- 6.3 An Operational Board meets monthly to ensure high quality oversight of the operational business. A further meeting is also in place to ensure the successful interface between Adoption@Heart business and the social care practice in each local authority/Trust.
- 6.4 Annual scrutiny and assurances are provided in Sandwell via the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board, which then makes its comments available to the Corporate Parenting Board. In Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton, the scrutiny and assurance process take place within the Corporate Parenting Board meeting.

7. Risks

- 7.1 The corporate risk management strategy has been complied with and has concluded that there are no significant risks that require reporting and that suitable measures are in place to mitigate the risks identified to acceptable levels. The risks associated with the RAA are included in the directorate risk register.

8. **Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)**

- 8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment screening is not required for this report. However, Adoption@Heart undertakes its own equality impact assessments. Ensuring that diversity and equality has a prominent focus is a key feature of the RAAs work

9. **Other Relevant Implications**

- **Workforce and Human Resources (HR) implications** - There are no HR implications in respect of this report.
- **ICT / digital implications** – There are no ICT implications in respect of this report.
- **Procurement implications** – There are no procurement decisions in respect of this report.
- **Climate change** – There are no specific environmental impact or sustainability measures in respect of this report.
- **Corporate parenting** – Adoption@Heart supports the delivery of the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities in identifying adopters for children where it has been agreed that would be the best outcome for them.
- **Social Value** – Adoption@Heart supports children to achieve, feel safe, be supported and access opportunities. Adoption@Heart supports community resilience through the recruitment of local residents as adopters
- **Health and Wellbeing** – There are no specific health and wellbeing issues in respect of this report
- **Crime and Disorder Act 1998** – There is no impact direct or indirect on the work completed by Adoption@Heart on crime prevention, community safety, or the Prevent duty.

10. **Background Documents**

N/A

11. **How does this deliver the Outcomes in the Council Plan?**

This report will support the delivery of the following Strategic Themes: -

- **Growing up in Sandwell**
By providing safe, permanent homes for children who cannot live with their birth families. Safeguarding vulnerable children and promoting stability, emotional wellbeing, and long-term development.
- **Living in Sandwell**
By recruiting adopters from diverse local communities, strengthening family networks and fostering inclusive, resilient neighbourhoods.
- **Healthy in Sandwell**
Offering post-adoption support that nurtures mental and emotional health for both children and families.

- **Thriving Economy in Sandwell**
Enabling families to flourish and contribute to their communities.
- **One Council One Team Approach.**
Bringing together four local authorities under a shared vision and governance structure to deliver high-quality adoption services across the region.