# Adoption England
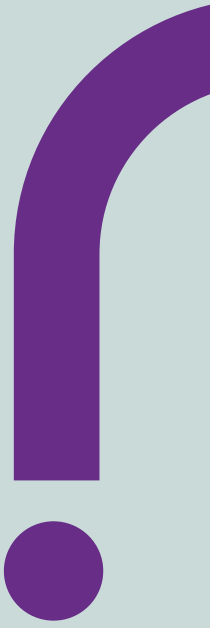
regional adoption agencies working together

# Adoption England Strategy 2024 - 2027

# Contents

# Foreword

I am delighted to introduce the Adoption England Strategy 2024-27.

Adoption England is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies working together, supported by a small central team working nationally.

Achieving permanence for children is a guiding principle in England to ensure that children have a framework of emotional, physical, and legal conditions that gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging. While adoption is not the right choice for most children leaving care, when it is in their best interests, adoption can offer children the chance to experience a lifelong connection, a sense of belonging with their adoptive family, and a feeling of psychological permanence. It provides children with a stable and loving environment, legal security, and the opportunity to grow and thrive within a permanent family. Ensuring that we have sufficiency of adopters to meet the needs of children is critical and a collaborative approach to recruitment is important.

Adoption needs to change, and it is changing, and regional adoption agency leaders have a clear vision to modernise adoption to better meet the needs of children and their families.

Modern adoption is about encouraging more openness in adoption and maintaining relationships for children who are adopted. We know that where there's some level of ongoing communication and relationship between adoptive parents, birth family and the adopted child, all parties can benefit. Fully embracing a spirit of openness primarily helps to strengthen an adopted child's sense of identity, reduce any sense of rejection, and enable them to thrive into adulthood. Considering the individual needs of each child and their best interests

is critical and digital technology can provide more options for creative ideas to support these relationships in a safe and meaningful way. Modern adoption should offer comprehensive support services for adopted people and their adoptive and birth families. With public services under significant pressure there are serious challenges to meeting these needs within current resources and the longer term.

Modern adoption needs to reflect the diverse society in England and actively seek and welcome adoptive parents from all backgrounds, including different ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identity and abilities. Adoption professionals need to be respectful, culturally competent, understanding and respecting the cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds of both children and adoptive families. Our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy (EDI) sets out our commitment to achieving equity throughout the adoption sector and to work together to identify and address issues within the system and practices.

A key aim within the strategy is for the voices of those with lived experience of adoption to be central to raising awareness about adoption, encouraging others to consider adoption, and influencing positive changes to practice and improving support. We are very grateful for their support.

This strategy builds on the achievements and learning from the first national recruitment strategy 2021-23 and the regional adoption agencies 3-year plan 2021-2024. The recruitment campaign, @youcanadopt has been raising awareness of adoption, dispelling myths and addressing misconceptions for the last few years and we have adapted our approach over time based on what the data and those with lived experience are telling us and crucially the needs of the children.

This strategy sets out how we will fulfil our vision to modernise adoption to ensure that:

- Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared, and supported to meet children's needs.

- Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted. Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence in the services and practice provided nationally and regionally.

- Children move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.

- Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.

I would like to thank regional adoption leaders, voluntary adoption agency leaders, local authorities and the Department for Education involved in the delivery of adoption services across England. I would like to thank all the adoption professionals who work tirelessly to ensure that children find loving homes and that adoptive families, birth families and adopted people, receive the support they need. I would specifically like to thank Mark Owers as the outgoing chair of the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group and Satwinder Sandhu, for working with regional adoption agency leaders on the EDI strategy, for their passion and commitment to this work. I would also like to pay tribute to the adopted people, adopters and birth families who have so willingly shared their lived experience, to encourage others to consider adoption and to achieve positive change to practice.

By implementing this strategy, we can work together to modernise adoption ensuring that children continue to benefit from adoption and that adopted people and their families are better supported moving forward.

Sarah Johal
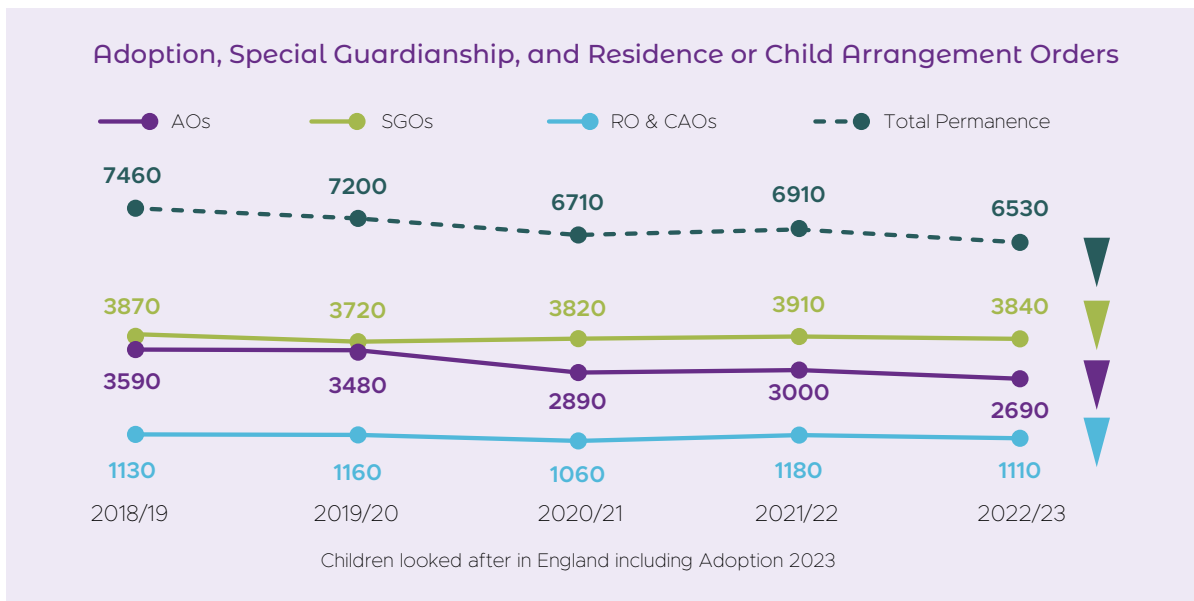
National Adoption Strategic Lead
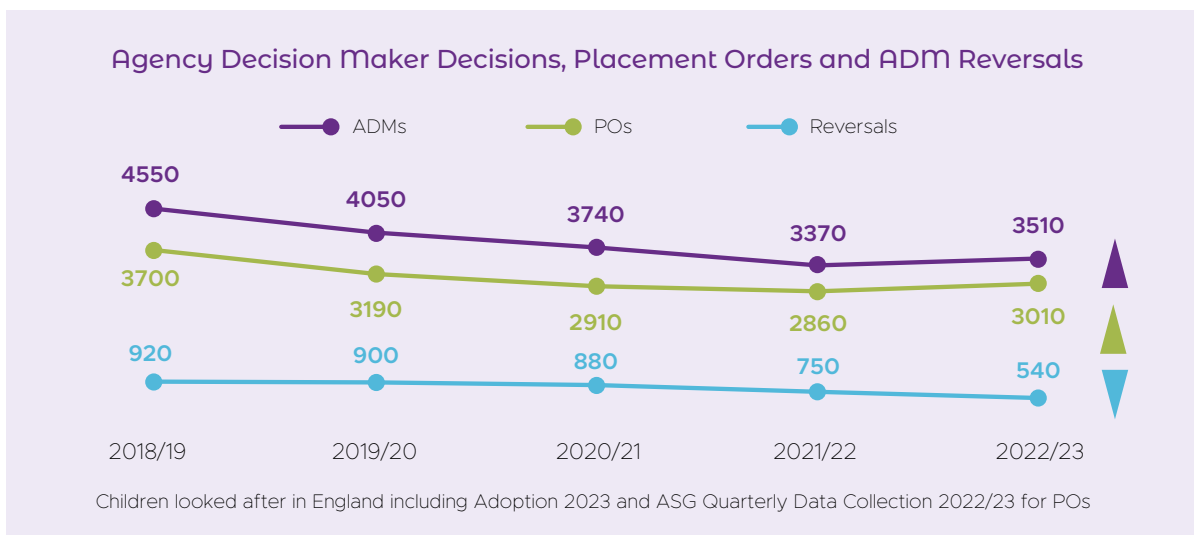
# The Adoption Landscape

## Children

Over the last five years there has been an overall decline in children leaving care achieving permanence through adoption, special guardianship and child arrangements order or returning home. However, the highest decline for these children has been in adoption orders.
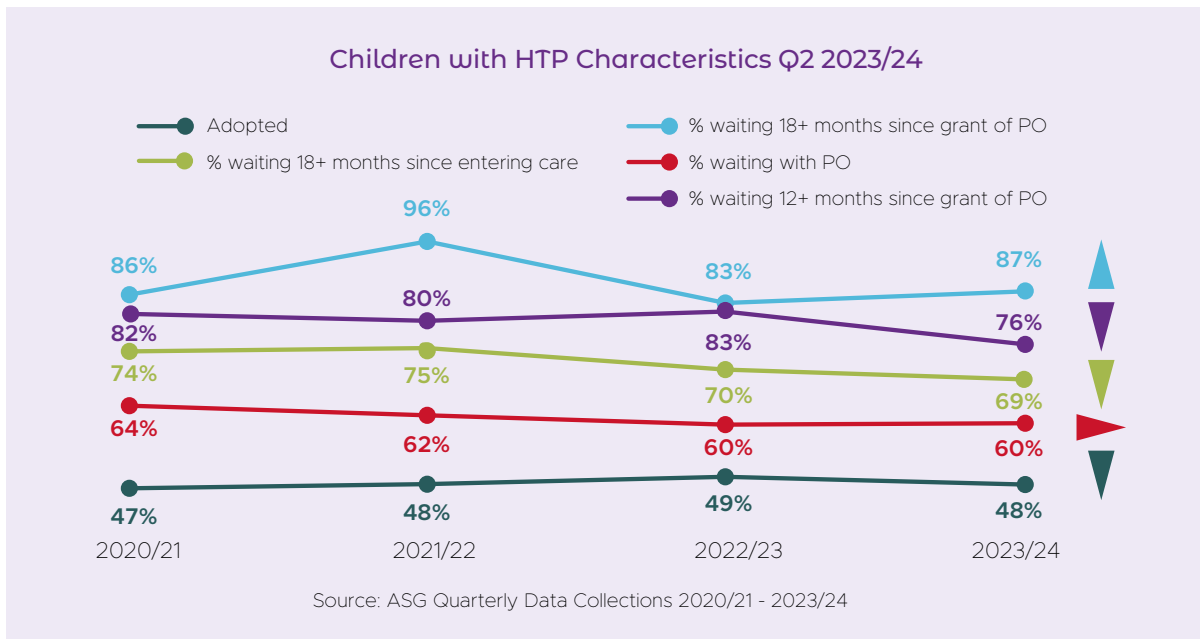
### Adoption, Special Guardianship, and Residence or Child Arrangement Orders

Legend: ● AOs  ● SGOs  ● RO & CAOs  ●-- Total Permanence

| | 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Permanence | 7460 | 7200 | 6710 | 6910 | 6530 |
| SGOs | 3870 | 3720 | 3820 | 3910 | 3840 |
| AOs | 3590 | 3480 | 2890 | 3000 | 2690 |
| RO & CAOs | 1130 | 1160 | 1060 | 1180 | 1110 |

Children looked after in England including Adoption 2023

The number of placement orders has declined, and the reasons for this are multi-faceted, with changes in practice focussing on family support and kinship care, the historic adoption legacy, the impact of new case law and the pandemic. Whilst the reversals of adoption plans for children have declined, there is a recent increase in new adoption plans being agreed for children by local authorities.

### Agency Decision Maker Decisions, Placement Orders and ADM Reversals

Legend: ● ADMs  ● POs  ● Reversals

| | 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ADMs | 4550 | 4050 | 3740 | 3370 | 3510 |
| POs | 3700 | 3190 | 2910 | 2860 | 3010 |
| Reversals | 920 | 900 | 880 | 750 | 540 |

Children looked after in England including Adoption 2023 and ASG Quarterly Data Collection 2022/23 for POs
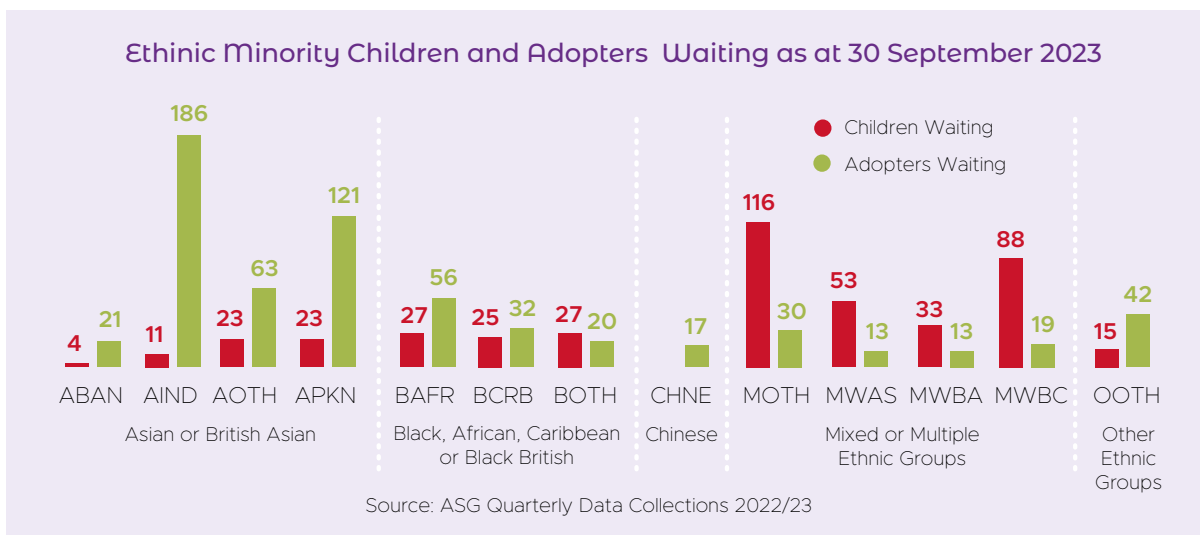
**Children who typically wait the longest:**
Adopters are in greatest demand for the children who typically wait the longest to be adopted - children over 5, children under 5 with multiple needs, brother and sister groups, and children from Black and mixed heritage backgrounds.

### Children with HTP Characteristics Q2 2023/24

- ● Adopted
- ● % waiting 18+ months since entering care
- ● % waiting 18+ months since grant of PO
- ● % waiting with PO
- ● % waiting 12+ months since grant of PO

| | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 | 2023/24 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| % waiting 18+ months since grant of PO | 86% | 96% | 83% | 87% |
| % waiting 12+ months since grant of PO | 82% | 80% | 83% | 76% |
| % waiting 18+ months since entering care | 74% | 75% | 70% | 69% |
| % waiting with PO | 64% | 62% | 60% | 60% |
| Adopted | 47% | 48% | 49% | 48% |

Source: ASG Quarterly Data Collections 2020/21 - 2023/24

**The system is institutionally racist:**
We know from the Ending Racial Disparity in Adoption report, that Black children are overrepresented in the care system. B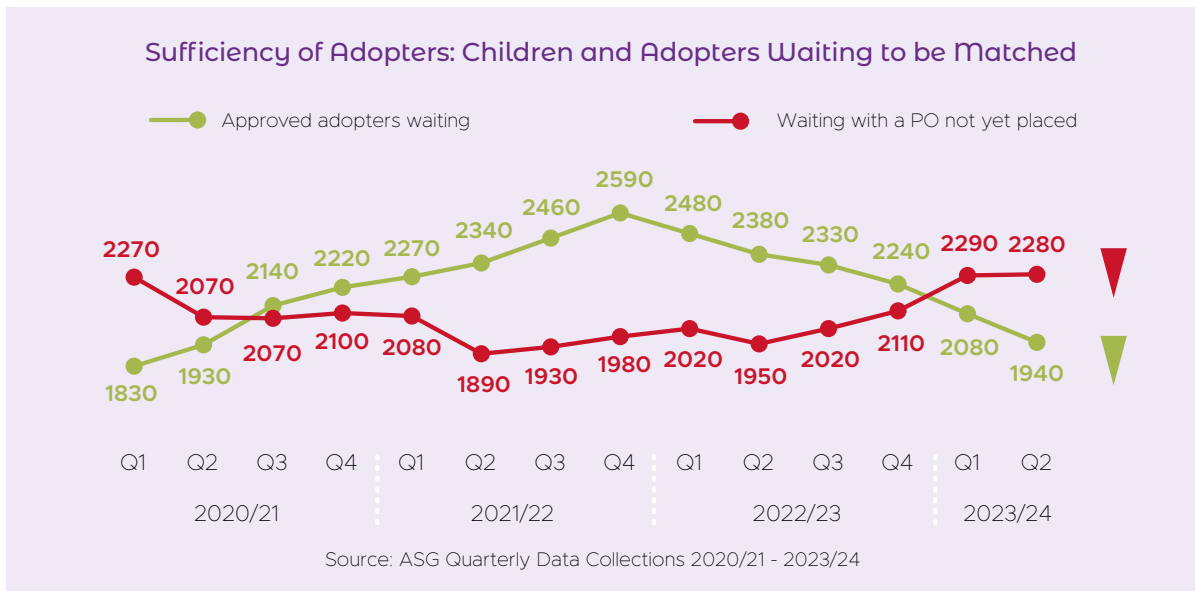lack children wait longer for adoption than white children. Black children are the least likely to achieve the lifetime stability and permanency of a family through adoption. We must seek to end the racial disparity in adoption.

### Ethinic Minority Children and Adopters Waiting as at 30 September 2023

- ● Children Waiting
- ● Adopters Waiting

| Group | Children Waiting | Adopters Waiting |
|---|---|---|
| ABAN | 4 | 21 |
| AIND | 11 | 186 |
| AOTH | 23 | 63 |
| APKN | 23 | 121 |
| BAFR | 27 | 56 |
| BCRB | 25 | 32 |
| BOTH | 27 | 20 |
| CHNE | | 17 |
| MOTH | 116 | 30 |
| MWAS | 53 | 13 |
| MWBA | 33 | 13 |
| MWBC | 88 | 19 |
| OOTH | 15 | 42 |

Asian or British Asian: ABAN, AIND, AOTH, APKN
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British: BAFR, BCRB, BOTH
Chinese: CHNE
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups: MOTH, MWAS, MWBA, MWBC
Other Ethnic Groups: OOTH

Source: ASG Quarterly Data Collections 2022/23

## Adopter Sufficiency

Despite an increase in recruitment between 2020 - 2022 there has been a decline in adopters in the last 18 months, with less registrations of interest to adopt overall, but with regional variations. The national picture is concerning, and at a national level a collaborative approach is necessary to ensure there are enough adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoption. An increasing number of adopters have withdrawn from the process, and the reasons for this are varied, and the following are highlighted here:

### Sufficiency of Adopters: Children and Adopters Waiting to be Matched

- Approved adopters waiting
- Waiting with a PO not yet placed

| | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2020/21 | | | | 2021/22 | | | | 2022/23 | | | | 2023/24 | |

Approved adopters waiting: 1830, 1930, 2140, 2220, 2270, 2340, 2460, 2590, 2480, 2380, 2330, 2240, 2080, 1940

Waiting with a PO not yet placed: 2270, 2070, 2070, 2100, 2080, 1890, 1930, 1980, 2020, 1950, 2020, 2110, 2290, 2280

Source: ASG Quarterly Data Collections 2020/21 - 2023/24

**The cost-of-living crisis is an increasing barrier to adoption:** The current cost of living crisis is a significant threat to the number of approved adopters. Nine out of ten prospective adopters say the cost-of-living crisis is affecting their decisions about adoption, according to Adoption UK's December 2022 survey. Adopters are withdrawing from the process as they are concerned about not being able to afford the cost of caring for children.

**There are a range of barriers to adoption:** We know that there are several things hampering recruitment: prospective adopters lack confidence in their suitability, capacity, and capability to be 'good enough' adopters; there is a lack of trust in the process, particularly amongst minoritised groups; variability in support being provided and a fear that that the right support will not be available at the right time. For Black people considering adoption, there remain multiple hurdles including barriers of perception as well as practical, cultural and personal issues.

**Fewer children and more children with multiple needs:** The number of children with a placement order has declined, whilst the multiple needs of children have grown. Some adopters have been waiting for the right match for some time and have withdrawn from the process, becoming disheartened after expressing interest in several children.

## Adoption Support

There is no national dataset regarding adoption support work undertaken across the regional adoption agencies. However, there is increasing demand across the country for support from adoptive families, with a lack of resources to address these needs. Waiting times for families to access support in many areas is lengthy and there is a limited provision of targeted support for families and very little support for teenagers and young people moving into adulthood.

Regional adoption agencies are dealing with the legacy of a higher number of children entering care in 2008-9 following the death of Baby Peter Connolly in 2007 and the increase in adoption orders, reaching a peak of 5360 in 2014.

There is now a better understanding of the impact of early childhood trauma and loss, with more families seeking support to help them to meet the needs of their children. The next few years will be challenging, with practice changes required to support relationships with birth families for adopted children. A clear adoption support strategy is needed to address the multiple issues in this area of work.

# Values in Modern Adoption

A modern adoption system in England should be a progressive and inclusive system that prioritises the well-being of children, provides robust support to adopted people and their adoptive and birth families and respects diversity in all its forms. We believe that a modern adoption system should have the following values:

**Child centred:** The best interests of the child should always be at the forefront.

**Equality:** Modern adoption services are fair; everyone is treated with dignity, respect and without discrimination. It challenges the actions, systems, processes and environments that limit an individual's opportunities to thrive.

**Diversity:** Modern adoption represents different individuals within society and the workplace. It recognises, understands and values the differences that individuals bring as well as their differing needs and reflects those who need our services.

**Inclusion:** Modern adoption takes an informed action to create an environment and culture where everyone feels they belong, can participate and are valued for their contribution, experience and perspective.

**Relational:** Modern adoption nurtures and maintains relationships that are important for children's wellbeing. When significant relationships are valued, promoted and talked about, it can help adopted children to develop a good understanding about their birth relatives, help with feelings of loss and to know that their whole identity is respected and valued.

**Supportive and timely:** Modern adoption provides needs led support to children, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth families and is efficient to reduce unnecessary delay in the adoption process for children and prospective adopters.

**Openness, honesty and transparency:** Modern adoption encourages openness, honesty and transparency, including for children and adopted people when seeking to understand their identity and life histories, and for prospective adopters during the preparation process.

**Trauma informed:** Many adopted children have experienced various forms of trauma, such as separation from birth parents, neglect, abuse, or multiple placements in foster care before adoption. These can have a profound impact on adopted children and their families. Modern adoption services are structured, organised and delivered in ways that promote safety and trust and which aim to prevent re-traumatisation.

**Value for money:** Spending money wisely to secure effective and efficient services is important given the pressures on public spending. Looking for economies of scale, streamlining services and reducing duplication are key to provide value for money.

**Working together:** Collaboration between local authorities, regional adoption agencies, voluntary adoption agencies, adoption support agencies, family courts and other stakeholders (e.g., education and health) should be robust to ensure a coordinated and efficient process.

**Technological:** Modern adoption should harness technology to improve the effectiveness of processes and connectivity, to capture and share information, to deliver training, and to help maintain relationships.

Child
centred

Respectful
Equality
Diversity
Inclusion
Relational
Supportive
Timely
Openness
Honesty
Transparency
Trauma Informed
Value for Money
Working Together
Technological

# Vision

Adoption England aims to modernise adoption to better meet the needs of children and families.

# Our Mission

Adoption England will:

- work effectively together, through support and challenge, to strengthen practice, solve common problems and influence and enable change regionally and nationally.

- work in partnership with voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) and the judiciary to address delay for children.

- create forums for learning, training, collaboration, and collective engagement with other key stakeholders: local authorities (LAs), CAFCASS, education and health partners, third sector organisations and others to influence change nationally.

- use research and evidence-based practice and experts by experience to influence sector wide continuous development.

- embed agreed EDI principles across our systems and processes to ensure that they are valued, understood and adhered to by the workforce. As a result, all children and adults that we work with will achieve better lifelong outcomes.

- collaborate pan-regionally and nationally, to develop and deliver services, to improve performance and build a framework of national standards in key areas of adoption practice.

# Outcomes for 2024-2027

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

**1** Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and supported to meet children's needs.

**2** Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.

**3** Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.

**4** Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.

**5** Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.

# How will we the achieve outcomes?

## Outcome 1

**Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and supported to meet children's needs.**

### Regional Adoption Agencies

*How will Adoption England (RAAs) help to achieve the outcomes?*

\* Link directly to the outcomes of the EDI Strategy

I. RAAs run regional recruitment campaigns and use other opportunities to promote the need for adopters to meet children's needs.

II. RAAs address bias and discrimination in their processes and decision making to encourage the recruitment of adopters that reflect the diversity of the children needing adoption in their area*.

III. RAAs consider the baseline recommended standards for LGBTQ+ adoption*.

IV. RAAs develop the diversity in adoption panels and their workforce to ensure their commitment to EDI principles is demonstrated through behaviours, decisions and actions of the staff within the RAA*.

V. Implement the Adopter Journey – National Practice Standards and preparation of adopters – framework.

### Adoption England National Team

*How will Adoption England (central team working nationally) help to achieve the outcomes?*

I. Develop a national recruitment strategy to meet the needs of children requiring adoption.

II. Raise the profile and understanding of modern adoption and promote the evidence-based benefits for children through national recruitment and national adoption week campaigns.

III. Through projects, communities of practice and learning opportunities address bias and discrimination in systems and processes and encourage diversity in the recruitment of adopters*.

IV. Promote opportunities to develop greater diversity and better cultural competence in adoption panels and the adoption workforce and the commitment to the EDI Strategy principles*.

V. Support the delivery and implementation of the National Practice Standards-recruitment to matching and preparation of adopters' framework.

### Measurement / Impact

*How will we monitor our progress and success?*

I. Evaluate the effectiveness of recruitment and marketing campaigns nationally and locally.

II. Adoption data to look at sufficiency and diversity of adopters to meet children's needs.

III Increased diversity of adoption panel members and staff from diverse communities.

IV. Evaluation of national projects to support targeted work to evidence impact and learning.

V. Feedback from adoptive parents (Adoption Barometer Report)

VI. Ofsted reports.

*Outcome 2*

**Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.**

## Regional Adoption Agencies

*How will Adoption England (RAAs) help to achieve the outcomes?*

\* Link directly to the outcomes of the EDI Strategy

I. RAAs work with their local authority partners to use tools and material available to promote and support the relationships between children and the important people in their lives.

II. RAAs will explore digital approaches to support connections.

III. RAAs work with their local partners to ensure adopted adults have access to the support they need.

IV. Some RAAs will pilot the Lifelong Links Services to adopted young people to help them to connect with important people in their lives.

V. The RAAs work with their local partners to ensure birth families across England can easily find out what support is available and accessible for them\*.
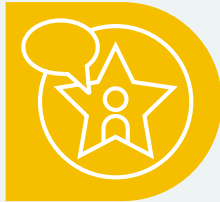
## Adoption England National Team

*How will Adoption England (central team working nationally) help to achieve the outcomes?*

I. Continue with the culture change programme of work in in respecting, supporting and maintaining important relationships for children who are adopted.

II. Develop resources and share the learning about digital approaches to encourage innovative ways of promoting maintaining relationships.

III. Continue to address the issues raised by adopted adults through the 'Improve Services for Adopted Adults' (IASA) working group.

IV. Adapt and develop the Family Rights Group's Lifelong Links model for adopted children and young people.

V. Develop a better understanding of support for birth parents and produce an interactive and informative map regarding services available in their area (birth family mapping) and seek to address the gaps in provision.

VI. Start to look at data requirements to evidence the impact of the culture change.

## Measurement / Impact

*How will we monitor our progress and success?*

I. All adopted children have a life story book available to them by their adoption order.

II. Birth parents and adopted parents meet up prior to the adoption order being made, where appropriate.

III. Plans for maintaining relationships for children are creative and less prescriptive.

IV. More RAAs use digital approaches to support connections.

V. Adopted adults have access to the support they need, and it is easy for them to find out how to access those services.

VI. Evaluation of the pilot of Lifelong Links Service supporting adopted young people to connect with important people in their lives.

VII. Information about birth family support is available and gaps are understood and starting to be addressed.

## Outcome 3

**Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.**

### Regional Adoption Agencies

*How will Adoption England (RAAs) help to achieve the outcomes?*

\* Link directly to the outcomes of the EDI Strategy

I. RAAs work to develop opportunities for young people to meet and influence the development of support and services

II. RAAs develop opportunities for adopted adults and birth families to have an increased voice and influence within their RAA.

III. RAAs work with adopters to ensure they have an influence in the development of support and services in their region.

IV. RAAs work with Black young people to better understand their specific needs and to ensure that services meet these\*.

### Adoption England National Team

*How will Adoption England (central team working nationally) help to achieve the outcomes?*

I. Accelerate the opportunities for children and young people to come together and amplify their lived experience, also to increase the skills and capacity of staff for this work.

II. Continue to develop and facilitate reference groups for adopted adults and birth families to share their views about key priorities for change in the adoption sector.

III. Develop an increased understanding and improve the coordination of the voice and influence of adoptive parents in the development and delivery of adoption services regionally and nationally.

### Measurement / Impact

*How will we monitor our progress and success?*

I. Adopted people of all ages, adoptive parents and birth families feel they have influence in the development and delivery of adoption support and services.

II. Increase in the number of young people's forums, regionally, pan-regionally and nationally.

III Evaluation of projects undertaken

IV. Feedback from staff about the development of skills and knowledge to better develop this work.

*Outcome 4*

**Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.**

## Regional Adoption Agencies

*How will Adoption England (RAAs) help to achieve the outcomes?*

* Link directly to the outcomes of the EDI Strategy

I. RAAs will work with local stakeholders to support the workforce to strengthen the quality of permanence planning.

II. RAAs will identify and understand delays for children and adopters through an EDI lens and strengthen matching practice, process and decision making*.

III. RAAs will work with local stakeholders to implement and embed the recommendations outlined in the Early Permanence National Standards.

IV. RAAs will work to implement and embed the recommendations in the Matching National Standards.

V. RAAs to work with their local authorities to improve the quality and consistency of approach to life story books and the provision of later life letters

## Adoption England National Team

*How will Adoption England (central team working nationally) help to achieve the outcomes?*

I. Support activity to improve permanence planning through better quality decision making and use of evidence about different routes to permanence for children.

II. Identify, raise awareness and understand delays for children and adopters through an EDI lens to strengthen matching practice, process and decision making and to give each child an opportunity to thrive in the longer term*.

III. Through targeted project work and activity increase the number, quality and consistency of Early Permanence (EP) practice in partnership with the judiciary and voluntary adoption agencies.

IV. Start to improve the quality of information, provided to adopters and children, about the child's history (life story work).

V. Improve sibling assessments.act of the culture change.

## Measurement / Impact

*How will we monitor our progress and success?*

I. National adoption data on children matched.

II. Feedback from adoption panels and agency decision makers on quality of Child Permanence Reports (CPR) and matching information provided.

III. Feedback via Agency Decision Maker (ADM) drop-in sessions demonstrating improved confidence and knowledge levels.

IV. Improved quality and timely matches. Fewer matches disrupt before adoption order.

V. Adoption data regarding EP data.

VI. Survey to RAAs to understand progress made on the implementation of national practice standards.

VII. Feedback from practitioners.

VIII. Feedback from families.

IX. Number of quality assured EP resources downloaded from the Adoption England website.

*Outcome 5*

**Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.**

## Regional Adoption Agencies

*How will Adoption England (RAAs) help to achieve the outcomes?*

\* Link directly to the outcomes of the EDI Strategy

I. RAAs to implement the new adoption support plan from October 2024 onwards following the national pilot.

II. RAAs to implement the early support framework and Purple Book from March 2025 onwards following the national pilot.

III. RAAs to work to develop their adoption support case management system so that the required data can be submitted by Q1 2025/26.

IV. RAAs to work towards their support services being more culturally sensitive and consider their support through an EDI lens, relevant to their local populations\*.

V. RAAs to support and contribute to the National Adoption Commissioning Programme Implementation Strategy.

## Adoption England National Team

*How will Adoption England (central team working nationally) help to achieve the outcomes?*

I. Support the implementation of the new adoption support plan and providing a clear early support offer for all new adoptive families.

II. Develop and implement the new national adoption support dataset.

III. Support projects and targeted activity to develop a holistic and multi-agency approach with education and health partners to support and meet children and families' needs.

IV. Further develop pan regional and national commissioning for adoption support.

V. Develop principles with virtual school heads to recognise the specific needs of adopted children in relation to education.

VI. Initiate work in partnership with adopted young people to address gaps in services and develop better understanding of what helps them.

## Measurement / Impact

*How will we monitor our progress and success?*

I. Every child / family has an adoption support plan (AUK Barometer/ surveys).

II. Early support framework and Purple Book is standard practice in all RAAs (AUK. Barometer / surveys).

III. All RAAs provide adoption support data.

IV. The grant funded multidisciplinary models continue providing services with a sustainable funding arrangement.

V. Increased number of multiagency / multidisciplinary models operating across England.

VI. Improved understanding of the needs of adopted children and families and the services and supports required to meet those needs.

# Appendices

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# Appendix 1:  National Adoption Recruitment Strategy 2024-27

## Introduction

This strategy sets out what the National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board will do over the next three years to ensure enough adopters are recruited from diverse backgrounds, and prepared, to enable timely placements for all children with an adoption plan.

Building on the success of our first adoption recruitment strategy, 2021-23 the strategy will address all aspects of adopter recruitment, assessment, and preparation to improve the adoption journey for all potential adopters. This will be supported by the learning from previous research on recruitment and adopter preparation, insight gained from delivering our first strategy, alongside the experience of adopters, adopted people, and birth families.

All prospective adopters need help to understand what to expect from adoption in an accessible and transparent way. This should include support and guidance about eligibility, the process and how long it should take, the needs of the children waiting to be adopted, the needs of birth families, the emotional impact on all those affected by adoption, the importance of peer support, the available training and preparation, financial considerations, and the need for ongoing support across the life span.

By offering the right information, support, and resources, at the right time, prospective adopters can better understand and navigate the realities of adoption, ensuring a more open and honest experience, and preparing them effectively to meet the needs of a diverse range of children.

The strategy will do this by:

- Raising awareness about modern adoption and the lifelong benefits of adoption where children cannot be cared for by their birth family.

- Encouraging people from diverse backgrounds and communities to consider adoption to maximise the opportunities for children to be placed with families that reflect their history, heritage, needs and diverse communities.

- Improving the preparation, support, and experience of prospective adopters and reducing delay.
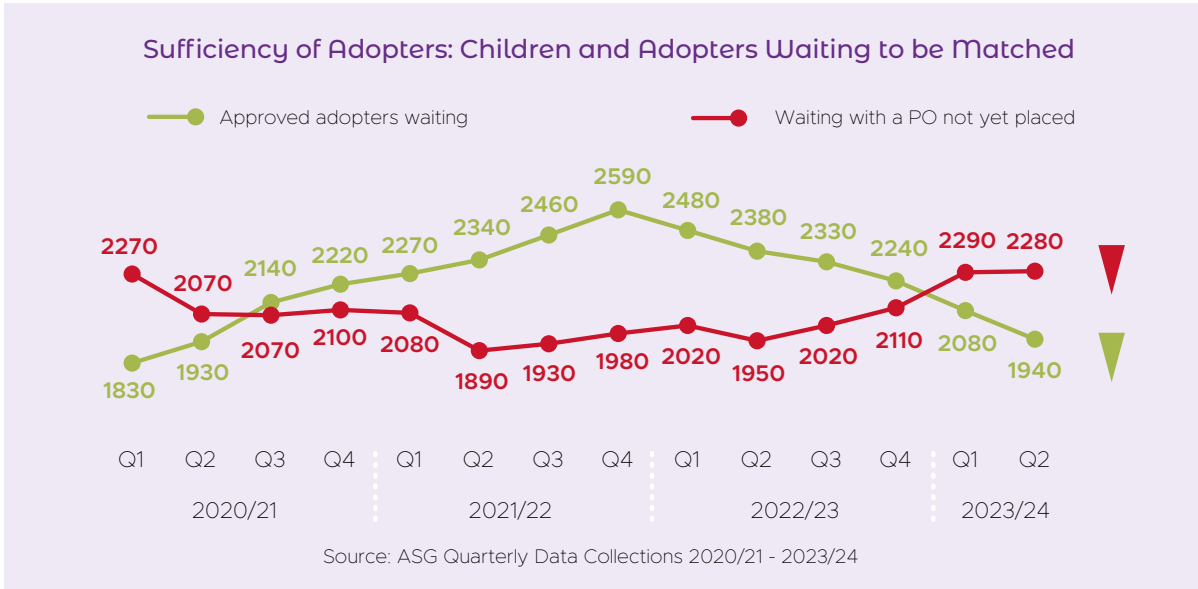
## Our Vision

Adoption will provide a safe, loving, and lifelong home for every child with a plan for adoption, regardless of their background.

We will deliver this vision by recruiting enough adopters from diverse backgrounds to enable timely placements with excellent matches for all children with an adoption plan.

## Scope and Purpose

This Strategy provides the overarching priorities and approach for recruiting and preparing enough adopters from diverse communities across England from April 2024 to March 2027. Our work will have regional variations to take account of the different needs of children across of the country with targeted project work to address the inequalities and variations highlighted by adoption data.

## Sufficiency of Adopters: Children and Adopters Waiting to be Matched

**Legend:**
- — Approved adopters waiting
- — Waiting with a PO not yet placed

**Approved adopters waiting (green):**
1830, 1930, 2140, 2220, 2270, 2340, 2460, 2590, 2480, 2380, 2330, 2240, 2080, 1940

**Waiting with a PO not yet placed (red):**
2270, 2070, 2070, 2100, 2080, 1890, 1930, 1980, 2020, 1950, 2020, 2110, 2290, 2280

| | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | 2020/21 | | | | 2021/22 | | | | 2022/23 | | | | 2023/24 | |

Source: ASG Quarterly Data Collections 2020/21 - 2023/24

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We will address all aspects of adopter recruitment, assessment, and preparation to improve the adoption journey for all potential adopters. Our strategy includes public perception of adoption; first thinking about adoption; pre-inquiry marketing and recruitment activity; the adopter preparation journey; and experience through to approval and matching panel.

Although this strategy does not cover the provision of adoption support, we recognise how important it is to prospective adopters to have clear, comprehensive information about the support that will be available to them and their children in the years ahead. We will therefore work to publicise the support available and raise awareness of the routes through which adopters can access support as their child grows. This will acknowledge that support is not consistently available across the country to ensure that that prospective adopters fully understand how the adoption system needs to improve.

The Strategy seeks to:

# Raise awareness and change perceptions

Raise awareness of adoption and dispel longstanding myths around who is eligible to adopt; change perceptions about adoption by breaking down assumptions and ensuring people feel welcome and capable to adopt, particularly those from Black, Asian and minoritised communities, and the LGBTQ+ communities. Seeing families that look like them in marketing materials can encourage individuals from diverse communities to consider adoption.

Provide an honest account of the joys and challenges of adoption today for the public through recruitment campaigns, proactive media, PR activity and social media, featuring people with diverse lived experience of adoption, and the values and attributes that make for resilient adopters.

## Promote the benefits of adoption

- Help key decision-makers – children's social workers, agency decision makers, children's guardians and judges – to be fully aware of the evidence-based benefits of adoption and how adoption is modernising.

- Regularly share research findings and studies that highlight the positive outcomes of adoption on children's well-being.

- Acknowledge that the adoption system needs to change, promote the plan for change and evidence how the system is changing.

- Promote opportunities with key-decision makers to proactively challenge anti-adoption views to foster a more supportive and understanding environment for modern adoption.

## Expect quality matches

- Recruit enough adopters who can meet the needs of children who have a plan for adoption.

- Prioritise raising awareness of adoption with potential adopters from Black, Asian and minoritised backgrounds, because these children typically wait longer to be placed with an adoptive family.

- Recruit more adopters for older children, sibling groups and those with complex health needs and/or a disability.

- Build awareness of and confidence in the support available for children and families to encourage people to come forward to adopt.

## Attract people from diverse communities

- Actively seek and welcome adoptive parents from various backgrounds.

- Increase the number of LGBTQ+ adopters. Help professionals recognise and challenge their own biases about LGBTQ+ individuals and families and demonstrating LGBTQ+ awareness. This will help to build trust, and to create a safe and welcoming environment.

- Increase the number of Black adopters. Train and support adoption professionals to be culturally competent, understanding and respecting the cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds of both children and adoptive families.

- Promote the need for greater diversity in the adoption workforce.

## Improve the preparation and experience of adopters and reduce delay.

- Ensure staff have the relevant training, skills, experience, and supervision to undertake consistently high-quality preparation and assessment of adopters.

- Deliver a positive experience for prospective and approved adopters from their first contact with an adoption agency. Seek feedback through a range of ways, regularly report on their experience, and use the insight to inform campaign work and improvements in practice.

- Promote the importance of valuing and promoting significant relationships for children, and the importance of timely and effective identify and life history work.

- Support all adopters to recognise the strengths and challenges of raising children in a diverse society.

- Ensure that all adopter preparation includes lived experience from adopters, adoptees, birth families., and birth children of prospective adopters.

- Identify, understand, and raise awareness of delays at each stage of the adoption process for adopters.

- Establish feedback mechanisms for adoptive families, birth families, and professionals to report delays and challenges in the adoption process. Use this feedback to identify areas for improvement.

- Collaborate with legal professionals and judges to ensure they understand the importance of timely placement and adoption orders and encourage efficient processes.

## Ways of working

The National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board seeks to effect change and improvement through collaboration, a powerful tool. By working together across regional adoption agencies, voluntary adoption agencies, local authorities, policy makers and other stakeholders, using lived experience, data, and the latest research, we will collectively influence and shape the adoption system. Collaboration will foster the sharing of ideas, resources, and best practice, leading to positive changes in adoption practices and policies.

We will represent those with lived experience in adoption campaigns to convey the

realities, challenges, and rewards of adoption. Personal stories can connect with audiences on an emotional level, providing deeper understanding of the adoption process and its impact on individuals and families. Our campaigns will continue to humanise the adoption journey by showcasing real stories of adopted adults, birth parents, adoptive families, and other people involved in the adoption process.

We will endeavour to support innovative approaches to recruitment in adoption, including technology, community outreach, and partnerships. These methods will help expand the reach, effectiveness, and inclusivity of adoption campaigns and recruitment efforts.

## Our Ambitions

The overarching aim of the strategy is to recruit and prepare diverse adopters to ensure children can be successfully placed for adoption in a timely manner, especially those children that wait the longest. The programme board will do this through three ambition groups that will be responsible for delivering nine goals.

Our ambitions replicate and build on the ambitions from our previous strategy and set out a bold agenda for change. They have been coproduced with adopters, adoptees, birth families and professionals. They are informed by evidence and learning from campaigns. They aim to achieve sustained improvements in adopter recruitment, preparation and matching policy and practice.
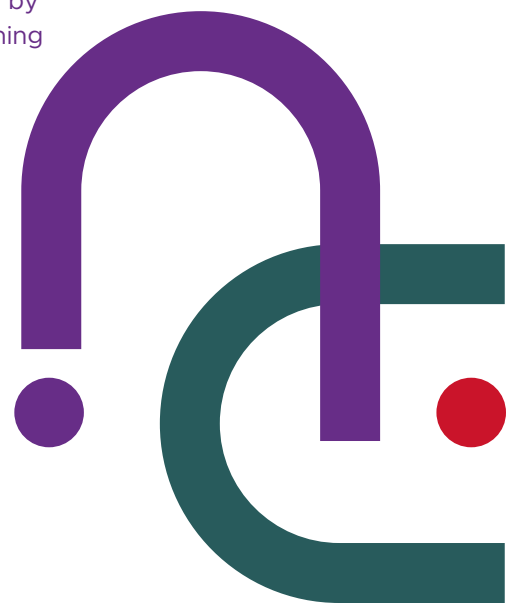
## Ambition 1:

Raise the profile and understanding of modern adoption and promote the evidence-based benefits for children.

**Goal 1:** Raise awareness through campaign work of modern adoption, the children who wait, and the support available amongst the public.

**Goal 2:** Promote the evidence-based benefits of adoption to key decision-makers, acknowledging that adoption needs to change, and is changing.

## Ambition 2:

Increase the diversity of adopters and promote the need for greater diversity in the adoption workforce.

**Goal 3:** Increase the number of Black approved adopters.

**Goal 4:** Increase the number of LGBTQ+ approved adopters.

**Goal 5:** In response to the increased costs of living, raise awareness of the legal duty to provide adopters with financial support and signpost prospective adopters to the available financial support, advice, and guidance.

**Goal 6:** Promote the need for greater diversity in the adoption workforce.

## Ambition 3:

Improve the preparation and experience of adopters who are approved and matched and reduce delay.

**Goal 7:** Implement National Practice Standards for the adopter journey up to the point of match and be assured that the standards are being met.

**Goal 8:** Ensure that all adopter preparation includes lived experience from adopters, adoptees, and birth families.

**Goal 9:** Report on the experience of adopters, understand reasons for delay and use the insight to inform campaign work and improvements in practice.

## Measuring success

We will use the data provided by local authorities and adoption agencies on children currently needing adoption, and the adopter gap to inform our work, and to understand the impact of work and progress with the strategy.

Each campaign will be fully evaluated in accordance with the stated aims as defined by the National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board, and the results will be shared widely, including adoption agencies,

and the Department for Education who fund the work.

We will report on the experience of adopters using the Adoption Barometer and the feedback that they regularly collect.

We will publish our headline findings from mystery shopping exercises to provide progress reports on adoption agency compliance with the national standards.

# Appendix 2: Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy

## Introduction

Adoption England's first Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy sets out its commitment to achieving equity throughout the services that it oversees, for all children and adopters we work with, as well as influencing across the sector through work with partners, particularly across local authorities (LAs) and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs).

Adoption remains a positive option for children who cannot remain safely within their birth families or in kinship arrangements and this EDI strategy will support our efforts and continual improvements, to further minimise delays, particularly for children but also for prospective adopters. It is clear from data and insights that there are some inbuilt inequities in services and whilst there are many interpretations of what equity itself means, in this context we mean services that are fair and just, irrelevant of the recipient and who delivers them. Given our services are delivered by people in human and human way, achieving equity as a sector has proved to be challenging because of how systems and processes vary across the country, and because of the impact of diminishing resources. Nonetheless, where issues are identified we must work together to address them, and an EDI strategy is a key component in guiding us to do this.

The list of what makes us all different is infinite as everyone has an identity, life experiences, needs, resources and relationships that shape who they are and the path their life takes. Examples include gender identity; sexuality; class; religion; disability; age; education; employment; marital status; parenthood; birthplace; experiences of discrimination; abuse and poverty to name just few. However, diversity is much more complex than labels alone, as each individual will often inhabit several identities simultaneously, and so this is where an intersectional approach to EDI is essential. We want all children to thrive in adoption and all suitable adoption applicants to be supported to care for these children. Matters for this strategy to consider include accent; age; caring responsibilities; skin colour; culture; visible and invisible disability; gender identity and expression; mental health; neurodiversity; physical appearance; political opinion; pregnancy and maternity/paternity and family status, and socio-economic circumstances, amongst other personal characteristics.

It is important to know and understand that in the UK the Equality Act 2010 provides legal protection for nine protected characteristics: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex and sexual orientation.

As a sector we already know that whilst the care system provides safety and access to resources to vulnerable children, outcomes remain variable when children leave care at any age and stage, as detailed in the review of children's social care in 2022. Currently there is also a growing call for care experience to be added to the legally recognised protected characteristics list.

Adoption, as we know it, is one way for children who cannot remain with their birth or extended families to achieve permanence in childhood and hopefully beyond. The reasons for children needing to be adopted are complex, but ongoing risk of harm is the primary factor, so the profile of children being adopted in 2024 is, on the whole, very different from the last two generations of adoptees.

Additionally, since changes to equality legislation were implemented, we have seen adoptions by members of the LGBTQ+ community choosing to adopt increase, now accounting for 1 in 5 of all adoptions in England.

Alongside this, the demographics of the population of England have also continued to change over the same period, thus further changing the profile of children not only entering care, but also being adopted.

Equality, diversity and inclusion are therefore central to the work of not only the adoption sector but social work as a whole. Delivering services for children that gives each child the same opportunities to thrive in the longer term, following their care experience, is integral to the EDI vision and mission of Adoption England. The aim is to embed agreed EDI principles across our systems and processes, to ensure that they are valued, understood, practised and adhered to by the workforce, so that all children and adults that we work with achieve better lifelong outcomes as a direct result of our actions.

## What is equality, diversity and inclusion for Adoption England?

Equality is about creating a fairness in our services, where everyone is treated with dignity, respect and without discrimination. It is about challenging and reimagining the systems, processes and environments that limit an individual's opportunities to thrive because of our services and/or actions.

Diversity is about the representation of different individuals within society and the workplace. It is about recognising, understanding and valuing difference that individuals bring as well as differences in their needs that arise as a result. By understanding, valuing and embracing these different experiences, skills, ideas, knowledge, identities and abilities we can create an organisation that can be extraordinary and truly reflects those who need our services.

Inclusion is about taking informed action to create an environment and culture where everyone feels they belong, can participate and are valued for their contribution, experience and perspective. Everyone has a part to play in creating and promoting inclusivity and ensuring it is at the heart of everything we do.

When equality, diversity and inclusion are achieved and work in harmony, we create equity in our systems and processes.

When equality, diversity and inclusion are embedded into our thinking, practice, systems and processes, and continue to evolve dynamically, we maintain equity and achieve greater outcomes and sustainable impact through our work.

## Plan

To achieve this ambition, the strategy will be rolled out from April 2024 to support the new Strategic Plan for Adoption England.

Given the number of priorities that will sit under the EDI umbrella, there is an acknowledgement that each RAA will have priority areas within their region, which they address locally at different points. However, in working collaboratively we have agreed to phase these priority areas for clear focus and attention.

This will be supported by a project plan and learning from each phase will be applied to the next.

Phases can and will run simultaneously and evaluations will take place at key intervals and changes made as necessary.

Work during each phase will be supported by key partners as necessary.

## EDI Strategic Priorities

1.  Address bias and discrimination in systems and processes at all stages of recruitment; matching and support.

2.  Improve outcomes for children and families affected by adoption through the application of EDI frameworks in decision making.

3.  Achieve greater diversity across the workforce to ensure that it better reflects the diversity of the children needing adoption.

4.  Ensure that the workforce is better able to demonstrate commitment to EDI principles through behaviours, decisions, actions and outcomes as a result of this strategy.

## Phase 1 - Addressing Racial Disparities

During the EDI consultation process across RAAs it was agreed that addressing racial disparities as the first priority was appropriate, because across the spectrum Black children remain over-represented in the care system; Black children continue to wait longer for a match and placement for adoption and Black children, particularly boys, still tend to fare less well through health and education services.

However, the sector is now at a time and place where we can invest time, energy and resource to bring about real and sustainable change across not only the work of RAAs but Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) too, taking a system wide approach. This continues the work begun by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB).

The aims of this Phase 1 will seek to positively address:

1.  The experiences of Black children who need adoption.

2.  The experiences of Black families who wish to adopt.

3.  The representation of Black workers across RAAs.

It is fully expected that learning generated from this phase will also inform our learning on achieving the strategic aim to improve the recruitment of adopters from diverse communities, particularly those that are hard to reach.

Like any successful change process, EDI has to start at the top. If an organisation is not supported to create equity through leadership, systems, processes and resources it will fail to achieve its objectives. Adoption England will therefore ultimately own responsibility for this strategy.

## Further phases

1.  Children with disabilities

2.  LGBTQ+ applicants and specifically addressing their experiences of the system.

3.  Working effectively with working class communities, to specifically ensure socio economic issues are removed as barriers.