

**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 Meeting  
**Subject:** Annual Adoption Agency Activity Report March 2021  
**Date of meeting:** 27 July 2021  
**Report by:** Sara Sweeney Service Leader, Through Care Team One  
**Wards affected:** All

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### **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 second 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 slightly lower in line with national trend.

### **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 2020 to 31 March 2021.

### **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 Barnardos and Parents and Children Together (PACT) to establish Adopt South Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).
- 3.5. Adopt South went live on 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 2020/21 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 2020/21 was 18. This cohort of children included two sibling pairs. Two of the children were in reception at school the others were under 4. The number of Portsmouth children adopted during this period is a decrease from the previous year whereby 25 children were adopted but is in line to the national trend.
- 4.3. For the period 2020/2021 there were 19 children matched with adoptive families whereby applications for adoption orders were in the process of being submitted to court. This included a sibling group of two school age children who had been waiting for two years for a family. 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. As at 31 March 2021 there were 7 children waiting for adoptive families to be identified. This included a sibling pair who have complex emotional needs and three children with significant health and development needs This is in line with the previous year when there were 5 children awaiting an adoptive family. The complexity of need is an influencing factor.
- 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 2020/21 there were four Portsmouth children matched with Fostering for Adoption families in contrast to two the previous year

4.6. In comparison with the 2019/20, the number of Portsmouth children with a plan of adoption endorsed by the court has decreased in 2020/21 from 20 to 18, 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 2020/21 period Portsmouth's timescale is 402 days, although well within the Government threshold it does represent an increase from the previous year 2019/20 of 396 days. The increase is explained by a sibling pair having waited for two years for a family.

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 2020/21 is 204 days in contrast to 208 days 2019/20.

4.10 The national pandemic Covid-19 lockdown restrictions prevented any children from being placed for adoption for a number of weeks. However, following this initial impact care planning has continued throughout and there are no concerns with timeliness for placement or placement matching for Portsmouth children.

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*.

4.11 During 2020/21 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.

4.12 The local authority also has a responsibility to track post adoption disruption rates, however these numbers are not always accurate, as there is no obligation for parents to report these. The most informed way found to calculate the disruption rate is as follows:

- Children re-entering care from an adoptive placement- and the care plan changes to something other than rehabilitation to adoptive parents.
- Those young people that adoption support teams are aware of who may have left their adoptive families to informal arrangements- such as returning to birth family (they can't informally return to birth parents as birth parents no longer have PR so come in via frontline services. The government doesn't collect data regarding those specific children as above) or staying with friends or extended families.

4.13 According to this criteria the post adoption disruption rate in the Adopt South region is 0.6 %, this is pre adoption order. The national disruption rate identified by Julie Selwyn in Beyond the Adoption Order

is still the most up to date research. It is calculated at 3.2%. Therefore in the Adopt South Region, our post adoption order disruption rate is 81% lower than the national average.

## **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 2020/21 Portsmouth Children's Services assessment team approved 16 adoptive families, contributing to Adopt South's overall total of 117 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. In 2020/21 the time has reduced to an average of 3.8 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 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, characterised by domestic abuse and 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. Adoption Support Fund interventions are being requested upon placement and pre Adoption Order with greater frequency possibly owing to the very different experiences of introductions and placement under Covid-19 restrictions.
- 6.2 Adopt South has strengthened adoption support services. 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 commissioned by PCC, and social activities. Many of the Adoption Support services previously provided Face to Face have been adapted to be delivered virtually including the "Adopting Changes" therapeutic parenting programme as well as workshops on Life Story, Teenagers and social media. PCC staff have worked with colleagues across the region to deliver these workshops and training.
- 6.3 For 2020 the Government gave a boost of 4.5million to the Adoption Support Fund which has enabled families to continue to access specialist therapeutic support. During 2020/21 there has been a total of £49,465,75 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.

- 6.4 This support including therapeutic parenting programmes, one to one therapeutic support for children, sensory integration therapy and specialist assessments. We have noticed an increase in families requiring support for child on parent violence- a known factor for Adoption family breakdown. In response we have used the Adoption Support fund to obtain the therapeutic NVR ( Non Violent Resistance ) programme in order to support these families with positive results The ASF has been particularly beneficial enabling those families living outside of the geographical region to receive specialist therapeutic support.
- 6.5 It is of note that some of our children really struggled with the transition back into school and out again due to lockdown. There were 9 families supported through Portsmouth CAMHS consultations over the previous financial year, mostly via phone calls as face to face was not possible. The team have further supported another 8 families across the region where there are significant mental health issues including self-harm , eating disorders , suicidal thoughts , suicide attempts, school refusal ( long term) and anxiety in children and depression , anxiety and mental health breakdown - ( parents )..
- 6.6 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 for Portsmouth sits outside of Adopt South. Between 2020/21 there were been 13 referrals received for birth records counselling and intermediary work and workers are holding an ongoing caseload of 20. It is likely that this figure has been impacted by the Covid 19 lockdown. Many court and social care archives have been closed during Covid, which has affected our ability to make progress for some of our clients. 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. It is notable that more recent childcare files are voluminous in comparison with those adopted in the 60's and 70's, whilst this is positive for the young person in understanding their life story it makes the task of providing the permitted information significantly more complex.
- 6.7 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. There were 258 adopted children involved in letterbox contact culminating in 953 active exchanges over the course of the year. We are very proud of being able to maintain the Letterbox service during the pandemic when access to the office was limited for many months. This was achieved by driving the usually paper based service to email; this was done with great care and attention to detail, owing to the particular importance of confidentiality in this aspect of the work.
- 6.8 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 Notable outcomes for Adopt South**

- Placed heavier emphasis on digital advertising with the use of more focussed messaging and placement in regional press, parish magazines, 3D Reach and digital news networks
- Evolving strategies both in recruitment and placement for greater diversity including increased number of BAME, ethnic and LGBT+ adopters
- Low number of disruptions at just 2 this year
- Evaluation of Adoption Support's intervention increased adopters rating of their average day by 85%

- 186 applicants/adopters now being supported by 35 Volunteer Mentors
- Stage 1 assessments continue to encourage new applicants to consider placements of siblings, older children and children with additional needs, giving greater scope for placement
- Training pathway increasing applicant's knowledge
- Speedier matching - Family Finding Team continue matching and all 4 Local Authorities within Adopt South have continued to be under Government thresholds for matching
- Centralising the Adoption Support Fund and the COVID-19 Scheme

## 7.1 Adoption Support Fund and the COVID-19 Scheme

The Adoption Support Team worked with a range of providers to commission 122 virtual interventions to form the COVID-19 package, this was as result of recognising the additional impact that Covid-19 would have on families.

### **EP Consultations**

1-hour virtual consultation with two Educational Psychologists, support is provided to parents, and other professionals as required.

### **Behaviour Support**

Block of 6 virtual sessions for parents with specialist providers covering pre-school, primary and secondary age children. The intervention uses strategies from the Great Behaviour Breakdown parenting approach as well as support around crisis co-regulation, mind-set change, conflict resolution, trauma driven response.

### **Sensory Regulation**

Block of 6 virtual sessions for parents with specialist Occupational Therapists focusing on emotional regulation.

### **Therapeutic Support**

Block of 6 virtual sessions for parents to provide support strategies specifically to support the COVID-19 situation. The strategies drew upon DDP, therapeutic parenting and the neuro sequential model to support parents. Therapeutic support also included two Teen groups of 6 sessions specifically aimed at teenagers, facilitated by a Clinical Psychologist. The groups focus was on stress management, mindfulness, building self-esteem and self-compassion, distress tolerance and emotional regulation.

### **Counselling**

Block of 6 virtual sessions for parents to support with issues around social distancing, employment pressures, relationship difficulties, loss & bereavement.

### **In-House Parenting Support**

An increased range and volume of in-house interventions provided by Adopt Support South's Post Adoption Team, including virtual support groups, bespoke consultations, the Adopting Changes programme (adapted to be delivered to individual families virtually), and weekly information sent out on Adopt South's database. The underlying theme of the in-house parenting support was focused on attachment and trauma informed parenting.

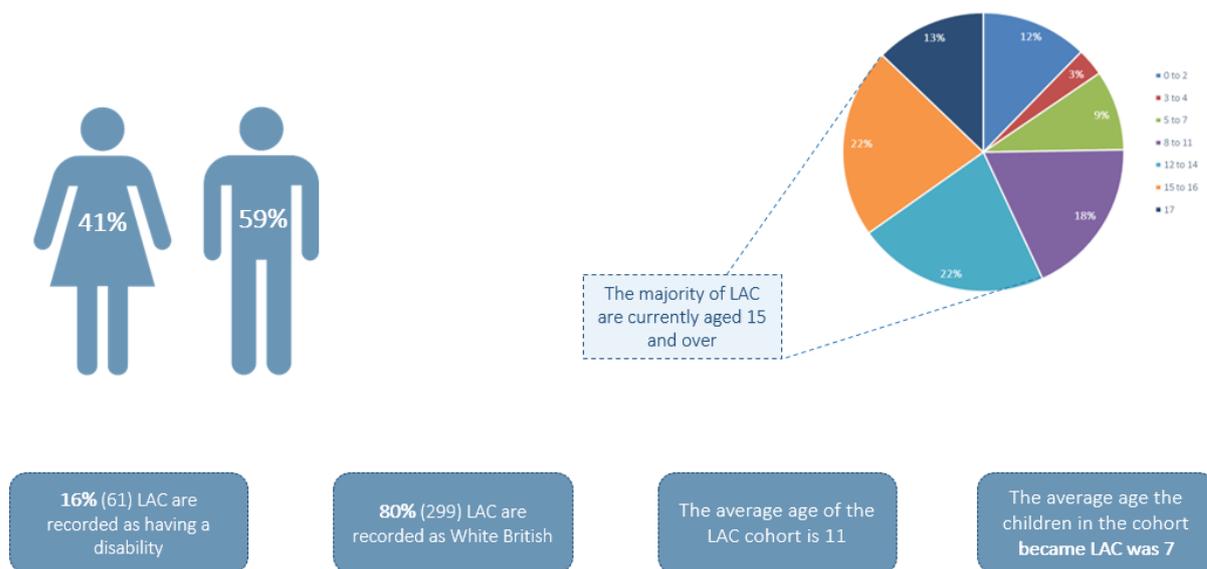
## **8 For consideration**

8.1 Nationally, the number of children needing adoption has reduced and in line with this Portsmouth has also 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. In Portsmouth the introduction of the Family Safeguarding Model has seen more children diverted from the care system and either remaining in the care of parents or placed with family members.

8.2 Portsmouth have a growing number of children entering care at an older age. The average age for a child becoming looked after in 2020/21 was 7 years.

### Looked After Children Profile



## 9 Areas of development

9.1 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.

9.2 There has been an increasing number of applications to revoke Placement Orders and then again at the Adoption Order stage. Bulk listing of adoption cases impacts on meeting government scorecards as there means that there is an adoption day every two months for all Adoption Orders and revocations. The court have indicated that if there is an urgent matter then they will list it but the tendency to all be bulk listed so this can cause delay if the next date is full when application is submitted. Overall, though, the bulk listings work well.

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9.4 Regionalising has been positive for the children and potential adopters in Portsmouth. In summary the strengths of Adopt South to Portsmouth are:

- The removal of local competitive recruitment for prospective adoptive families.

- 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.
- Immediate access to a wider pool of adoptive families for Portsmouth children across the region. Adoptive placements more localised within the local regional area, promoting efficiency in adoption support, particularly specialist local service providers for adoption support. For example, the sibling pair that were placed for adoption in June last year after a two year wait were placed with Adopt South prospective adopters. These children have complex needs and a robust support plan was able to be established due to access to the range of support available within Adopt South.
- 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.
- A centralised Adoption Support Fund and COVID-19 Scheme to help families, further reducing the risk of disruptions for children.

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Signed by (Director)

**Appendices:**

- Adoption activity 2020/21
- PCC Adoption Scorecard 20/21 , Government Adoption Scorecard -Portsmouth data

**Appendix 1** Adoption activity 2013 – 2020

<b>Year 1 April - 31 March</b>	<b>Adoption orders No. of children adopted</b>	<b>Children's plans for adoption agreed</b>	<b>Placement Orders granted</b>	<b>Children linked with adoptive family</b>	<b>Prospective adoptive families approved</b>	<b>FfA placements</b>	<b>Placements disrupted</b>
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
2020 / 21	18	16	16	19		5	0

## 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](http://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

Portsmouth timescales for 2020/2021

A1 Average 387 days

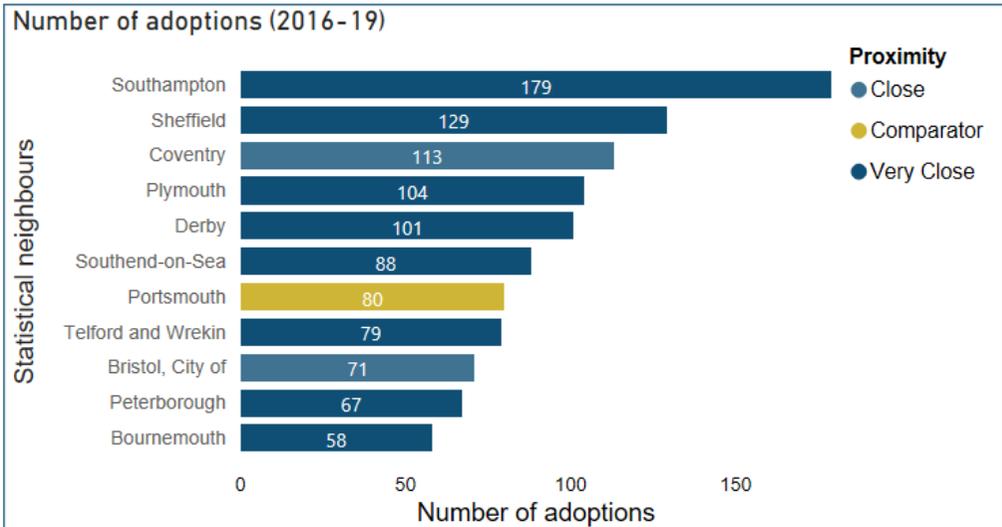
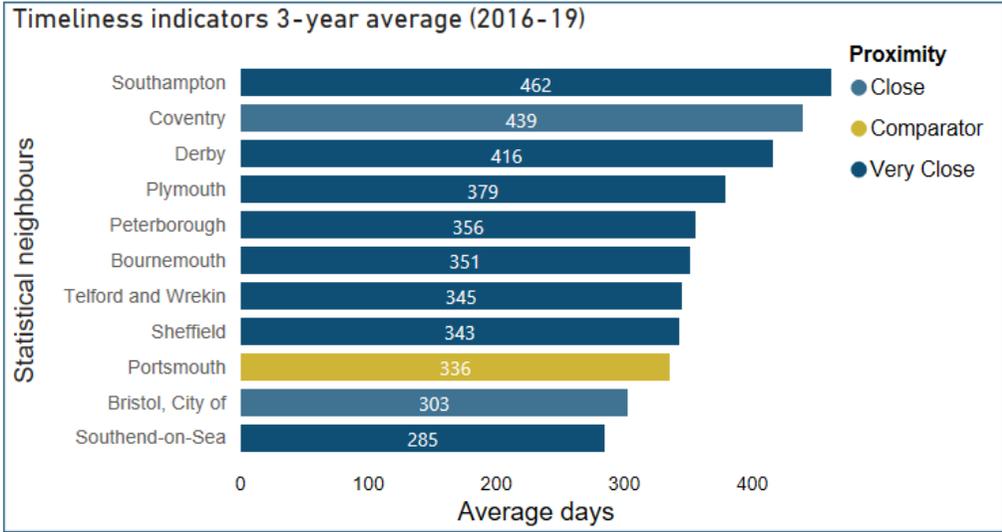
A10 Average 339 days (this is BLA date to Placement date adjusted for FC adoptions)

A2 Average 204 days

Select LA:  
Portsmouth

Select indicator to display on the graph:  
 A10  
 A2  
 A20

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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

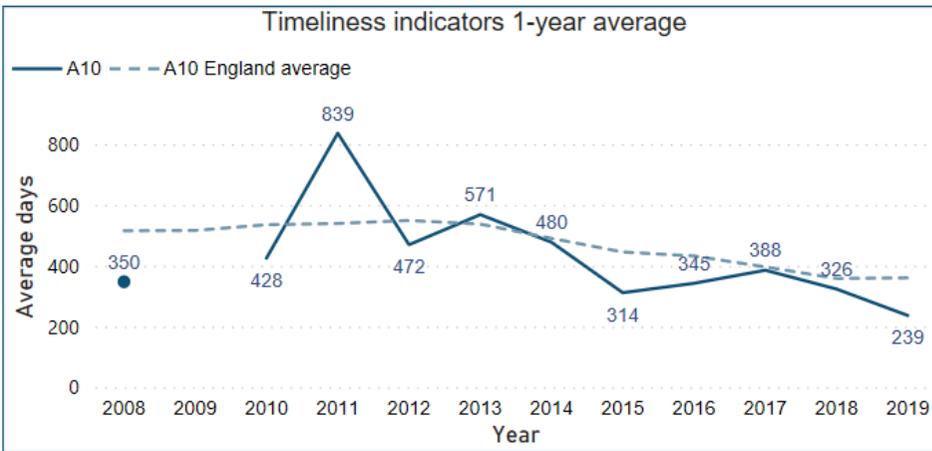
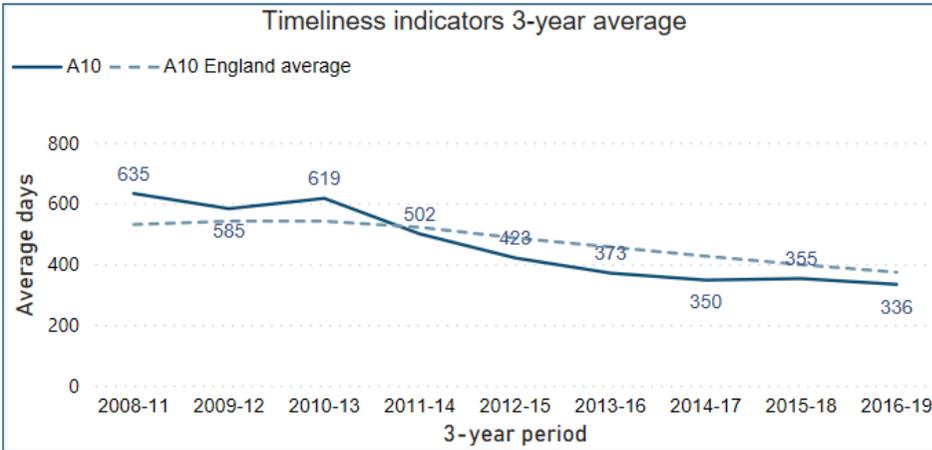
Select indicator(s) to display on graph:

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- A2
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- A20
- A20 England average

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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)

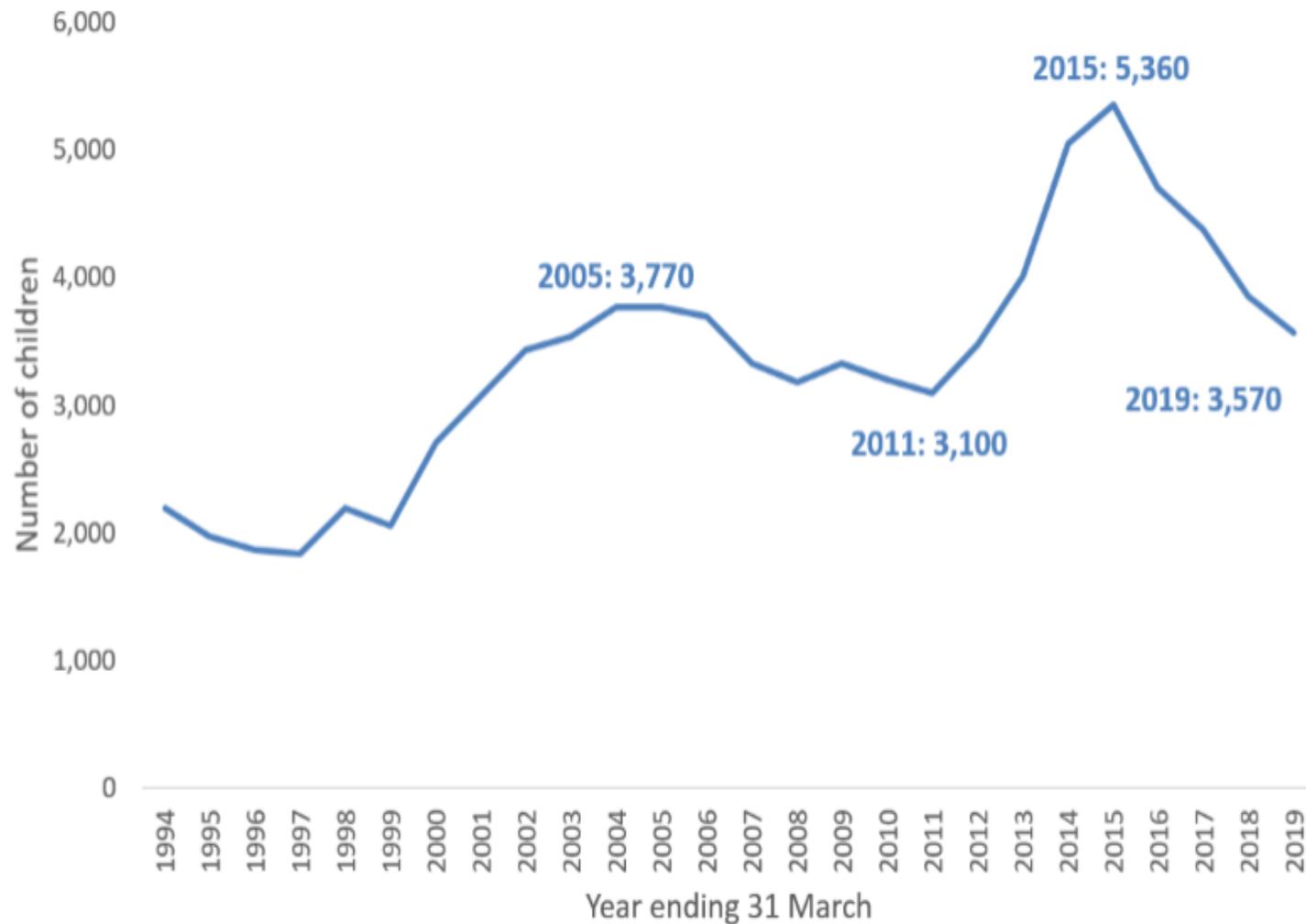
A11: Number of approved adoptive families waiting to be matched:	A13: Number of applications of adoptive families still being assessed:	A14: Number of children waiting to be placed with a placement order:
x	20	21

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.

Data from DfE ASGLB published 24/08/20

## 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.