

THIS ITEM IS FOR INFORMATION ONLY. (Please note that 'Information Only' reports do not require Equality Impact Assessments, Legal or Finance comments as no decision is being taken.)

Title of meeting: Cabinet member for Children and Families Services
Subject: Annual Adoption Agency Activity Report March 2020
Date of meeting: 01/10/20
Report by: Jackie Clark, Service Leader, Adoption
Wards affected: None

1. Requested by:

1.1. It is required by Standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011 for Local Authority Adoption Services that the executive receives a six-monthly written report outlining the management and performance of the adoption agency.

1.2. The Lead Member is asked to note the performance of the Portsmouth Adoption Agency in terms of:

- a) Update regarding the first year of Adopt South Regional Adoption Agency
- b) Reducing waiting times for children being placed with adoptive families.
- c) Sustained number of children adopted in contrast to the national picture.

2. Purpose

2.1. The previous report was presented March 2020. This report will update the Lead Member on Portsmouth Adoption Service activity for the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

3. Background

3.1. Practices in adoption have continued to receive government attention since the Government's Adoption Reform Programme 2012 to promote stable, permanent care arrangements for children unable to be cared for by their birth families. In the DfE paper 'Adoption - A Vision for Change' the government outlined expectations for improved practices measured through the introduction of the National Adoption Scorecards and the development of regionalised adoption agencies.

3.2. Portsmouth Children and Families Service were subject to Ofsted inspection September 2018 and the service was graded as 'Good'. With regard to the adoption service the Ofsted report stated:

- 3.3. 'Children who need adoption benefit from timely decision-making and effective planning. Good assessment, training and support is available for prospective adopters. Children move quickly to live with their adoptive families and they enjoy stability. Good use is made of the adoption support fund to meet children's therapeutic needs. Close work with CAMHS, the virtual school, educational psychologists and play therapist holistically supports carers to meet their children's needs'. The regionalisation of Portsmouth adoption service is an opportunity to further develop the service provided for Portsmouth children and their families.
- 3.4. In June 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) published 'Regionalising Adoption' and asked all adoption agencies in England to consider how to work more closely together on a regional basis. This was enacted as the Education and Adoption Act 2016, which authorised authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to join together to form Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). Hampshire County Council, Isle of Wight Council, Portsmouth City Council and Southampton City Council adoption services came together along with the voluntary adoption agencies Barnardo's and Parents and Children Together (PACT) to establish Adopt South Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).
- 3.5. Adopt South went live 1 April 2019 and became responsible for specific aspects of adoption to improve outcomes for children and families involved with adoption. The key functions for Adopt South are the recruitment, assessment and support of prospective adoptive families and the post adoption support services for adopted children and their families. Adopt South has a centralised marketing and recruitment team dedicated to identifying potential adoptive families for children needing adoption within each of the four local authorities. The Adopt South children's family finding team is directly linked to each local authority children's adoption team to ensure suitable potential adoptive families are identified as soon as possible promoting timely matching and placement for those children. Furthermore those children adopted and their families now have access to Adopt South's comprehensive post adoption service comprising a range of support that includes adopter mentoring, consultations with CAMHS and Education Psychologists, therapeutic parenting programmes, informal support workshops and social events.
- 3.6. The two key benefits of Adopt South to Portsmouth has been the removal of the competition between the four local authorities for adoptive families through having one centralised Adopt South recruitment and marketing strategy and the pooling of resources to enhance post adoption support services available to families across the Adopt South region. These centralised services have meant that for 2019/20 that the vast majority of Portsmouth children needing adoptive families have continued to move to adoptive families within an improving timescale in line with Government timescales and adoptive families have access to local Adopt South support services.

4. Areas that are doing well

- 4.1. The timeliness and number of Looked After Children leaving foster care to adoption has generally continued to be in accordance with Government Adoption Scorecards. Please see appendix 1.
- 4.2. The number of children adopted during the year 2019/20 was 25. This cohort of children included three sibling pairs. Two children were older children. Sibling groups and children over the age of four can wait longer for an adoptive family to be identified as many adoptive families will set out to adopt younger children. The number of Portsmouth children adopted during this period is an increase from the previous year whereby 15 children were adopted and is in contrast to the national trend.

- 4.3. For the period 2019/2020 there were 21 children matched with adoptive families whereby applications for adoption orders were in the process of being submitted to court. This group of children included two children with very complex health and development issues who had been waiting for adoptive families for more than twelve months. Whilst the time will have impacted Government led timescales the extensive search to identify an adoptive family represents a positive outcome for each child.
- 4.4. At 31 March 2020 there were six children awaiting for adoptive families to be identified. This is a marked improvement in contrast to the previous year when there were 21 children awaiting an adoptive family, many of those children had complex needs.
- 4.5. For some young children unable to live with their birth family it is possible for them to be placed in Fostering for Adoption Placements (FfA). These are adoptive families who are also approved temporarily as foster carers for a specific child. Fostering for Adoption can offer the best opportunity for the child if the court decides they need to be adopted as the child can be placed with an approved adoptive family whilst parents and wider family members are being considered. The child remains in one placement whilst decisions are being made rather than being placed with a foster family and then move to an adoptive family should the court decide the child needs adoption. For 2019/20 there were two Portsmouth children matched with Fostering for Adoption families
- 4.6. In comparison with the 2018/19, the number of Portsmouth children with a plan of adoption endorsed by the court has decreased in 2019/20 from 29 to 20, which reflects the national trend in the reduction in number of children leaving care for adoption. When children come into care, reunification to birth parents or permanence with a member of the child's extended family will always be explored before an adoption plan is agreed. This reflects the legal duty placed on the court to only grant an order agreeing for a child to be placed for adoption when it is satisfied the child cannot live with birth family or within the wider family.
- 4.7. Portsmouth's timeliness for children being adopted has continued to improve. The government threshold measurement in number of days from the date the child entered care to the date the child is placed with an adoptive family is 426 days. For the 2019/20 period Portsmouth's timescale is 396 days, although well within the Government threshold it does represent an increase from the previous year 2018/19 of 336 days. The increase in number of days would be due to members of the child's birth family being considered during care proceedings and/or the child has complex needs and therefore identifying a suitable adoptive family take longer.
- 4.8. The other timescale is the number of days the court agrees a child to be placed for adoption and the local authority agreeing to the potential match with an adoptive family which has a threshold of 121 days. For Portsmouth the timescale for 2019/20 is 208 days in contrast to 178 days 2018/19. The increase in number of days reflects the fact that some of the children successfully placed are particularly vulnerable and have complex needs and therefore identifying a suitable family takes longer as the many adoptive families set out to adopt young infants.
- 4.9. Both sets of timescales compare favourably with the England national average timescales published August 2020 for the year 2018/19 by the government Adoption and Special Guardianship Board (ASGLB) at 433 and 173 days. Please see appendix 1.
- 4.10. During 2019/20 the vast majority of children have been placed with Adopt South adoptive families which means those children remain placed within the geographical region

and those families will already have knowledge of and access to the Adopt South support service. Therefore adoptive parents are more likely to access support before a crisis point and the risk of adoption breakdown will be reduced.

5. Adopt South

5.1. The Regional Adoption Agency has removed the competitive element of the four local authorities recruiting adoptive families as Adopt South has a centralised recruitment team. In 2018/19 Portsmouth Children's Services assessment team approved 11 adoptive families, in 2019/20 the Portsmouth team approved 34 adoptive families contributing to Adopt South's overall total of 121 adoptive families being approved. For Portsmouth this has enabled children to be placed with families across the regional area. The relationships forged between the local authority children's adoption teams and Adopt South family finding team and adopter assessment teams means that information sharing for potential matching is comprehensive, robust and expedient. The adopter assessment process has been enhanced and standardised by sharing the good practice between the four local authorities quality assured through the Adopt South centralised Adoption Panels and Agency Decision Maker. Equally the Adopt South family finding team working with the children's adoption teams has promoted improved practice to ensure children's information needed for family finding is comprehensive and will fully inform an adopted child as an adult about their birth history and adoption.

5.2. Adopter recruitment is measured against the Government threshold of a two stage assessment totalling six months. For Adopt South the average assessment timescale for 2019/20 was 5.3 months. This means the Adopt South family finding team is able to identify potential families at an early point and there has been increase in choice of potential families for children. The approval of adoptive families within timescales feeds into the improving timescale for children being placed with those families. Those children and their families are supported within a shared ethos of delivering a co-ordinated and high standard adoption support service throughout the process of adoption and beyond. Prospective adoptive families are linked with an adopter mentor and training opportunities from the point of assessment offering support all the through to beyond an adoption order thereby enabling families to become regard adoption support as a familiar and accessible service at any point as an adoptive family.

6. Adoption Support

6.1. Many children needing adoption come from families with complex backgrounds where they have experienced trauma due to ongoing neglect, families characterised by domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse. Research shows the impact of those experiences can have a significant impact upon the child's development and these children need nurturing, resilient and stable families able to care for the child through to adulthood and sometimes beyond. As children are matched with prospective adoptive families it is imperative for those families they are able to access support.

6.2. Adoption support services have been strengthened by Adopt South. Portsmouth currently has 142 adoptive families eligible for adoption support. Families may request an assessment of their support needs at any time. Adoptive families can now access training programmes, workshops; mentoring and support groups, one to one support, consultations with educational psychologists and CAMHS practitioner and social activities.

- 6.3. In addition the Government Adoption Support Fund (ASF), enables adoptive families to have access funding for therapeutic support. During 2019/20 Portsmouth has secured a total of £99,121 for adoptive families needing specific therapeutic support. This support including therapeutic parenting programmes, one to one therapeutic support for children, sensory integration therapy and specialist assessments. The ASF has been particularly beneficial enabling those families living outside of the geographical region to receive specialist therapeutic support. Across Adopt South there was a total of £720,548 granted for adoptive families to access therapeutic support.
- 6.4. For 2020 the Government gave a boost of 4.5million to the ASF which will enable families to access specialist therapeutic support. For the period 1 April to 30 June 2020 there has been a total of £21,540 granted for Portsmouth families. The ASF and the number of families accessing funding for specialist support is a reflection of the complex needs of adopted children. Adopt South has centralised the four local authorities ASF process and developing support service that would be sustainable should the ASF reduce or come to an end.
- 6.5. Adoption Services continue to learn from the work in supporting adopted adults and birth family members who were involved in adoption (Birth Records Counselling and Intermediary Service). Currently this service sits outside of Adopt South. Between 2019/20 there were been 34 referrals received for birth records counselling and intermediary work. This figure is consistent with the previous year which culminated in a total of 42 referrals being made. There is an increasing number of young adopted adults accessing their adoption records. These younger adults are more likely to have been adopted through care proceedings and it is evident that they are seeking to understand the detail in decisions made to separate them from birth parents particularly when separated as siblings.
- 6.6. Post adoption contact with birth family members is promoted from the outset of a child being placed for adoption in order for the child to develop a clear understanding of their birth family and sense of identity. The majority of adopted children will continue to have indirect contact with birth parents and siblings up to the age of 18 through a letterbox exchange co-ordinated by the adoption service. Over the course of the year there are 250 adopted children involved in letterbox contact culminating 1097 exchanges over the course of the year.
- 6.7. At present the Birth Records Counselling and Intermediary Service and the Post Adoption Contact Service exchange sits outside of the Adopt South remit. However now that adopter recruitment; assessment and support; family finding and post adoption support is established Adopt South are proposing both those service areas to become part of Adopt South Post Adoption Support from 2021. The benefits will be adoptive parents being able to access consistent support relating to the lifelong needs of adopted children.

7. Areas for consideration

- 7.1. Nationally, the number of children needing adoption has reduced and Portsmouth has seen a reduction in the number of children with a court agreed adoption plan (Placement Order), over the past three years. Portsmouth Children's Social Care continues to maintain a robust permanence tracking process to ensure children becoming looked after have a timely permanence plan appropriate to their needs. This may be placement with birth parents, special guardians, relatives, long-term fostering or adoption. Children may be placed with kinship (family and friends foster carers) before securing a Special Guardianship order.

8. Areas of development

8.1. The government provided £650,000 investment to regional adoption agencies to boost adoptive family recruitment particularly for those children with complex needs and deemed harder to place i.e. older children, sibling groups and children of black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Adopt South continuously updates the recruitment strategy including developing prospective adoptive parents knowledge, understanding and support to promote matching with the children with complex needs.

8.2. In summary the strengths of Adopt South to Portsmouth are:

- 8.2.1. The removal of local competitive recruitment for prospective adoptive families.
- 8.2.2. Immediate access to a wider pool of adoptive families for Portsmouth children across the region.
- 8.2.3. Adoptive placements more localised within the local regional area, promoting efficiency in adoption support, particularly specialist local service providers for adoption support.
- 8.2.4. Building on local authority good practice, skills and expertise to enable prospective adopters to be fully prepared and suitably matched and supported with those children placed - securing that child's future throughout their childhood and beyond.
- 8.2.5. Early indications regarding Adopt South show an increase in the number of adoptive families available for those children needing adoption and that the timeliness for Portsmouth children leaving care for adoption continues to be on an improving trajectory.
- 8.2.6. Regionalising adoption support enables adoptive families being able to access robust comprehensive support packages to mitigate risk of disruption for children with complex needs.

Signed by (Director)

Appendices:

- Adoption activity 2014-2020
- PCC Adoption Scorecard 19/20 , Government Adoption Scorecard -Portsmouth data

Appendix 1 Adoption activity 2013 – 2020

Year 1 April - 31 March	Adoption orders No. of children adopted	Children's plans for adoption agreed	Placement Orders granted	Children linked with adoptive family	Prospective adoptive families approved	FfA placements	Placements disrupted
2013/14	27	41	30	35	37	0	0
2014/15	34	29	27	31	32	1	2
2015/16	25	41	41	28	22	4	2
2016/17	35	21	19	31	21	5	0
2017/18	30	31	30	20	11	5	1
2018/19	15	30	29	25	15	5	0
2019/20	25	27	20	21	34 (Portsmouth number)	2	2

Appendix 2 - Adoption Scorecards

- 1) Pages 9 and 10 show data extracted from the DfE Adoption, Special Guardianship Leadership Board Adoption Scorecards published 24/08/20. For full information please see link:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards

- 2) Government thresholds for children needing adoption timeliness

A1: 426 days - from date child enters care to moving in with adoptive family

A2 : 121 days -from date the court agrees to local authority placing a child for adoption to the date the local authority agrees the match for the child with an adoptive family

Government Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB), figures for rolling year 2016-19 (published August 2020)

A1: National England average 433 days

A2 : National England average 173 days

ASGLB Portsmouth timescales for 2016-19

A1 : Average 336 days

A2: Average 178 days

Portsmouth timescales for 2019/20

A1: Average 397 days

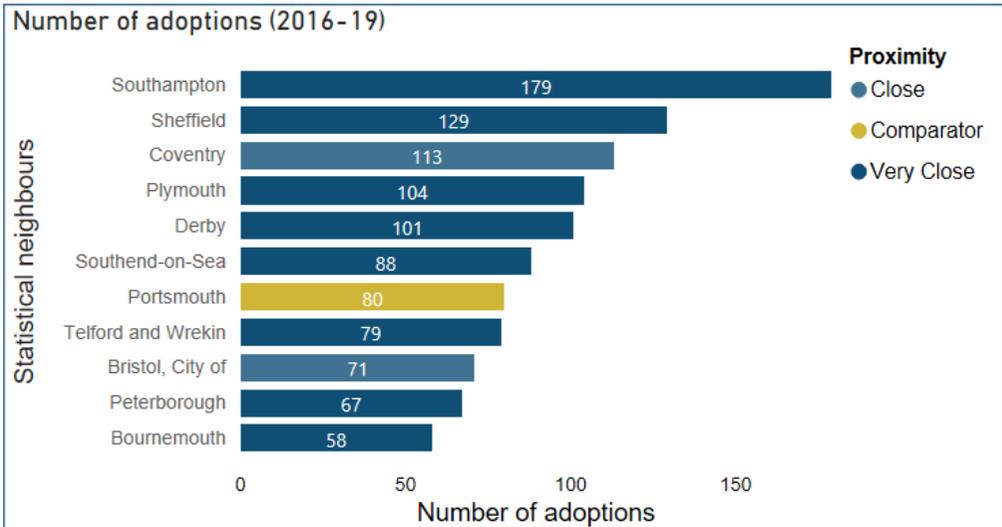
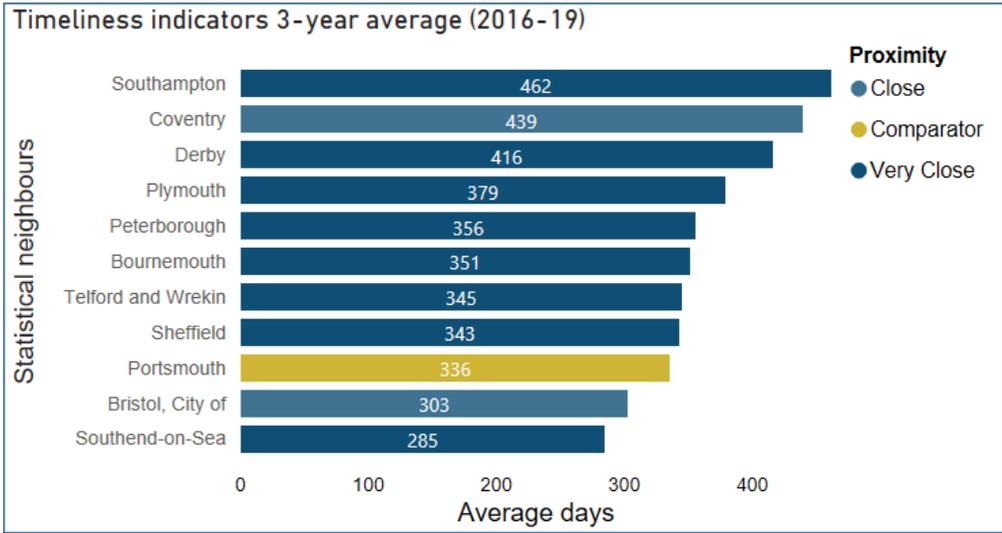
A2: Average 208 days

Select LA:
Portsmouth

Select indicator to display on the graph:

- A10
- A2
- A20

RAA this LA is in:
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A10: Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster care adoptions:

2019:		2016-19:	
LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:	LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:
239	408	336	380

A2: Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family:

2019:		2016-19:	
LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:	LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:
121	203	184	195

A20: Average time (in days) between entering care and placement order:

2019:		2016-19:	
LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:	LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:
143	252	178	241

Note: If there is no data, or the data has been suppressed, the LA will appear as blank in the graphs.

Select LA:
 Portsmouth

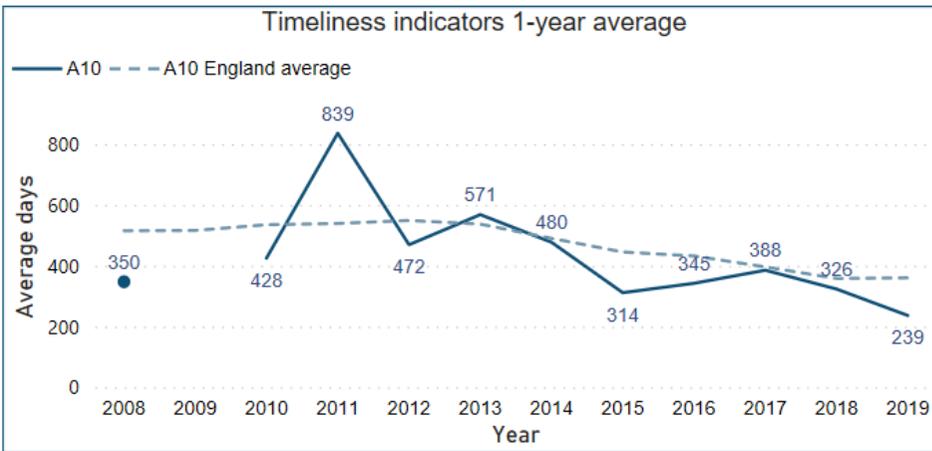
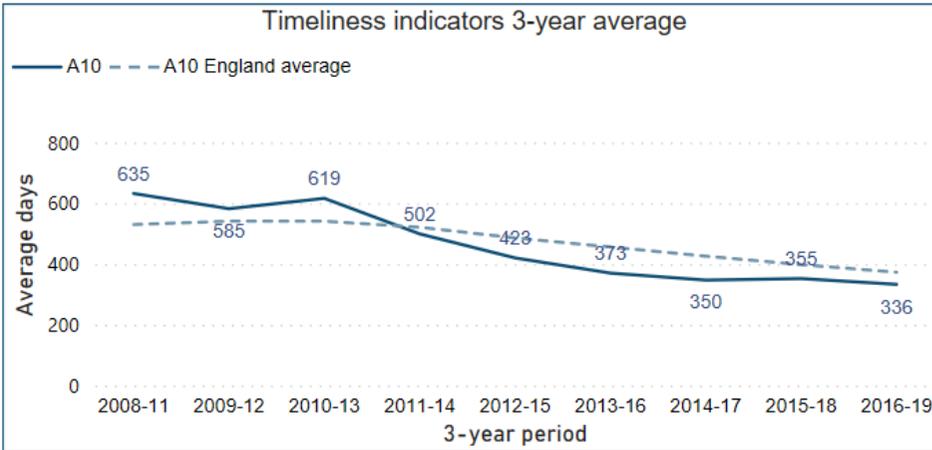
Select indicator(s) to display on graph:

- Select all
- A10
- A10 England average
- A2
- A2 England average
- A20
- A20 England average

Select indicator(s) to display on graph:

- Select all
- A10
- A10 England average
- A2
- A2 England average
- A20
- A20 England average

RAA this LA is in:
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Related information - 2019

A15: Number of ADM decisions:	A16: Number of new placement orders granted:	A17: Number of children in a FFA/Concurrent Planning foster placement:
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Additional information - 2016-19

A5: Number of children for whom permanence decisions have changed away from adoption:	Number of adoptions:	Number of adoptions: BME:	Number of adoptions: Aged 5 or over:	Number of children starting to be looked after: Under the age of 5
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A10: Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster care adoptions:

2019 average days:	2019 England average:	Average time in 2019 was shorter than in 2018	2016-19 average days:	2016-19 England average:
239	363		336	376

A2: Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family:

2019 average days:	2019 England average:	Average time in 2019 was shorter than in 2018	2016-19 average days:	2016-19 England average:
121	170		184	178

A20: Average time (in days) between entering care and placement order:

2019 average days:	2019 England average:	Average time in 2019 was shorter than in 2018	2016-19 average days:	2016-19 England average:
143	256		178	257

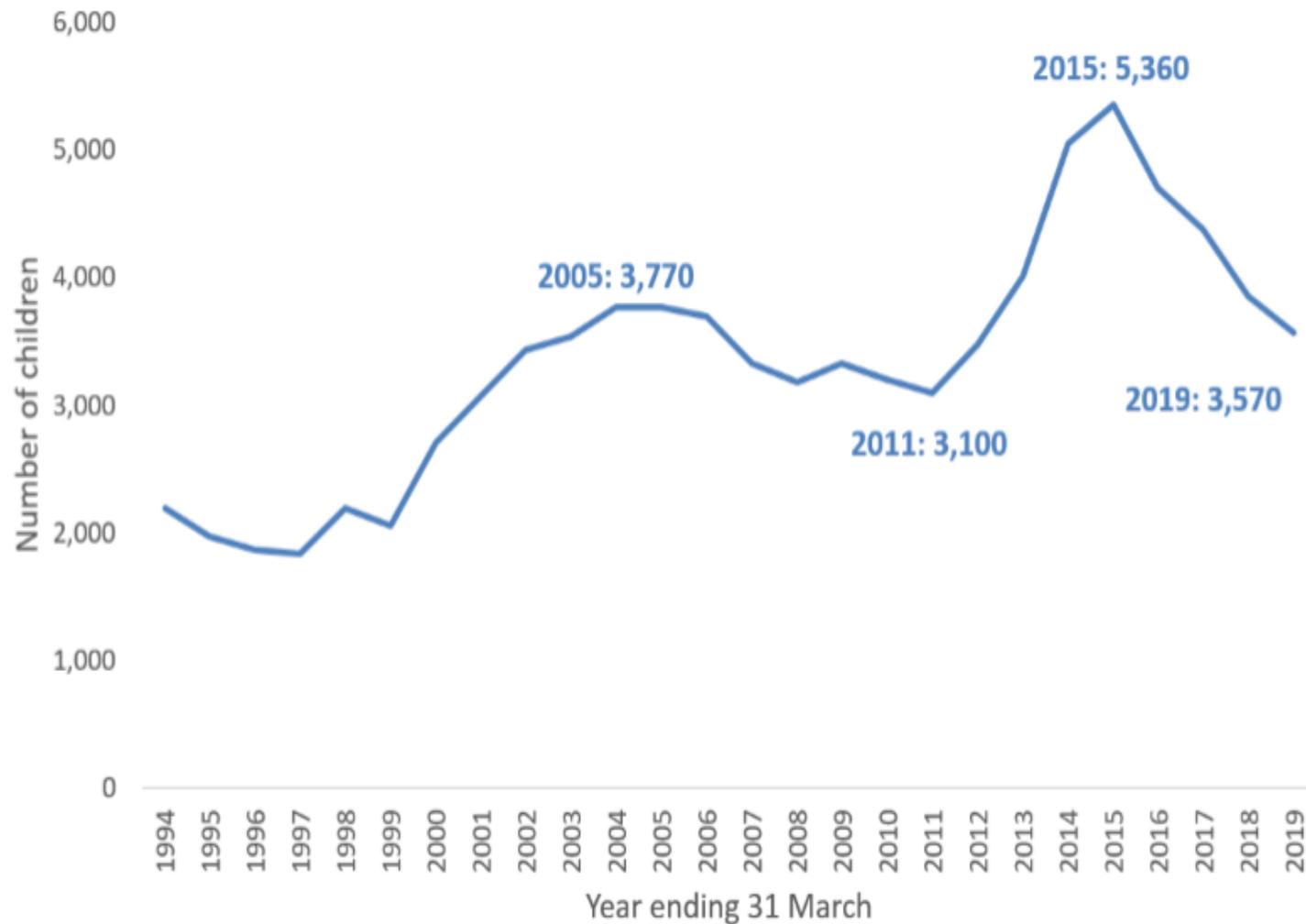
Matching and Recruitment (at 31 March 2019)

A11: Number of approved adoptive families waiting to be matched:	A13: Number of applications of adoptive families still being assessed:	A14: Number of children waiting to be placed with a placement order:
x	20	21

Please see ASGLB local level files for further adopter measures. Where a LA is part of a RAA they will show as N/A for the A11 and A13 indicators.

Adoptions from care continue to fall...

Looked after children who were adopted during the year



Children ceasing to be looked after during the year due to adoption fell by 7% to 3,570 - this continues the drop seen last year and is down from a peak of 5,360 in 2015.