

**Annual Report 2023-2024**

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**Introduction**

This was the fifth year of operation for AEM.

The aims of the Regional Adoption Agency, as recorded in the business case.

* Provides all children with an adoptive family that meets their needs.
* Ensures that those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand their adoption journey.
* Ensures that RAA families are well prepared, enabled and supported to care for the children with plans for adoption.
* Delivers improved outcomes for children for whom adoption is the preferred plan for permanence.
* Delivers the new service at no additional cost to the partner local authorities.

We continue to be proud of our achievements, our growth in areas of service, and developing services. We are a learning organisation and seek to continually improve.

Adoption practice is a continuously developing area of work, responding to changes in society and currently modernising adoption practice in line with these changes. We have used existing resources differently, to allow dedicated service to maintaining relationships, both at point of adoption planning, and for those adopted some time ago.

We have innovative practice and have been invited to present at focus groups and webinars. This work is supported by the new birth family team, and we hope to build on the work of this team in the coming year, to incorporate birth family voices into our service delivery.

We have seen the benefit of help desk in adoption support, providing practical help to families, rather than an assessment response. Families find this valuable, and the need for immediate assessment has reduced.

Our adopter preparation and support in the early months of placement is now refined, bringing together all our learning about therapeutic parenting, modern adoption and our service is making strides to being one service for all families impacted by adoption, listening and learning all the time.

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

We have had a budget overspend this year and have used reserves to cover this. The budget has not been uplifted since we went live in 2019.

The area which overspends is interagency fees, due to a high volume of children becoming subject to Placement Orders in 2022-23, and a decline in numbers of adopters approved. In addition, this year more than two thirds of the children we have placed have been single children, meaning the total number of adopter households needed, is higher.

There has been a pay rise for all staff, met within existing budget, using reserves.

**Working Practices**

We now regularly meet in person for team and service meetings, in this way the staff are all together at a variety of times, we rotate venue around the geography.

We also have a monthly virtual staff event, focussed on a learning activity.

Our adopter preparation sessions are now in person, enabling supportive relationships to develop.

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

We no longer use the Derby office with any frequency, and we have moved space within Matlock, which has left us with connectivity issues, and has become a disincentive to accessing the space, our IT departments continue to work together to resolve this problem.

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

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

**Staff Development**

We have had further retirements, and part time arrangements, with no difficulty to date in recruiting. We have had new social workers and social work support officers, advanced practitioners, and the new family worker roles.

We continue to use some vacant hours, for others to temporarily increase hours, however this is less so as we become fully staffed.

This year we have also used internally earned Adoption Support Fund ( ASF) income (from therapeutic work delivered by AEM therapeutically qualified social workers) to increase the overall staffing establishment at AEM and have recruited 2 fte social workers (adoption support) and a fte Family Peer Mentor co-ordinator whose role will be to build a peer support network across to the region for adopters to access.

Our Advanced Social Work Practitioners support staff learning and development through offering Reflective Practice sessions, workshops, virtual learning sessions, and consultations with staff. These are very positively received, and where possible we include permanence staff in learning events.

**Local Authority Partnership working**

The operations meeting which involves service managers from fostering and children’s permanence teams in the Local Authorities (LA) is a regular meeting, it was not well attended in the past, and we have now expanded the invite to lead Independent Reviewing Officers. We have worked together to move the chair role to a Local authority partner, and to produce a work plan, which captures all the areas of joint work, with leads for each area.

The operations meeting is now used to review progress on the work plan and remove any blocks. In addition, we meet every 2/3 months with each LA leads for permanence. These additional meetings ensure we remain connected, and have a forum to problem solve, but the benefit of services across all 4 LAs coming together to problem, solve, are sometimes lost.

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

We continue to promote the possibility of different ongoing keeping in touch arrangements for adoptive and birth families and have many examples of creative arrangements. Having the Birth Family team within AEM really supports and strengthens these arrangements.

We continue to work with the 5 RAAs across the Midlands and 3 VAAs operating in the same area. This is with the aim of placing children as locally as possible, recruiting adopters to meet children’s needs, and offering a consistent adoption support service. Again, best practice is shared, plus collaborative problem solving.

The family finding activity has been enhanced by DfE grant, to dedicated time, for promoting the region working together.

There is also regional work on needs analysis for services funded via the ASF.

**Voice and Influence**

**Adopter Voice**

This year we have maintained our commercial relationship with Adopter Voice (AUK) and have continued to utilise their support within our service development of a regional peer co-production programme with experienced adopters from the region who bring their knowledge and lived experience to service development. Building on the success of our initial Education co-production group, this year we have completed facilitation of our Complex Trauma group and have launched our third peer led group thinking about support when parenting adopted teens. As part of this we have launched a programme of co-production work, facilitated by Adopter Voice and AEM alongside a network of experienced adopters who have been able to share their knowledge, experience and lived experience to support the regional adoption community as well as the development of our service provision.

We will continue to build on this learning and utilise our peer network in delivery of support going forward.

**The Voices of Adoption**

This year our ‘Voices of Adoption’ Young People’s group has continued to meet throughout the year on a Saturday to share experiences as adopted young people and to feed into service development and delivery. We are pleased that young people from across the region are now represented within in this group. This year the group has supported our recruitment of Youth Workers into our MDT, taking part in an activity with applicants and then providing feedback in the selection process. In addition, they have been consulted and provided updated Voice of the Child questions that are asked of prospective applicants at their Adoption Panel.

This group is also represented on the Nottinghamshire Young People’s Board; we would welcome the opportunity to extend this offer to our other LA Partners.

As a number of the young people have now reached 18years, they have supported the development of a young adult group which they have transitioned into and which we will now continue to build during the year ahead.

**Birth Family Voice**

This year, the on-going development of our Birth Family Support Team and services has been supported by seeking and hearing the voices of those with lived experience. The team hosted a meeting with the charitable organisation BEAM and a number of their ambassador birth mothers to learn more about their experience and what support should look like for parents who lose their child(ren) to adoption, which is shaping our service delivery.

We have also been able to film a short video interview with a birth father who has been supported by the team, which has been used in awareness raising with AEM staff and LA colleagues as well as becoming part of our Prepare to Adopt training.

**Recruitment**

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

We continue to engage in all national government ‘You Can Adopt’ recruitment campaigns and this is complemented by our own ongoing recruitment activity throughout the year. In addition, this year we supported the first Midlands Together Collaboration Adoption Week in February. There continues to be an ongoing presence on social media channels with regular posting and organic content on social media, we have significantly increased our followers on social media platforms this last year. We have good engagement with adopters willing to share their story either at Information Events or through the development of bespoke recruitment videos. We regularly review our website to ensure it is up to date and useful for adopters. The vast majority of our enquiries about adoption come via the website.

This last year we have attended a number of cultural festivals and community events across the region, including the Nottingham Carnival Festival in the summer. More recently our newly appointed Family Worker has been going to the Derbion Centre in Derby, alongside Fostering East Midlands to raise awareness about Adoption East Midlands.

We plan to reach out to more communities and raise awareness and are currently planning this by developing a calendar of events for the region, where we hope to have a presence. We hope to have many opportunities to jointly work with Fostering East Midlands in the coming year.

Last year we identified a key area for development in making links with black and ethnic diverse local communities across the region, to meet the needs of our Global Majority children. We will continue to give further thought and consideration on how best to do this and plan to put together a bespoke recruitment and marketing strategy to support this work further, creating links with key people within these specific communities to raise awareness about adoption.

**Assessment and Placement**

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

We continue to review and maximise our use of technology, an example of this is developing a new Registration of Interest form which is completed online, this will soon be ready to go live, and we hope will be a more efficient and easier process for applicants.

To support staff in their work we have produced Adoption Process Guidance from the point of enquiry through to when an Adoption Order is granted.

One of our Social Worker roles now has a specialist function to Lead in Learning and Development, overseeing the Adopters Learning and Development programme. Last year we relaunched our Prepare to Adopt course which was previously known as ‘Preparatory Training’ and was delivered virtually following covid restrictions, all of the Prepare to Adopt Courses are now held face to face in different venues across the region. Our first face to face sessions started in April 2023, and this has been warmly received by adopters attending the course. A new workshop called ‘transcultural parenting’ was also launched this year and is now an integral part of the Prepare to Adopt Course, along with Maintaining Family Links.

Following this course Prospective adopters attend the Therapeutic parenting course in person in stage two. It builds upon their earlier learning on brain development, trauma, PACE and therapeutic re-parenting, including trying practical strategies to use with children. It is run monthly, either in a Derbyshire or a Nottinghamshire venue. The new Trauma Informed Pathway for matching is fully embedded within all AEM matches, and all families have an individualised Therapeutic Parenting Plan.

All our prospective adopters are given access to CATCH (Children & Trauma Community Hub) a resource for independent learning, which continues across both Stage 1 and Stage 2.

This year we have approved 65 adopter households, this is slightly more than previous year but less than 2021-2022. We continue to have a healthy level of enquiries and we have a high level of prospective adopters in the process, we have more assessments than last year converting to approvals. The applications which don’t progress to approvals are for similar themes as last year, including cost of living and financial and economic impact on families, and significant challenges and changes in family circumstances and lifestyle. Assessments generally have been complex and taken more time to complete. Once approved however, AEM adopters do not generally wait to be matched with children there is early linking with families.

National data shows a much lower number of waiting adopters than last year, there is great regional variation, with the South having more waiting adopters than the North.

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

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

**Home Finding**

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

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

The team have attended several profile events, both within the Midlands area, and nationally, which has proved successful in making matches for some of the children. The team also hosted an AEM profile event in June 2023, where again several matches were made with AEM families.

To support children who move to families outside of the AEM region, the team have developed a useful pack for the adoptive families and their agency around expectations along with guidance around transitions and therapeutic parenting and support.

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

There have been 150 children’s plans this year, this is slightly less than last year, and is the second highest year since AEM started. The last two years have had the highest number of children’s plans. The average over the 5 years is 143 plans a year.

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115 children have been matched, a similar figure to 21/22, at 116, the average over the five years is 128.

122 adoption orders were granted, with the average per year being 100.

Derbyshire has the highest level of activity in all areas, bar placement orders, where Nottinghamshire has the highest number.

There have been 16 sibling groups of 2 matched this year, the eldest children were 7, and 17 children under a year old.

28 per cent of children are not white British, with two thirds of those children being of mixed ethnicity and heritage.

We have been involved in a Pilot to develop practice in meeting children’s identity needs throughout their childhood. This is due to be launched in Spring 2024.

This year we reviewed all the learning from disruptions and have been able to share this both with partners, and nationally. There will be some national research on disruptions during 2024. The rate remains stable at around 2% of all placements, pre order, both for AEM and nationally.

**Adoption Support**

**Service Development:**

As the need and demand for adoption support continues to increase across the region, we have continued to review and develop our service offer with the support of those who bring with them the lived experience as well as with colleagues across AEM and LA teams, seeking efficiency as well as ensuring we meet need. Focus this year has been on establishing the multi-disciplinary team (grant funded) and ensuring its practice fits in with and supports the wider AEM support objectives, driving forward our early intervention offer and engagement and ensuring an equitable and timely service for families which creates sustainable change.

As well as adding to our Universal Offer of support services and being able to provide more in-house therapy from our therapeutically trained social workers, we have now established our ‘Helpdesk’ (in January 2023) as the gateway into support services and as our front-line service delivery model. This model has enabled us to provide immediate support to families without the need to wait for an allocated social worker and a period of assessment before a support offer can commence. Within the 15-month period from January 2023, over 2/3rds of all new referrals received have been held by our Helpdesk social workers and/or subsequently closed following a brief intervention of ‘Therapeutic Listening conversations’ and/or referral to universal services which ordinarily would have been allocated to a social worker for assessment (see below fig). As well as providing immediate and effective support to families, this model allows our social workers to focus on assessing and delivering support to families with the most complex and challenging needs.

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| **Period (Jan ‘23-Mar ‘24)** | **Total new Referrals** | **Total Closed** | **Closed held on Helpdesk** | **Allocated to Team** | **Remaining Open to Helpdesk** |
| Quarter 1 | 12 | 9 | 8 | 1 | 3 |
| Quarter 2 | 62 | 53 | 36 | 17 | 9 |
| Quarter 3 | 40 | 35 | 23 | 12 | 5 |
| Quarter 4 | 47 | 29 | 19 | 20 | 18 |
| Quarter 5 | 47 | 11 | 7 | 4 | 36 |
| **TOTAL** | **208** | **137** | **93** | **58** | **71** |
| **%** |  | **65%** | **67%** | **27%** | **34%** |

**Peer Support**

This year has seen the continued development and embedding of our peer support network across the Region which culminated in us getting agreement to use internally earned funds (from ASF funded therapy work) to recruit a FTE Peer Network Support Coordinator to the team (experienced adopter).

The significance of bringing in those with lived experience to shape and support services is now well embedded. The co-production groups set up last year (Education and Complex Trauma) have continued to meet and have supported the development of our multidisciplinary team with one member of the group sitting as adopter representative on our steering group and three others designing and delivering a one day workshop for newly matched adopters (‘The First Year’) which is entirely peer led. AUK have also supported facilitation of a third co-production group where the focus is on parenting adopted teens; this work will continue into 2024 alongside the establishment of a further group who will focus on support for young adults.

**Early Intervention**

Early Intervention support remains a key objective as we know that the right support in the early stages of placement and early years can have a significant impact on reducing future crisis intervention and the need for intensive and costly therapy and potential family breakdown. We have firmly embedded our ‘Making Connections’ programme into practice and it sits as a key component of an adopters Learning & Development journey, as well as building on our Universal offer which includes delivering a series of collaborative workshops with CAMHS. We have also scoped out and are in the early stages of launching further early intervention support which will continue to build adopter understanding, strengthen attachments and support their child’s development including a 4-week Theraplay UK programme and an Early movement group which will be co-facilitated with our MDT staff (OT and Speech & Language).

A key focus area for us this year has been about how we remain connected to adopted children and their families post adoption order in order to provide the early intervention support and be able to proactively contact and support at key times of transition (eg starting school, moving to secondary school). We have therefore developed and embedded into practice our ‘Welcome to Adoption Support’ seminar for all approved adopters and have developed our systems & process to ensure that the right information is passed to adoption support at the point of order that will enable us to identify where there is likely to be future need. Finally, with the development of the MDT, we have now embedded a consultation model in Adoption Support which enables social workers from AEM and LA teams as well as families, to access consultation with our service at an early stage to think about likely future need and ensure a robust adoption support plan is in place from the start.

**Keeping in touch:**

This continues to be a key focus area for AEM in line with a growing national focus on practice development with AEM in an established and leading position. We have a dedicated social worker in place who provides fortnightly consultations to professionals (from AEM and LA teams) as well as adopters and have provided safe and creative birth family links for many families as well as enabling reunification between siblings.

In the year ’23-’24, we have led 43 consultations which have resulted in 7 birth parent reconnections and 11 reconnections with a sibling, with a further 5 being worked towards.

This year we have also established a co-production group with social workers from AEM and representatives from our LA partner permanence teams to develop a ‘contact tool’ which will support workers to think about current and potential future keeping in touch requirements, opportunities & arrangements as part of the child’s planning for adoption.

**Birth Family Support:**

Following the establishment of our Birth Family Support team in 2022/23 we have continued to make significant progress with our service development and delivery which now also now includes Derbyshire families therefore providing a fully equitable service across the region. AEM are leading service delivery in this area and this year have been asked to talk about and share their practice nationally including at the National Champions workshop led by Professor Beth Neil and in a recorded Webinar on behalf of Adoption UK.

We continue to learn from feedback and refine our offer which encompasses:

* + Support around coming to terms with the adoption plan decision.
  + Support with letterbox, both trial and ongoing
  + Writing a life history letter to the child/ren.
  + Preparation for direct or more creative keeping in touch arrangements.
  + Preparation for reconnection.

In the last 12 months the team has actively supported 368 letterbox exchanges

271 of these were for established and on-going exchanges, however 97 involved exchanges that had lapsed and are now, as a result of the Birth Family Support team, positively re-engaged into the scheme.

In addition, there have been 78 referrals into the team for additional support, predominantly from birth parents but also some birth siblings.

**Data Reporting:**

National work continues, in which we are participating, to agree and develop some national data collection points for Adoption Support. The on-going challenge remains in gaining standard and therefore comparative data across the regions given the variation in service delivery models that exist and what type of support is being provided.

Given our own changes to service delivery over the last 12-18 months, thanks to the Helpdesk and their ability to contain & support families by offering Therapeutic Listening Conversations (either one-off or up to 6 sessions) or by making ongoing referrals to our MDT or Universal Offer, the number of adoption assessments completed by the team (and therefore recorded in data collection) has reduced significantly.

In the previous 12-month period we completed 200 new Adoption Support Needs assessments following referral into the service; all will have experienced some level of delay whilst waiting for a social worker to be allocated and our model was one of ‘assess first and support later’.

In the last 12 months we have completed approximately 60 new Support Needs assessments and significantly reduced the waiting time for families for these to start. Our new model means that our longer-term team are able to do a more thorough assessment with families who are experiencing the most significant challenges and complexity which is rooted in child development, and we have developed our practice to support this which includes ensuring that we work systemically across the families network, children are visited and their voices are heard within the assessment.

The Adoption & Special Guardianship Fund (ASGF) continues to be used to support the ongoing needs of children and families within the region and this year the value of financial support received topped £2million.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Financial Year** | **Applications** | **Total**  **£** |
| **2015/16** | **145** | **629,000** |
| **2016/17** | **367** | **1,009,000** |
| **2017/18** | **370** | **849,000** |
| **2018/19** | **547** | **1,424,000** |
| **2019/20** | **442** | **1,297,645** |
| **2020/21** | **583** | **1,404,507** |
| **2021/22** | **612** | **1,893,261** |
| **2022/23** | **573** | **1,961,580** |
| **2023-24** | **582** | **2,033,940** |

In 2023/24 whilst there has been a slight increase in the number of applications to the fund, average spend per application remains the same at approx. £3500 per application.

**Multi-Disciplinary Team Funding:**

In support of the National Adoption Strategy ([Adoption strategy: achieving excellence everywhere - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-strategy-achieving-excellence-everywhere)), the National Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Leaders Group are funding a number of projects aimed at improving matching services and practice at local, regional & national levels. The aim is to ensure that best practice becomes the norm so that every adopted child and their family can access the services and support they need wherever they live and maximise children’s outcomes in the short and long term.

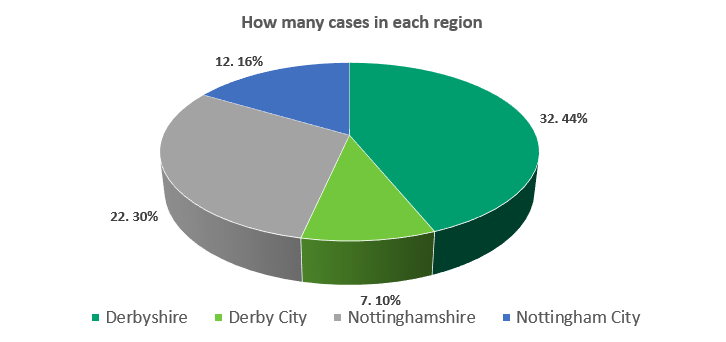
Last year was Year 1 of a 2 year project funded by the DfE which AEM secured to develop a regional, multi-disciplinary team and service offer bringing together professional expertise to enable the holistic assessment of needs of children, young people and families at the early stages of placement, families with more complex needs and young people on the edge of care.

We have made good progress in year 1 which has seen recruitment to the MDT of key roles including Educational Support Workers, Youth Workers, Occupational Therapy, Speech & Language and Clinical Psychology as well as service delivery models in place delivering support to families which will continue to be built upon in the year ahead. A key offer from the MDT is to provide consultation to families and professionals to enable the network to think about ‘what is going on’ and what needs to be considered in supporting needs now and in the future and as such we hope to improve the learning and improved practice of all those involved. Consultation is being used regularly and pro-actively by all 4 LA teams as well as AEM staff and families.

We are focused on building an evidence base for future sustainability of the MDT and as such have developed data reporting for each area of delivery as well as feedback tools and a project evaluation strategy for the year ahead. By having a greater understanding of the data we are starting to identify patterns and where support is needed the most, in order to inform our on-going service delivery.

**Education Support**

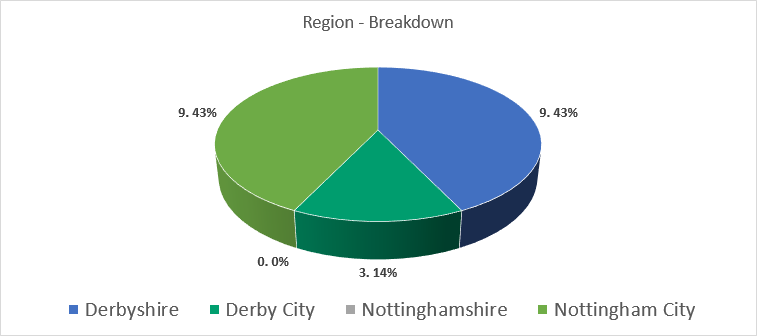
To date we have had 78 referrals into our Education team which we triage on a weekly basis and RAG rate dependant on level / urgency of need. The team has developed a suite of resources and training but will also provide advocacy where needed most.



**Youth Support**

To date we have had 20 referrals into our Youth Work team which are RAG rated for allocation. The team are offering targeted 1:1 and group work with the aim of enabling young people to build and access safe spaces and groups in their local area. Again, by analysing the data we are now able to collect, we are able to identify common areas of need and therefore can develop our service offer accordingly. For example, there is a significant cohort of young people who identify as transgender who we will be able to tailor support to.

Whilst to date we are not working directly with young people in Nottinghamshire, this is likely to be because Nottinghamshire have a youth service and PALS support for adopted young people which is already established. It is positive that we are now able to offer a more equitable service across the whole region and will continue to build on this.



**Complaints/ compliments/ data breaches**

There have been 17 data breaches reported, managers are conscientious in reporting breaches, and none of these have been high risk.

However, a theme is selecting the wrong e mail recipient, accidentally copying people, and cut and paste of documents. Some staff have repeated data protection training, as these errors are avoidable.

There have been 4 complaints, one of a historical nature, which we responded to, and the others regarding decisions in assessment or support. All of these have been resolved early, with managers always reaching out to meet with complainants, and actively listen.

We regularly receive positive feedback in forms following events, training and adoption panel, and we have also had direct e mails regarding specific workers.

**Ofsted**

Derbyshire had full inspection this year, and there were focused visits to the others. AEM remain ready with data and documentations for any pending inspection.

AEM always distribute the stakeholder surveys on behalf of Ofsted, this is an annual survey.

There has also been a themed inspection of five RAAs this year, AEM were not part of that.

**Shelagh Mitchell**

**Group Manager**

**Adoption East Midlands**

**May 2024**