

**Adoption End of Year Report**  
**1<sup>st</sup> October 2015 - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016**



**Executive Report**



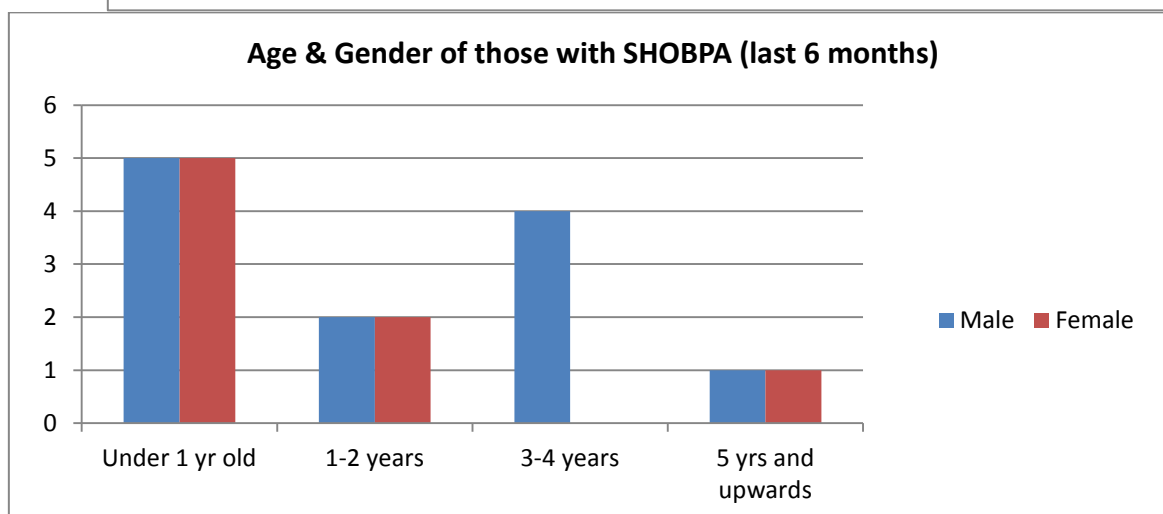
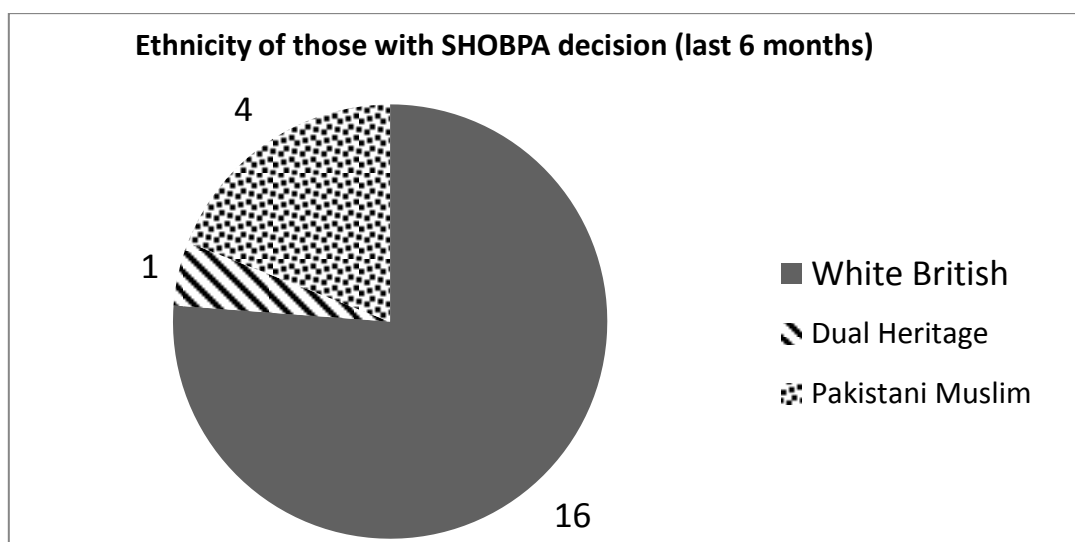
## Introduction

The Adoption Service contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people in line with priorities outlined in other Council plans.

## Adoption Agency Business - Children

### Children with an Adoption Plan

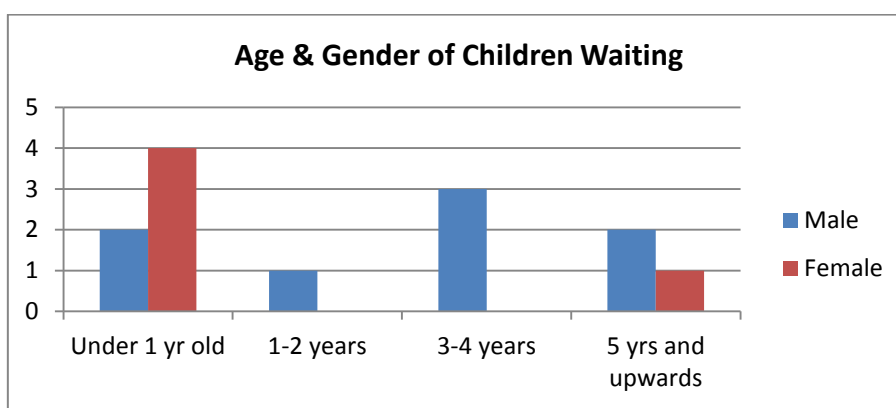
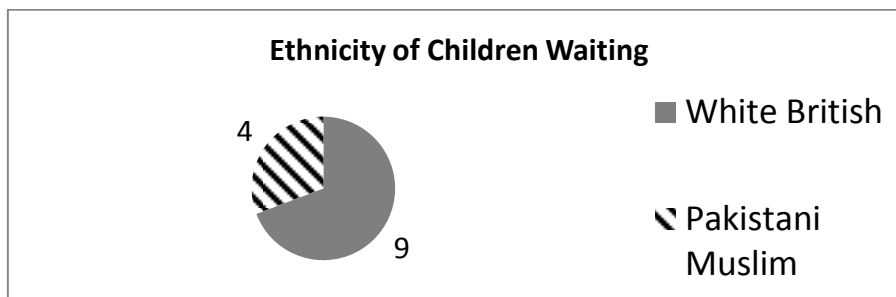
There has been a significant increase in the number of children being presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a Should Be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decision, resulting in more than double the number of positive decisions being made (21, up from 8 in the first half of the year). This included a sibling group of two where the decision was reversed before the final hearing and one child where the Local Authority maintained its plan for adoption but a Placement Order was not granted. A relatively high number of children have been booked on to the consultation meeting for decisions and have been withdrawn prior to the meeting due to changes in plans. These plans have changed largely due to the courts preferring family members to adopt and are not related to any difficulty in matching or placing children. This issue was raised in the Queen's Speech recently when she indicated the intention of the Government to tackle this with the judiciary.



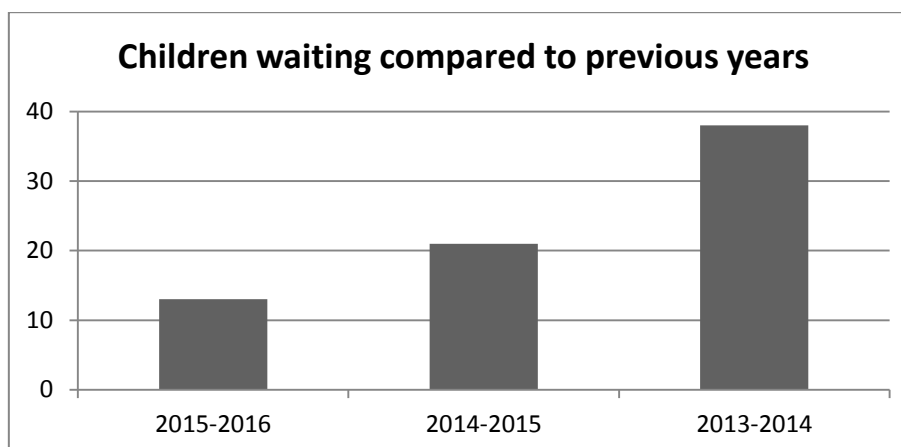
The total number of SHOBPA decisions made this year is 29 compared to 24 during the last financial year. Some local authorities are reporting a much higher increase after low numbers, but locally the change appears to have been slower, although the Authority is now beginning to follow the national trend.

## Children Awaiting Matching

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, there were 15 children with a plan for adoption awaiting placement, although one was awaiting a change of care plan after a Placement Order was not granted, and one was awaiting further court ordered assessment after a Placement Order was not granted. Of the 13 remaining children, 4 are awaiting Placement Orders and one is matched and awaiting placement. Two of the children have significant health difficulties, which are likely to affect their future development and functioning; however, in both cases, potential matches have been identified and are being explored.



In addition to the above, six children are in Concurrent or Fostering For Adoption placements awaiting SHOBPA, Placement Order or matching.



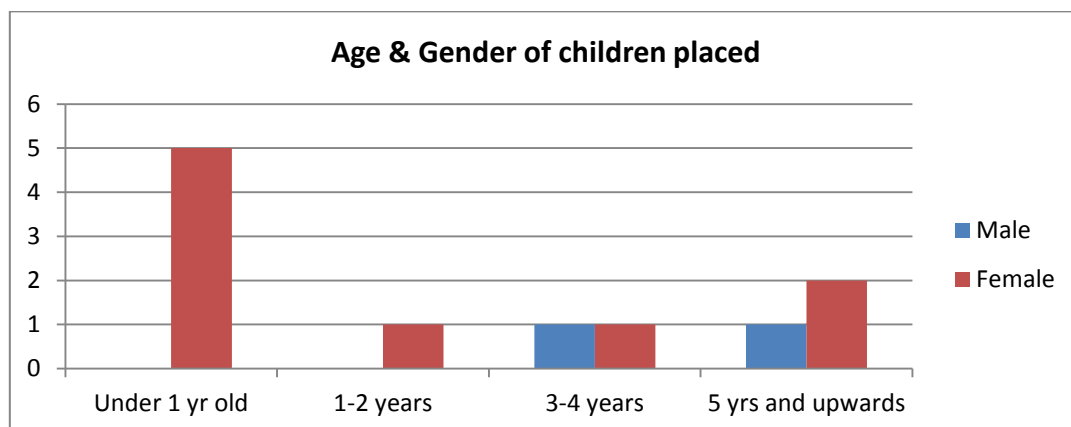
## Family Finding Activity

Over the past year, the most frequently used and successful family finding activities have included in-house and area (A6) placement meetings, use of professional links and relationships, and Adoption Link. In addition, the regional database, CHARMS, which is facilitated by 23 local authorities in the North West and holds information about families waiting and children available in all the partner agencies to support quicker matches, has been used for all children and the National Register for those where a potential match was

not identified within the first month. Exchange Days and the Children Who Wait publication have been used for a small number of children, who were harder to place by virtue of age, ethnicity or medical background. There have been no Activity Days in the North West due to the low numbers of children regionally; therefore, it has not been possible to use these for family finding.

### Children Placed for Adoption

The number of children placed has fallen from 16 in the first half of the year to 11 children in 9 placements in the second half of the year. These included two siblings matched with their foster carers, and two babies matched with concurrent carers (i.e. the legal status of the placement has moved from fostering to an adoption placement, but the children have not experienced a further move). Of the 11 children placed, there were 8 White British and 3 of Pakistani Muslim ethnicity.



It has not been possible to sustain the high percentage of in-house placements achieved in the first half of the year; however, this has largely been as a result of the needs of the children (e.g. being placed with existing siblings, concurrent placements which are commissioned, avoiding a further move and placing further afield for safety reasons), rather than a lack of availability.

	North West	Further Afield
Own	1	0
Other Local Authority	3	2
Voluntary Agency	2	1

In total, 27 children have been placed compared to 35 in the last financial year; however, this does not represent a failure to place but rather a reduction in children with a plan for adoption as evidenced above.

There are a number of different targets used to measure timescales as indicated below.

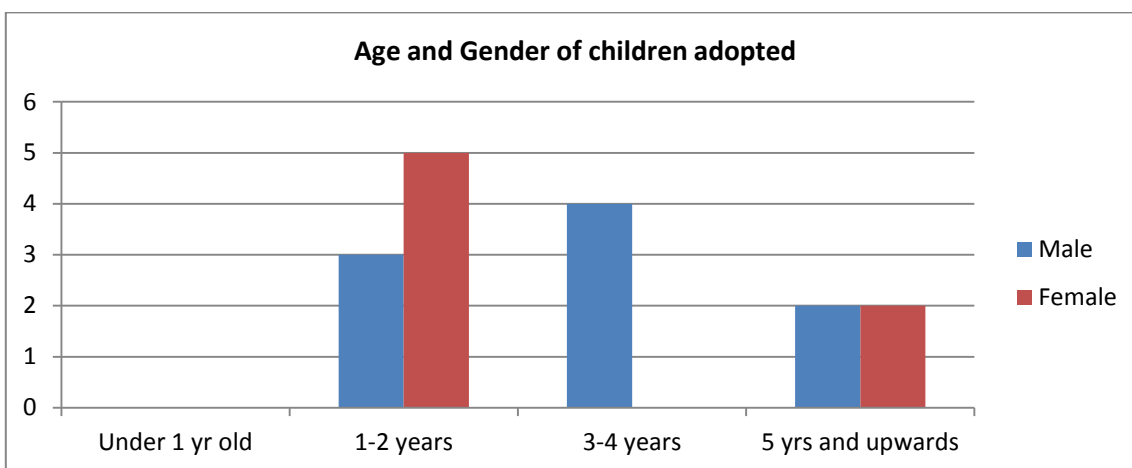
#### *Timescales for placements made*

Timescale	Target	BwD Placements achieved quicker than standard			BwD Placements achieved slower than standard		
		Oct-Mar	Apr-Sept	Annual	Oct-Mar	Apr-Sept	Annual
SHOBPA to Panel	National Minimum Standard – 6 months	5	4	9	6	12	18
SHOBPA to Placement	Government Standard - 12 months	7	12	19	4	4	8
Placement Order to Matching	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	5	8	13	6	8	14

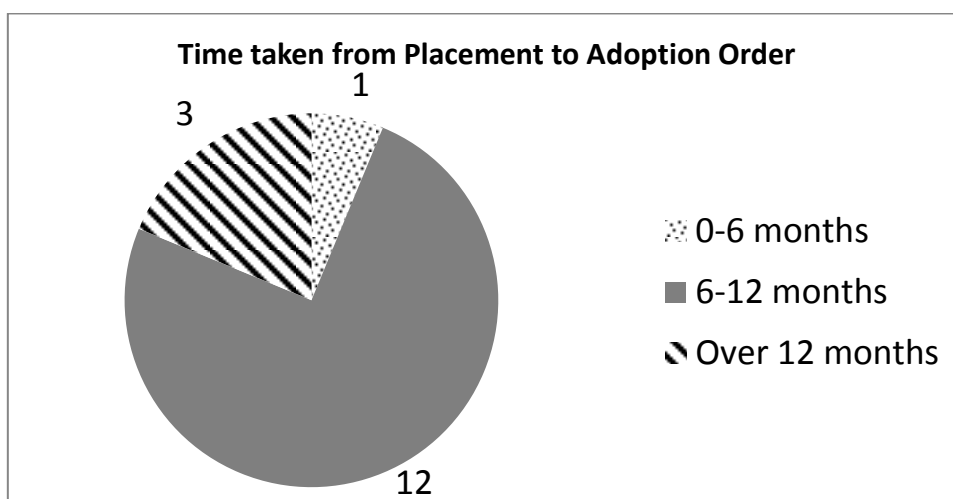
The most significant of these is the Scorecard Indicator as it most accurately measures the quality, in terms of speed, of family finding activity. Despite efforts to increase the number of concurrent placements, it appears consistently difficult to achieve the target of 121 days as an overall average or in a majority of cases. Of the six children in the last 6 months, who took longer than 121 days to match, 2 had experienced a previous adoption disruption and then awaited the assessment of their foster carers (735 days each) and 1 had experienced a previous match breakdown (256 days). Two older Asian Muslim siblings were harder to find a family for (220 days) and one older boy took longer to prepare following the making of a Placement Order due to a high level of uncertainty during court proceedings up until the making of the Order (156 days). The results in part reflect the Service's commitment to follow a plan for adoption for any child this is considered the best plan for regardless of the impact upon timescales; however, the Adoption Service continues to be mindful of avoiding delay when at all possible as, for the vast majority of children, this is in their best interests. Regular case tracking and analysis helps the Service as a whole to keep a focus on timescales and continually aim for improvement in this area.

### Children Adopted

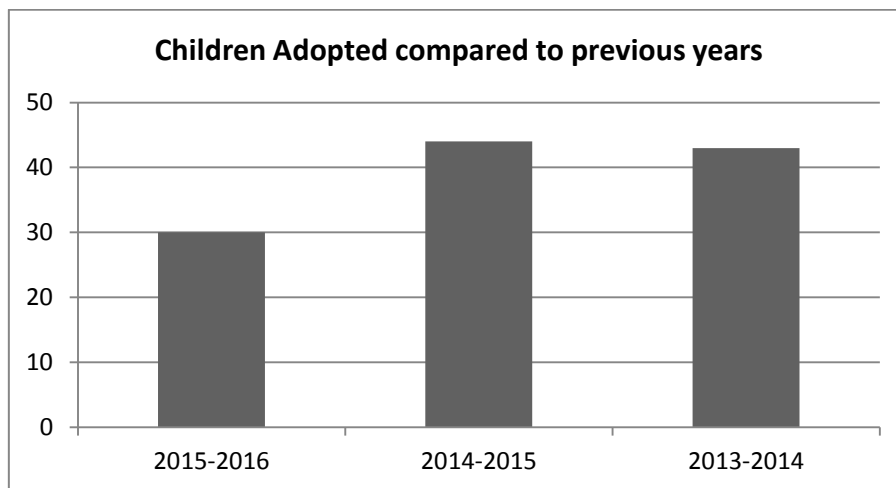
The number of Adoption Orders granted to Blackburn with Darwen children in the second half of the year has remained on a par with the first six months, with 16 children being adopted making a total of 30 over the whole year. Of the 16 children adopted, 14 were White British, 1 child was dual heritage White British/Pakistani and 1 child was dual heritage White British/¼ Black Caribbean.



Those adopted in the second half of the year included two male sibling groups of two including one older pair, who had waited over 2.5 years from entry into care to placement and one younger pair, who had significant developmental and behavioural difficulties. Also included was a boy, who had experienced a previous adoption placement breakdown, a sibling group of three and a girl with significant medical and developmental difficulties resulting from Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. All of these children are experiencing exceptionally high levels of therapeutic care and love from their parents.



The vast majority of Adoption Orders were made between 6 - 12 months following the date of placement. Adopters are unable to lodge an application until 10 weeks after placement and it is now the norm for birth parents to request leave to contest, which adds a minimum of 2 months to the length of time taken from lodging an application to an order being made (roughly 2 - 3 months if no leave to contest is lodged). It is now extremely rare for Adoption Orders to be made in under six months from the point of placement. It is vital that there is ongoing contact with birth parents in the intervening period so that fair representation can be made of their current situation and capacity to parent.



It is only after the making of an Adoption Order that the Placement Order to Matching figures count towards our Scorecard. The average over the second half of this year has remained roughly the same as the first half, giving an overall average of 214 days. The reason for the average number of days being 214 is due to the complexity of a number of cases. If these were to be removed, the figure would fall to 136 days. The figures below (other than those for this year) are taken from the government published National Scorecards, which measures the average over a rolling 3 year period. Also included is the indicator relating to the number of days from Entry into Care to Placement.

	Entry into care to Placement			SHOBPA to Matching		
	Threshold target	National average	BwD	Threshold target	National average	BwD
<b>2015/16</b>	426	Unknown	501	121	Unknown	214
<b>2012-15</b>	487	593	680	121	223	226
<b>2011-14</b>	547	628	702	152	217	221

These figures indicate that nationally local authorities are struggling to achieve the thresholds set and failing to see any movement regarding the average length of time taken to match children to appropriate adoptive families. Given Blackburn with Darwen's diverse ethnic demographic and the consistently high number of children leaving care through adoption, it is not surprising, and is perhaps something to celebrate that the Service's figures are broadly in line with the national average, although it is vital that continued efforts are made to reduce these figures further, not just in terms of averages, but for every individual child.

### Adoption Disruption

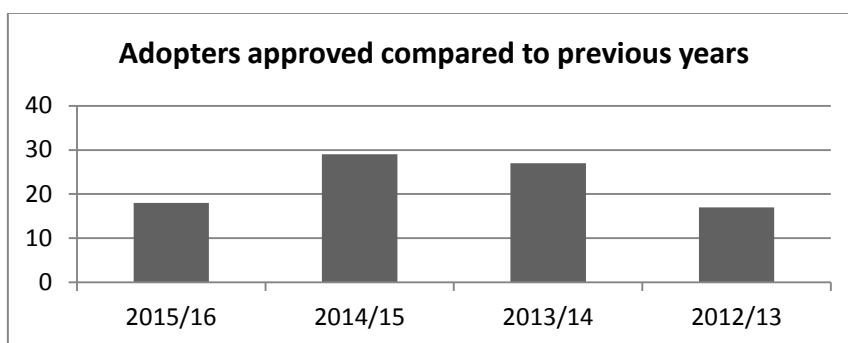
There have been no adoption disruptions this year compared to 4 children affected by disruption from three placements in the last financial year. Prior to last year, there had been no disruptions for several years. Whilst each case was unique last year, it would seem that the 'law of averages' relating to the high number of placements made leading up to the disruptions in part explains the sudden increase in those figures.

The Adoption Service continues to support a number of placements where children and their prospective adopters are finding it difficult to adapt to being family together; however, these placements are regularly reviewed to ensure it remains in the best interests of the children to stay with these families.

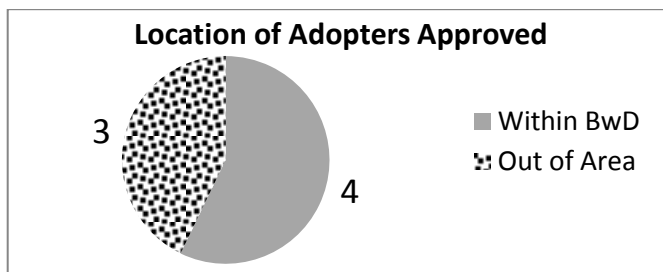
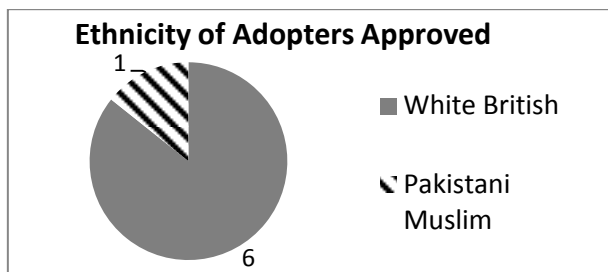
**Adoption Agency Business - Adopters**

**Adopter Recruitment**

The number of adopters approved this year has significantly fallen in comparison to the previous two years with a total of 18 families being approved, 7 of which were in the second half of the year (the previously reported figure of 9 families in the first half of the year was incorrect and should have been 11 families). This is back in line with 2012-13 figures before the peak of 2013-15, and reflects the national and regional trends.



Of those adopters approved, one was a second time adopter who had been approached to adopt a sibling of a child already in their care.



The last quarter of the year has seen a slight upturn in the number of positive enquiries received. Whilst there were only two families in assessment and one awaiting approval at the end of the year, there were a further five families signed up to begin the process in April and a further one family, which wished to wait until July before attending preparation training. Just under half of these are out of area allowing the possibility of in house placements.

Blackburn with Darwen continues to perform well with regards to adopter assessment timescales. Over the year, 15 of the 18 assessments have been completed within timescale. Where assessments have run over the six months, this has been due to prospective adopters choosing to take a break between stages 1 and 2, issues around Disclosure and Barring Service checks, and delays in receiving statutory checks back.

**Assessment timescales for Adopters Approved**

Under 6 months	6 months	Over 6 months
3	3	1



## Adopters Waiting

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, 20 families were awaiting the placement of a child/children, a reduction on the number waiting at the same time last year (27) reflecting a reduction in the number of applications made rather than an increase in the number of placements made with Blackburn with Darwen adopters. Of those waiting, three have already been identified for potential matches and are awaiting Panel or placement.

Of those adopters awaiting a placement, 1 has been waiting for over 2 years, 6 for 6 – 12 months, 11 for over 1 year and 6 for 0 – 6 months.

**Ethnicity of adopters waiting**

White British	12
White Other	2
Asian Muslim	5
Dual heritage – White/ Asian	1

**Time waited as of 30/03/2016**

Over 2 yrs	1
Over 1 yr	11
6-12 mths	2
0-6 mths	6

The majority of those waiting have shown interest in specific children over the last six months or had interest shown in them; however, due to the high number of adopters waiting nationally, there is now 'competition' for matches. Adopters waiting have been supported and some have been supported in reconsidering their matching criteria to better match what they are able to offer to the children waiting.

In response to the fact that adopters are waiting longer for a match after approval, the Adoption Service has rolled out post approval training courses. In January, all approved adopters waiting for a match were invited to 'Managing the Wait' training aimed at supporting adopters with the emotional impact of waiting for a match. This was attended by 4 couples and one single adopter, and received positive feedback. In March, 'Preparing for a Placement' training was held and was attended by 2 couples.

All possible avenues are being pursued to make Blackburn with Darwen adopters known to those looking for families, and established professional relationships with a number of local authorities are proving particularly fruitful in this regard. All adopters are profiled on the Adoption Register and most are on Adoption Link.

## Adopter Placements

Despite this difficult climate, ten Blackburn with Darwen adopter families have had a child placed with them over the past six months, up from four this time last year. Two families had a sibling group of two placed with them. 7 placements were with North West agencies and one with Blackburn with Darwen children was a foster carer adoption. Of the 10 placements, 2 are Fostering for Adoption placements which are yet to be formally matched. The remaining 2 placements were made by Dundee and Birmingham City Councils respectively. Six adoptive families have formally adopted children in their care during the last six months.

## Adoption Panel

The Panel met on 6 occasions during this period. Panels were quorate on every occasion and no changes to Panel membership have been made. Draft Panel Minutes are circulated to the Chair, Panel Members and Social Workers within six working days of the Panel.

Appraisals for Panel Members took place in March and April, and were an opportunity for them to reflect on their contribution to the Panel and to offer advice to the Agency. Panel members stated they were very happy with the way the Panel was functioning. Suggestions for future training were proposed. All of the Panel members take their roles very seriously and are diligent in their reading and preparation. However, there is an ongoing issue for Independent Panel members accessing reports using the tablets that have been issued. It appears that the 'firewalls' are too stringent and this is being addressed.

## **Training**

Training was delivered by Legal Services on Special Guardianship at the request of the Panel in December and there was a development day in October where Dr Nicholas Shelley delivered training on 'brain based parenting'. Panel members and adopters were invited to a one day training event delivered by Dr Margot Sunderland on 'Troubled Children and Teenagers' to help understand the dynamics of challenging and out of control behaviour in December.

## **Panel Feedback**

Feedback Forms were completed by 14 Adopters and by 4 Social Workers from other agencies and there was one anonymous return. Comments included:

'Can't get any better'

'At all times they were wonderful'

'our whole experience from initial enquiry to panel has been very positive'

'procedure and questions were very clear and straightforward'

'can't think of anything that can be improved'

## **Panel Business**

The Panel considered five Special Guardianship Reports during the period, involving 7 children. The proposed Special Guardians were either family members or the foster carers for the children. The Panel does not make a recommendation but offers advice as to the suitability of the proposed permanent option. The Agency Decision Maker accepted the advice of the Panel. In one case, The Panel did not recommend Special Guardianship and in another queried whether the foster carers should be consulted further and asked to consider adoption as a more permanent and suitable outcome for the child.

During the period, there were 10 matches of Prospective Adoptive Families with children, both singletons and sibling groups. Prospective Adopters attended the Panel in all cases. All matching reports were felt to be of sufficient quality to enable the Panel to understand the reasons why the adopters were deemed suitable. The Adoption Support Plans were deemed appropriate by the adopters and were felt by the Panel to be robust documents in the majority of cases and took into account the known current and likely future needs of the children. The Panel came to the conclusion that in all cases there had been a thorough, consistent and fair approach across the Service in the assessment of cases where it was asked to consider these proposed placements of children with identified Adoptive Families. The Agency Decision Maker supported all the Panel recommendations.

The Panel considered 8 assessments of couples and single people seeking approval as people "suitable to adopt." In all cases, the Prospective Adopters attended the Panel when their application was being considered. All of the Prospective Adopters commented positively to the Panel about the service they had received, and the thoroughness and speed with which the assessment had been undertaken. In all but two cases, the six month timescale from application to approval was met. In these cases where there was a delay, it was due to DBS delays. The Panel considered all of the reports to be of good quality. The Panel recommended that all of the couples were "suitable to adopt" and the Agency Decision Maker supported the Panel's recommendations.

There were 5 Review reports of Approved Adopters, who had been waiting for a placement for more than twelve months. In each case, the Panel recommended the Prospective Adopters remained on the list of Approved Adopters.

## **The Adoption Service**

### **Staffing**

During this 6 months, the Service operated with a team of eleven social workers (two of whom work 4 days a week and two of whom work just over half time), one Child Support Officer (4 days a week), one Psychologist, one Deputy Team Manager and one Team Manager. Together, they cover adopter recruitment and support, family finding and child case holding, post adoption support and the Fast Track service.

### **Collaborative Working**

The Adoption Team Manager continues to meet regularly with managers from across the North West to share ideas, difficulties and good practice. In addition, Post Adoption Support workers meet with others in their field across this region for similar purposes. Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council continues to take part in monthly meetings with five other local authorities to facilitate early matches (children with adopters) and highlight available Fostering For Adoption adopters locally. The adopter preparation training is now delivered in collaboration with Bolton and Tameside with training being run on a monthly basis and each Local Authority taking turns to facilitate this.

Plans for Regionalisation continue to develop and will be reported on by the Permanence Head of Service separately to this report. The Adoption Team remains excited to see what opportunities this will bring, whilst maintaining its commitment to offer uninterrupted service to Blackburn with Darwen children, families and adopters. The coming six months will see further development in this area with some implementation potentially beginning towards the end of this period.

## **Adoption Agency Business**

### **Adoption Support**

#### **Training and Support to Adoptive Parents**

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council continues to offer training on a monthly basis for those applying to adopt, in conjunction with Tameside and Bolton's Services. The Adoption Service recognises the value of ongoing training and support for adopters at different stages in the adoption process and their child's/children's development, in preventing family breakdown in later years. As such, two training events aimed specifically at adopters approved and waiting and a further five training events for all adopters have been offered during the second half of this year.

Support events have been held over the past six months including a bowling event and regular coffee mornings. The aim of such events is to provide low level support and pick up on the need for further intervention as early as possible whilst also providing adopters with the opportunity to receive peer support.

### **Post Adoption Support**

The Post Adoption Support Team continues to co-ordinate mailbox contact for children in adoptive placements with their birth families and deal with various issues, which include facilitating direct contact for a number of children with their birth families, providing an access to records service for adult adoptees and more individualised support to those adopted children and their families who are in greater need. In total, 10 new referrals have been made in this six month period.

#### ***Number of Referrals Received***

Assessment and Support	5
Contact/Mailbox issues	4
Information and Advice	1
Access to Records	0

The quality of assessments being completed continues to improve resulting in specific plans of support for adoptive families in need. Therapeutic support is being offered both in-house and, where families live further afield, through commissioned services. The Adoption Support Fund has continued to help with funding these services.

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, a total of 44 cases were open to Post Adoption Support.

***Number of open referrals at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016***

Assessment and Support	12
Contact/Mailbox issues	23
Information and Advice	3
Access to Records	6

In addition to the above, 16 birth parents or relatives have been referred to Birth Ties for counselling and support, which Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council commissions for such purposes. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, 20 birth parents/relatives were accessing support.

Feedback from adopters is positive:

'We see post adoption as our friend'

'Post adoption is very good for us, it has always been there especially when the children joined us'

'Even though it has been 9 years in, I still get the best support ever'.

Feedback from children and young people is also positive:

'I love post adoption under X, they look after me really well.'

'Easy to approach, funny and inspirational.'

Young people involved in the post adoption support group have also fed back that they enjoy the activities they have been offered – picnic in the park, cycling at Witton etc.

### **Fast Track Adoption and Permanence Team**

The Fast Track Team has received referrals on 4 individual children, and 1 sibling group of 4 children. Assessments and consultations have been carried out following each of these. There have also been 12 consultations focussed on the emotional health needs of children on the edge of care and those subject to a Care Order. Fast Track has received referrals to work therapeutically with 4 children known to the Post-Adoption Team.

### **Adoption Agency Business - Other**

#### **Non-agency adoptions**

There have been very few referrals for advice and support regarding step-parent adoptions. A specialist has now been identified within the Team (Deputy Team Manager) to counsel parents regarding the intricacies of step-parent adoptions. Within the past six months, none have progressed to a formal assessment.

#### **Inter-country adoption**

Inter-country adoption services are rarely requested in Blackburn with Darwen but the Local Authority has a statutory obligation to provide or commission a service. The Borough remains part of a regional commission for inter-country adoption services provided by the Inter Country Adoption Centre.

#### **Participation of Young People**

Participation of young people remains high on the agenda. It has been noticeable that the Team as a whole has now fully engaged with this area and looks for ways not only to involve children fully but also to report stories of good practice. A 'toolbox' was being created to provide social workers with useful and creative resources and ideas to aid direct work with children by one of the participation champions, who has left the team; this work will be continued once a replacement champion has been identified. The Post

Adoption Team has also run three support groups for young people in this six month period, which have been well attended, and received good feedback from the young people attending.

### **Complaints/Compliments**

There has been one formal complaint within the last six months, which has been investigated and responded to by the Customer Care Team.

### **Allegations**

There have been no allegations in the last six months.

### **Budget**

Approval of adopters enables the service to generate income to offset the cost of placing children. The total income generated during 2015/16 was £453,000 and this was used to offset both the cost of placing children elsewhere and other pressures within the department. In respect of post Adoption Support Services we have been able to secure £80,900 worth of funding to provide therapeutic services and support to families.

### **Management information**

Following the transfer of case responsibility to the Adoption Team post Placement Order, there has been an increase in the Team's use of the children's database for recording actions. The Post Adoption module is now up and running, and the Adopters Assessment module is now being used to record the adopters' journey and monitor timescales. The Family Finding module is due to go live on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2016.

### **Team Development**

Staff continue to attend training events to help with their professional development and this learning is also shared with the wider Team. Opportunities are also taken to nurture and grow skills within the Team.

### **Update on actions for the last 6 months**

**Action** – Continue to develop the skills and knowledge of those Social Workers case holding children, particularly around Life Story work (direct and indirect), management of information and processes to ensure a high quality of work and service to children.

**Progress** – A steering group is reviewing Children's Services' policy in relation to this area of work.

**Action** – Continue to improve the timescales for placement of children with adopters and make greater use of Concurrent/Fostering for Adoption placements.

**Progress** – There has been some progress made in this area and the Department continues to look for innovative ways to improve these timescales further. There has been an increase from one Fostering for Adoption/Concurrent placement in the first half of the year to 6 placements during the second half of the year. This progress will need to be continued and built on to ensure that children achieve placements quickly and timescales are met/offset for the more difficult children, who may take longer to place.

**Action** – Continue to work on ways of ensuring that whenever possible, adopter assessments are completed within or under timescales.

**Progress** – Progress continues to be made in this area and the introduction of the Protocol module should enable greater scrutiny of timescales and evidencing of any delay.

**Action** – Develop a focussed recruitment strategy for adoption and ensure that this continues to result in the approval of around 30 per year, with a good range of adopters willing and able to meet a variety of children's needs.

**Progress** – Recruitment has focussed on finding adopters for harder to place children but this has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of adopters recruited. Those recruited have broader matching criteria or are geographically placed to be able to take Blackburn with Darwen children.

**Action** – Further work to promote the Fast Track Service to ensure that relevant referrals are received and the consultation service is well used.

**Progress** – There has been an increase in the uptake of this Service and consultations have been well used where appropriate.

**Action** – Continue to seek ways to promote involvement by children and young people in service development, including further developing a young persons' Post Adoption Support leaflet.

**Progress** – Three events for young people have been held and been well received. This continues to be an area that needs to grow to ensure young peoples' views are included in service planning and delivery.

**Action** – Improve availability of management of information through electronic systems across all areas of the Adoption Service.

**Progress** – Post Adoption Support and Adopter Assessment Modules are now live, and it is hoped that the Family Finding Module will be going live on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2016.

### **Actions for coming 6 months**

**Action** – Participate fully as a Team in relevant workshops and events to assist the development of the Regional Adoption Agency.

**Action** – Continue the targeted recruitment strategy for adopters, involving the wider team to ensure a greater number of people/people groups are reached and that this results in a good range of adopters willing and able to meet a variety of children's needs.

**Action** – Improve the Scorecard performance by reducing the relevant timescales from SHOBPA through to Adoption Order.

**Action** – Improve availability of management of information through electronic systems across all areas of the Adoption Service, and utilise family finding and adopter assessment modules to generate data for future reports.

**Action** - Ensure proactive family finding is undertaken with adopters waiting to achieve matches with a majority over the coming year.

**Action** – Continue to seek ways to promote involvement by children and young people in service development including further development of the young peoples' groups.

**Katrina Williams**  
**Adoption Team Manager**  
**May 2016**