

Adoption Six Monthly Report

1st April to 30th September 2016



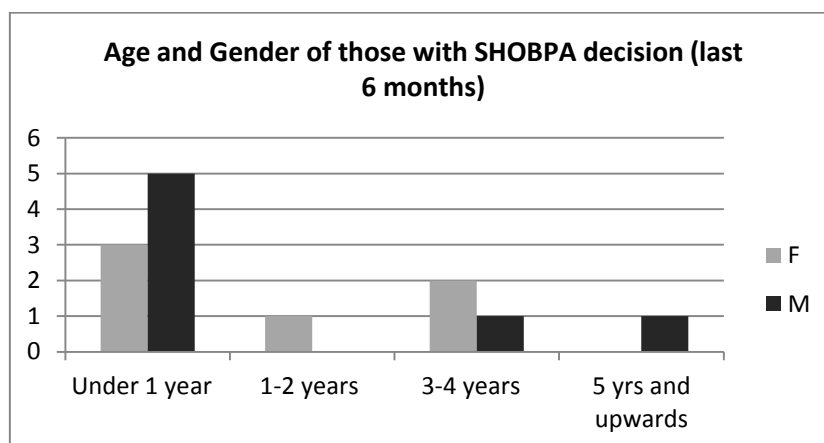
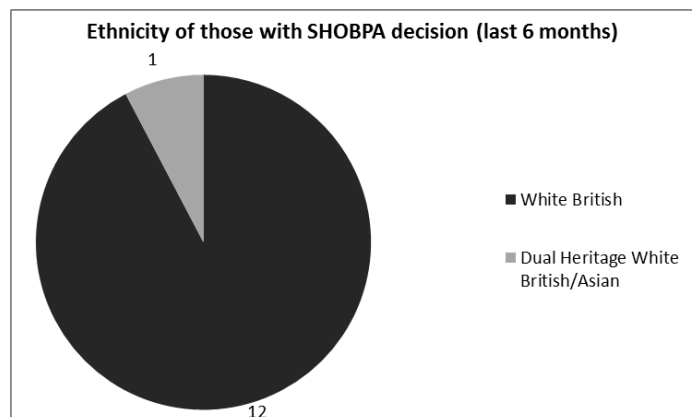
Executive Report

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

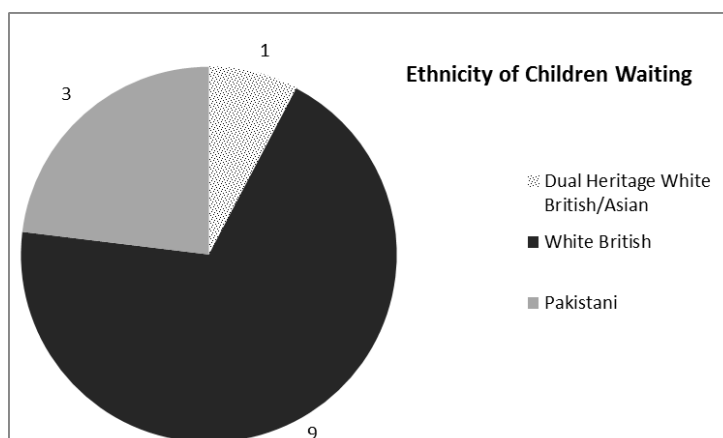
Children with an Adoption Plan

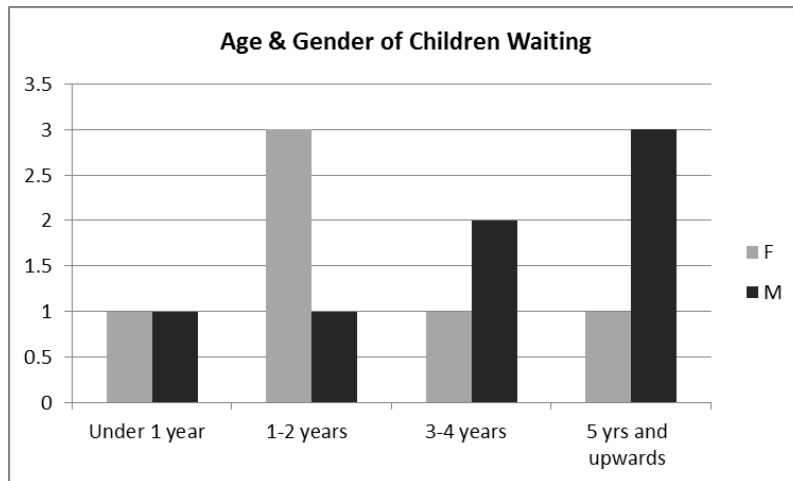
During this 6 month period, thirteen children have been presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a Should Be Placed for Adoption decision (SHOBPA), a slight increase on this time last year. Of these children three have significant additional health needs likely to result in disability including twin boys. There was also a sibling group of four. One child is awaiting a reversal to the decision after the court ruled that a Special Guardianship Order was in his best interests.



Children Awaiting Matching

On 30th September 2016, there were 13 children with a plan for adoption awaiting placement, a similar figure to the same time last year. The does not include the child for whom a reversal of plan is awaited. Six children, including one sibling group of 4, are awaiting the making of Placement Orders and for one of these foster carers are being assessed. Of the remainder, five are due to go to panel in October for matching including one sibling group of three and one baby with suspected foetal alcohol syndrome and other significant health needs, and one is already matched and awaiting imminent placement. This leaves only one child on a Placement Order without a linked family.



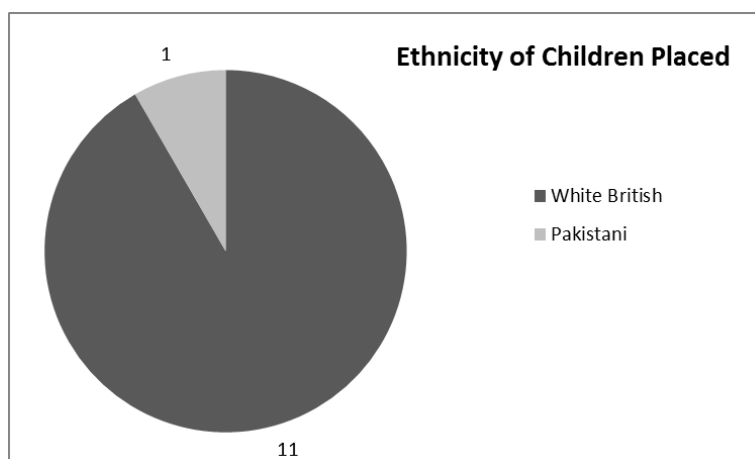


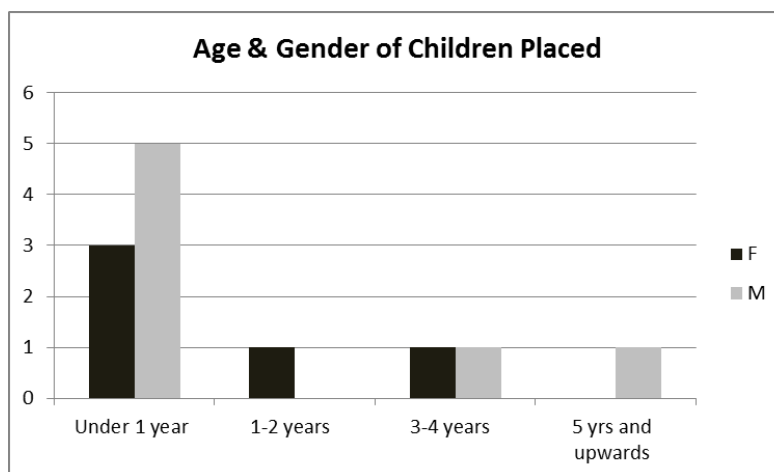
Family Finding Activity

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches. Blackburn with Darwen also regularly receives high numbers of profiles of adopters seeking children and these are circulated as appropriate. In addition to these more informal routes, in-house placement meetings and regional placement meetings continue to be held on a monthly basis with children coming through court profiled anonymously alongside those with Placement Orders still waiting. Link Maker (previously Adoption Link) continues to be a useful tool, and children are also placed immediately on Adoption Match (previously the Adoption Register) and CHARMS (the NW database). One Exchange Day has been used for a sibling group of three but mostly there have been no children available to profile at Exchange Days. Equally there have been no children for whom it was possible to use Activity Days or publications during the last six months.

Children Placed for Adoption

A total of 12 children have been placed with adoptive families since April 2016 in 10 placements, a further slight reduction on last year's figure. Three of these children were formally matched with Concurrent or Fostering To Adopt Carers, changing the status of the placement from a foster placement to an adoptive placement. There were two sibling groups of two including twin baby boys with additional health needs and an older sibling group of two were placed as was a further baby with developmental delay and additional health complications.





It has only been possible to place one child in an in-house placement, mirroring the second half of last year, however all of the placements made have been within the North West and the majority have been made within agencies included in the developing West Penine Regional Adoption Agency. This should therefore result in a cost saving once the agency is fully formed. Placing children within the North West also enables the Local Authority to provide a high level of support when needed using in-house resources.

	North West	Further Afield
Own	1	N/A
Other LA's within Adopt NoW	3	N/A
VAA within Adopt NoW	3	N/A
Other Local Authority	3	0

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

Timescales for placements made

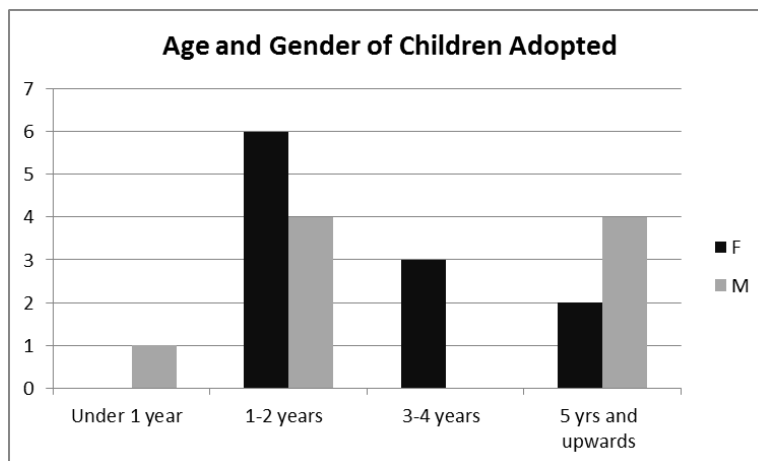
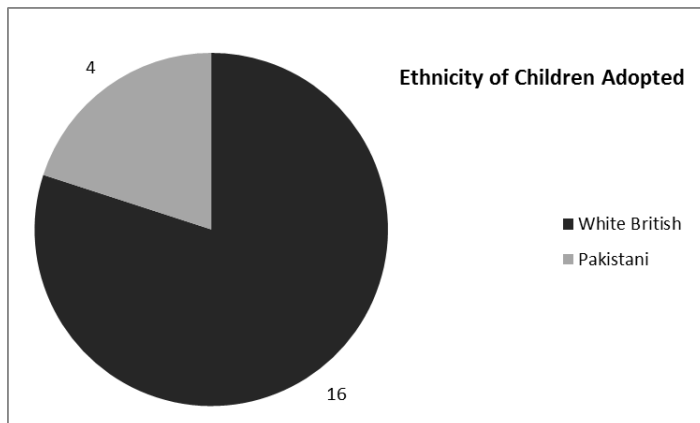
Timescale	Target	BwD Placements achieved quicker than standard	BwD Placements achieved slower than standard
SHOBPA to Panel	National Minimum Standard – 6 months	10	2
SHOBPA to Placement	Government Standard - 12 months	12	0
Placement Order to Matching	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	8	4

These figures show a marked improvement on last year's figures. The most useful indicator in terms of measuring the quality and speed of our family finding is the Scorecard Indicator. As indicated above two thirds of placements made in the first half of this year were within this timescale despite the continuing placement of some more complex/harder to place children. Those that took longer went over the target by 7 days for a baby with additional health needs, 16 days for an older sibling group of two and 35 days for an older boy with some additional behavioural needs. The Scorecard measures are not 'counted' until after an Adoption Order has been made, therefore these positive figures will not influence our published Scorecard results for some time yet.

Children Adopted

The number of Adoption Orders being granted to Blackburn with Darwen children has remained on a similar level to last year with 20 children having been adopted in the first half of this financial year including one child with a significant disability, one child with foetal alcohol syndrome, two sibling groups of two, one

sibling group of three and one child who had previously experienced the breakdown of an adoptive placement.



It has now become the norm for birth parents to request leave to contest Adoption Orders which causes delay in the making of the orders, however all orders to date have eventually been made with confidence by the judges involved. A number of children adopted in the first half of this year have had exceptionally long journeys from entry into care to adoption order. This has been for a number of reasons including children’s additional emotional and behavioural needs making it harder to find the right families plus the adopters needing additional support for an extended period before feeling confident to apply for an adoption order; the placement breakdown mentioned above; and difficulties in tracing birth parents in order to inform them about court proceedings.

Whilst the outcomes for these children have eventually been positive, the inclusion of these historic cases in our Scorecard Indicator data has resulted in an inflated average for the last six month period. As detailed earlier, the target average from Placement Order to Matching is 121 days. Blackburn with Darwen’s average over the first six months is 233, a slight increase on last year. The target timescale from entry into care to placement is 426 days with Blackburn with Darwen’s average for the first six months of this year being 443. If the figures for the child who had a placement breakdown are disregarded the averages are reduced to 183 and 389 respectively. Whilst 183 is still above the target timescale it is a significant improvement upon recent years. Therefore it is evident that the Department is making the necessary improvements to achieve timely placements for the children in its care.

Adoption Disruption

There have been no adoption disruptions in the first half of this year.

Adoption Agency Business - Adopters

Adopter Recruitment

The number of potential adopters coming forward has continued to fall with only four approved in the first half of this year as compared to 9 during the same period last year. Whilst the exact reasons for this are

hard to ascertain, this reduction is also reflected regionally. Recruitment activity has continued but with more focus on those children who are waiting nationally. There are currently eight families in assessment with the possibility of a further three families who are either foster carers or second time adopters who may need assessing for a specific child. Overall however this will result in very low numbers at the end of the year.

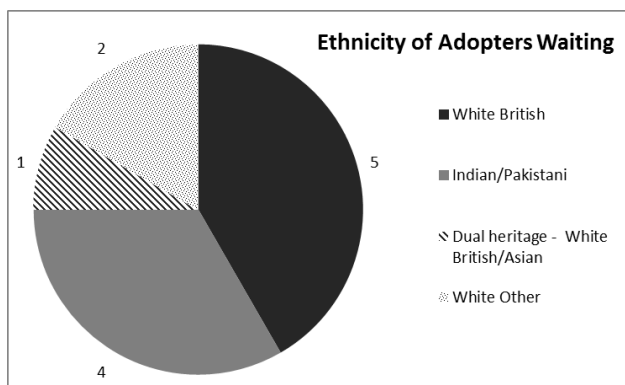
Of those adopters approved the majority are White British, with one couple being of Indian heritage. 50% live within the Local Authority border and the remainder outside. Two of the four already have children placed with them, one of these being second time adopters who were assessed for a sibling of their existing child.

Six of the eight currently in assessment live outside of Blackburn with Darwen which increases opportunities for in-house matches. Between them they offer a variety of resource in terms of matching criteria although many still have a preference for younger single children without additional needs.

Blackburn with Darwen has continued to perform well with regards to adopter assessment timescales. All four assessments were within timescales for stage 2. Two took longer than 6 months from application to approval due to either adopter led delay or factors (eg. Statutory checks) outside of our control.

Adopters Waiting

On 30th September 2016, there were 12 families awaiting the placement of a child/children, just over half those waiting at the same time last year. One family have been matched with a child who will be placed in early October.



Time Waited as of 30/09/2016

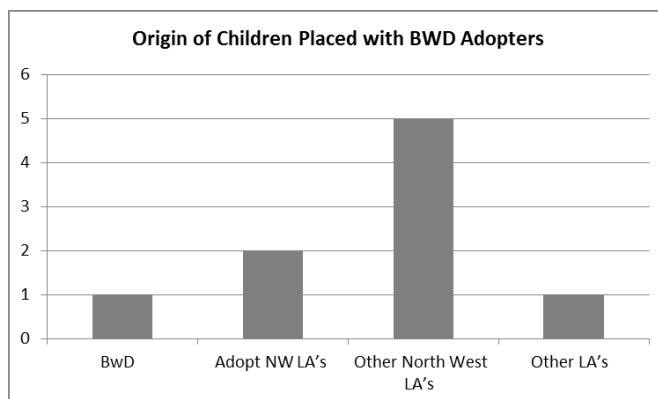
Over 2 years	2
Over 18 months	4
Over 1 year	3
6-12 mths	1
0-6 mths	2

Two families have withdrawn over the last six months and further two are anticipated imminently. This is largely due to the length of time the families have been waiting, causing them to reassess their decision to adopt. Further events have been offered to those adopters waiting to help support them however they have chosen not to attend these. One couple attended a recent North West event for those who have waited for longer than six months and found this very helpful both in terms of their interactions with other authorities and the support they experienced from Blackburn with Darwen. Only three of the families waiting currently live in areas where an in-house placement could be considered, however all three require more 'straight forward' children than are currently available locally.

Two families over the past six months have had possible placements fall through due to the adopters plans to travel resulting in delay to the child being placed with them. In both cases the Department has given clear council to the adopters to reconsider their plans and prioritise the placement of the child and as a result consideration is now being given with the adopters as the most appropriate way forward.

Adopter Placements

Blackburn with Darwen adopters continue to attract interest from other Local Authorities both in the North West and around the country. Nine families have had children placed with them over the past six months, with one of these welcoming a sibling group of two.



Blackburn with Darwen continues to enjoy very positive links with Blackpool who still attend the Adopt NoW placements meeting by agreement despite not being part of the Regional Adoption Agency. As a result, a third of the placements made were for Blackpool children.

Adoption Panel

Panel has continued to meet on a monthly basis to consider adopter approvals, reviews, matches and Special Guardianship cases. In all cases the panel recommendations were agreed by the Agency Decision maker. The panel has continued to receive very positive feedback from both professionals and prospective adopters who have attended.

For every panel, panel members received the papers in sufficient time to enable them to read the papers thoroughly and had sufficient information to consider the case. All reports in relation to matches and approvals were considered to be good or excellent and in respect of Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) the reports were considered to be good or sufficient. The majority of support plans were found to be robust and reflective of the child's needs.

The timeliness of matches was noted. Panel accepted the explanations for the delays and felt that the Agency could not have done anything different that would have improved upon the timescales. With regards to adopter approvals again most were completed within timescales and the explanation for delay in one case was accepted. Panel minutes were circulated within the planned timescales and in some cases more quickly so that decisions could be ratified without causing delay.

Adoption Agency Business – Support

Training and Support to Adoptive Parents

Preparation training for prospective adopters being assessed continues to run on a monthly basis as detailed earlier in this report. 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, to prevent family breakdown in later years and add quality of life to adoptive families. Unfortunately however there has been a decline in the take up of training events. Two have been offered over the past six months but had to be cancelled due to lack of participants.

A number of support events were held over the past six months including a Fun Day and a bike ride, both of which attracted good numbers. The regular coffee mornings have been less well attended of late and these are subsequently being reviewed. Due to the family events held over the summer, a young persons' event was not held during this period but one is being planned for November. With the forming of the

Regional Adoption Agency it is anticipated that training and social events will be shared across the region very shortly which should provide more consistency due to the increased numbers being invited.

Post Adoption Support

The Post Adoption Support Team continues to co-ordinate Mailbox contact for children in adoptive placements with their birth families, facilitate direct contact for a number of children with their birth families, provide an access to records service for adult adoptees, provide more individualised support to those adopted children and their families who are in greater need and respond to lower level queries with advice and one off support. Only those general enquiries and mailbox queries which cannot be resolved fairly easily are recorded as referrals. A total of 24 referrals have been received in the first half of this year.

Number of Referrals Received

Assessment and Support	14
Contact/Mailbox issues	3
Information and Advice	2
Access to Records	5

Nineteen applications to the Adoption Support Fund have been accepted providing therapeutic support to 18 children. Scope for the fund has been reviewed placing increased limitations on what is covered. Six children have been receiving therapeutic support delivered by either the Fast Track psychologist or one of the Post Adoption Support social workers and these are included in the applications made to the Support Fund.

On 30th September, a total of 60 cases were open to Post Adoption Support.

Number of open referrals at 30th September 2016

Assessment and Support	40
Contact/Mailbox issues	8
Information and Advice	7
Access to Records	4

A number of birth parents have accessed support through Birth Ties (a service which Blackburn with Darwen commissions through After Adoption) – the exact numbers for the past six months have not yet been received.

Fast Track Adoption and Permanence Team

Over the past six months, Fast Track has received referrals for 7 families, a total of 12 children, requesting assessments prior to a final hearing and/or support. These included two relating to Post Adoption Support. Two of these resulted in one off consultations with the remainder resulting in detailed assessments. Of these, four families went on to receive ongoing therapeutic support. A further 10 one-off consultations have been taken place upon request.

The end of this six month period saw the departure of the Fast Track Psychologist from this role. He has carried a number of Post Adoption Support cases forward into his new role. As of 30th September, the Child Support Officer continues to provide therapeutic life story and preparation work to a total of eleven children who form 6 sibling groups/individuals, working alongside case holding social workers. This includes supporting carers to meet the children's needs over the period of transition into permanency.

It is anticipated that a new Psychologist will be appointed to the Fast Track team but will sit within the new Revive service.

Adoption Agency Business - Other

Non-agency adoptions

There have been two requests for step-parent adoptions. One progressed to assessment however during the assessment the couple decided not to progress. The second is progressing to 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

The two Participation Champions within the Adoption Team continue to keep participation of young people high on the agenda. The team as a whole is engaged with this area and look for ways not only to involve children fully but also to report stories of good practice. Further creative ways to achieve this continue to be sought and trialled.

Complaints/Compliments

There have been two formal complaints within the last six months and both were resolved. There have been no formal compliments however members of the team regularly receive praise from adopters and other professionals for the work they complete with children and adopters. These are acknowledged and saved on personnel files.

Allegations

There have been no allegations in the last six months.

Staffing

During this 6 months the service operated initially 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. One full time social worker left during this period and is not being replaced, and one went on maternity leave in August and is not currently being covered. Together they cover adopter recruitment and support, family finding and child case holding, post adoption support and the Fast Track service.

Budget

A total of £330,000 has been spent on placing children with outside agencies in the first half of this year. This expenditure has been completely offset by the making of placements with Blackburn with Darwen adopters totalling an income generation of £313,000 plus the reclamation of £140,000 of interagency fees from the DfE for the placement of harder to place children outside of the area.

In addition, £107,477 has been claimed from the Adoption Support Fund for further assessments and therapeutic work as detailed previously. Most of this work was commissioned externally due to geographical constraints or the nature of the work required; however £26,301 was claimed for work being provided directly by the Local Authority.

Collaborative Working and RAA

The Adoption Team Manager continues to meet regularly with managers from across the North West to share ideas, difficulties and good practice. In addition the Post Adoption Support workers meet with others in their field across this region for similar purposes. Blackburn with Darwen takes part in monthly meetings with six other Local Authorities and two VAA's to facilitate early matches (children with adopters) and highlight available Fostering For Adoption adopters locally. The adopter preparation training continues to be delivered in collaboration with Bolton and Tameside. The training is run monthly with each Local Authority taking turns to facilitate this. It is also possible on occasion for adopters to attend training facilitated by Rochdale, Oldham or Bury when the need arises and there are vacancies available.

Work towards the forming of a Regional Adoption Agency (Adopt NoW) involving Blackburn with Darwen, Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham, Tameside, Caritas Care and Adoption Matters North West has continued but at a slower pace than originally anticipated. Efforts have been made to increase collaborative working in the interim and it is now possible for emergency items to be heard at any of the adoption panels being held across Adopt NoW rather than having to convene additional panels locally. In September the DfE have informed Adopt NoW that funding has been agreed for its set up which must be completed by the end of March 2018 at the latest. The aim is that Adopt NoW will be operational within a year although there are still some big decisions to make in order to achieve this.

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. Information is shared across the team at monthly team meetings.

Various members of the team are involved in workshops to help develop aspects of the Regional Adoption Agency. This is also helping those involved to build stronger relationships with colleagues from the other agencies involved, as well as developing their skills in reflection, development, presentation and negotiation.

Update on actions for the last 6 months

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

Progress – Various members of the team have responsibility for attending different workshops but share this with colleagues when they are unable to attend. Blackburn with Darwen has been well represented at every workshop.

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.

Progress – Recruitment work has continued but results have been limited in the first half of this year. Articles have been included in disability newsletters.

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

Progress – There has been some slight improvement in the average for the first half of this year. A lack of Concurrent adopters within the commissioned service has prevented some placements from being made in the latter part of this period – concurrent placements help to bring down the overall average.

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.

Progress – Further forms have been developed within Protocol to enable further use on the adopter side. Some development of electronic folders to help mirror paper files more effectively. Adult post adoption cases now being inputted onto Protocol.

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

Progress – A good number of matches with Blackburn with Darwen adopters has taken place in first half of this 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.

Progress – Team members continue to give reports of positive involvement by young people, including one adopted young person mentoring another. Young person's group is due to meet imminently after a break over the summer period due to other activities.

Actions for coming 6 months

Action – Participate fully as a Team in relevant workshops and the next phase of development of the Regional Adoption Agency.

Action – Recruit 12 new adopters with variety of matching criteria, from both within and outside the Local Authority - Whilst there are still some adopters waiting, there are also still children awaiting appropriate placements and therefore the right adopters are still needed. In addition it is anticipated, due to increased numbers in Looked After Children locally and nationally, that there will be an increase in demand in the coming months.

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

Action – accelerate closures once work is complete to enable new referrals to be allocated and support offered in a timely fashion

Action – Ensure that use of the Adoption Support Fund continues to facilitate therapeutic support for families, ensuring that work is well monitored and strategically planned

Action - Embed full use of Protocol across all areas of adoption

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

Action – Complete the development of Quality Assurance tools and practices to ensure that accurate information is collated regarding quality of work across the Adoption Team

Katrina Williams
Adoption Team Manager
28th October 2016