

Adoption End of Year Report
1st October 2016 - 31st March 2017



Executive Report

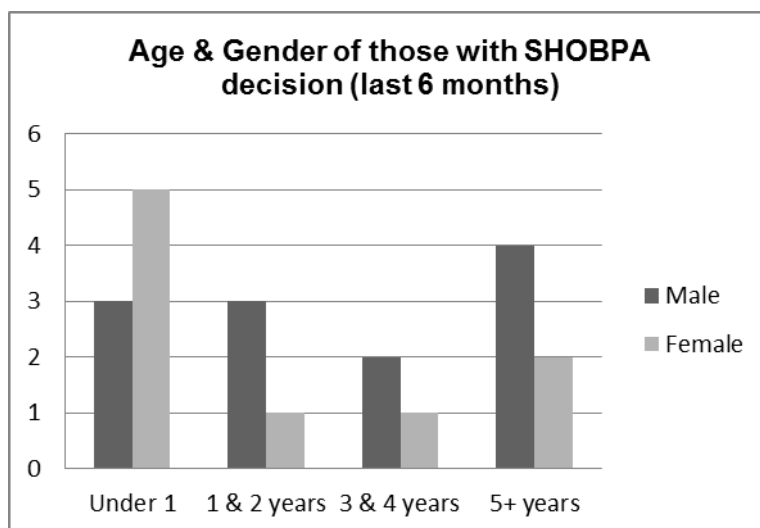
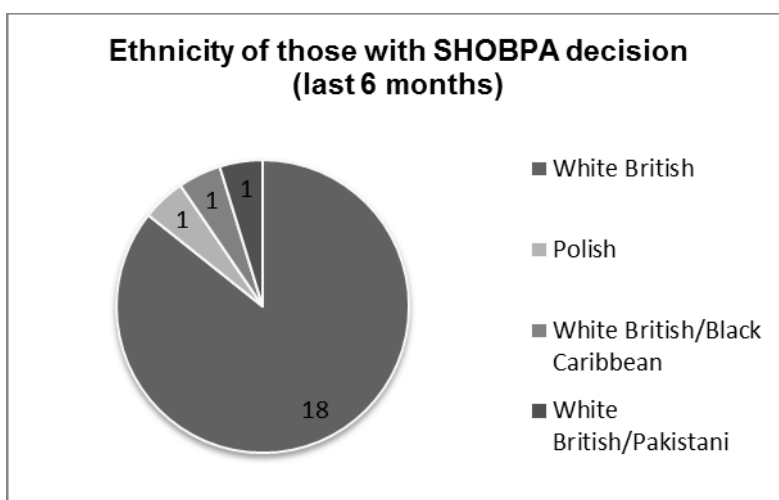
Introduction

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

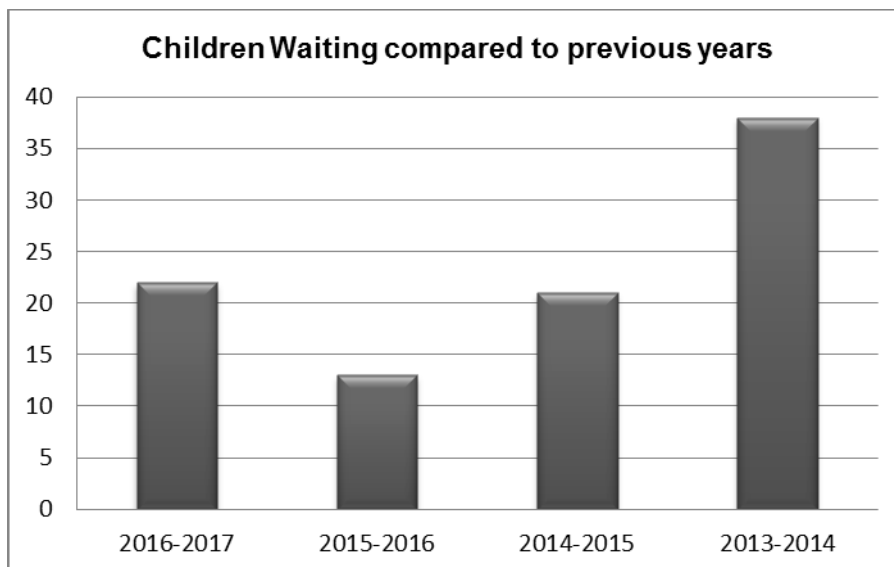
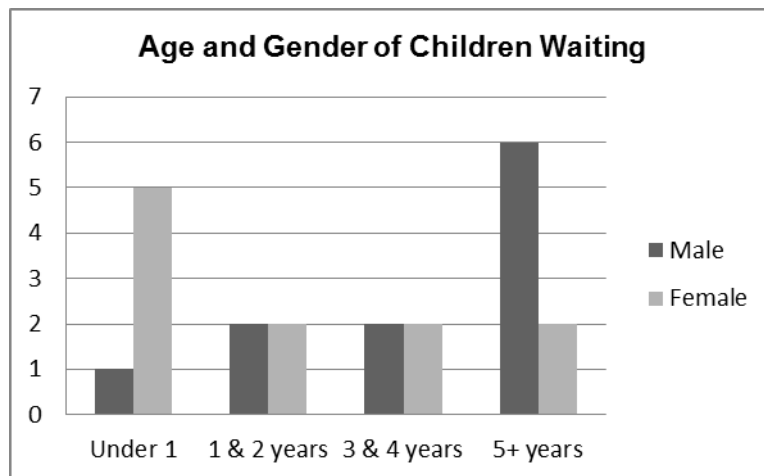
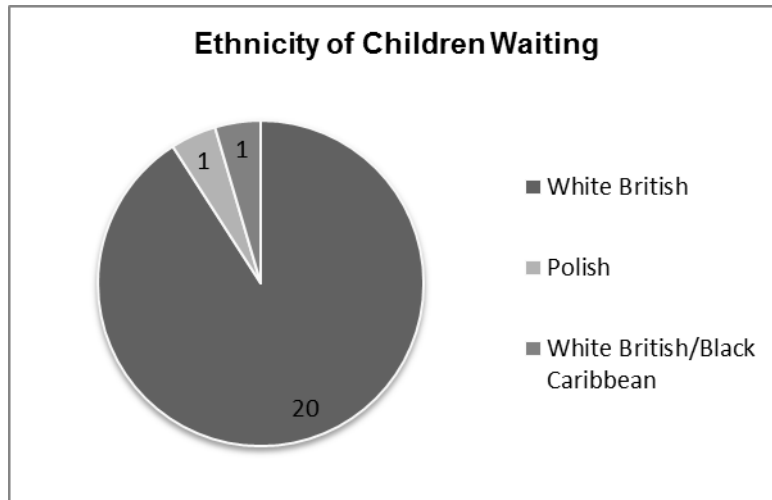
Mirroring the last financial year, there has been an increase in the number of children presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a Should Be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decision in the second half of this year, up from 13 to 21, making a total of 34 children over the year as a whole compared with 29 last year. The ages of those with plans for adoption is very varied, with an increasing number of older children particularly in sibling groups. In addition, a number of the youngest children have quite significant health needs including Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and more severe developmental delay.



Children Awaiting Matching

On 31st March 2017, there were 23 children with a plan for adoption awaiting placement. This may on the surface appear an alarming figure in comparison with recent years, and does to some extent reflect the complexities of age, sibling groups and health that are currently being faced in family finding, but it should be noted that 15 of the 19 Placement Orders were made between January and March 2017. Four were still awaiting Placement Orders including a sibling group of two who were awaiting a reversal of decision due to a family member being positively assessed to care for them, a little boy whose foster carers have been positively assessed to adopt him and another young boy already in a concurrent placement. Therefore it does not currently indicate a sliding return to the figures of 2013/14.

Amongst the children waiting with Placement Orders were three older sibling groups of 2, 3 and 4 (one of each) and one slightly younger sibling group of two. It was anticipated that at least five children (including the older sibling group of two) would be going to the Adoption Panel in April or May 2017 for matches due to positive links being explored.



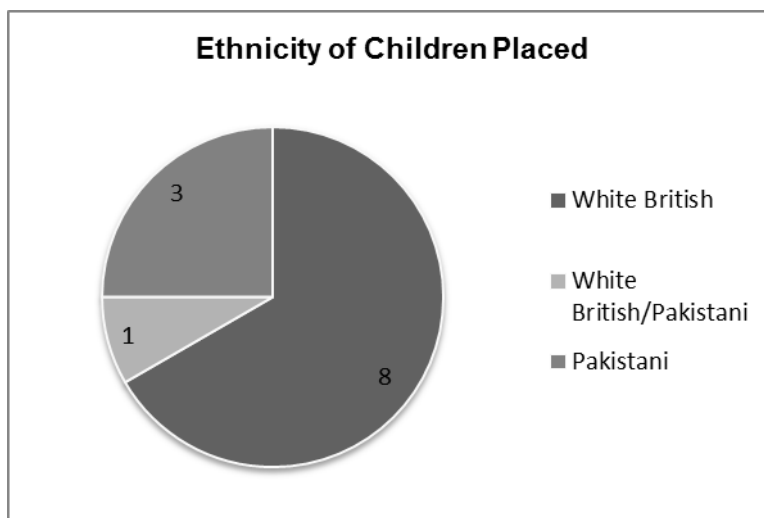
Family Finding Activity

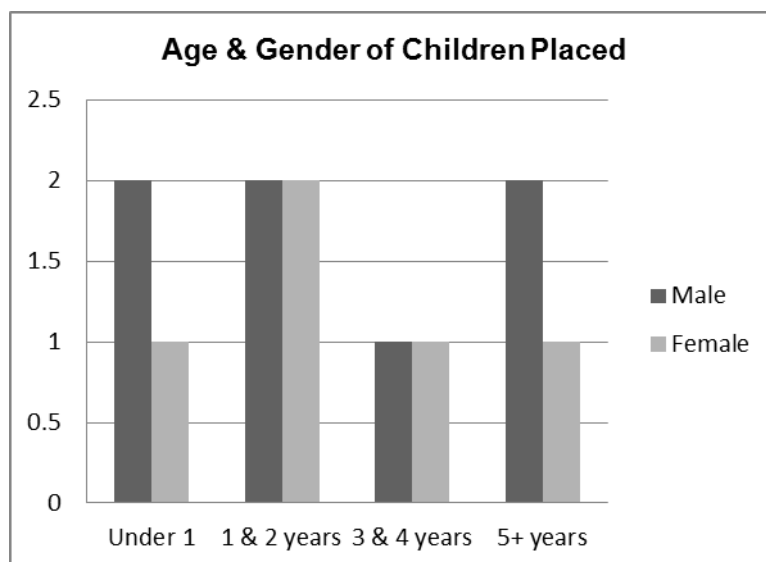
During the last six months the North West regional database, CHARMS has been deleted as it was recognised that Link Maker (previously called Adoption Link) in particular, and Adoption Match (previously the Adoption Register) to a lesser degree are able to facilitate regional searches and data collected from CHARMS to provide regional comparisons can be collated from other sources.

The old A6 placement meetings have been revamped and now include the six local authorities and two voluntary agencies from the Adoption NoW Regional Adoption Agency in addition to Blackpool Council, which continues to attend at present. These are particularly used for early alerts of children pre Placement Order. On-going professional relationships particularly with agencies in the North West continue to be helpful and good use has also been made of Link Maker. Children for whom a wait has been anticipated have been immediately placed on Adoption Match and a number of children have been profiled at two Exchange Days. Whilst Activity Days were becoming harder to utilise due to the lack of children awaiting placements, it has been possible to make use of these again over the past six months with the older sibling groups and one of these has resulted in a positive link for a sibling group of two and some tentative links for a sibling group of four. A further Activity Day is planned for May 2017 with up to nine Blackburn with Darwen children expected to attend if matches are not achieved prior to this. The Children Who Wait publication has also been used to profile for the older sibling group of four resulting in serious enquiry although it was not appropriate to proceed to a match.

Children Placed for Adoption

Twelve children have been placed in ten placements in the last six months, equalling those placed in the first half the year making a total of 24 children placed this financial year, marking a slight further decrease from last financial year. It has only been possible to make one in-house placement over the past six months but all, except one sibling group of three older children of Pakistani heritage, have been placed in the North West. One younger girl placed has complex health needs.





The lack of in-house matches mostly reflects a lack of availability of adopters living far enough afield from birth families. This is explored further later in this report.

	No. of Placements	
	North West	Further Afield
Own	1	0
Other LA's within Adoption NoW	2	0
VAA within Adoption NoW	2	0
Other Local Authority	2	0
Other VAA	2	1

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

Timescales for placements made

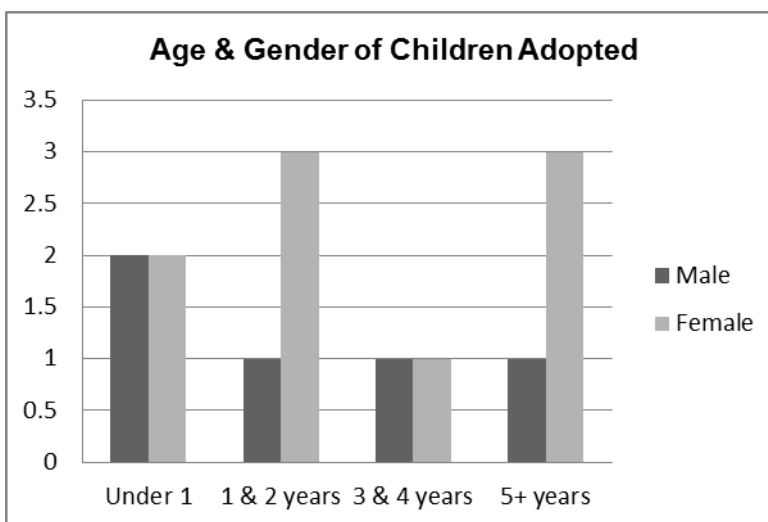
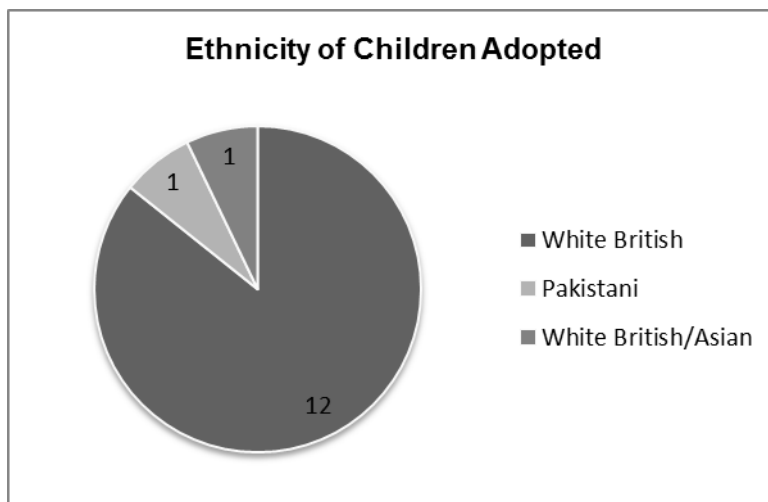
Timescale	Target	BwD Placements achieved quicker than standard			BwD Placements achieved slower than standard		
		Oct-Mar	Apr-Sept	Annual	Oct-Mar	Apr-Sept	Annual
SHOBPA to Panel	National Minimum Standard – 6 months	7	10	17	5	2	7
SHOBPA to Placement	Government Standard - 12 months	12	12	24	0	0	0
Placement Order to Matching	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	8	8	16	4	4	8

The most significant of these is the Scorecard Indicator as it most accurately measures the quality, in terms of speed of family finding activity without being influenced by court directed delay. The figures above demonstrate an increasingly positive picture with regards to timescales. Of the four that were over the Scorecard target, three were a sibling group of three older, Pakistani children who were placed together. The overall average of those children placed and awaiting Adoption Orders on 31st March 2017 was 131 days from Placement Order to Matching, including the three children mentioned who each took 339 days to

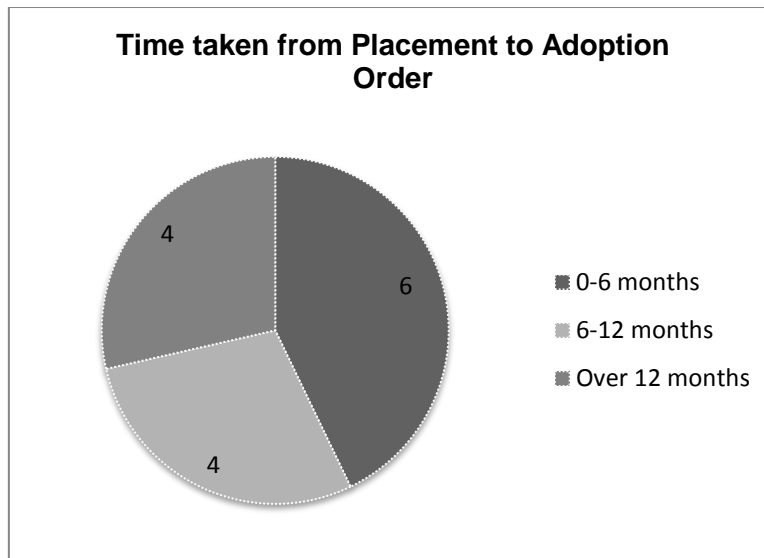
match. These figures will not officially count towards the Scorecard average until Adoption Orders are made, which is likely to be within the next financial year.

Children Adopted

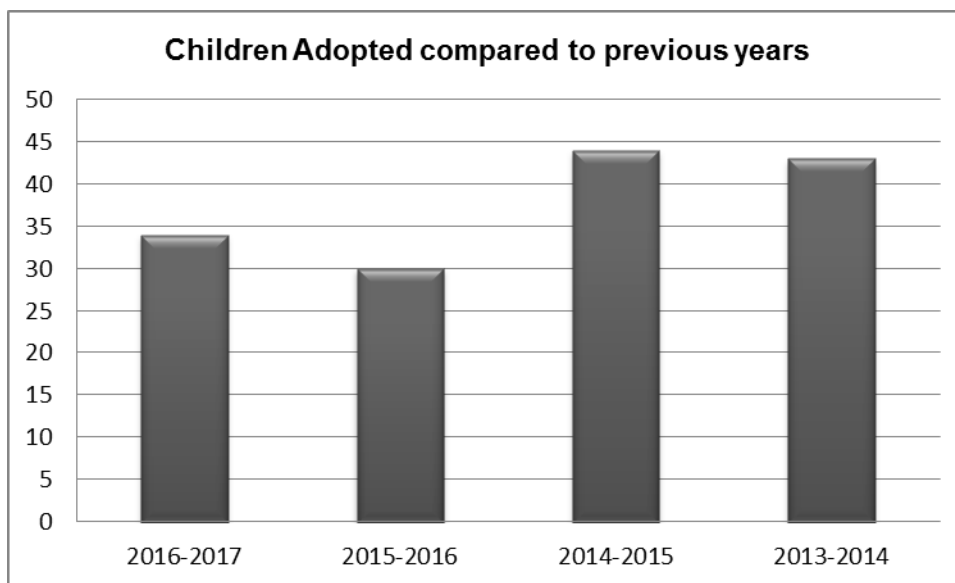
The number of Adoption Orders granted to Blackburn with Darwen children in the second half of the year has dropped slightly from 20 in the first half to 14 in the second half; however, over the year as a whole, this demonstrates a very slight increase on last year.



Those adopted in the second half of the year included an older sibling group of two who had previously experienced an adoptive placement breakdown, and two siblings placed together but not at the same time for whom there has been significant delay in achieving Adoption Orders due to issues surrounding birth family inheritance. The elder of these two was therefore unusually 12 years old upon the making of an Adoption Order, having been eight years old when she was first placed. On the other end of the scale, four children were adopted before their first birthday, three of whom had been placed in fostering for adoption or concurrent placements.



There has been a significant increase in the number of Adoption Orders made within six months of placement, which is largely due to the making of concurrent and fostering for adoption placements allowing prospective adopters to make their applications immediately after formal matching. However, there has also been a drive to encourage those that are ready, to apply promptly, and where possible the Local Authority's report is submitted along with the application rather than waiting for the court directed deadline. A majority of birth parents are now requesting leave to contest the making of Adoption Orders and this is resulting in significant delay in some cases.



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 is significantly lower than the first half when a lot of historical cases reached completion. In terms of entry into care to placement, the average for the second half of the year alone was 357 days and for SHOBPA to Matching it was 186 days. When taken together with the averages for those children already placed but awaiting Adoption Orders, this demonstrates a continual improvement over the past year closing the gap between the Department's averages and the threshold targets. Overall for the year, this has resulted in a significant improvement in the timescale from entry into care to placement (under the threshold target), and a very slight improvement on the matching timescales.

	Entry into care to Placement		SHOBPA to Matching	
	Threshold target	BwD	Threshold target	BwD
2016/17	426	397	121	212
2015/16	426	501	121	214
2012-15	487	680	121	226
2011-14	547	702	152	221

These figures demonstrate a significant achievement for Blackburn with Darwen in terms of positive outcomes for its children especially given the demographic diversity and the continuing high percentage of children leaving care through adoption. However, it is important to remain mindful of those children waiting for whom the right family is likely to take time to find.

Adoption Disruption

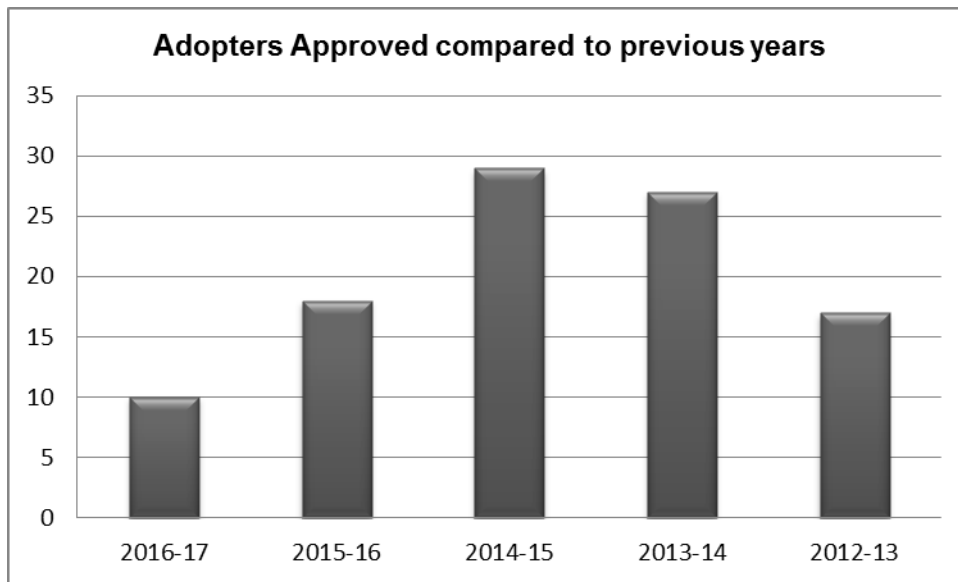
Once again there have been no adoption disruptions during this year. There have been some very positive improvements in a number of placements over the past year where significant support was previously needed due to the high level of needs presented by the children and adopters finding difficulty in adapting. One placement of three siblings is currently being supported at a higher level to help both the children and the adopters adjust, and to ensure that the adopters develop a deeper understanding of the specific needs of the children. Positive developments have already been seen as a result of this support.

One child was removed from a concurrent placement prior to matching as a result of new lifestyle information coming to light about one of the foster carers. It was also apparent that whilst his partner had not been aware of the full facts, he had been complicit in not providing some information that he was aware of. The couple's relationship also broke down with immediate effect once the full information was disclosed. A decision was made to move the child to a new placement and an in-house foster to adopt placement was found which fully met his needs. Although this did not constitute an adoption disruption, a disruption meeting was held so that any learning could be extracted. Whilst the decision to move the child was not in doubt at the end of the disruption meeting, it was acknowledged that some information had been wrongly assumed during the decision making process due to the adopters' social worker not being invited to attend the care planning meeting, and a recommendation was made that all professionals involved should be invited to attend in future.

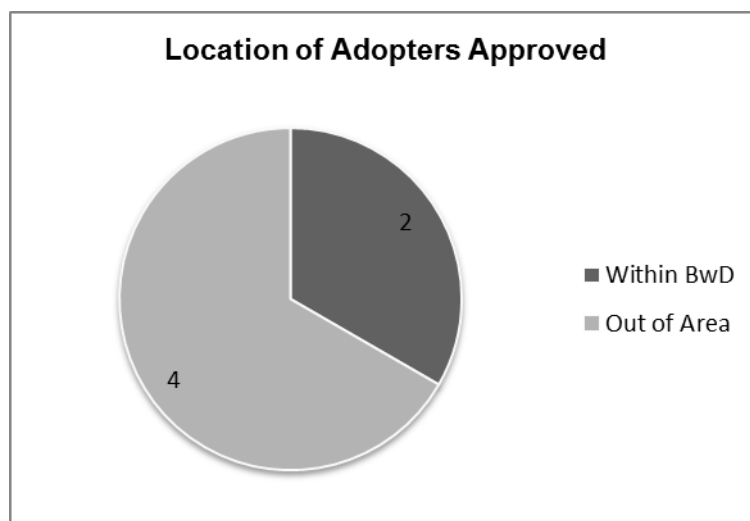
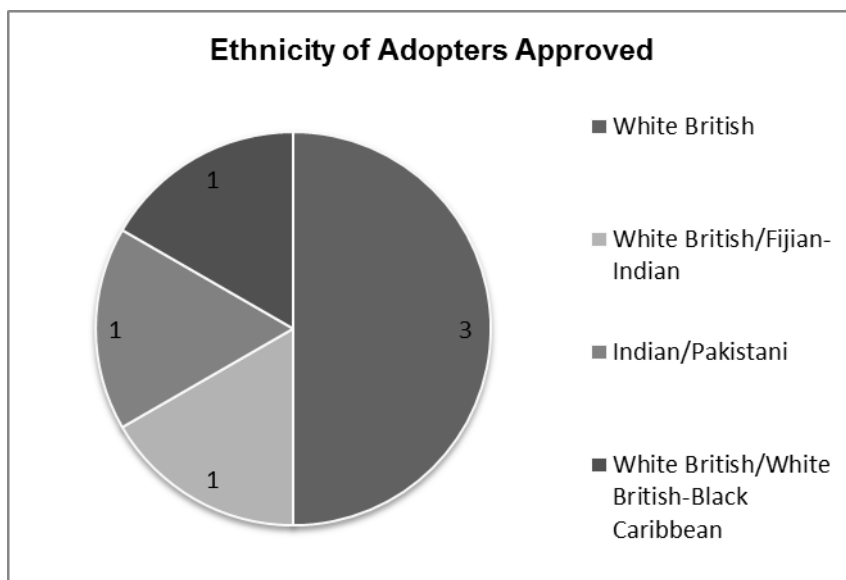
Adoption Agency Business - Adopters

Adopter Recruitment

The number of adopters approved this year has continued to fall with a total of just 10 families being approved, six of whom were approved in the second half of the year. This is very disappointing and whilst it does reflect a national trend of fewer prospective adopters coming forward, it does appear to represent a slightly greater decline than other agencies in the North West. The reasons behind this sharp fall remain unclear at present but require further analysis.



Of those adopters approved, one couple were second time adopters who were approached to adopt a sibling of a child already in their care.



On a more positive note, on 31st March 2017, there were already twelve families in either stages 1 or 2 of the assessment process, and a further family, which had chosen to take a six month break between the two stages. One of these families were foster carers applying to adopt a child in their care, and two families

were applying to adopt a specific child (a sibling of adopted children in one case and a child known to them in the other). Whilst the recruitment figures for this year remain concerning, it appears that this may have been a blip rather than a downward spiral.

Five out of the six assessments completed in the second half of this year were unfortunately slightly out of timescale. These have been largely due to adopters taking 1-2 months between ending stage 1 and starting stage 2, as well as, in one case, issues relating to overseas checks; however, it is noted that stage 2 has consistently been very slightly over the 4 months allowed and this is largely due to a misunderstanding in how the exact timescale is calculated which has now been rectified.

Adopters Waiting

On 31st March 2017, there were just nine families awaiting the placement of a child/children. This is largely due to the significant decrease in adopters recruited over the past twelve months; however, it also reflects success in matching those adopters who were waiting with children. Furthermore, of those waiting, four were moving towards matching with children, and three were being seriously considered for matches.

Of those adopters awaiting a placement, 1 has been waiting for just over 2 years, 1 for just over a year, 1 for just over 6 months and the remainder for less than 6 months. One couple has previously been matched but was subsequently involved in a breakdown during introductions and therefore also took some time out following this before recommencing with family finding. All of those waiting have explored links with some children and have had interest shown in them by children's family finders.

They are largely all white British, except for three couples who are White British/dual heritage Fijiun/Indian, Indian/Pakistani and White British/dual heritage White British/Black Caribbean respectively.

This year has been unusual in that there have been a number of adopter withdrawals and two agency led de-registrations. As well as two who withdrew in the first half of the year due largely to changes of heart and feeling unable to broaden their matching criteria having waited for some time, a further two families withdrew in the second half of the year for similar reasons. In addition to these, one family withdrew following the breakdown of a possible match and the agency's concerns regarding their priorities and understanding of the child's needs, which is what had led to the breakdown. Another adopter was deregistered due to concerns regarding her commitment. She had been approved for three years and had been unresponsive to several possible matches during this period. The final couple requested deregistration after they reported firstly that they had adopted a child abroad and then that they had had a birth child whilst abroad. The Department made the decision not to accept their withdrawal but to formally deregister them and investigations regarding the child are ongoing with the international police.

Adopter Placements

Four Blackburn with Darwen adopter families have had a total of five children placed with them (one sibling group of two) making a total of 15 children placed with 13 families over the year as a whole. One of those made in the second half of the year was a foster to adopt in-house placement, two were children from other local authorities within the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and one was from a local authority further afield. Eleven adoptive families have formally adopted children in their care over the last six months.

There has been one breakdown during introductions involving Blackburn with Darwen adopters. There were a number of contributory factors including distance (the match was in the Orkney Islands which made it more difficult to support), some lack of preparation around the child, some missing information in terms of what was presented to the adopters, issues relating to conducting introductions in such a small community and elements of the adopters being unrealistic in terms of the expectations of a child that age. They have since reassessed their matching criteria and have learned from the experience in terms of where their own skills and child experience lies.

Adoption Panel

The Panel has met monthly over the past 6 months and each was quorate. One new social worker member has joined and the long standing medical advisor has been replaced with a new medical advisor during this period. There has been no Panel training or development during the past six months, the last

development day having taken place at the end of June 2016, but further training is planned for the new financial year, along with Panel member appraisals in April 2017.

Papers were circulated to allow sufficient time for Panel members to consider the information and in every case the members felt there was enough information in the paperwork in order to make a decision. Minutes were equally circulated for checking and amendments in a timely fashion and on two occasions these were fast tracked to allow for earlier ratifications and introductions to commence.

Feedback from those who attended the Panel was mostly extremely positive. The only negative comments related to staff at the children's centre not directing them to the appropriate waiting area or informing anyone of their arrival. This has been addressed with the manager and appeared to relate specifically to a new member of staff, who had not been sufficiently briefed.

In addition to the main adoption business, the Panel considered six Special Guardianship (SGO) reports during the second half of the year and found the decisions to proceed appropriate in all cases. The Panel noted that the paperwork presented for SGOs was satisfactory to excellent, but that on the whole the verbal presentations were better than the written reports.

Paperwork relating to matches was found to be good or excellent with Child Permanence Reports having been updated appropriately. Support Plans were seen to be robust documents in the majority of cases. For adopter approvals too, the paperwork was deemed good or excellent in all cases with good or excellent verbal presentations also.

Some elements of procedure and protocol relating to the Panel have been developed in the last three months to help align the Panels serving all of the local authorities in the Regional Adoption Agency. Blackburn with Darwen is now able to take cases to any of the Panels within the region and Blackburn with Darwen's Panel can also hear cases brought by the other local authorities within the region. This is in a drive to work more closely together and to reduce timescales or the need to hold additional Panels.

Adoption Agency Business – Adoption Support

Training and Support to Adoptive Parents

Preparation training is provided for those in Stage 1 of the assessment process. The course is available at least once a month across the Adoption NoW RAA with each local authority taking it in turns to host and run the training. The programme has been consolidated to provide consistency whilst there remains some element of flexibility in terms of guest speakers including adopters, adoptees and birth families. So far these new collaborative developments have run smoothly and been very positive in terms of freeing up staff time whilst continuing to provide suitable training and choice to adopters.

Further training is also now offered on a regional footprint to adopters who have been approved. Some is specifically tailored to those who have children already with them, but others are open to those waiting also. Again the hosting and delivery is shared across the local authorities so that there are usually representatives from two different local authorities at each training event. It is still early days but so far the take up from adopters has been positive and the prospect of a short drive to access these training events does not appear to have deterred people. Previously, a number of training events had to be cancelled at short notice due to lack of take up and it is therefore hoped that by combining with our RAA partners, this will no longer be the case.

Representatives from the RAA's six post adoption teams are currently considering how best to deliver support events across the region. In the meantime, Blackburn with Darwen continues to offer regular coffee mornings, with varied take up, and more popular young people's groups every 2-3 months which involve adopted young people and their parents.

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, 20 new referrals have been made in this six month period.

Number of Referrals Received

Assessment and Support	12
Contact/Mailbox issues	2
Information and Advice	2
Access to Records	4

Good use continues to be made of the adoption support fund. Whilst the application process has become much more complex, it has been possible to cover a majority of therapeutic support costs through these applications including some in house intensive therapeutic support.

On 31st March 2017, a total of 66 cases were open to Post Adoption Support, a significant increase on the same time last year, largely due to a significant increase in the number of assessment and support cases open. This did not include a number of ongoing mailbox queries, which are mostly being handled without formally opening the case.

Number of open referrals at 31st March 2017

Assessment and Support	45
Contact/Mailbox issues	8
Information and Advice	3
Access to Records	10

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council continues to commission After Adoption to provide support through Birth Ties to birth families. The end of year report has not yet been received from After Adoption; at the last review, it appeared that take up in the first half of the year had been high, with it tailing off a little in the second half of the year.

Feedback from adoptive parents, adopted children and young people and from birth families accessing support continues to be very positive on the whole.

Fast Track Adoption and Permanence Team

There has been no Fast Track Psychologist in post over the last six month period. As a result, there have been fewer referrals; however, the Child Support Officer within the Fast Track Team has continued to provide support to a number of children and their carers and on 31st March 2017, was still actively involved with 11 children offering more intensive and specialist support. These included three larger, older sibling groups. Some referrals have been made to the new Revive Team, which might previously have been dealt with by the Fast Track Psychologist, and the Psychologist who was previously in post (and now heads up the Revive Team) currently continues to offer therapeutic services to three families, who are open to Post Adoption Support.

Adoption Agency Business - Other

Non-agency adoptions

One step parent adoption is now nearing completion and a second has progressed to assessment in the last six months. Assessments are completed by After Adoption as part of our broader commissioning agreement with them.

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

During the last six months, Blackburn with Darwen Adoption Agency has applied for Investors in Children status. The draft report has been completed and is very positive. It is just awaiting sign off by the children and young people involved. The children and young people involved really appreciated the further opportunity to voice their own opinions as well as to meet together. The group was mostly made up of adopted young people but also included one birth sibling, who is supported with sibling contact. She particularly appreciated the opportunity to meet with others affected by adoption as there are currently few opportunities for her.

A small group of young people have compiled some questions for the Adoption Panel to ask prospective adopters. The plan is for the young people to deliver some training to the Panel members around these questions in the coming year.

The Adoption Service

Staffing

During this 6 month period, the Service operated with a team of nine social workers (two of whom work 4 days a week and two of whom work just over half time) reducing to eight in December, one Child Support Officer (4 days a week), 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

Collaborative working over the past six months has been focussed very much on developing co-working within the Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption NoW. There have been a large number of workshops to help develop agreed protocols and practices, and Blackburn with Darwen has been able to input fully into these. The Head of Service is due to take post in April 2017 and it is anticipated that more clarity and pace will be added after this whilst heading towards the launch in October 2017.

Complaints/Compliments

There have been four formal complaints within the last six months, which have been investigated and responded to by the Customer Care Team. All were resolved with no further action, although two relate to the same family who have some ongoing dialogue and are confined to discussions with two members of staff only.

There have been three compliments noted, one relating to a helpful assessment within post adoption support and two relating to support given through matching and introductions. One of the latter was from a social worker from another agency and the other two were from adopters.

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 2016/17 was £374,600 and this was used to offset both the cost of placing children elsewhere and other pressures within the Department. In addition, £140,000 of grant funding was received to cover interagency fees for harder to place children. In respect of post Adoption Support Services, we have been able to secure over £139,000 worth of funding to provide therapeutic services and support to families including £33,450 for services provided in-house.

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. A full team development day has not been held this year due to the impending formation of the Regional

Adoption Agency. Various team members continue to take part in workshops related to developing RAA co-working.

Update on actions for the last 6 months

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

Progress – Workshops regarding Preparation and Post Approval/Adoption training have resulted in a regional programme of events with shared responsibility across the local authorities. Workshops regarding Care Planning, Recruitment, Panels, Post Adoption Support Groups and IT are ongoing, although there have already been some changes made to the processes and practice for Panels to ensure conformity across the region enabling the sharing of Panels in the interim period before the RAA is set up.

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.

Progress – This target was not achieved. As predicted, demand has increased and it is positive that there are a high number of prospective adopters currently in different stages of assessment.

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

Progress – Good progress has been made in this area. At 31st March 2017, the average time taken from Placement Order to matching for children placed but awaiting Adoption Orders was 131 days, which is a very positive indicator for next year's Scorecard figures. There are however two large, older sibling groups awaiting matching which may affect these figures. The number of Adoption Orders made in under 6 months has also increased significantly.

Action – ensure that closures are completed promptly once work is complete to enable new referrals to be allocated and support offered in a timely fashion.

Progress – Work is being completed at present on clearing a backlog of closed files, which require updating and auditing. This is not affecting the ability to allocate. Further work is still needed in terms of ensuring that cases are closed promptly and this is being linked to ensure that files are up to date. This work is ongoing.

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.

Progress – Whilst the application process has become increasingly difficult, the results from therapeutic input have been mostly extremely positive and in a number of cases, have prevented the breakdown of adoptive placements/families. Applications continue to be made for all eligible work.

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

Progress – Use of the adopter processes on Protocol are now more embedded, with initial visits being recorded electronically and the system being used to generate data for timescales. Further work is needed to ensure that adopters are progressed through the initial stages in particular in real time to avoid mistakes with data recording. Within Post Adoption Support, the processes are now very well embedded and some technical glitches are being addressed with Liquid Logic. For children, the adoption branch is not yet being fully utilised although there has been increased usage which is positive.

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

Progress – The Department has applied for Investors in Children and the final outcome is being awaited. The young people's groups have continued to be well attended and the young people have expressed new ideas about the services they would like and how they would like to be involved.

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.

Progress – These are now in use with some tweaks being made in practice. Dates are being set monthly for audits to be completed across the three areas of adoption.

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, and implement agreed changes in readiness for the launch in October 2017.

Action – Recruit 12 new adopters with a variety of matching criteria, from both within and outside the Local Authority – There are now only five Blackburn with Darwen adopters waiting who are not currently progressing to a match and there has been an increase in the number of children with plans for adoption across the region.

Action – Maintain the new lower timescales for matching by using all available family finding possibilities and ensuring that every day counts.

Action – Clear the backlog of closures and create processes which take account of the additional administrative responsibilities for the Team to ensure a smooth workflow and avoid delay in being able to allocate new cases.

Action - Further embed the use of Protocol in adoption processes for adopters and children.

Action - Continue to seek ways to promote involvement by children including incorporating questions from adopted young people into the Panel and using a young people's Panel (including adopted young people) as part of any staff recruitment.

Action – Collate and implement learning from audits.

Katrina Williams
Adoption Team Manager
April 2017