



Adoption
East Midlands

DERBY NOTTINGHAM DERBYSHIRE NOTTINGHAMSHIRE



ANNUAL REPORT 2024-2025

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

Adoption East Midlands

Annual report 2024-5

Introduction

This was the sixth 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)

We have innovative practice and continue to be invited to present at focus groups and webinars, for example on the AFDiT work, keeping in touch work, delivering preparation learning, young people's voice, peer network.

We have seen the benefit of help desk in adoption support, and the multi-disciplinary approach which supports our work throughout the service, and enable work within the system, to enhance life chances for adoptive families.

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

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, again this year two thirds 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.

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.

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

We no longer use the Derby office with any frequency and are likely to move space within Matlock again.

In Nottingham we have moved space, but remain with fostering and permanence staff, so a useful co located space.

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

Staff Development

We have had further retirements, 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 are able to increase or reduce hours, to fit with family needs.

We continue to use internally earned Adoption Support Fund (ASF) income (from therapeutic work delivered by AEM therapeutically qualified social workers) to increase the overall staffing establishment at AEM and have 2 fte social workers



(adoption support) and a full-time Family Peer Mentor co-ordinator whose role will be to build a peer support network across the region for adopters to access.

Staff Learning and Development

Our three Advanced Social Work Practitioners have continued to support staff learning and development across AEM. This has included facilitating bi-monthly Reflective Practice sessions on a range of themes, as well as leading learning workshops for staff and providing some staff consultations. We have also held regular whole service virtual learning events, which have included visiting speakers as well as sharing webinars and service updates. Learning opportunities continue to be both well attended and positively received, and where possible we include permanence staff in learning events.

Adoption Assessment Report (AAR)

AEM now uses the Adoption Assessment Report (AAR) for all of our assessments and the Recruitment and Assessment Team have adapted well to this change and engaged with the support available around this. The new report format and associated toolkit was well received by staff and panel members alike with some panel members commenting on how well workers have embraced the change and providing feedback on examples they have seen of good analysis and highlighting how the new format allows them to see clearly adopters' preparedness for adoption. AEM are part of work underway to look at how to incorporate AFDiT into the AAR.

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

In May 2024 AEM were represented at the national launch of AFDiT. Following this AEM hosted their own local launch event in July 2024, inviting representatives from all four local authorities' permanence teams and fostering services. Adoption panel chairs and vice chairs were also invited to this event. AEM recognise learning from lived experiences to fully understand the impact when children's identity needs are not met. We have had the pleasure of working alongside adults who have shared their personal experiences of being transracially adopted at various events. The framework has been well received and there is a strong desire to use the framework to improve outcomes for minoritised children.

There has been a gradual process since the launch event to embed the framework into all areas of practice. This has involved incorporating practice tools from the framework into paperwork and assessment forms. Additional learning events have been provided to Home Finding teams across the region, permanence teams across the four local authorities and plans are being made to extend the learning to fostering services.

Naomi Groves and Laura Poxon became AFDiT champions in January 2025 and we celebrated Naomi receiving the Luthur King award for her commitment and hard work. Alice Austin has recently become the named lead for Adoption Support and she will become a champion once she has the opportunity to attend the training.



Local Authority Partnership working

The operations meeting which involves service managers from fostering and children's permanence teams, 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.

It remains a constant task of the AEM management group, to communicate with all partners repeatedly, we seek to work in partnership at all times and resolve any difficulties at the earliest opportunity.

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.

There has also been regional work on needs analysis for services funded via the ASF, and we have a funded project scoping activity breaks for adoptive families.

Recruitment

AEM continue to hold a monthly virtual Information Sharing Event, these are always well attended, during national campaign recruitment activity additional Information events are held due to the increased number of enquiries from people who are interested in adoption.

The recruitment team has grown and evolved over the past year with an increased presence in our local communities and many exciting events planned for over summer. Upcoming events include pride festivals, county shows and carnivals. We've been out in the community doing pop up events at local libraries, shopping centres, local churches, leisure centres, supermarkets and garden centres. We've been backing national campaigns throughout the year such as 'You Can Adopt' which includes National Adoption Week in October last year which saw us at a community roadshow in Victoria Centre, Nottingham. This event also saw us launch an AEM commercial which focused on real adoption stories and highlighted that there is no perfect time to adopt. We also had an exciting week this year in March to mark LGBTQ+ Adoption and Fostering Week. This included running an extra information event with an LGBTQ+ adopter and an LGBTQ+ adoption and fostering event. We continue to mirror our recruitment campaigns and advertise our upcoming



events on social media and on AEM's website. Earlier this year we have a benefitted within our geographical region from some additional marketing including TV/digital video adverts on Sky TV, provided by the Adoption England National team, this increased traffic to our website.

When out in the community, it has been wonderful to talk with people who are interested in adoption but may have some questions or misconceptions. Some people we have spoken to whilst at our pop-ups or events have communicated that they plan to attend an information event to find out more and start their journey. We've also heard lots of inspirational stories about people who have been through the process with us before or who have family members who have adopted.

In an exciting recent development, we are beginning to have adopters attend with us to some community events to share their experiences, invaluable to anyone considering adoption. Looking ahead into the new year, we hope to increase our presence within global majority communities with a particular focus on Black History Month and leveraging the diverse talents and perspectives of our global team and community members.

In the coming year we also plan to enhance our online presence and social media reach. The vast majority of our enquires still come from our website. We have also identified some geographical areas we want to target our recruitment activities and reach out to more communities.

This year, the social media planning group (consisting of swso's, a community care officer and family workers from both ends of the service) has continued to meet on a monthly basis to plan the following month's social media campaign. This includes promoting the recruitment team's information evenings, pop-up events, adoption support workshops, young peoples' events, coffee mornings and other national campaigns and surveys that will be interesting to our audience. We also have an exciting adoption myth-busting series on Facebook commencing in April 25. This will be aimed at debunking common misconceptions around adoption and increasing user interaction with posts. We also schedule cultural celebration posts with an AEM theme, such as Christmas, Easter, bank holidays, world mental health day, black history month etc.

We now have an audience of 632 Facebook followers. 87.8% of these are female and 12.2% are male.

Our top post from this year has been our celebration post about AEM turning 6 which has had 614 views and 32 interactions.

Recently the RAP team have set-up an Instagram account to help with recruitment campaigns, and the adoption support team are pursuing a separate Facebook page or community group just for AEM and local adopters, so that promotional material for workshops and events can be highlighted more effectively and directly with adopters to enhance our take up and engagement with all that adoption support has to offer



Assessment and Placement

We continue to work within our Vision and identity as one Adoption East Midlands service. We have now fully embedded one Recruitment, Assessment and Placement Team. This has enabled most families to be allocated just one Social Worker to complete both stage one and stage two of their adoption journey. We have found this approach enables Social Workers to get to know their families at an earlier stage, it enhances and improves the adopter's journey by providing consistency for adopters and reduces delay within the process.

Our Registration of Interest (ROI) form is now available online for applicants to complete, making it more efficient and easier process. Our next project for the coming year is to create an Expression of Interest form online accessible via our website. To support staff in their work we have produced Adoption Process Guidance from the point of enquiry through to when an Adoption Order is granted.

The 'Prepare to Adopt' courses are held face-to-face in different venues across the region, and these have been warmly received by adopters attending the groups. Two new workshops were launched in February 2024 and are now an integral part of the Prepare to Adopt course: 'Introduction to Transcultural Adoption' and 'Keeping in Touch After Adoption', both of which include learning from lived experience, and which embed messages about the importance of supporting identity.

Following completion of Prepare to Adopt training in Stage One, prospective adopters attend the 'Therapeutic Parenting' course in person in Stage Two. This builds upon their earlier learning on brain development, trauma, PACE and therapeutic re-parenting, including trying practical strategies to use with children. It is run monthly across the region and combines a theoretical introduction to how trauma affects the brain, followed by a day in which adopters can practise therapeutic techniques using a variety of toys and games that we demonstrate and encourage them to try.

We have also revised and updated our virtual training programme in Stage Two:

Our 'Fostering for Adoption' workshop has now been renamed to 'Early Permanence: Fostering for Adoption' and includes wider learning to encourage adopters to think about their capacity to offer an early permanence placement. This is in line with the application of the AAR and the focus upon a wider understanding of early permanence. We continue to have an experienced adopter join to share their experience in this session.

The 'Considering Siblings' workshop has a range of new material and links to useful learning. This includes preparing for adopting siblings at different times as well as in a pair or group, the importance of understanding the different and individual needs of siblings in identifying and using appropriate therapeutic re-parenting techniques, and the significance of supporting relationships with siblings who live elsewhere. We continue to have an experienced adopter join to share their experience in this session.



The virtual 'Linking, Matching and Introductions' workshop now includes training on the UEA model of transitions, to better equip prospective adopters to understand how to prepare themselves and children for this stage. The new Trauma Informed Pathway for matching is fully embedded within all AEM matches, and all families have an individualised Therapeutic Parenting Plan. This is supported by the 'Moving In-Coming Home' workshop, which is completely peer-led and delivered in person by experienced adopters. This focuses upon thinking about how children will be experiencing the transition in a sensory way and helping the prospective adopter to prepare a child through considering the five senses.

In addition, we have completely revised our 'Family and Friends' virtual workshop by including some of the learning and practical tips from the 'Therapeutic Parenting' course, to better equip them to understand how they can support the prospective adopter in reparative parenting. This includes the impact of trauma upon the brain, PACE, the cycle of need and the 'bottom-up' approach using the 'Three Rs', followed by practical tips and suggestions and learning from lived experience. We are working to include hearing directly from family members.

All our prospective adopters are given access to CATCH (The Children and Trauma Community Hub), an online resource for independent learning, which continues across both Stage One and Stage Two. We have also created a Learning and Development Journal with updated reading lists, which includes a specific section on what they have utilised on CATCH and a self-directed learning section for other resources they have found useful in developing their understanding of adoption.

We have revised our Stage One workbook to be in line with the use of the AAR in assessment and expanded areas such as our dog assessment to include current safety information on children and pets. Linked to this is the recent updating of our Safe Care Family Plan, which has been relaunched with additional safety advice and links to required reading.

Our Lead Learning and Development Adoption Social Worker has been working since last year with Adoption England in delivering a learning programme around the new National Adopter Journey Practice Standards. This has involved being part of the working group looking at the Preparation to Adopt Framework pilot. The Lead Social Worker co-delivered a national virtual webinar for Standard 4: 'Train the Trainer Part 1', which focused upon presenting adoption preparation training in person to prospective applicants. This enabled co-working with, and learning from, colleagues from across a range of regional adoption agencies, which was very informative in thinking about how we can develop our preparation training further.

One of our Social Workers has recently training in VIPP (Video Intervention for Positive Parenting) which is a therapeutic intervention model, originally developed in the Netherlands, and now being used globally as a way of working with families that focuses on attachment and the parent/carer – child relationship. VIPP is recommended in the NICE Guidelines for Children's Attachment. The model aims to increase parent/carer sensitivity and attunement by enhancing the responses to their child and their knowledge of child development.



This is not a crisis intervention, but expected outcomes include improved relationship between the parent/carer and their child which generalises to other family members and improved confidence and skills in parenting. It is envisaged that this intervention may be useful within our service provision for adopters who are struggling with confidence in their parenting, or in strengthening the attachment and the carers perception of this.

This year we have approved 64 adopter households; this is in line with previous years but less than the numbers from 2021-2022. This decline in numbers is a national trend, and our local numbers are remaining steady, within that trend. We continue to have a healthy level of enquiries, and we have a high level of prospective adopters in the process, applications which don't progress to approvals are for similar themes including cost of living and financial and economic impact on families, and significant challenges and changes in family circumstances and lifestyle. Assessments generally continue to be complex and take more time to complete. Once approved however, AEM adopters do not generally wait to be matched with children there is early linking with families. Some families have been linked with children from other RAAs this year. Where adopters wish to consider children from all agencies, we now link them with a Family Finder for support.

National data shows a very low number of waiting adopters, and more children waiting longer.

We continue to have great success in matching children, and few plans changed away from adoption because families could not be found. It continues however to be challenging to find families for, large sibling groups, children with complex needs, or developmental or genetic uncertainty, as the pool of available adopters nationally has reduced.

AEM recruit adopters who can meet the needs of a range of children but continue not to have enough adopters for all the children at any one time, meaning continued use of inter-agency placements, for the same range of children we are also able to place within AEM.

Home Finding

The home finding team has remained very busy and continues to work closely with the four Local Authorities in finding families for children with a plan of adoption. The team continue to liaise with and offer support and guidance to the Local Authorities where a plan of adoption is being considered for a child. Once a plan of adoption is agreed, the team are proactive in starting family finding for the children. We receive consistently positive feedback from colleagues, prospective adopters and other agencies, in relation to communication, profiles which are regularly updated, along with photos and videos to aid with the family finding journey.

Throughout the year there has been a significant decrease in adoptive families being available nationally, and therefore for some children, where an AEM family is not available, family finding can take longer than in previous years. However, for those



children where an AEM family is suitable, early matching has proved successful for many of the children.

The team have attended several profile events, both within the Midlands area, and nationally, which has proved successful in making matches for some of the children.

The team work closely and is part of the Midlands Together Collaboration, recent positive feedback was received from another adoption agency:

‘The overall message is that we like working with AEM because you are the most professional and responsive RAA we work with. Without MTC, we couldn’t have developed professional relationships in the way that we have. The largest group of placements (20%) were with AEM this year and last year’

To support children who move to families outside of the AEM region, there are resources available on our website which the team have developed which includes a useful pack for the adoptive families and their agency around expectations along with guidance around transitions and therapeutic parenting and support.

The regional and national links also continue to develop for the team, with workers being involved in the development of regional and national guidance on family finding and permanence.

Following a retirement in February 2025, a part-time family worker has been appointed who will start working in the team in April 2025. Each of the 4 Local Authority partners now has 2 home finders allocated to support them. There have been 117 children’s placement orders this year, this is less than last year and is the second lowest year since AEM started. The average over the 6 years is 138 placement orders a year.

142 children have been matched, this is a high number with only 19/20 and 22/23 being slightly higher. All other years are significantly lower, the average over the six years is 132.

130 adoption orders were granted, with the average per year being 128.

Derbyshire has the highest level of activity in all areas,

There have been 21 sibling groups of 2 matched this year, and two larger groups. The eldest child was over 10, 16 children were under a year old, and 51 under two. Two thirds of all children are single children.

There have been 22 early permanence arrangements this year.

22 per cent of children are not white British, with two thirds 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. 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

Adoption Support 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. Recognising the importance of 'early intervention support', we have continued this year to encourage new adoptive families to remain connected to the RAA and to access early our early intervention offer.

Our core objectives are to:

- Work in co-production with adopters and adoptees to understand their lived experience, what support can make a difference and the ongoing development of our regional support offer
- 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
- deliver excellent customer service which is proportionate to the level of need and with the aim of empowering families and improving outcomes for all
- support adopted adults and birth relatives with a clear service pathway

Voice & Influence: Learning from lived experience and co-production

Co-production remains at the heart of our service development and delivery supporting more equal partnerships between families who use our services and professionals, as well as ensuring the best use of resources, the delivery of better outcomes for adoptive families and building stronger relationships and communities across our region.

We now have four embedded and regular co-production groups which meet regularly and have been able to share their collective knowledge and lived experience to support the regional adoption community as well as the development of service provision. Groups have been established around key areas of support need:

- Complex trauma group
- Parenting Teenagers group
- Education group
- Adopted Adults group

Alongside these groups, our regional peer support network continues to grow in number and strength. Developing and embedding this service across the region has



been a key priority for us over the last 12 months, and we are proud to now have a well-established and active network (Peers4Peers) providing lived experience support to families pre and post order as well as for some just starting their adoption journey. We now have lived experience integrated into all our workshops (pre and post order) and are successfully offering a totally peer-led workshop specifically designed for pre-approved, newly approved, and matched adopters who are preparing for their child to “Come Home.”

To date, the Peer Family Coordinators have recruited and trained 38 peer mentors. Currently, 17 mentees are actively engaged in one-to-one support through the service, and we offer regular coffee mornings for the network to which we invite and encourage all families to attend.

The significance of bringing in lived experience to shape how support is offered and to co-deliver that support has been well received by our families; the feedback has been positive, and we will continue to develop this service over the next year.

In addition to our **Peers4Peers network**, we continue to expand and develop our **Voices of Adoption** consultation and participation group which as well as informing the development of services, represents the youth voice both regionally and nationally on behalf of AEM, including having representation on the Nottinghamshire Young People’s Board; we would welcome the opportunity to extend this offer to our other LA Partners. This year a representative group from our Voices of Adoption group attended a ‘National Youth Voice in Adoption event’ hosted by Adoption England and were asked to present their views on what Youth Voice and support looks like for them and what they have achieved as a group over the last 12 months.

This year, AEM have been working to develop support to young adopted adults aged 17-25 and have connected with a number from this cohort, some of whom are transitioning from our Voices of Adoption group) and have been meeting on a monthly basis to think about the purpose of the group and how it should be developed. The group currently has eight members who have feedback that meeting together has enabled them to feel a sense of commonality with each other, as well as enabling them to talk openly about adoption themes and also providing an opportunity to grow and maintain peer relationships through socialising and having fun. The group are keen to share their lived experiences with us (as young people and adults) and work in co-production with us in the development for appropriate support services.

Due to the geographical needs of some of the young adults we are now working to set up a second group to meet in the north of the region, as the current group has established meeting in the south of the region works for them, and we are actively encouraging other young adults to join.

Multidisciplinary Support



This year we have continued to embed our grant funded MDT into our wider Adoption Support offer and now have a well embedded and communicated early intervention and specialist support offer across the service which more efficiently and effectively meets the regions adoption support needs, and which is supporting the knowledge development and learning of social workers across AEM and LA Permanence teams through offering case consultation as well as specific training.



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 come together as a Reflective Team so enabling a more holistic understanding of need and therefore the most effective support at any given time for young people and their families.

Through our multi-disciplinary reflecting team, we are working alongside parents to bring crisis levels down, increase resources for the family (both internal and external to the family) and promote feelings of safety for the whole family through more targeted early intervention work:

- improving understanding of the child's history & developmental trauma through multiple lenses enabled through our MDT approach (for parents & professionals)
- stabilising the child's home and school environment so they are able to better regulate
- providing support to primary care givers to strengthen their network (this can include family, friends, informal and formal support) to create feelings of safety and peer support
- providing resources, training, consultation and support to educational staff to better understand and support the needs of adopted young people in the school environment
- providing consultations to families and professionals giving opportunities for deeper reflection, understanding and planning.

Whilst March 2025 saw the official end of the Grant funded period of our MDT, we have been successful in securing some additional funding from Adoption England which means that we can achieve sustainability of the team until July 2026. During this extended period, the project team will be working with Adoption England and



strategic partners to identify future funding opportunities to ensure the permanence of the team within our Adoption Support service.

Adoption Support Helpdesk

The Helpdesk remains a fundamental tenet of the Adoption Support service offer, providing immediate support to adoptive families in the region as well as being an integral part of the multidisciplinary reflecting team that triages incoming Pathway assessments into the service. Thanks to the Helpdesk, families with immediate needs have been able to access in-house therapeutic intervention groups without the need to wait for social worker allocation. Half of all referrals received have been closed following effective support from the Helpdesk (See below fig), freeing up social worker resource for those families with the most complex, long-term needs. Towards the end of Quarter 3, the Helpdesk was joined by colleagues in the Multi-Disciplinary Team in triaging referrals and Helpdesk became the single front door for families accessing any area of the service. This saw a spike in referrals in Quarter 4 and enabled the Helpdesk and Multi-Disciplinary Team to deliver a more cohesive, holistic plan of support to meet the varying needs of our adoptive families.

Period (Apr 24 – Mar '25)	Total New Referrals	Total Closed	% Closed Held on Helpdesk	% Allocated to Team
Quarter 1	68	28	50%	50%
Quarter 2	47	19	36.8%	63.2%
Quarter 3	47	11	72.7%	27.3%
Quarter 4	87	17	52.9%	47.1%
Total	249	75	50.7%	49.3%

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. Over the past year, the team has received 98 new referrals, which are triaged on a weekly basis. Since the service was established, a total of 184 referrals have been received, with 79 cases now successfully closed.

Over the last 12 months, the team has delivered 66 Education Consultations. These one-off sessions provide adoptive families with the opportunity to discuss current challenges related to their child's education with an Education Support Worker. In addition, the team delivered 12 education workshops, covering key topics such as: *Transitions into Primary and Secondary School*, *Introduction to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)*, *Building Effective Communication and Relationships with Schools*. These workshops were co-delivered by Education Support Workers, a Derbyshire SENCo, and the Senior Practitioner. A total of 89 participants attended training sessions over the past year.



The education on TRACK team knows from their data that there is a gender distribution: 55% of referrals relate to male pupils, while 44% relate to females and that 14-year-olds represent the most common age group in referrals.

There is only a 4% variation between referrals involving Primary and Secondary school students.

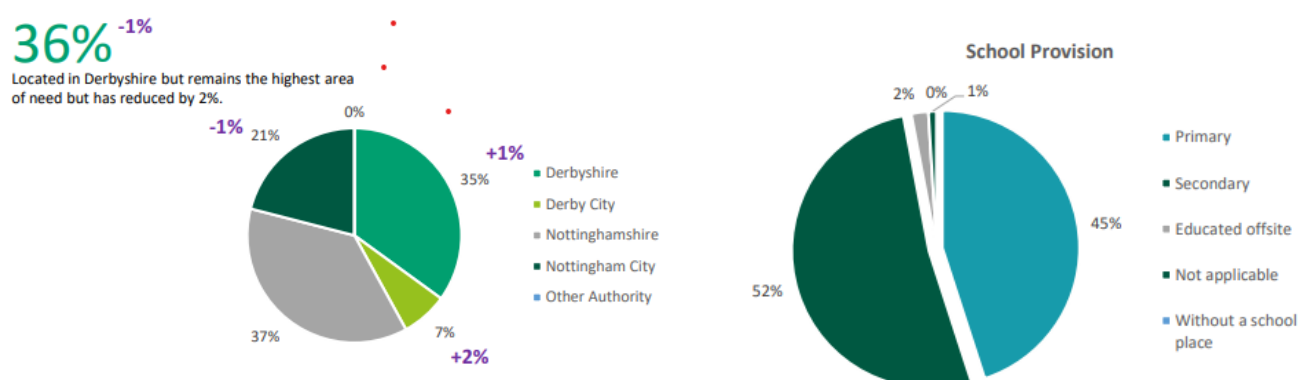
We recently tracked 43 families and of these 15 children (34.8%) had experienced school suspensions. One child, aged just 4, had already been suspended. Another child, aged 14, had been suspended six times. Two children were permanently excluded and are now home educated, placing increased strain on their family relationships.

A significant learning over the last year has been the realisation 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.

In the coming year, Education on TRACK will begin rolling out a whole-school support offer across secondary schools in the region. This initiative will involve key MDT professionals, including Occupational Therapists, Youth Workers, Speech and Language Therapists, Education Support Workers, Adoption Education Champions Peer Supporters.

Working collaboratively with schools, parents, and young people, this expanded approach aims to foster environments where children and families feel supported and understood—ensuring better educational outcomes for all adopted children.



Youth work



Over the past year, the Youth Connect service has grown in both capacity and expertise. The team now consists of three full-time Youth Workers, each bringing prior experience of working with adopted young people or adults. This expansion has strengthened the team's ability to collaborate effectively across services, build meaningful relationships with families and professionals, and deliver creative, tailored interventions that meet the evolving needs of young people and their families.

Analysis of referral data shows that young people aged 12 and 13 represent the most common age group accessing support, with Derbyshire being the region with the highest number of referrals. The primary reason for referrals remains mental health and well-being challenges, reflecting the continued need for accessible, relational support.

In the last 12 months, Youth Connect received 78 referrals. Of these, 12 young people have successfully accessed support, and their cases have been closed following effective intervention. The team also facilitated 21 Youth Consultations, offering one-off sessions where families can explore current challenges, particularly around education and well-being, with a trained practitioner.

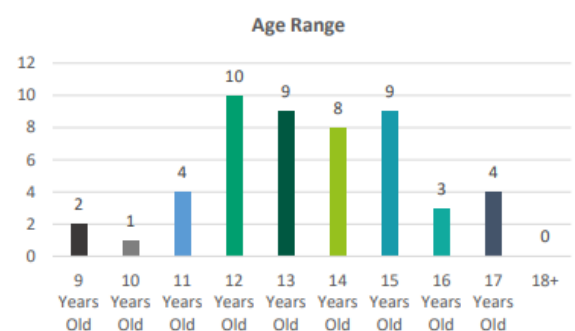
The youth workers are currently actively working 22 young people, offering them support tailored to their needs. As demand continues to grow, the team has adapted by offering flexible, short-term support interventions. These include *Pupil voice focusing on their voice for therapy*, *In-school support as part of a whole-school approach*, *targeted one-to-one sessions and participation in the Youth Connect Club*.

The Youth Connect Club has been particularly successful. Feedback from both parents and young people has been overwhelmingly positive. The group offers adopted young people a safe, supportive space to expand their peer networks, engage in shared experiences, and access guidance on key issues that matter to them.

Looking ahead, Youth Connect is committed to further growth and development. Over the next year, the team will deepen its collaboration with the **Voice of Adoption group**, supporting more young people events and will continue to elevate the voices of adopted young people across the region.

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.

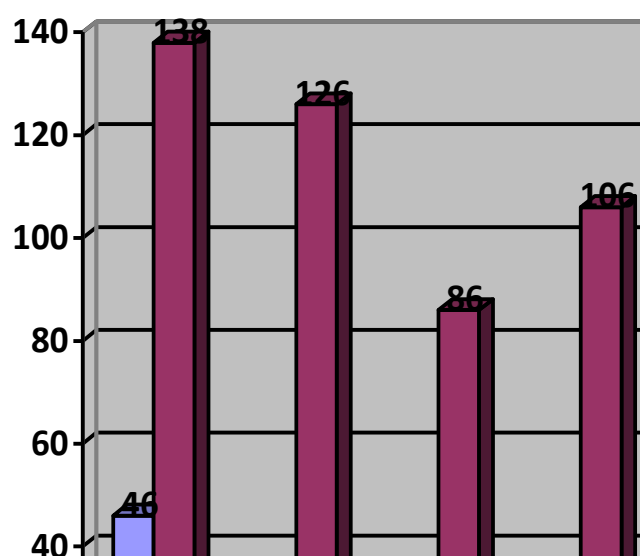


Over the last year 64 KIT consultations have taken place with 64 (29.7%) resulting in no further work after consultation. The remainder went on to be directly supported with exploring an alternative KIT arrangement (25%), the completion of a risk assessment with the view of then supporting an arrangement (43.8%) and 1.6% resulted in a child's letterbox plan being reviewed and amended.

Our dedicated KIT social worker has continued to support family reunifications. Most recently she has supported two young people (aged 13 and 14) along with their adoptive parents to be reunified with their older, birth siblings (brother and sister who were cared for and raised by their paternal grandmother), their grandmother and their paternal aunt. Adopters recognised this was important to their sons, one of whom had already reached out to his adult sister via social media. The preparatory work undertaken allowed the boys and both families the opportunity to explore their worries, fears and reservations and be supported to understand one another's expectations and hopes for the future. The direct meeting was a huge success, both families showed mutual respect for the other. There is now a plan for them to continue to meet twice a year face to face. The social worker will review how the next meet up goes and support with any issues, if they arise, following this her involvement will end.

Birth family support.

It's been a busy year for the birth family support workers, and we have had a seventh birth family support worker join the team in January 2025 (taking the team to 5 full time equivalent posts). Over the year we have received a total of 582 referrals (456 letterbox referrals and 126 for birth family support), from one our four 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 workers are seeing more and more birth parents/wider family members returning each year for continued support (174 this year) thus demonstrating a maintenance of letterbox exchange where previously it may have ended prematurely.

Our work alongside the keeping in touch (KIT) social worker continues, enabling both the birth parent/s and adopters and young people to be supported whilst exploring (in some cases implementing) more creative arrangements. For example, a young girl (3) living with her adoptive mum, plan of direct contact with his birth sister (6, living with their birth maternal grandmother). The KIT social worker has worked with/supported adoptive mum, and a birth family support worker has supported grandmother, together they've supported both families with two direct meet ups. There is now an arrangement in place for both adults to continue these meets up twice a year, knowing they can request support/review of circumstances any time from the team in the future. This arrangement allows for both girls to be raised with adults committed to supporting their sibling relationship.

Adoption Panels

Adoption East Midlands now have five virtual panels each month, these are The Unity Panel, Chatsworth, Wollaton, Kedleston and Rufford and are held on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays throughout the month. We increased the number of panels from January 2025 as an acknowledgment of the increase in reading matches create due to reports being more in depth. For 8 months of the year, each panel has capacity for 4 families, and in the remaining months each panel have capacity for 5 families. It's acknowledged this has increased the workload of the panel advisers, but it does reduce the amount of reading on the majority of panels that have 4 slots.

We have a healthy central list of 28 panel members. This figure includes five independent chairs and five independent vice-chairs, nine Social Work Reps and nine independent panel members. We do not currently have any vacancies, but 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 so far.

April 2024 saw a structural change within the Panel Management Team, a Team Manager post was created, and Laura Poxon commenced that role. Laura remains operational to some extent as well having oversight of the wider panel process and structure. The team continue to provide Quality Assurance of children's plans for Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire County Council as well as our core tasks around panels.

It has continued to feel like a very busy period, the majority of panel manager time is undertaking a lot of work to reduce issues where cases need a lot of input to ensure they can come to panel, and to try and reduce the number of cases that would be deferred or removed from a panel at very little notice leaving spaces that cannot then be utilised due to late movement

Panels heard 195 matters and had availability for 236 matters.



Panel continues to have a very strong Business Support Team, which has been fully staffed.

Business support are the backbone of the panel process and ensure the systems work smoothly and where possible have been instrumental in supporting the changes to certain panel processes. They are a highly skilled team, who show great initiative. If work allows, they make every effort to attend panel training sessions with the rest of the panel members.

Complaints/ compliments/ data breaches

There have been 12 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. Some staff have repeated data protection training, as these errors are avoidable.

There have been 6 complaints, mostly regarding decisions in assessment or support. All of these have been resolved early, with managers always reaching out to meet with complainants, and actively listen.

One from a previous year is still in process.

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

Group Manager

Adoption East Midlands

May 2025



