

Adoption and Special Guardianship Quarterly Data Collection

Headline Measures: Q4 2025/26

July 2026

Note: The Department for Education's annual figures on adoptions and timeliness for children who have been adopted are published in the [Children looked after in England including adoption](#) report. This is the most robust source of information on adoption.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERALL PICTURE

The results indicate growing pressure on adopter sufficiency. In 2025/26, more children waited for adoption, including for longer periods of time, when compared to the previous year. While, registrations and the number of prospective and approved adopter families has declined. Activity was also lower at several stages of the adoption process. However, the trends in adoption were not all uniformly negative: the average time taken for a child to move from entry into care to adoption decreased, and the proportion of adopter families matched within three months of approval increased.

KEY FINDINGS FOR 2025/26

Children and permanence

- Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decisions varied and court issued orders decreased compared to last year. Whilst there were **3,550** Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decisions to place a child for adoption (the same number as 2024/25) ADM reversal decisions increased **58%** to **1,010** (see full report for caveat). This was the highest level of ADM reversals in the last five years. The number of Placement Orders (POs) granted decreased by **5%** to 3,040; and the number of Adoption Orders (AOs) decreased by **10%** to **2,730**. However, Total permanence orders (AOs and Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs)) fell **7%** to **6,660**, also the lowest level in the series.
- The number of children with a PO waiting to be placed increased **3%** to **3,010**. Of these, **1,560** had been waiting for 18 months or more since entering care, an increase of **13%**. Over the past five years, the total number waiting increased by **52%**, from **1,980** to **3,010**.
- Children with harder to place (HTP)¹ characteristics remained over-represented among those waiting and continued to wait longer on average. The number adopted fell **13%** to **1,230**, while the number waiting with a PO increased **4%** to **1,800**. These children accounted for **60%** of all children waiting with a PO.
- Timeliness² outcomes were mixed. For children with a PO still waiting to be placed, the average time spent waiting since entry into care increased by **20 days** to **646 days** when compared to last year, while scorecard indicator A2³ reached a five-year high of **222 days**. By contrast, A20⁴ improved for a second consecutive year, falling by **25 days** to **324 days**, and the average journey from entry into care to adoption fell by **17 days** to **816 days**.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs)

- There were **3,930** SGOs in 2025/26. This was a **4%** decrease from the 2024/25 DfE figure and a **6%** decrease from the 2024/25 ASG figure used for the detailed year-on-year comparison⁵. The overall profile of children and special guardians remained broadly stable: children aged 1 to 4 remained the largest child age group, while grandparents continued to account for the majority of special guardians.
- Since 2021/22, the proportions of children with a disability and children from an ethnic-minority group (excluding white minorities) with SGOs increased, while the proportion of special guardians who were former foster carers declined.

¹ children aged 5 years and over, with a disability, in a sibling group, or from an ethnic-minority group excluding White-minority groups.

² How long children and adopter families take to reach key stages in the adoption process, measured either in days between specified milestones or as the proportion progressing within a stated period.

³ Average time from court authority to place a child to the local authority's decision on an adoptive match.

⁴ Average time from entry into care to the local authority receiving court authority to place the child.

⁵ See the data source note in the [Data Sources](#) section for an explanation of how the DfE and ASG collections are used

Adopters and sufficiency

- Registrations fell **2%** to **3,180** and have declined in each of the last five years. Approvals increased slightly to **2,240**, but adopter families matched and placed both fell **5%**. At 31st March 2026, the number of prospective adopter families not yet approved had fallen **8%** to **2,030**, while the number approved and waiting had fallen **7%** to **1,400**.
- **The number of approved adopter families waiting for a match was 1,400.** The number of children with a PO waiting to be placed was **3,010 children**. When compared with **1,400 approved adopter families** waiting, this evidences a numerical difference of **1,610**. This comparison does not account for sibling groups, appropriateness of matches or placements and should be treated as a broad indicator of imbalance rather than a literal estimate of the number of additional families required. However, it does indicate a lack of adopter families and the related pressure on the system that has grown substantially over the last three years.
- **2025/26 indicated a shortfall of adopter families. An estimated 1,580 adopter families** were required for children in active family finding⁶ compared to only **640 approved adopter families** actively in family finding. This equates to a shortfall of **940 adopter families**.

⁶ The process of identifying and securing a suitable permanent family for a child.

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GLOSSARY

Terms and abbreviations used in this report are defined below.

TERM	DEFINITION	TERM	DEFINITION
ADM	Agency Decision Maker: the senior decision-maker who confirms whether adoption should be the plan for a child.	A10	Average time from entry into care to moving in with the adoptive family, adjusted for foster carer adoptions.
A2	Average time from court authority to place a child to the local authority's decision on an adoptive match.	ASG	Adoption and Special Guardianship quarterly data collection.
A20	Average time from entry into care to the local authority receiving court authority to place the child.	DfE	Department for Education.
Early permanence	A placement intended to provide continuity while the child's final adoption plan is still being determined.	Family finding	The process of identifying and securing a suitable permanent family for a child.
HTP	Harder to place: children aged 5 years and over, with a disability, in a sibling group, or from an ethnic-minority group excluding White-minority groups.	LA	Local authority.
PO	Placement Order: a court order authorising a local authority to place a child for adoption.	RAA	Regional Adoption Agency.
SGO	Special Guardianship Order: a court order placing a child with a special guardian and granting enhanced parental responsibility.	VAA	Voluntary Adoption Agency.
Adopters/Adopter family	One approved adopter or an approved adopting couple, counted as one family.	Percentage point	The arithmetic difference between two percentages, for example 25% to 20% is a decrease of 5 percentage points.
Reporting year	The period from 1 st April to 31 st March.	Suppression	Small counts shown as 'c' or 'S' rather than a number to protect confidentiality.
AO	Adoption Order: a court order that makes an adoption legally permanent and transfers parental responsibility.	Timeliness	How long children and adopter families take to reach key stages in the adoption process, measured either in days between specified milestones or as the proportion progressing within a stated period. For children still waiting, it measures time elapsed up to the reporting date, not their eventual completed waiting time.

REPORTING NOTES

Note on how percentages are reported: This report uses *percentage change* to describe changes in numbers. For example, adopter registrations fell from 3,240 to 3,180, a decrease of 2%; where shown after a comparison, *n* gives the corresponding numerical change in the rounded count (*n* = 60). Changes between proportions are expressed in *percentage points*: for example, a fall from 25% to 16% is a decrease of 9 percentage points. Elsewhere, *n* indicates the rounded number represented by a percentage.

Note on rounding: Counts shown as *n* are rounded national totals unless otherwise stated. Counts and percentages are rounded independently; component values may therefore not sum to the displayed total or to 100%. Rounding is carried out on all reported figures to ensure anonymity of individuals.

Note on data revision: The ASG 2025/26 Q4 and total annual figures are based on the Q4 returns available at the time of analysis and remain subject to revision if updated data submissions are received.

CHILDREN

The adoption and permanence figures were lower in 2025/26 compared to before, while Agency Decision Maker (ADM) reversals and the number of children waiting with a Placement Order (PO) increased. Long waits became more common, and children with harder to place (HTP) characteristics remained over-represented among those waiting and continued to wait longer on average.

Timeliness was mixed. The A20 scorecard indicator and the completed journey from entry into care to adoption decreased, while the average time for children still waiting and scorecard indicator A2 increased.

DECISIONS FOR CHILDREN

Change since 2024/25

In 2025/26, Local Authority (LA) ADM decisions that a child should be placed for adoption remained the same as last year. POs decreased, while ADM reversals increased (fig. 1). Compared with 2024/25, there were:

- **3,550** ADM decisions, unchanged
- **3,040** POs granted, a decrease of **5%** (*n* = 170)
- **1,010** ADM reversals, an increase of **58%** (*n* = 370)

Note: The ASG collection recorded 1,010 ADM reversals in 2025/26, 58% higher than the 640 reported in the 2024/25 DfE annual statistics found in the *Children looked after in England including adoptions* 2025 report. This comparison should be interpreted with caution as the latest 2025/26 figure is drawn from the ASG quarterly collection, while the historical figures are taken from the *Children looked after in England including adoptions* 2025 report, which use the annual SSDA903 data collection. However, the data presented here indicates a rise in reversals. This caution should be applied to all interpretations of results that use both these data sources, with changes viewed as indicators of change.

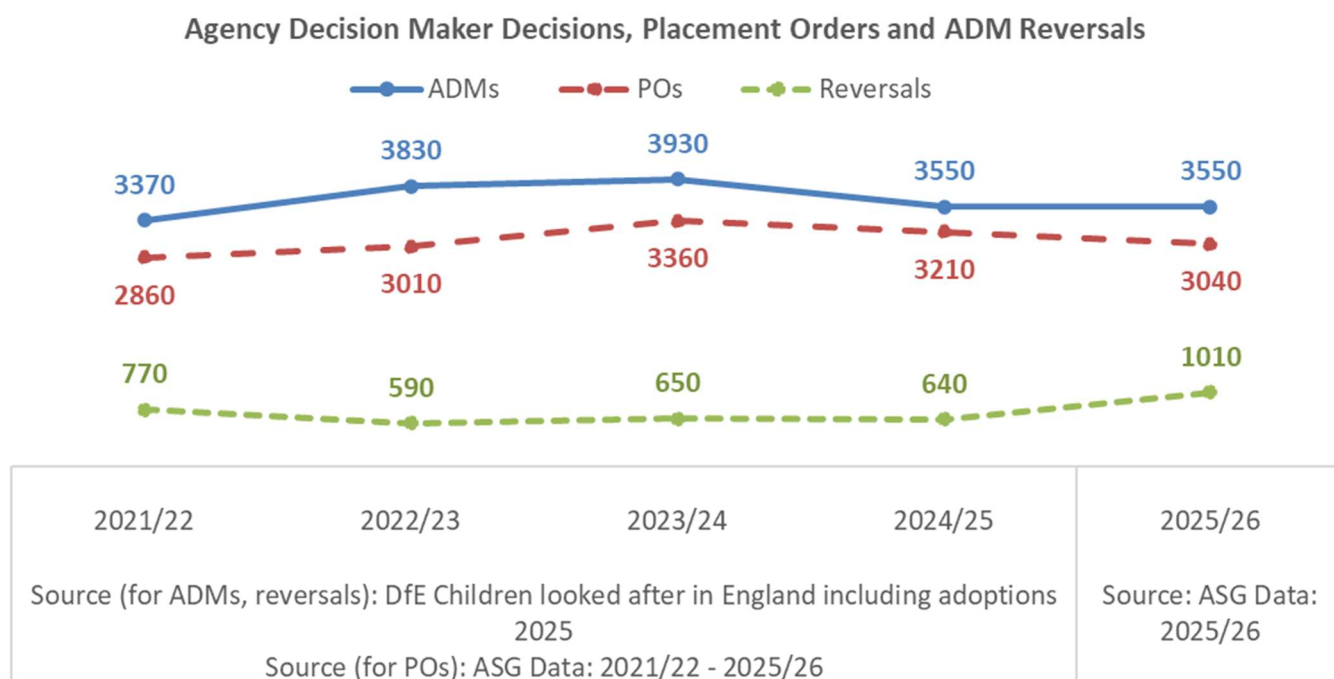


Fig. 1: graph showing changes in ADM decisions, POs and ADM reversals since 2021/22.

The number of children placed in early permanence decreased to **510**, **20** fewer than in 2024/25, representing a **4%** decrease (fig. 2). The proportion of ADM reversals attributed to the court not making a PO fell from **25%** in 2024/25 to **16%** in 2025/26, a decrease of **9** percentage points (fig. 3).



Fig. 2: number of children placed in an early permanence placement over the last five reporting years.

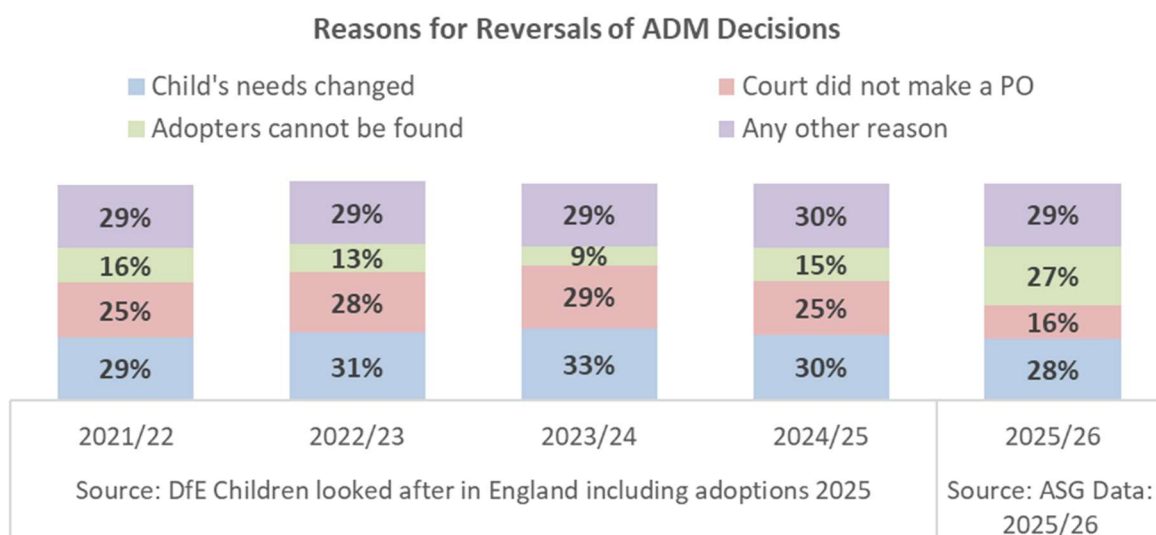


Fig. 3: reasons given for ADM reversals by percentage for the last five years. **Note:** 2025/26 percentages use unique child-level records with a valid reversal reason. Duplicate records and records without a reason code are excluded; consequently, the denominator differs from the rounded national-level total.

In 2025/26, the number of Adoption Orders (AOs) and Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) decreased. Compared with the 2024/25 DfE Children looked after in England including adoption figures (figs. 4-6), there were:

- **2,730** AOs granted, a decrease of **10% (n = 310)**
- **3,930** SGOs granted, a decrease of **4% (n = 180)**
- There were **6,660** permanence orders (AOs and SGOs, not including ROs and CAOs) in total, a decrease of **7% (n = 490)**
- SGOs continued to outnumber AOs and accounted for **59%** of permanence orders

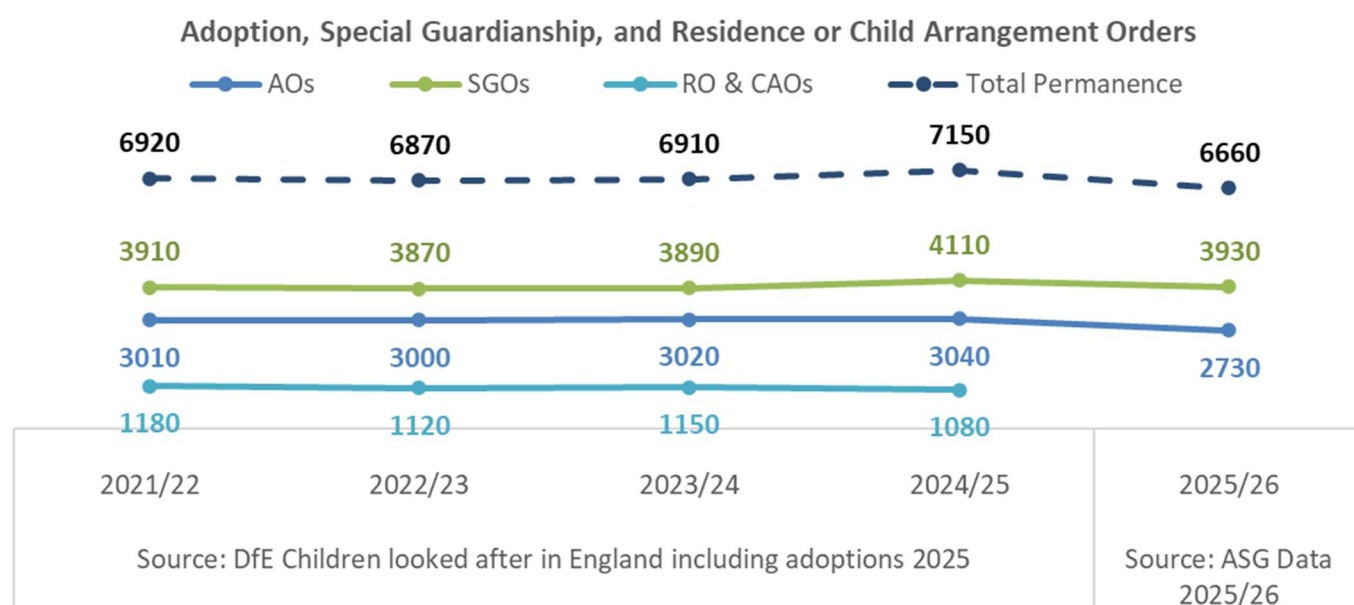


Fig. 4: number of AOs, Special Guardianship Orders and Residence or Child Arrangements Orders granted over the last five reporting years. **Note:** Data on Residence Orders and Child Arrangements Orders are not collected in the ASG collection.

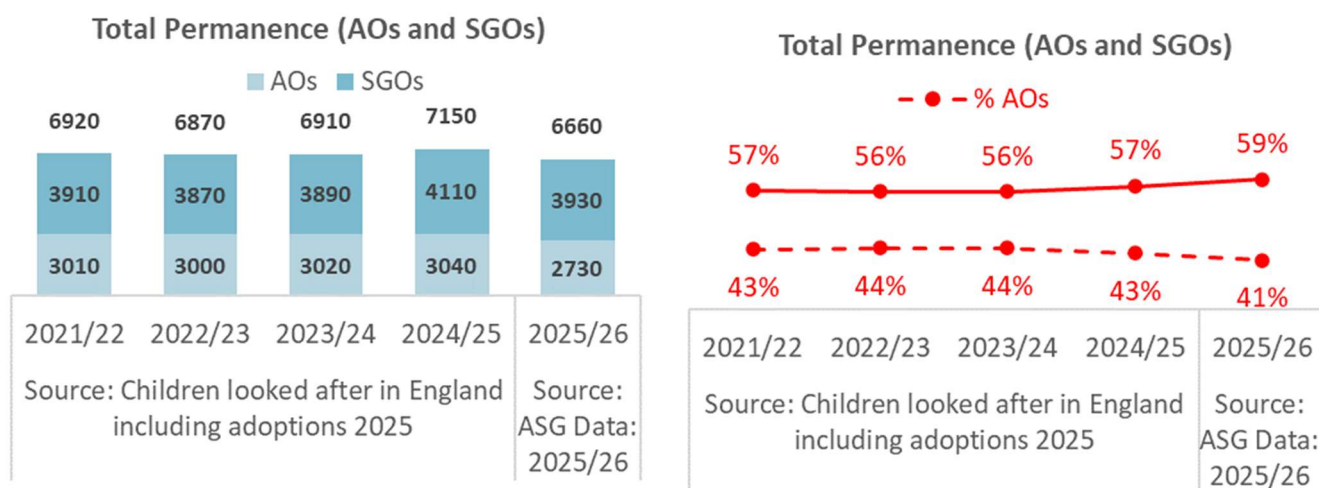


Fig. 5 (left): total permanence by number of AOs and Special Guardianship Orders over the last five reporting years.

Fig. 6 (right): total permanence by percentage of AOs and Special Guardianship Orders over the last five reporting years.

In 2025/26, the number of children matched and placed with an adopter family decreased. Compared with 2024/25 (fig. 7), there were:

- **2,570** children matched with an adopter family, a decrease of **6% (n = 170)**
- **2,590** children placed with an adopter family, a decrease of **5% (n = 150)**

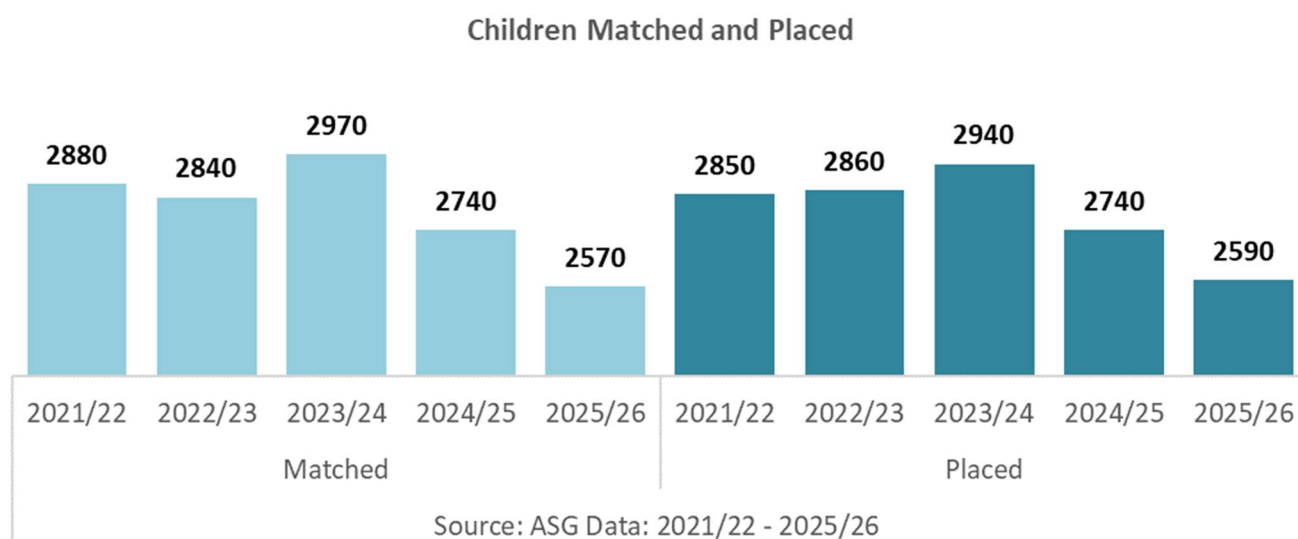


Fig. 7: number of children matched and placed over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

Across the last five years above, ADM decisions and permanence activity fluctuated rather than following a uniform decline. POs rose from **2,860** in 2021/22 to a peak of **3,360** in 2023/24, then fell in each of the next two years to **3,040**. ADM reversals moved in the opposite direction after 2022/23 and reached a five-year high of **1,010** in 2025/26 (though see note on page 6). Early permanence placements declined for three consecutive years after

peaking at **570** in 2022/23. Total permanence orders, children matched and children placed also fell to five-year lows in 2025/26, at **6,660**, **2,570** and **2,590** respectively.

CHILDREN WAITING

Change since 2024/25

Timeliness outcomes were mixed. The average time for children waiting with a PO increased, as did scorecard indicators A10 and A2, while A20 decreased. Compared with 2024/25:

- The average time since entry into care for children waiting with a PO was **646 days, 20 days** longer than in 2024/25 (fig. 8)
- Scorecard Indicator A10, the average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, adjusted for foster carer adoptions, was **480 days, 5 days** longer than 2024/25 (fig. 9)
- Scorecard Indicator A2, the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match with an adoptive family, was **222 days, 17 days** longer than 2024/25 (fig. 9)
- Scorecard Indicator A20, the average time between a child entering care and a local authority receiving court authority to place them, was **324 days, 25 days** shorter than 2024/25 (fig. 9)

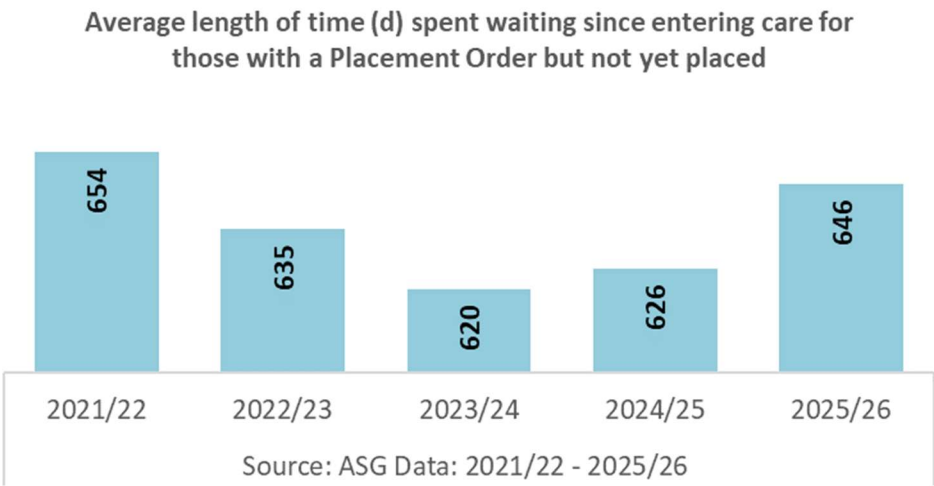


Fig. 8: average time since entry into care for children waiting with a PO, over the last five reporting years.

Adoption Scorecard Indicators



Fig. 9: scorecard indicator average wait times (days) over the available reporting years. A20 is available for the three most recent reporting years only.

In 2025/26, the number of children waiting with a PO increased. The numbers waiting 18 months or more since entry into care, and, 12 or 18 months or more since the granting of a PO, also increased.

Compared with 2024/25 (figs. 10-11), there were:

- **3,010** children with a PO waiting to be placed, an increase of **3% (n = 100)**
- **1,560** children with a PO waiting to be placed 18 months or more since entering care, an increase of **13% (n = 180)**
- **940** children with a PO waiting to be placed 12 months or more since its grant, an increase of **19% (n = 150)**
- **490** children with a PO waiting to be placed 18 months or more since its grant, an increase of **26% (n = 100)**

Children Waiting with a Placement Order

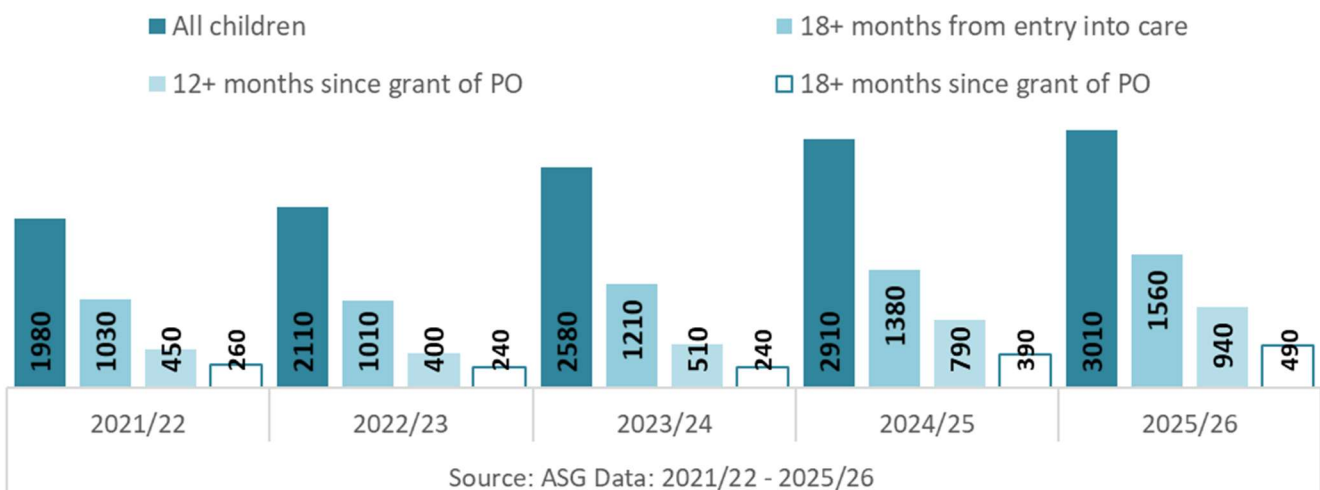


Fig. 10: number of children waiting with a PO but not yet placed, over the last five reporting years.

The proportions of children waiting for each of the specified long periods also increased (fig. 11). Compared with 2024/25:

- **52%** of children with a PO had been waiting to be placed for 18 months or more since entering care, up from **47%**
- **31%** had been waiting for 12 months or more since the grant of a PO, up from **27%**
- **16%** had been waiting for 18 months or more since the grant of a PO, up from **13%**

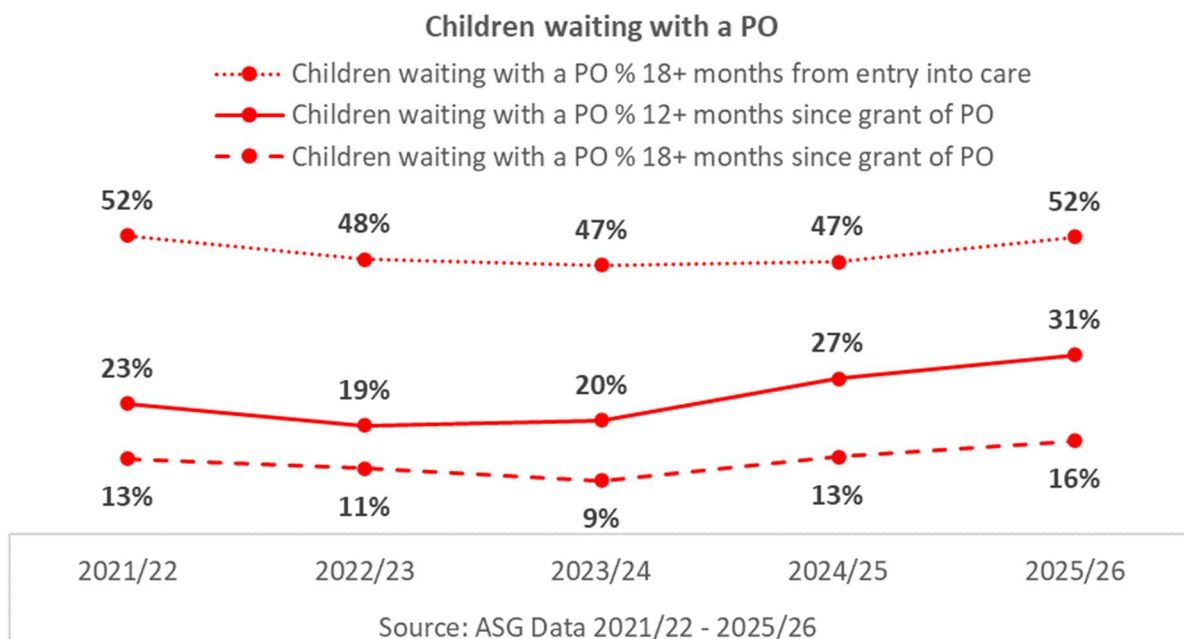


Fig. 11: proportion of children waiting with a PO but not yet placed, over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

The number of children waiting with a PO increased every year since 2021/22, from **1,980** in 2021/22 to **3,010** in 2025/26; an overall rise of **52%**. The number waiting 12 months or more since a PO being granted more than doubled, from **450** to **940**, while the number waiting 18 months or more increased from **260** to **490**. Their corresponding proportions reached five-year highs of **31%** and **16%** in 2025/26. Average time since entry into care initially fell from **654** days in 2021/22 to **620** days in 2023/24, but then increased for two consecutive years to **646** days. A10 remained within a relatively narrow range of **460** to **485** days; A2 increased to a five-year high of **222** days; and A20 decreased across its three-year series, from **362** days to **324** days.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WAITING AND ADOPTED

Children with one or more HTP characteristics are those aged 5 years and over, with a disability, in a sibling group, or from an ethnic-minority group, excluding White-minority groups. These categories overlap, so figures for the individual characteristics should not be added together. Children with HTP characteristics wait longer for adoption on average.

Change since 2024/25

In 2025/26, fewer children with one or more HTP characteristics were adopted, while more were waiting with a PO, including for the specified long periods. Compared with 2024/25, there were:

- **1,230** children with HTP characteristics adopted, a decrease of **13%** (**n = 190**)
- **1,800** children with HTP characteristics waiting with a PO, an increase of **4%** (**n = 70**)

- **1,090** children with HTP characteristics waiting with a PO for 18 months or more since entering care, an increase of **10%** (**n = 100**)
- **680** children with HTP characteristics waiting for 12 months or more since the grant of a PO, an increase of **15%** (**n = 90**)
- **370** children with HTP characteristics waiting for 18 months or more since the grant of a PO, an increase of **16%** (**n = 50**)

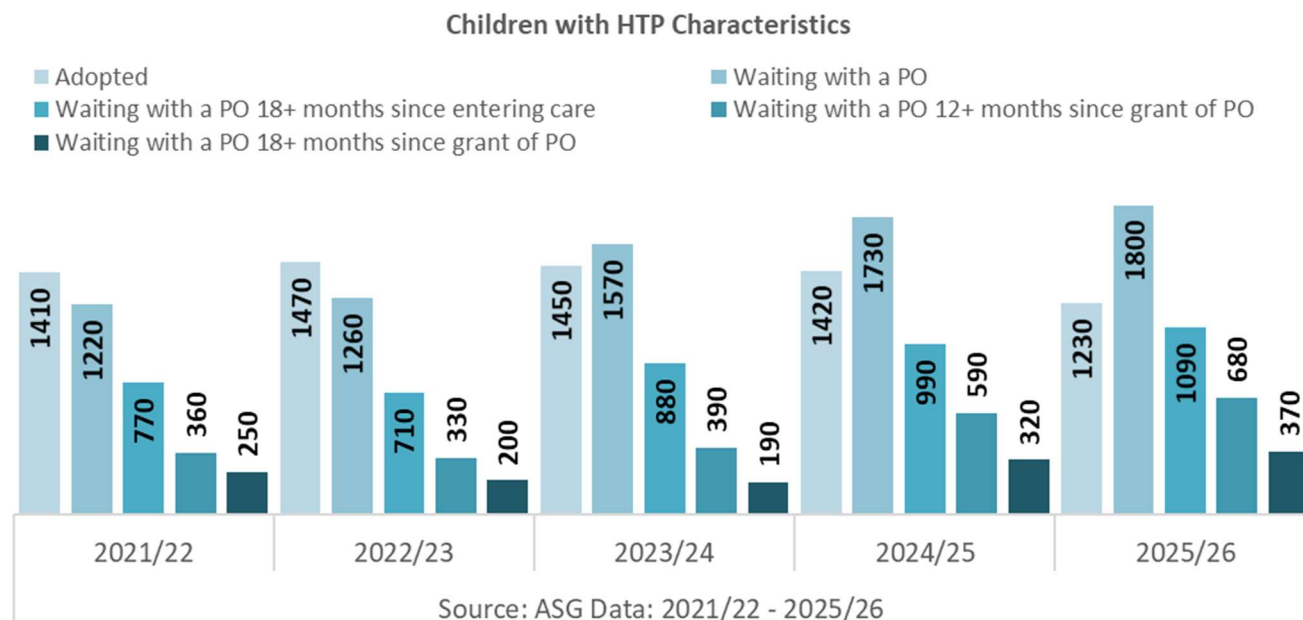


Fig. 12: number of children with one or more HTP characteristics who were adopted or were waiting with a PO, over the last five reporting years.

The proportion of adopted children with HTP characteristics decreased, whereas the proportion of all children waiting with a PO who had HTP characteristics increased. Within the long-wait groups (12 and 18 months plus), the proportions with HTP characteristics decreased (fig. 13). Compared with 2024/25:

- **45%** of all children adopted had HTP characteristics, down from **47%** (a decrease of **2** percentage points)
- **60%** of all children waiting with a PO had HTP characteristics, up from **59%** (an increase of **1** percentage point)
- **70%** of children waiting 18 months or more since entering care had HTP characteristics, down from **72%** (a decrease of **2** percentage points)
- **72%** of children waiting 12 months or more since the grant of a PO had HTP characteristics, down from **75%** (a decrease of **3** percentage points)
- **76%** of children waiting 18 months or more since the grant of a PO had HTP characteristics, down from **82%** (a decrease of **6** percentage points)

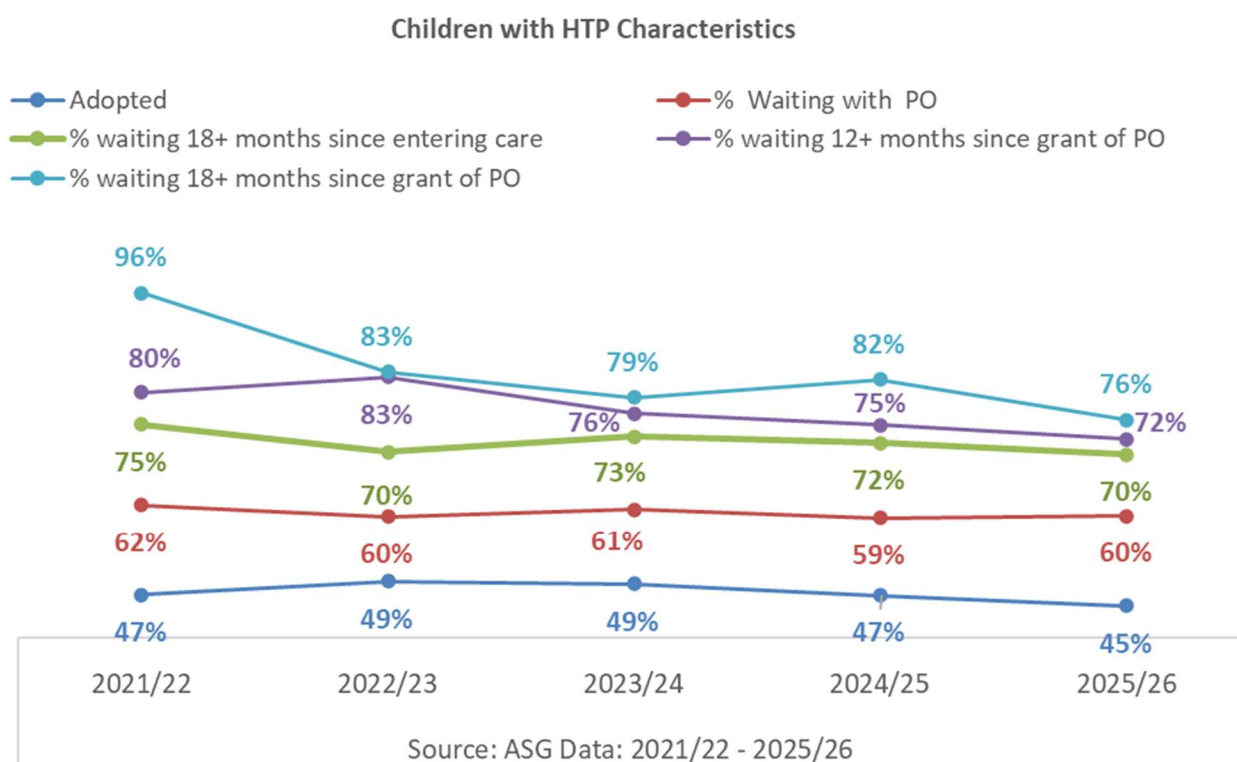


Fig. 13: proportion of children with one or more HTP characteristics who were adopted or were waiting with a PO, over the last five reporting years.

Figure 14 shows children waiting and adopted in 2025/26 according to HTP characteristics.

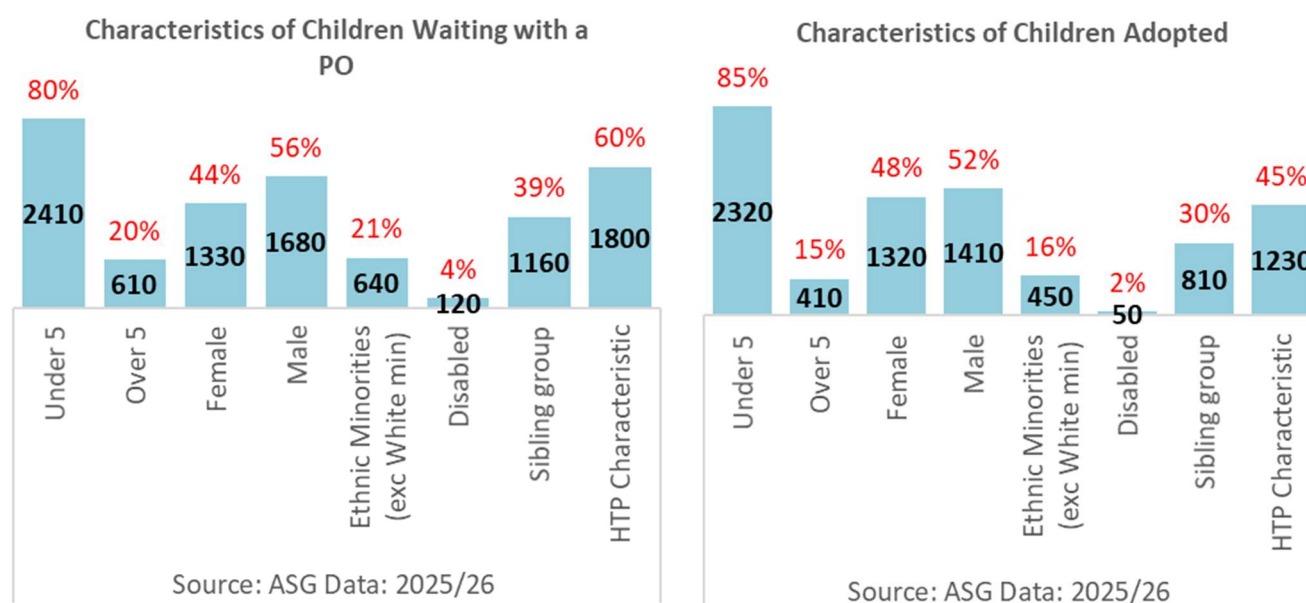


Fig. 14: graph showing the breakdown of children waiting and adopted in 2025/26 by HTP characteristics.

Longer-term trend

Over the past five years, the number of children with HTP characteristics fell from **1,410** to **1,230**, while the number of children with HTP characteristics waiting with a PO rose from **1,220** to **1,800**. The number of children with HTP characteristics waiting 18 months or more since entering care increased from **770** to **1,090**, and the number of children with HTP characteristics waiting 12 and 18 months or more since a PO was granted also increased from **360** to **680**, and from **250** to **370**, respectively. Despite these rises in absolute numbers, the proportion of the long-wait groups with HTP characteristics decreased. This indicates that the total long-wait population proportionally grew faster than the HTP long-wait population.

CHILDREN'S TIMELINESS BY CHARACTERISTICS

In 2025/26, the average time from entry into care to the report date for all children waiting with a PO was **646 days**, **20 days** longer than in 2024/25. Children aged 5 years and over waited the longest, at **926 days**, followed by children with a disability at **778 days**, children classified as 'harder to place' (specifically with one or more HTP characteristic) at **722 days**⁷, and ethnic-minority children at **703 days** (fig. 15).

The average time from a PO being granted to the report date was **309 days**, **28**⁸ days longer than in 2024/25. Children aged 5 years and over waited the longest, at **501 days**, followed by children with a disability at **432 days**, children classified as harder to place at **357 days**, and children in a sibling group at **337 days** (fig. 16).

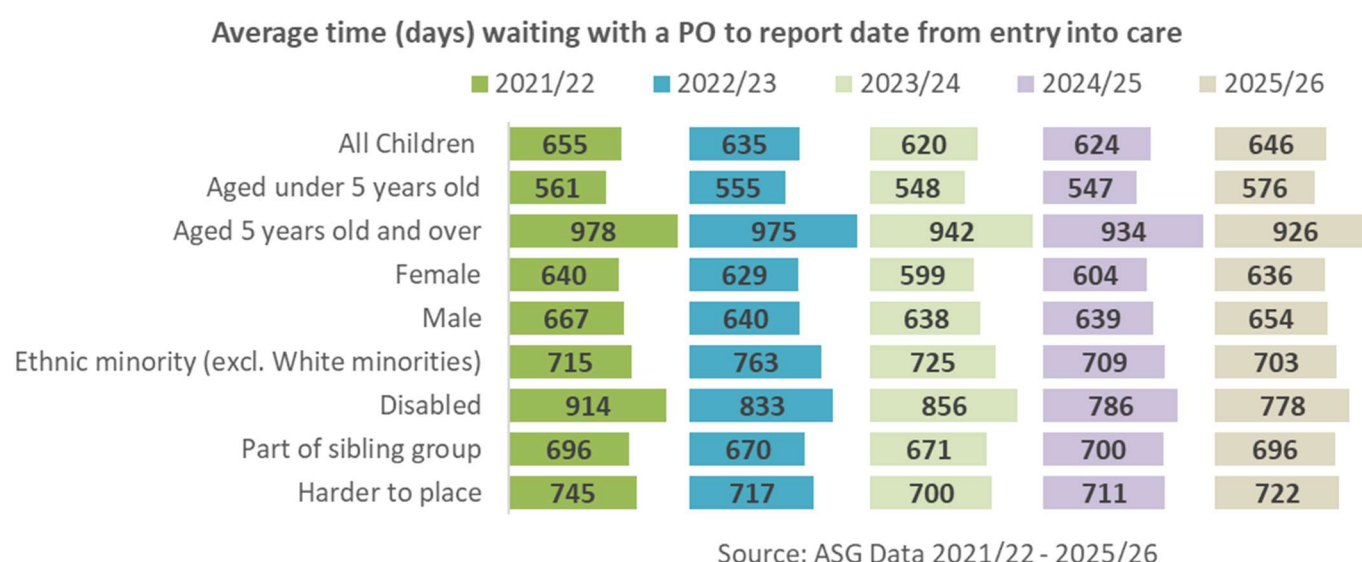
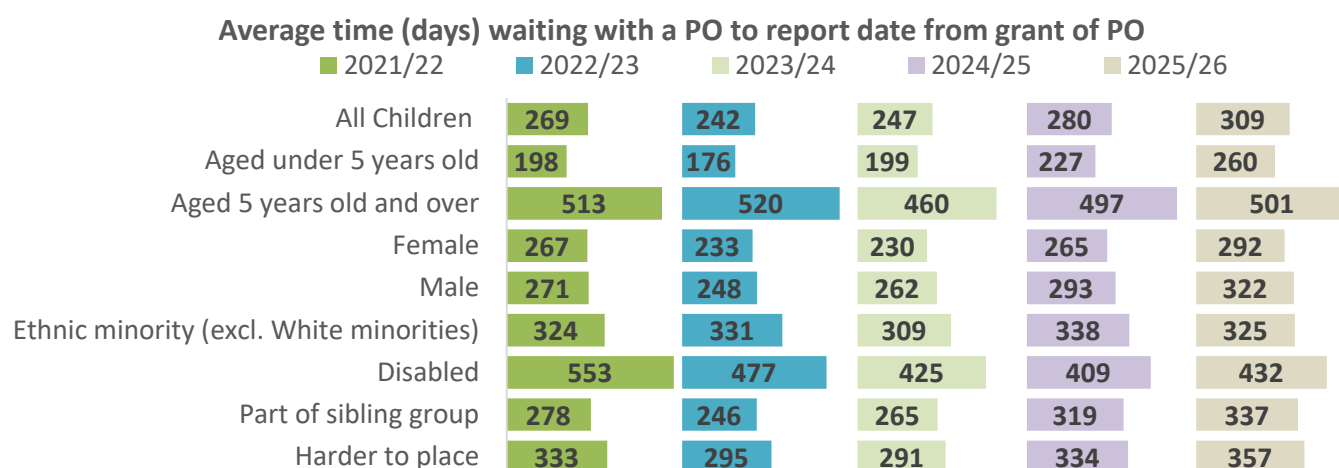


Fig. 15: average time since entry into care for children waiting with a PO at the report date.

⁷ The 'harder to place' category in figures 15-17 relates to children with one or more HTP characteristic; values within this category should therefore not be simply added together with any other HTP value in that same figure when conducting any calculation.

⁸ This difference accounts for rounding of the average times. It is calculated from the non-rounded figures of 308.622967 and 280.43354, equalling 28.189427 rounded to 28. The rounded figures (280 and 309, respectively) in figure 16 gives the rounding error-based difference of 29.



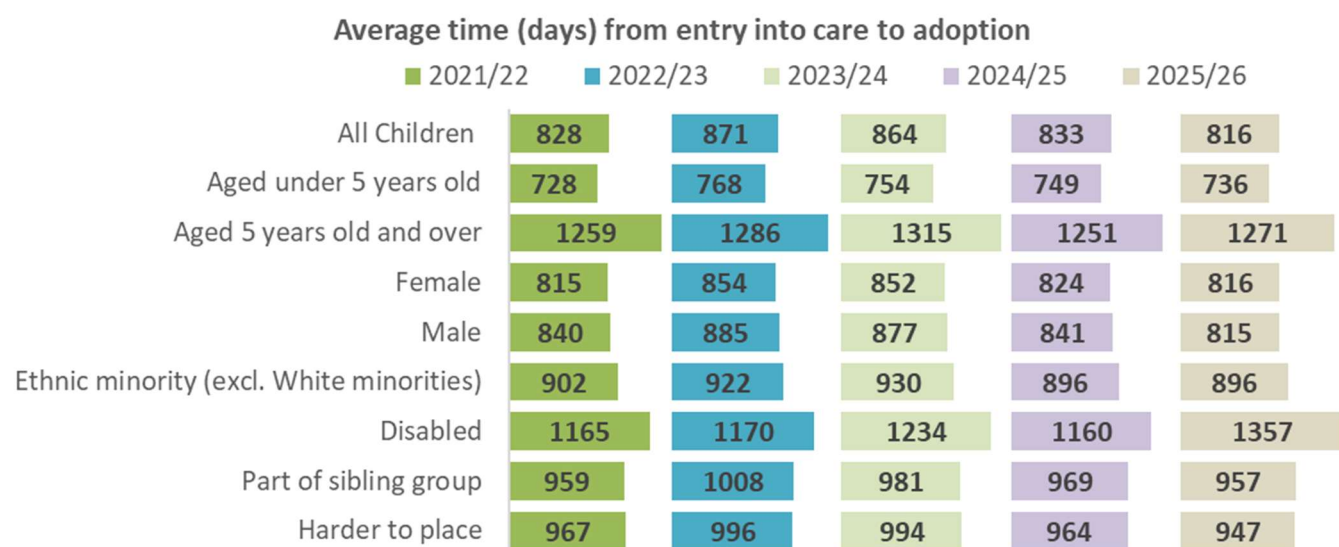
Source: ASG Data 2021/22 - 2025/26

Fig. 16: Average time from the grant of a PO to the report date for children still waiting.

The average time from entry into care to adoption was **816 days**, **17 days** shorter than in 2024/25. The longest average journey was for children with a disability, at **1,357 days**, followed by children aged 5 years and over, at **1,271 days**, and children in a sibling group, at **957 days** (fig. 17).

Longer-term trend

Across the last five years, the average time since entry into care for children with a PO still waiting to be placed showed slight decreases up to 2022/23, followed by a subsequent rise across the last two years; overall, falling by **1%** from **655 days** in 2021/22 to **646 days** in 2025/26. It fell by **5%** for children aged 5 years and over, from **978** to **926 days**; by **15%** for children with a disability, from **914** to **778 days**; and by **3%** for children classified as harder to place, from **745** to **722 days**. By contrast, the average time from a PO being granted to the reporting date increased by **15%**, from **269** to **309 days**. After falling to **242 days** in 2022/23, it rose in each of the following three years, increasing by **28%** over that period. The average completed journey from entry into care to adoption peaked at **871 days** in 2022/23 and then fell for three consecutive years, decreasing by **6%** to **816 days** in 2025/26.



Source: ASG Data 2021/22 - 2025/26

Fig. 17: average waiting time of children from entry into care to adoption over the last five reporting years.

SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS (SGOs)

The number of SGOs fell in 2025/26 compared to the year before, although the overall profile of children and special guardians remained broadly the same. Children aged 1 to 4 remained the largest child age group, while grandparents continued to account for the majority of special guardians.

Across the last five years, the main shifts were increases in the proportions of children with a disability and children from an ethnic-minority group, alongside a decline in the proportion of special guardians who were former foster carers.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN

Change since 2024/25

There were **3,930 SGOs** in 2025/26, a decrease of **6% (*n* = 260)** from **4,190** in 2024/25. The demographic profile of children subject to a SGO remained broadly similar overall.

The number and proportion of SGOs granted to children with a disability increased. The number granted to children from an ethnic-minority group was unchanged at **750**, while their proportion increased from **18%** to **19%** because the overall number of SGOs fell (fig. 18):

- **49% (*n* = 1,920)** of the children were male and **51% (*n* = 2,010)** were female
- **6% (*n* = 220)** of SGOs were granted to children with a disability
- **46% (*n* = 1,820)** of SGOs were granted to children aged under 5, and **54% (*n* = 2,110)** to children aged 5 years and over
- **19% (*n* = 750)** of SGOs were granted to children from an ethnic-minority group, excluding White-minority groups
- **43% (*n* = 1,700)** of the children were in a sibling group of two or more

Characteristics of Children with a SGO Granted

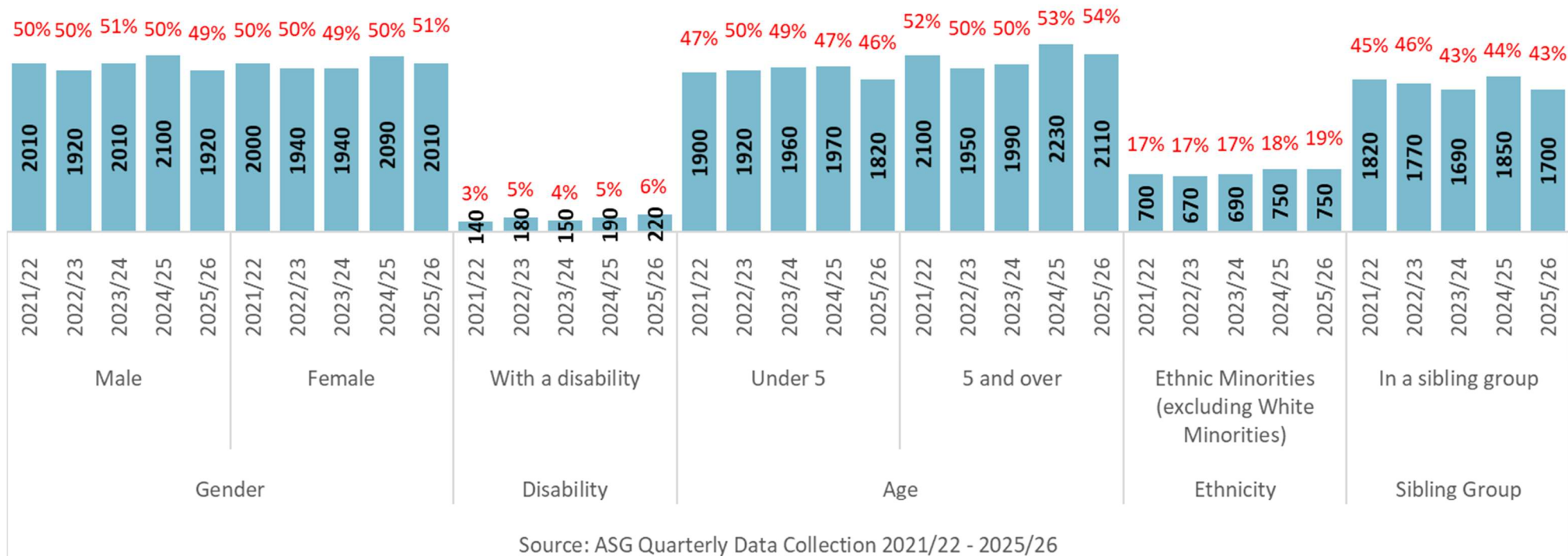


Fig. 18: number and proportion of children granted a SGO over the last five reporting years.

The number and proportion of children aged 1 to 4 who were granted a SGO decreased by **170**. However, they remained the largest age group, accounting for **34%** (*n* = **1,320**) (fig. 19).

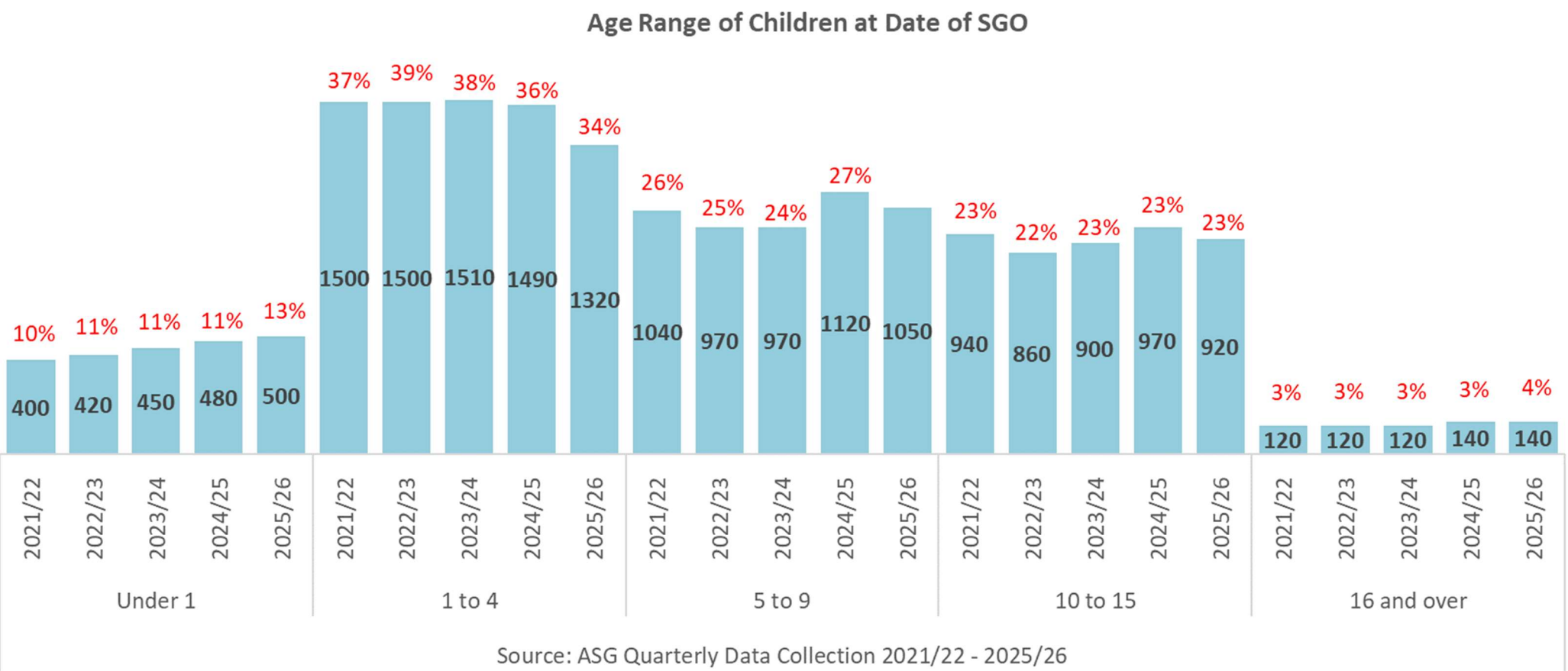


Fig. 19: number and proportion of children granted a SGO by age range, over the last five reporting years.

The ethnic profile of children granted a SGO remained similar to 2024/25, with children of White ethnicity remaining the largest group at **80% (n = 3,140)** (fig. 20).

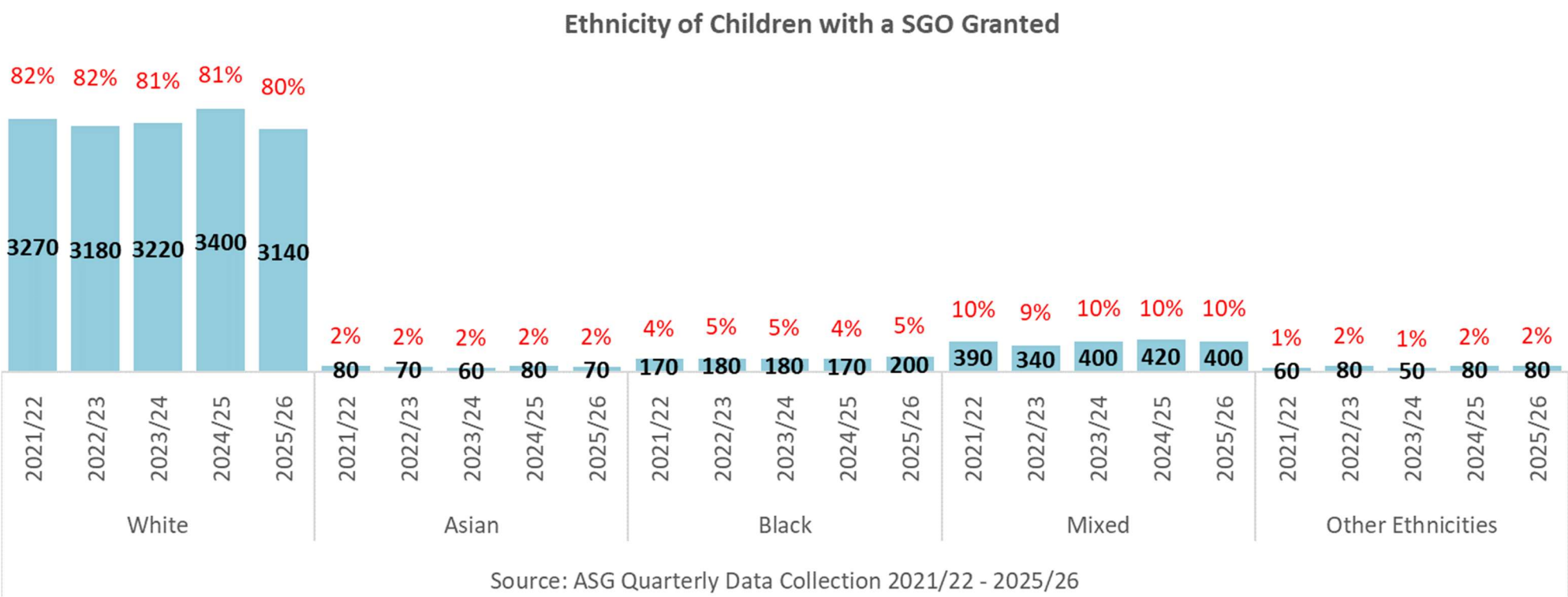


Fig. 20: number and proportion of children granted a SGO by ethnicity, over the last five reporting years. Ethnicity was not obtained or was refused for 40 children (1%).

The number and proportion of SGOs granted to children in sibling groups of two or three decreased (fig. 21):

- in a sibling group of two, from **28% (n = 1,160)** in 2024/25 to **26% (n = 1,010)** in 2025/26
- in a sibling group of three, from **13% (n = 530)** in 2024/25 to **11% (n = 450)** in 2025/26

By contrast, the number and proportion granted to children in sibling groups of four or more, increased:

- in a sibling group of four, from **3% (n = 120)** in 2024/25 to **4% (n = 160)** in 2025/26
- in a sibling group of five or more, from **1% (n = 40)** in 2024/25 to **2% (n = 70)** in 2025/26

Children not in a sibling group remained the largest group of children granted a SGO, at **57% (n = 2,230)**.

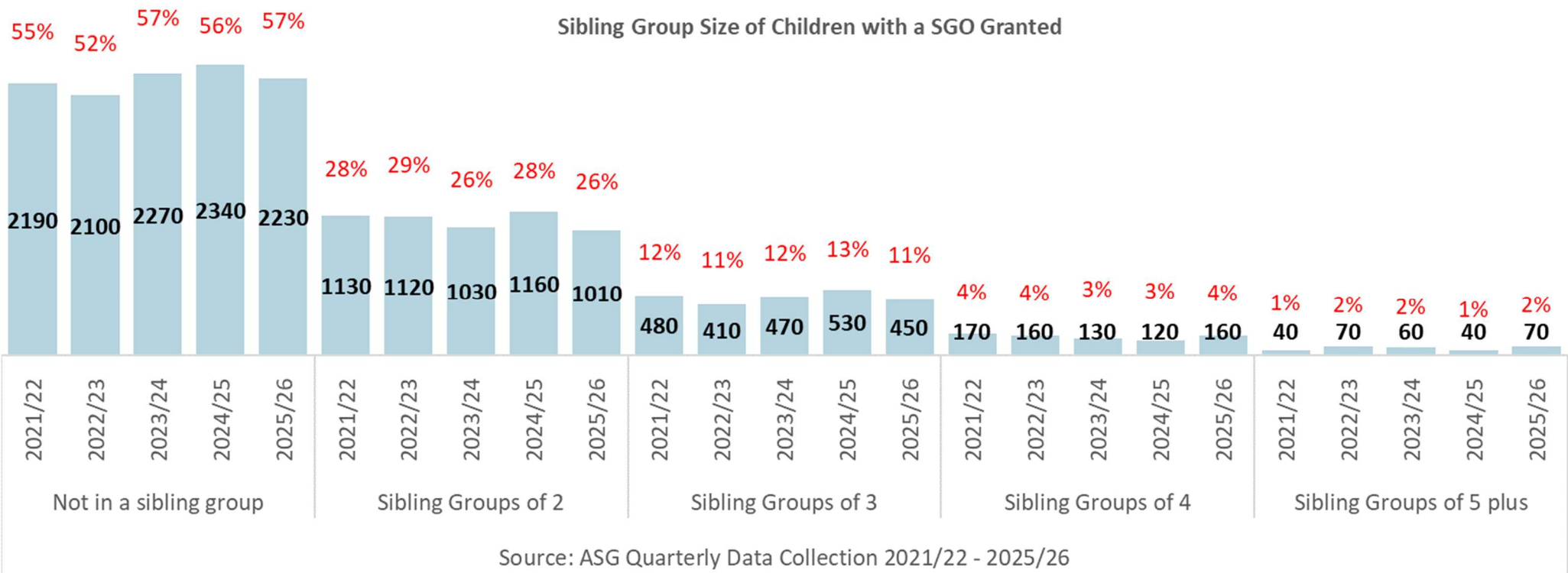


Fig. 21: number and proportion of children granted a SGO by sibling-group size, over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

The annual number of SGOs fluctuated over the past five-year period. It fell to **3,870** in 2022/23, rose to a five-year high of **4,190** in 2024/25 and then fell to **3,930** in 2025/26. The profile of children remained broadly the same, but there were small shifts in some characteristics. The proportion aged 5 years and over increased from **52%** to **54%**; the proportion with a disability increased from **3%** to **6%**; and the proportion from an ethnic-minority group increased from **16%** to **19%**. Within the detailed age profile, the proportion aged 1 to 4 fell from **37%** to **34%**, while the proportion aged under 1 rose from **10%** to **13%**.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SPECIAL GUARDIANS

Change since 2024/25

Figure 22 shows decreases in both the number and proportion of special guardians who were an ‘other family relative’, from **32% (n = 1,330)** in 2024/25 to **30% (n = 1,190)** in 2025/26, or a ‘former foster carer’, from **11% (n = 470)** to **10% (n = 410)**. The number and proportion who were a ‘friend or other existing relationship’ increased from **3% (n = 130)** to **4% (n=160)**. Although the number of grandparents decreased from **2,170** to **2,110**, their proportion increased from **52%** to **54%**, and they remained the largest group of special guardians.

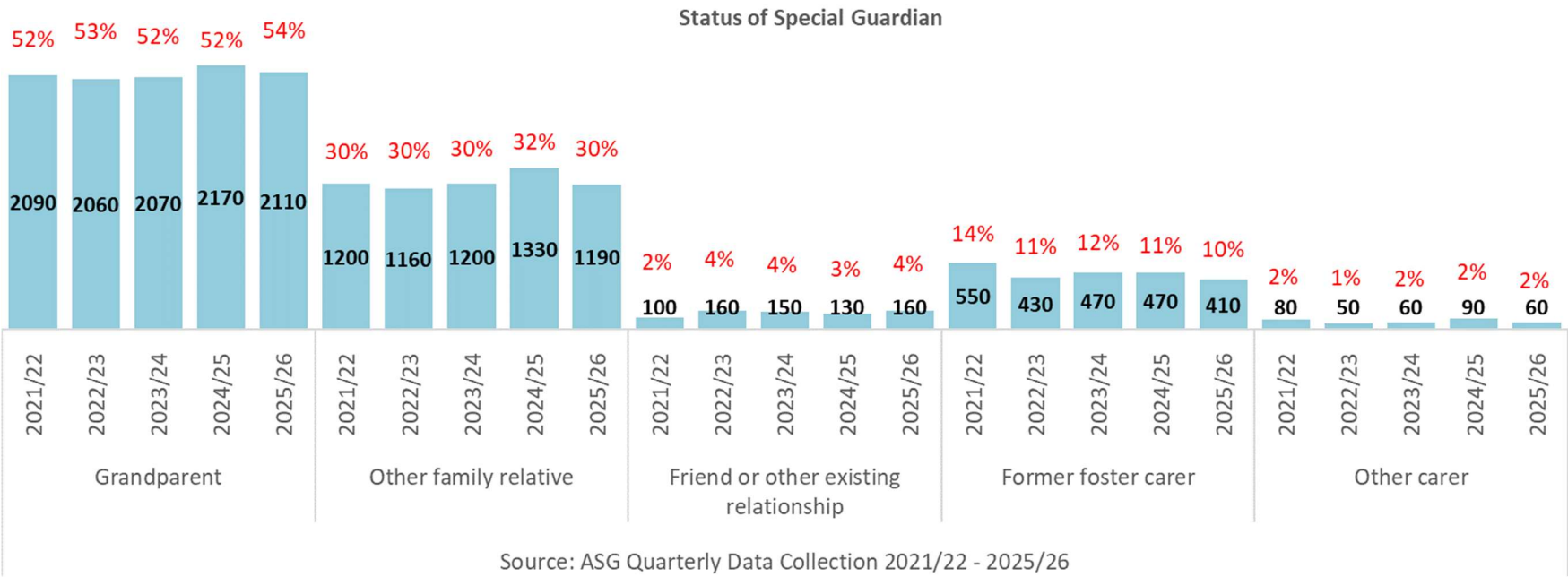


Fig. 22: number and proportion of children by their special guardian’s relationship or status category over the last five reporting years.

Figure 23 shows a decrease in both the proportion and number of special guardians aged 60 and over, from **23% (*n* = 1,050)** in 2024/25 to **22% (*n* = 940)** in 2025/26. Special guardians aged 50 to 59 remained the largest age group at **31% (*n* = 1,310)**.

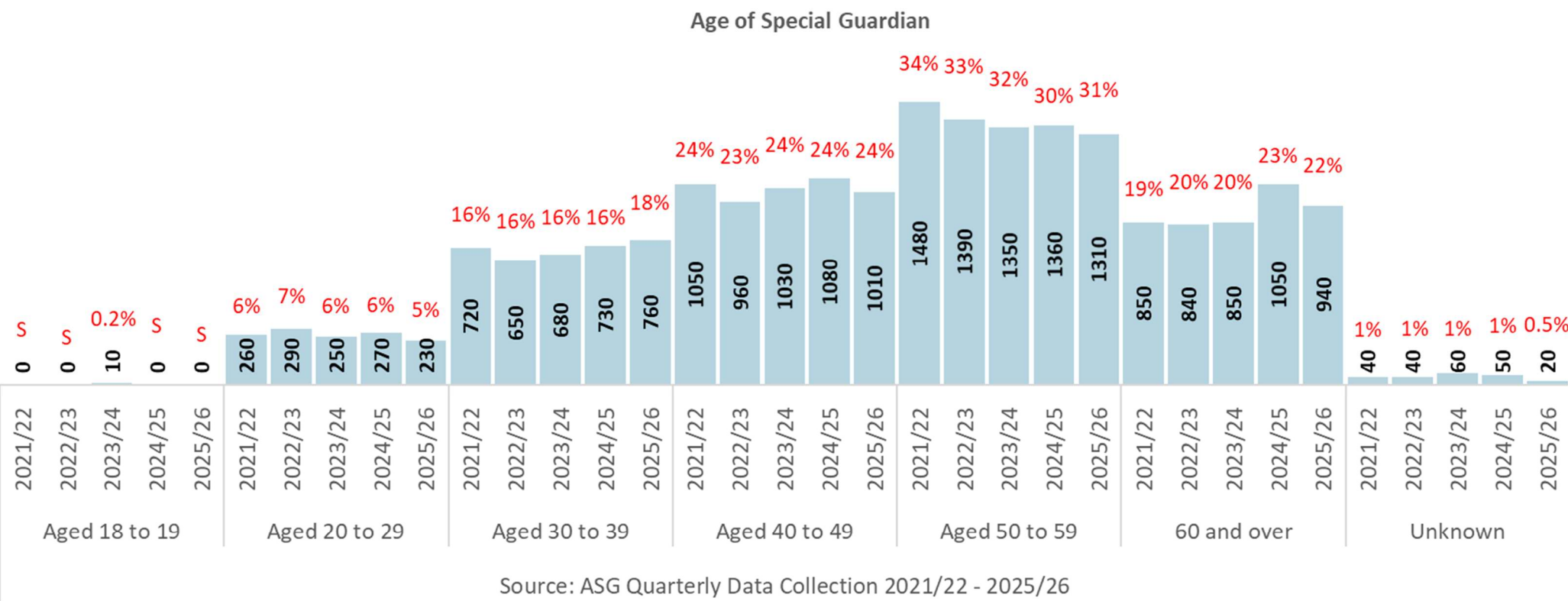


Fig. 23: number and proportion of special guardians by age range over the available reporting years. ‘S’ indicates a count below five that has been suppressed. Where a child has more than one special guardian, both guardians are included

Longer-term trend

The relationship of special guardians to children was fairly consistent across the past five-year period. Grandparents accounted for between **52%** and **54%** each year, while other family relatives accounted for between **30%** and **32%**. The main sustained change was among former foster carers, whose share fell from **14%** in 2021/22 to **10%** in 2025/26. The age profile also remained relatively stable. People aged 50 to 59 were the largest group throughout, although their share fell from **34%** to **31%**, while the share of special guardians aged 60 and over increased from **19%** to **22%**.

ADOPTERS

Most adopter activity measures decreased in 2025/26 when compared to the previous year: registrations, adopter families matched and placed, prospective adopters not yet approved, and approved adopters waiting all decreased. Approvals were broadly the same, increasing slightly. The combined pattern suggests a weaker adopter pipeline resulting in continued sufficiency pressures.

The proportion of adopters approved within six months of registration was unchanged, while the proportion matched within three months of approval increased.

RECRUITMENT AND PROGRESSION

Change since 2024/25

In 2025/26, adopter registrations decreased and approvals were broadly consistent with the previous year (fig. 24). Compared with 2024/25, there were:

- **3,180** registrations, a decrease of **2% (n = 60)**
- **2,240** approvals, slight increase (**up 10, or 0.4%**)

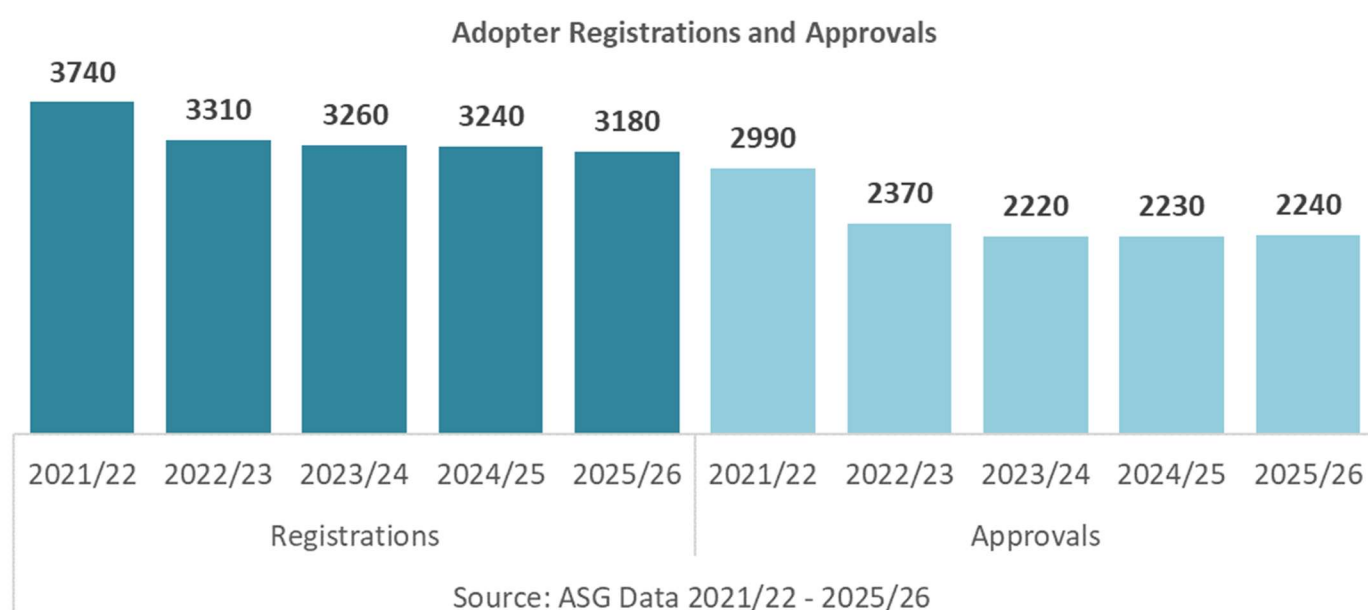


Fig. 24: number of adopter registrations and approvals over the last five reporting years.

The number of adopter families matched and placed declined (fig. 25). Compared with 2024/25, there were:

- **2,150** adopter families matched with children, a decrease of **5% (n=110)**
- **2,140** adopter families with a child placed, a decrease of **5% (n=110)**

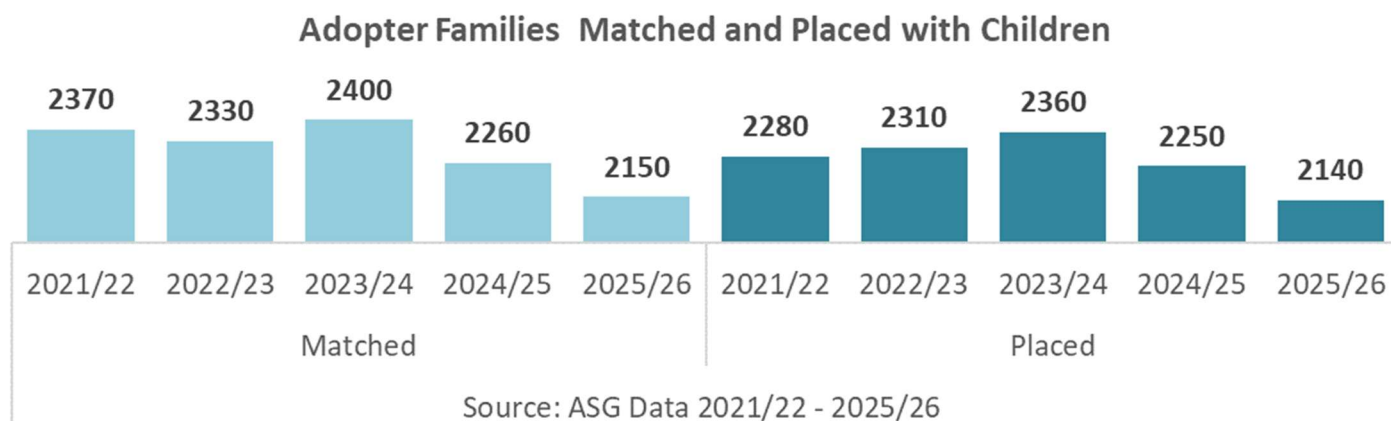


Fig. 25: number of adopter families matched and placed over the last five reporting years.

Both the number of prospective adopters not yet approved and the number approved and waiting declined (fig. 26). Compared with 2024/25, there were:

- **2,030** prospective adopter families not yet approved, a decrease of **8% (n=180)**
- **1,400** approved adopter families waiting to be matched, a decrease of **7% (n=110)**

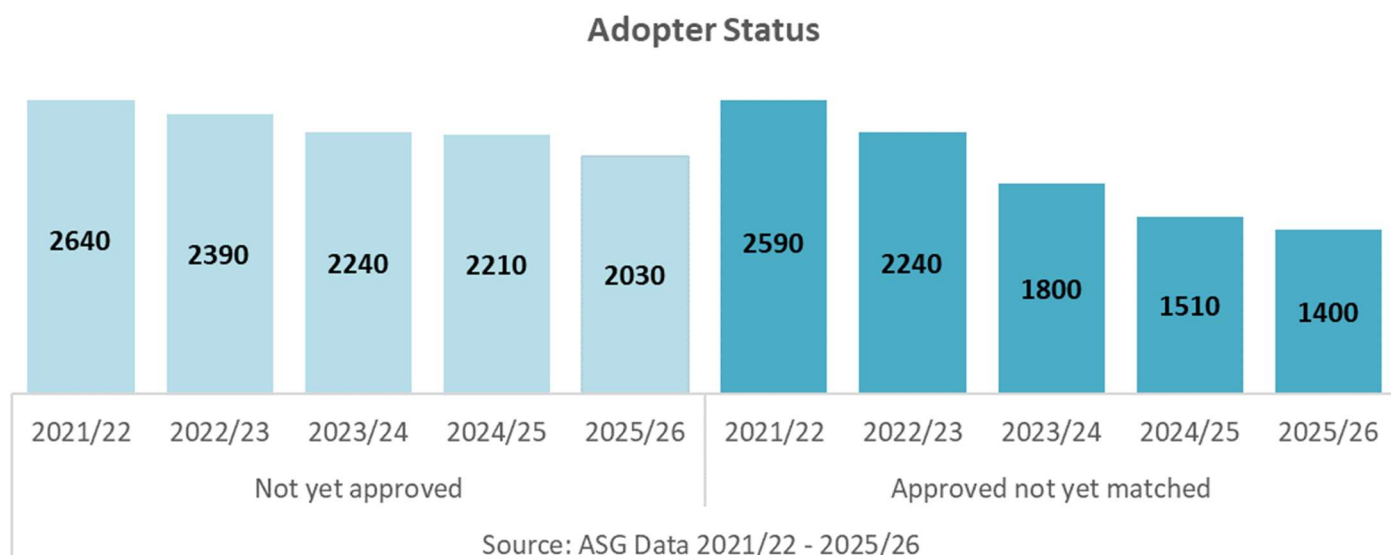


Fig. 26: number of adopter families not yet approved or approved but not yet matched, over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

Adopter registrations declined every year since 2021/22, from **3,740** in 2021/22 to **3,180** in 2025/26, a fall of **15%**. Approvals fell sharply by **21%** between 2021/22 and 2022/23, from **2,990** to **2,370** respectively, but then remained broadly stable between 2024/25 and 2025/26, at **2,230** and **2,240** respectively. Families matched and placed in the last five years both peaked in 2023/24 and then declined for two consecutive years to five-year lows of **2,150** (matched) and **2,140** (placed) in 2025/26. Across the last five years the number of prospective adopters not yet approved fell by **23%**, from **2,640** to **2,030**, while the number approved and waiting fell by **46%**, from **2,590** to **1,400**.

ADOPTER TIMELINESS

Change since 2024/25

Adopter timeliness was broadly stable over the past five years, with an increase in the proportion matched within three months of approval (fig. 27). Compared with 2024/25:

- **24%** of adopter families were approved within six months of registration, unchanged from 2024/25
- **25%** of adopter families matched during the year were matched within three months of approval, an increase of **2** percentage points

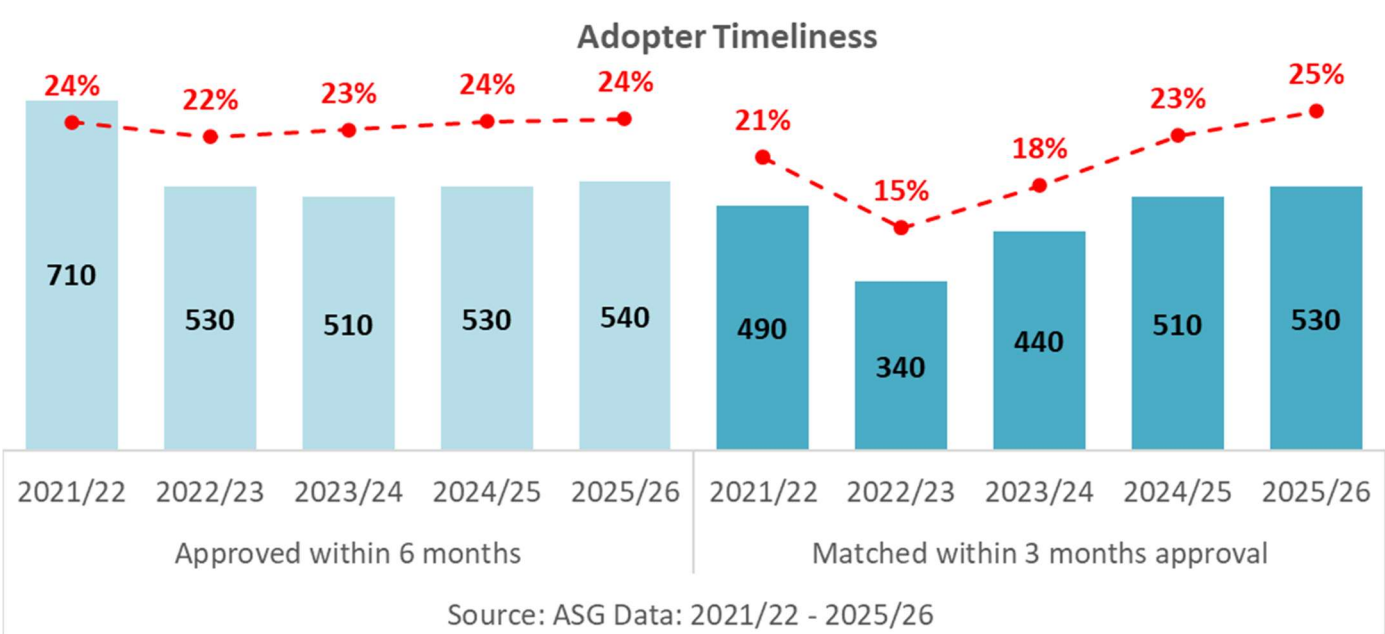


Fig. 27: adopter timeliness by number and proportion over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

The proportion of adopter families approved within six months remained within a narrow range of **22%** to **24%** across the last five years. The proportion matched within three months followed a different pattern, falling to **15%** in 2022/23 before increasing in each year to a five-year high of **25%** in 2025/26.

PLACEMENT PROVIDERS

Change since 2024/25

Figure 28 shows the numerical and proportional split by placement provider. Compared with 2024/25, the proportion of children placed with:

- 'Own RAA' increased by 3 percentage points to **79% (n = 2,040)**
- 'Other RAA' was unchanged at **6% (n = 160)**
- 'VAA' decreased by 3 percentage points to **13% (n = 340)**
- local authorities or VAAs outside England were unchanged at **2% (n = 50)**

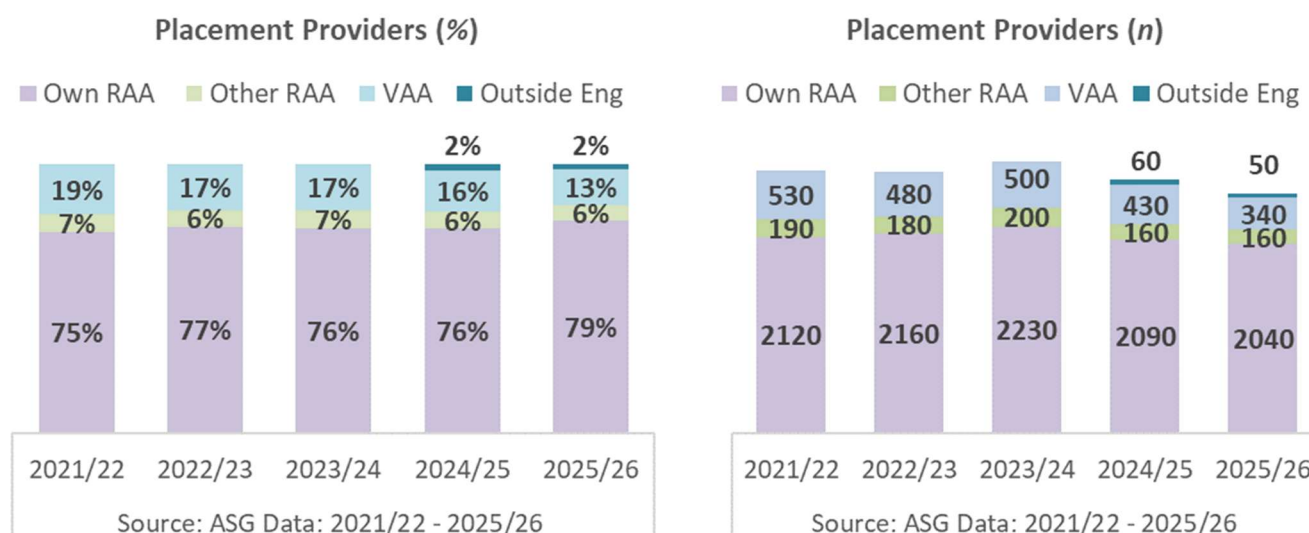


Fig. 28: proportion (left) and number (right) of children placed for adoption, by placement provider, over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

Across five years, the proportion of children placed through their own RAA increased from **75%** to **79%**, while the proportion placed through a VAA fell from **19%** to **13%**. The proportions placed through another RAA or outside England remained comparatively small and stable. The number placed through an own RAA peaked at **2,230** in 2023/24 and then fell to **2,040** in 2025/26, reflecting the wider reduction in placements.

FAMILY FINDING AND WITHDRAWALS

Change since 2024/25

There was little change in the family finding status overall. Compared with 2024/25, the proportion of adopter families that:

- were in active family finding was unchanged at **46% (n = 640)**
- were expected to go on hold or withdraw decreased by 2 percentage points to **8% (n = 110)**
- had a child found but were not formally matched at panel decreased by 2 percentage points to **37% (n = 520)**

There were **240** adopter families that withdrew after approval, **20 fewer** than last year, representing an **8% decrease** (fig. 30).

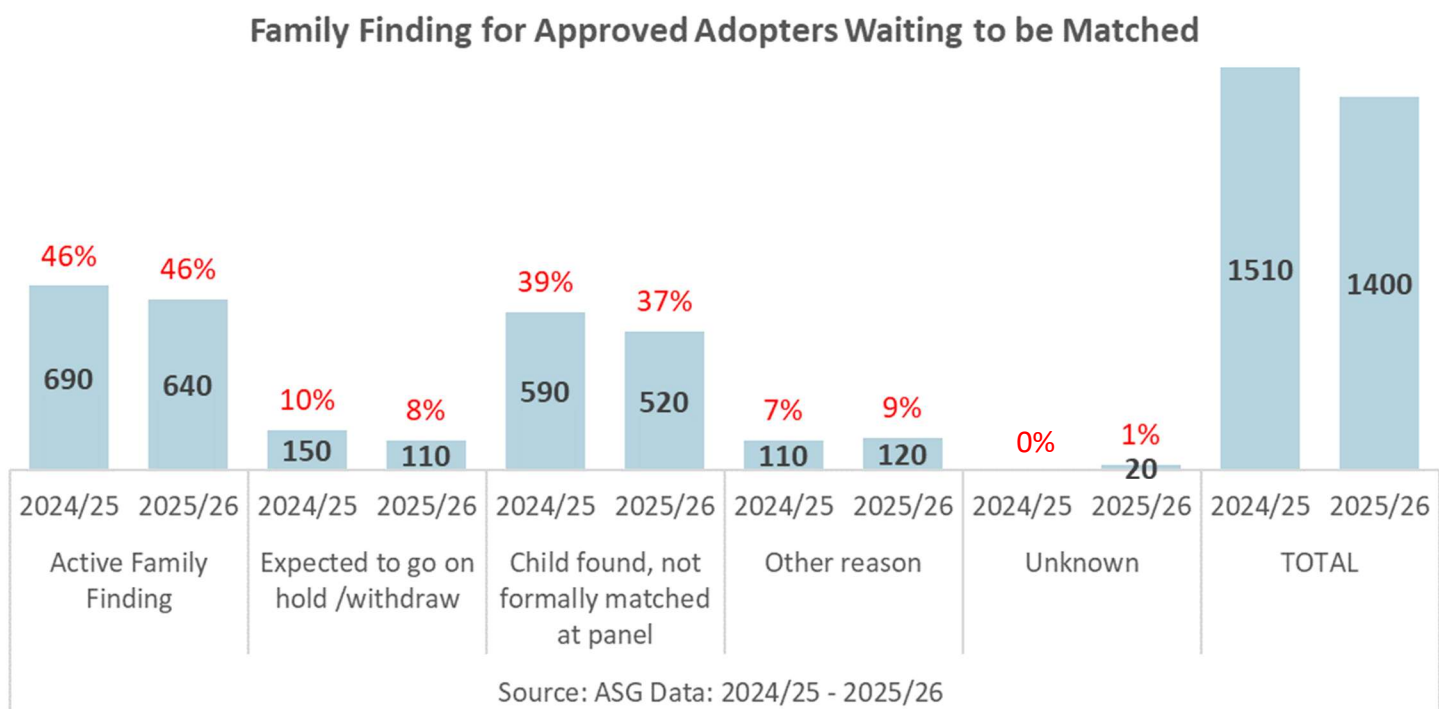


Fig. 29: proportion and number of adopter families by family finding status, compared with 2024/25.

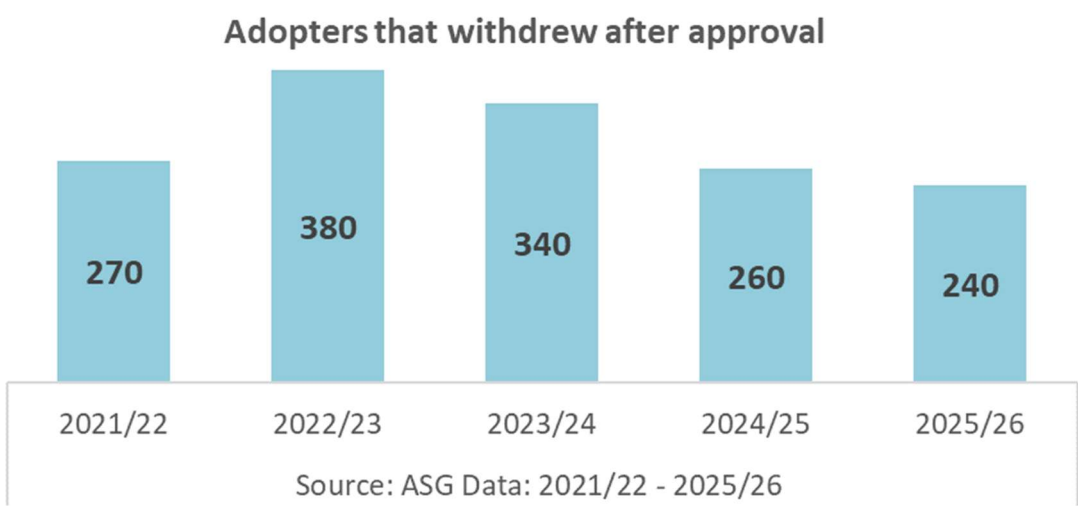


Fig. 30: number of adopters that withdrew from the process after approval over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

Family finding status is available for only two reporting years, so a longer-term trend cannot yet be established. Withdrawals after approval are available for five years. They peaked at **380** in 2022/23 and then fell every year to **240** in 2025/26, the lowest figure in the series.

SUFFICIENCY OF ADOPTERS

Status at end of reporting year (31st March 2026)

At the end of this reporting year, the number of children waiting with a PO ($n = 3,010$) exceeded the number of approved adopter families waiting ($n = 1,400$) by **1,610** (fig. 31). Because one adopter family may be able to care for either one child or a sibling group, this difference is not an estimate of the number of additional families required. It is a broad indicator of the imbalance between children and available approved families.

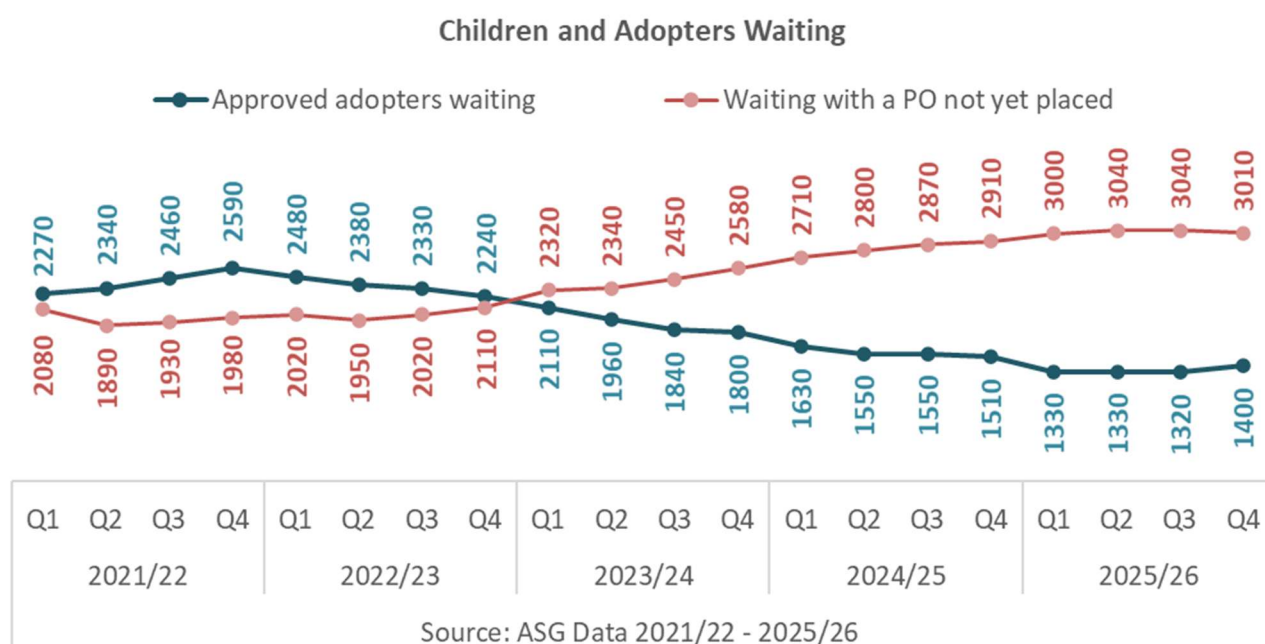


Fig. 31: comparison of children waiting with a PO not yet placed, and approved adopters waiting to be matched, by quarter for the last five reporting years.

Figure 32 provides the more comparable family-level measure of adopter sufficiency. It shows that there were:

- **2,060** children with active family finding
- **640** adopter families with active family finding
- **1,580** adopter families estimated to be needed, based on the number of single children and sibling groups waiting to be placed
- **940** estimated shortfall of adopter families

Longer-term trend

The balance between children and approved adopter families changed markedly over the last five years. At the end of Q4 2021/22, there were **2,590** approved adopter families waiting and **1,980** children waiting with a PO. The trend reversed during 2023/24. By Q4 2025/26, the number of children had increased by **52%** to **3,010**, while the number of approved adopter families had fallen by **46%** to **1,400**. The resulting numerical gap therefore widened to **1,610**.

Status of Family Finding for Children and Adopters

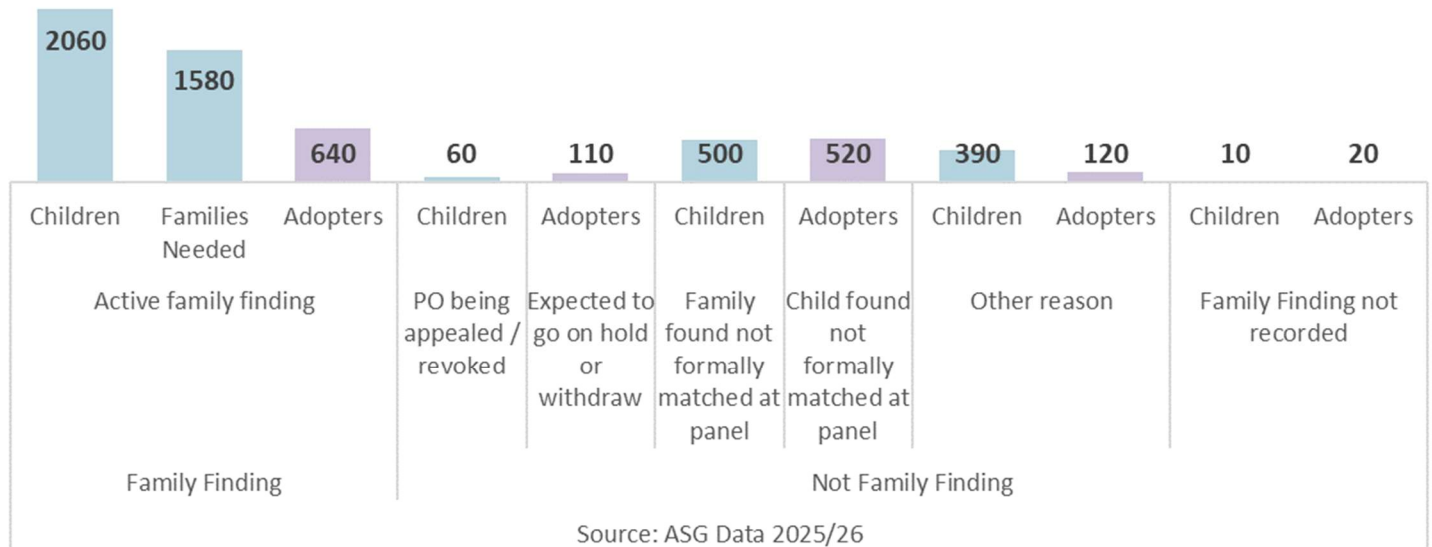


Fig. 32: Family finding status for children and adopters.

ADOPTER PIPELINE

Figure 33 shows quarterly flows of registrations and approvals, and quarter-end counts of prospective adopters not yet approved and approved adopters waiting, over the last five years.

Compared with 2024/25, the total number of adopter registrations was lower in 2025/26, while approvals were broadly the same, increasing slightly from **2,230** to **2,240**. At the end of Q4, the numbers of prospective adopters not yet approved and approved adopters waiting were also lower than the same groups at the end of Q4 last year.

Within 2025/26, the Q4 figures show that:

- **830** registrations in Q4, **120** more than in Q3, **20** more than Q1 and **10** fewer than Q2
- **560** approvals in Q4, equal to Q2, **30** more than Q1 and **50** fewer than in Q3
- **2,030** prospective adopter families not yet approved at the end of Q4, unchanged from Q3
- **1,400** approved adopter families waiting at the end of Q4, the highest quarter-end figure of 2025/26

Adopter Pipeline: Registrations, Approvals and Awaiting Approval and Approved

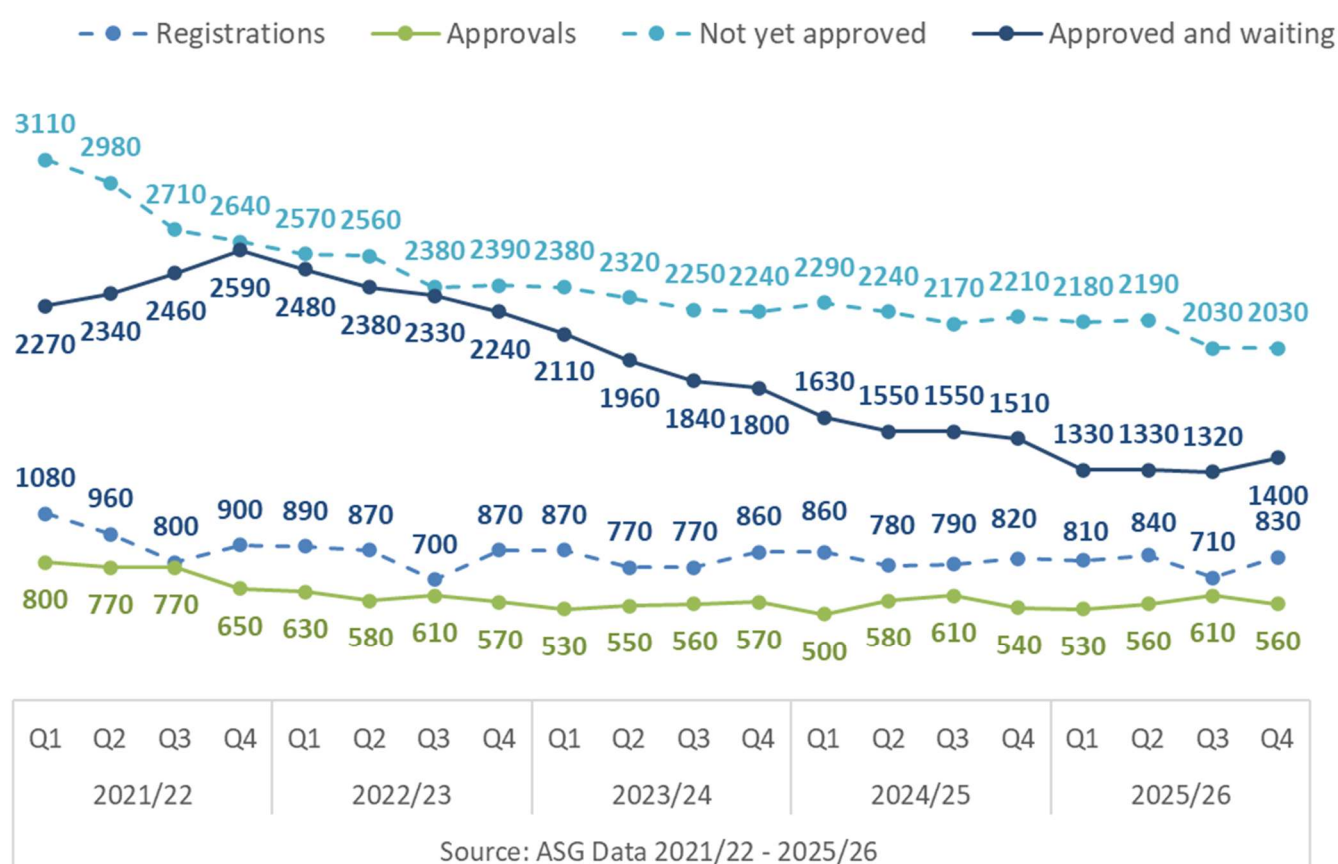


Fig. 33: adopter pipeline by quarter over the last five reporting years.

Longer-term trend

Across the quarterly series, both pre-approval and post-approval number of adopters reduced substantially. Prospective adopter families not yet approved fell from **3,110** in Q1 2021/22 to **2,030** in Q4 2025/26, while approved families waiting fell from **2,270** to **1,400**. Quarterly registrations were also generally lower than in 2021/22. Since 2022/23, quarterly approvals have been comparatively stable, mostly between **500** and **610**.

PIPELINE BALANCE

Longer-term trend

In each of the past four years, the number of children granted POs was higher than the number of adopter families approved. These measures are not directly comparable because they count children and families respectively, and one family may adopt more than one child. Nevertheless, the consistent difference indicates continuing pressure on the supply of approved adopters. In 2025/26, the difference between the quarterly figures reduced from **270** in Q1 to **100** in Q4 (Figure 34).

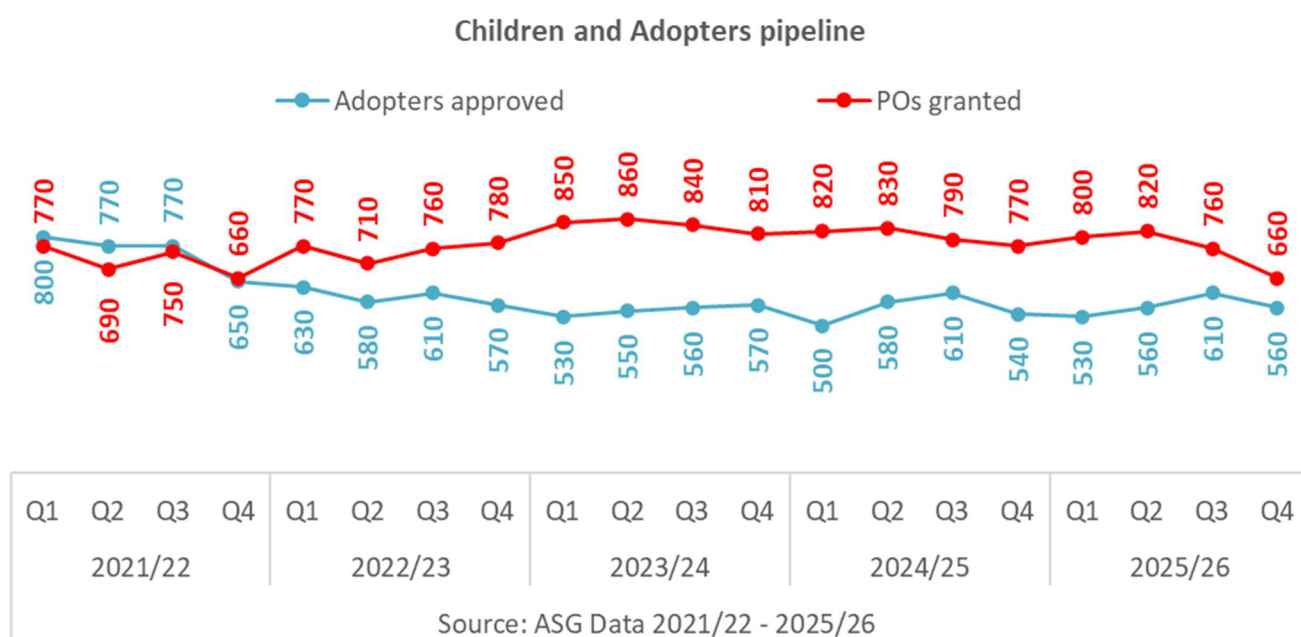


Fig. 34: children and adopter pipeline comparison per quarter over the last five reporting years.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The 2025/26 data show reduced activity at several stages of the adoption process alongside increasing pressure among children who are waiting. POs, AOs, matches, placements and total permanence orders all fell compared with 2024/25. In the longer-term series, total permanence orders (AOs, SGOs), children matched and children placed were at five-year lows, while ADM reversals reached a five-year high.

The pressure is most evident in the waiting population. Both the number of children with a PO still waiting to be placed and the numbers waiting for long periods have increased substantially over five years. Children with harder to place characteristics continue to be over-represented among those waiting and experience longer average waits. At the same time, registrations and the pool of prospective and approved adopter families have contracted, and the family-level analysis estimates a shortfall of **940 adopter families**.

The pattern is not uniformly negative. A20 and the average journey from entry into care to adoption improved, adopter approvals remained similar to last year, and the proportion matched within three months increased. SGO characteristics also remained similar to last year. Monitoring in 2026/27 should therefore consider both the continuing growth in waiting and the extent to which improvements in individual timeliness measures translate into reduced waits across the system.

DATA SOURCES

ASG QUARTERLY DATA COLLECTION

In Q4 2025/26, response rates for the local-authority child-level and adopter-level sections were both 100%. The response rate for the voluntary-adoption-agency adopter-level section was also 100%. National and regional figures on adoptions and adopters therefore do not include estimates for non-response.

DfE SSDA 903 DATA COLLECTION

Local authorities provide data on their looked after children using the SSDA903 collection. Data are collected from all local authorities. The information is collected at child level and includes information about the child's characteristics and their dates for each stage of the care process, including adoption. The data undergo thorough quality assurance and local authorities are able to update their historical data annually. We therefore view this as the most robust source of information on adoption. It is used to produce the [Children looked after in England including adoption](#) (SFR) and the [Adoption Scorecards](#).

DATA SOURCE NOTES:

- a. Detailed analyses in the [Special Guardianship Orders](#) section of this Headline Measures report, including longer-term trends, use ASG data for all reporting years. This provides a consistent series incorporating the latest 2025/26 results and the detailed characteristics examined here. DfE statistics are used earlier in the report for the headline historical comparison of national permanence totals. Small differences may occur because the two collections are produced and revised separately.
- b. Figures 15-17 are calculated from individual child records containing valid dates and relevant characteristics. They may differ slightly from the national averages in Figure 8, which are based on rounded figures in line with standard practice throughout the rest of this document. Unrounded child-level values were used to produce the most accurate average waiting times by child characteristic shown in figures 15-17. Only national aggregate averages are presented; no individual-level values or potentially identifiable small counts are reported.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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download: [ASG Quarterly Data](#)

email: asglb@coram.org.uk

write: Coram, Coram Campus, 41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ