

# **Adoption Six Monthly Report**

## **1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017**



## **Executive Report**

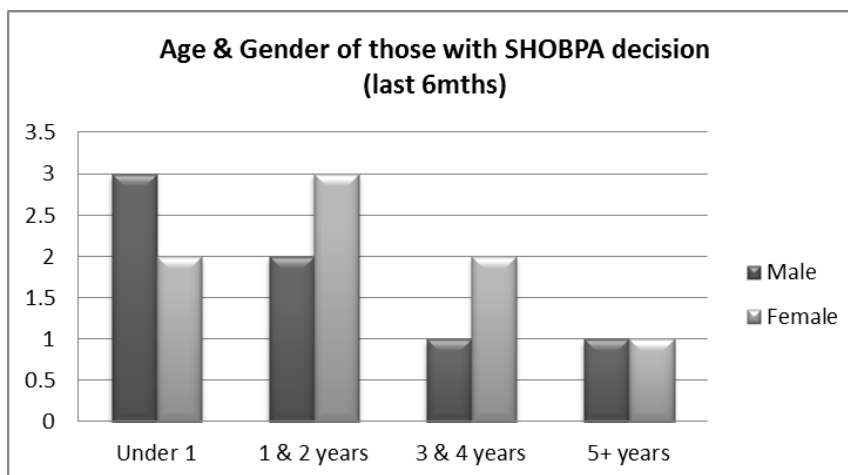
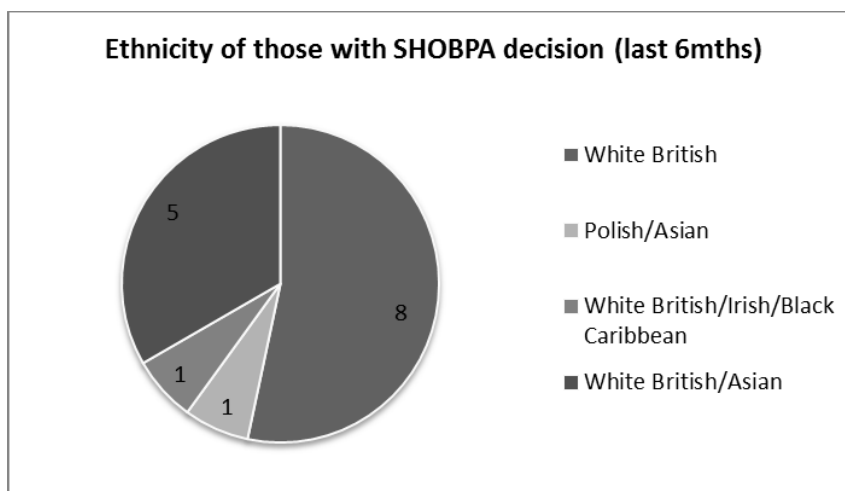
## Introduction

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**

During this 6 month period, fifteen 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, however three of these subsequently had a reversal of decision after the court ordered that they should return to birth parents on Care Orders. Of the children with SHOBPA decisions, two are a sibling group with plans to place together and two were already in two separate concurrent placements. None have significant health needs or disabilities.

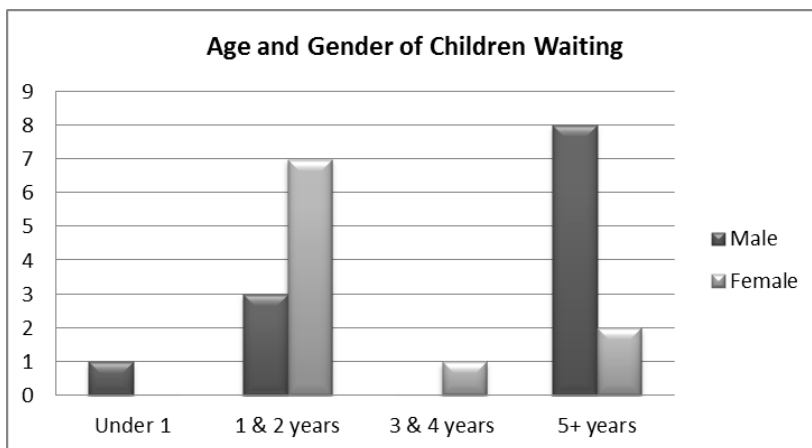
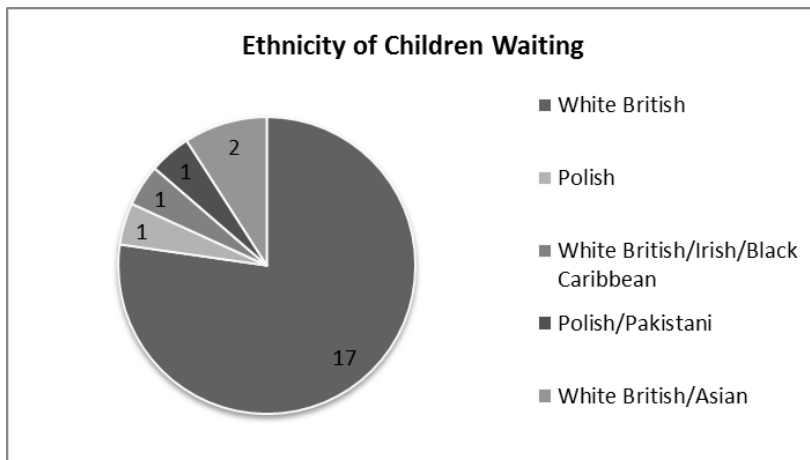


### **Children Awaiting Matching**

On 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017, there were 22 children with a plan for adoption awaiting placement, over a third more than the same time last year. Ten of these were in sibling groups – one sibling group of four and three sibling groups of two. Two little girls had significant health needs/disability however one of these was already placed in a fostering for adoption (FFA) placement. Three children were still awaiting Placement Orders although a placement had already been identified for one of these and another was already in a concurrent placement.

Of the remaining nineteen children, eight were currently proceeding to matches including a sibling group of four who will be placed together and two who were already in FFA or Concurrent placements. This left eleven children on a Placement Order without a linked family which is higher than in recent years due to a slight increase in the number of children with plans for adoption, and a decrease in the number of adopters

available. It is also notable that there were a high number of boys aged five years and over. Four children (two sibling groups of two) had very recently experienced placement disruptions and were not ready as yet for full family finding to recommence. Of the remaining seven, only two had been waiting a significant period of time, one with significant additional health needs and a boy aged five years with significant developmental delay and attachment difficulties.

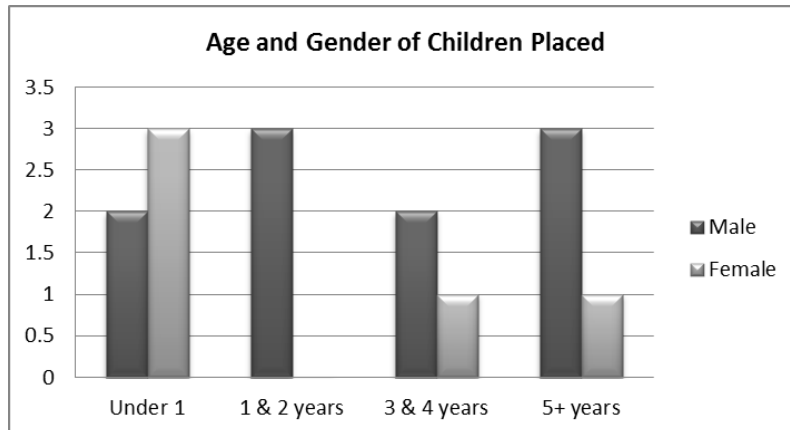
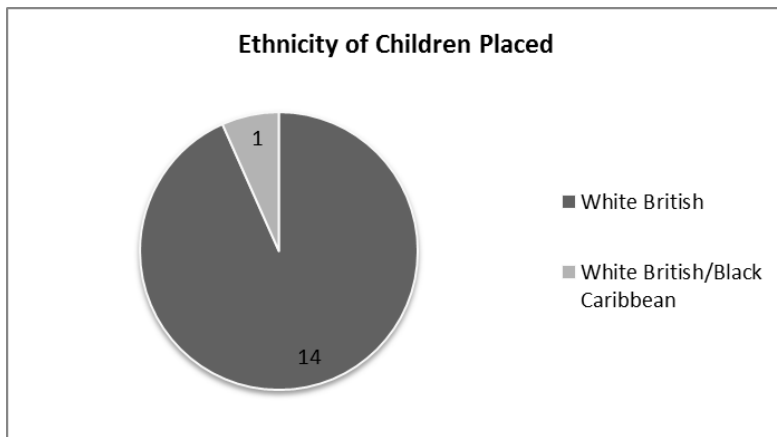


### Family Finding Activity

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches, especially within those local authorities and voluntary agencies due to form the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) alongside Blackburn with Darwen. Blackburn with Darwen also regularly receives 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 continues to be a useful tool, and children are also placed immediately on Adoption Match once a Placement Order is made. Exchange Days have been used with limited success for those children who are considered harder to place. Two children attended an activity day, however for others this has not been appropriate within the last six months. Activity Days continue to be considered for all children waiting. Media coverage has been considered for five children during the last six months. For a sibling group of four, the parents were not in agreement, and a placement has since been identified. For a little girl with a rare health condition, this is still being considered and the parents are being approached.

### Children Placed for Adoption

A total of fifteen children have been placed with adoptive families since April 2017 in 14 placements, a slight increase on this period last year. Two of these children were formally matched with concurrent carers, changing the status of the placement from a foster placement to an adoptive placement. There was one sibling group of two and one child with suspected foetal alcohol syndrome who was placed with his two sisters who had previously been adopted through another local authority.



Two thirds of those children placed have been placed with local authorities or voluntary agencies, which will form the new RAA, Adoption NoW from November. Whilst voluntary agencies within Adoption NoW will continue to charge for placements made (including concurrent placements which are part of a joint commission), this still leaves over of a third of placements made prior to the launch of Adoption NoW which will now result in a cost saving going forward. From a support perspective it is also possible to offer a much more cohesive package of support within Adoption Now. It is also significant from this support perspective, as well as preserving the identity of the child, that all except one of the placements made was within the North West. The one placement made further afield was in order to place a little boy with two siblings, who had previously been adopted. Local support has been sourced for that placement.

	North West	Further Afield
Own	1	1
Other LAs within Adoption NoW	4	0
VAA within Adoption NoW	4	0
Other Local Authority	4	0
Other VAA	1	0

***Timescales for placements made***

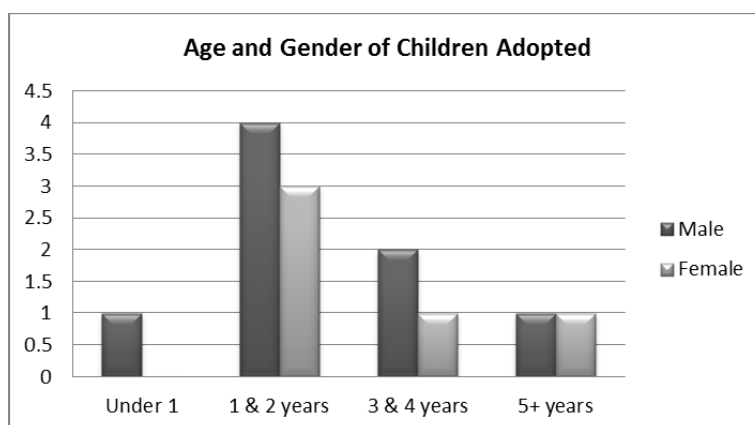
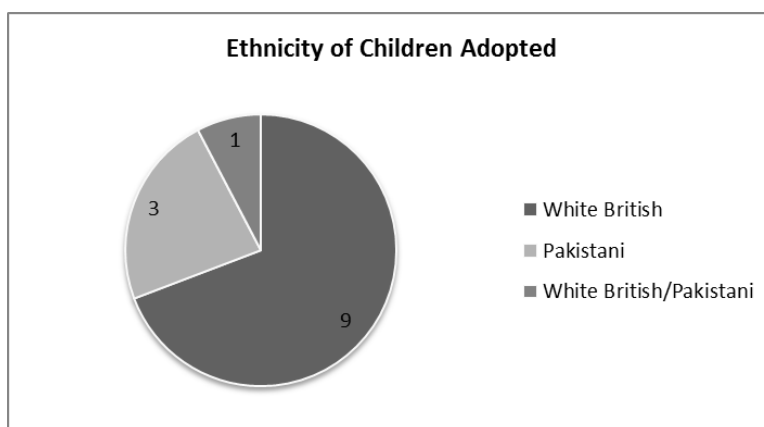
<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>BwD Placements achieved quicker than target</b>	<b>BwD Placements achieved slower than target</b>
Placement Order to Matching	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	10	5

These figures are similar to this time last year with two thirds of placements being made in under the target of 121 days. Of the five that were over, two were just 4 days over (a sibling group of two). The Scorecard

measures are not 'counted' until the year after an Adoption Order has been made, therefore these positive figures will not influence the published Scorecard results for some time yet.

### Children Adopted

Thirteen Blackburn with Darwen children have been granted Adoption Orders in the first half of this financial year, a reduction on this time last year when the number was 20. These included two sets of sibling groups of two and three children, who had additional health complexities.



Most Adoption Orders have been made in a timely fashion despite birth parents requesting leave to contest in the majority of cases, however four children did experience more significant delay post placement before Adoption Orders were granted. In one case this was due to the birth mother requiring the involvement of an Official Solicitor (ie. lacking capacity) resulting in very protracted adoption proceedings. For the other three, there was delay in applying for an Adoption Order; in the case of a sibling group of two because the elder of the two took longer to settle into the placement and in the other case due to issues around inheritance which took over two years to conclude.

Next year the figures relating to timeliness of care proceedings and placement will impact on the published scorecard. The indicators so far for this year are extremely positive, with the best average figures ever achieved. Whilst the A2 figure is the one that arguably the Department has more control over, both figures are scrutinised to consider how and why delays are occurring.

	Target	BwD under target	BwD over target	Total BwD average
A1 Entry into care to placement	426	7	6	410
A2 Placement Order to Matching	121	9	4	118

### Adoption Disruption

There have sadly been two adoptive placement disruptions in the first half of this year, affecting two sibling groups of two. In the first case, the children were in placement for a very short time when the adopter

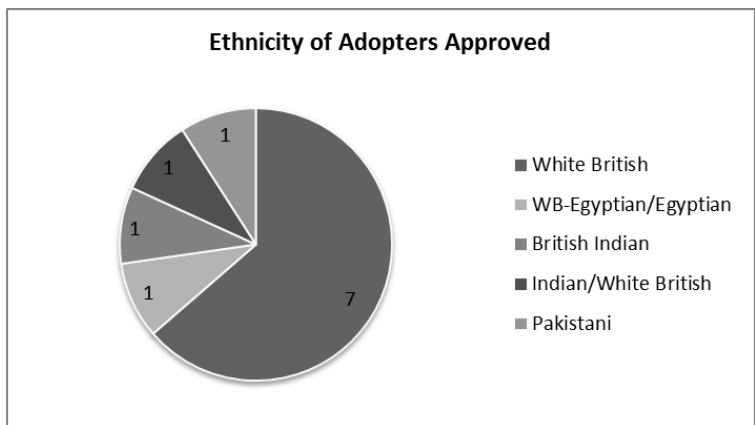
decided that he no longer wished to parent and that he was finding it particularly difficult to bond with one of the children. In the other, the Department took the decision to remove the children after just a few weeks due to a series of significant concerns regarding to the adopters' honesty, openness, integrity and ability to offer safe and appropriate care to the children.

The disruption meeting for the first is planned for early November and it is hoped that the second will be held before the end of the year. These will be opportunities to reflect and consider whether anything could have been done differently to avoid these tragic outcomes. The meetings will also give the opportunity to start to look forward to consider whether adoption is still in the best interests of all of the children, and whether placement together is also both best and achievable for each sibling pair.

## **Adoption Agency Business - Adopters**

### **Adopter Recruitment**

The first six months of this financial year have been very positive in terms of adopter approvals, as predicted in last year's annual report. A total of eleven families have been approved, a significant increase on the same period last year and an increase of two from the previous year also. In addition, on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017 there were seven families at various stages of assessment. There is still a need regionally for more adopters however and recruitment has now broadened out again to meet the need for adopters for White British babies as well as sibling groups, older children and children with additional health needs/disabilities.

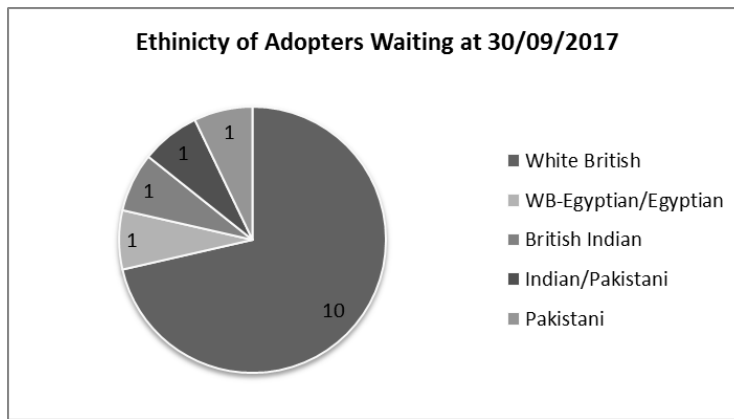


Just over half of those approved live outside the Local Authority border and three of these were assessed for specific children. Three of those approved this year already had children placed with them by 30<sup>th</sup> September including two of the three being assessed for specific Blackburn with Darwen children.

Only three of those approved completed the whole process within the six month timescale. In two cases, both stages of the assessment were completed within timescale but the adopters took a little longer to proceed from stage 1 to stage 2. The issue with most was delay in completing stage 1 due to checks taking longer than the required timescale to be returned, including foreign police checks in some cases. In three cases, stage 2 went out of timescale; one because the adopters chose to wait for a specific assessor who they had got to know rather than progressing more quickly with stage 2 with an alternative assessor, another because the adopters wanted to wait to be approved and matched to the child in their care at the same panel and there were delays with the child's care proceedings, and the third because of failings on the part of an independent assessor to provide an adequate report within timescales for the Panel.

### **Adopters Waiting**

On 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017, there were 14 families awaiting the placement of a child/children, just slightly more than those waiting at the same time last year. Of these, nine were proceeding with strong links anticipating matches and placements in the following month or two leaving just five open to enquiries for children.



**Time Waited as of 30/09/2017**

Over 2 years	1
18 months	1
1 year	1
6-12 mths	2
0-6 mths	9

There are very few difficulties now with adopters waiting long periods of time. Of those above, the family who have been waiting for over two years now have a match lined up and are expecting placement in October and the couple waiting for a year are also progressing with a placement. The family who have been waiting for 18 months experienced a breakdown during introductions and therefore took some time to recover and reconsider their matching criteria before being available again. Care is being taken not to over recruit adopters from an Asian background looking to adopt just one very young child as there still appears to be a surplus of these adopters.

Over the past six months, two families have withdrawn during the assessment period due to changes in their circumstances and/or understanding. A third couple were de-registered following concerns that they had acquired a baby through illegal means and were being dishonest about this. The appropriate authorities were informed and the case remains under investigation.

**Adopter Placements**

Blackburn with Darwen adopters continue to attract interest from other Local Authorities both in the North West and around the country with an increasing number of adopters being identified for matches before or very shortly after approval. Seven families have had children placed with them over the past six months, with two of these welcoming sibling groups of two.

**Origin of Children Placed with BwD Adopters**

BwD	2
LA within Adoption NoW	3
Other LA	2

**Adoption Panel**

The Panel has continued to meet on a monthly basis to consider adopter approvals, reviews, matches and Special Guardianship cases. In all cases but one the Panel recommendations were agreed by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). With regards to one approval where the Panel felt the report provided by an independent assessor remained inadequate, the ADM made the decision to approve on the proviso that further work was completed on the assessment to make it fit for the purposes of matching. The Panel has continued to receive very positive feedback from both professionals and prospective adopters who have attended. Some Panel agendas have included items being considered for other local authorities within the Regional Adoption Agency.

For every Panel, Panel members received the papers in sufficient time to enable them to read the papers thoroughly and in all but the case mentioned above, they had received sufficient information to consider the case and reach a conclusion. The majority of 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 adequate. Support plans were found to be appropriate to the child's needs. Timescales for approvals and matches were considered and the Panel was satisfied with the explanations provided regarding any delay.

The Panel Chair and two other members resigned in September, and there was one new Panel member, who joined the pool during the last six months.

**Adoption Agency Business – Support**

**Training and Support to Adoptive Parents**

Preparation training for prospective adopters being assessed continues to run at least once a month although some across the region have had to be cancelled due to lack of take up. The facilitation of these groups is already shared by the six local authorities forming Adoption NoW. 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. Post approval and post adoption training is now spread across the region, which has meant that fewer events have had to be cancelled due to lack of attenders and a greater variety of training subjects can be offered.

The last six months saw the return of the annual Fun Day for adopters and their children and there has also been an event held aimed at older children/young people and their parents during this time period. A new venue was used for the Fun Day which people found to be safer and more accessible. Previously it has been held in a Children's Centre and there have been difficulties with local children and young people entering the building, plus adopters of Blackburn with Darwen children feeling more vulnerable when attending.

**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 thirteen referrals have been received in the first half of this year, a significant reduction on the same time last year, however many lower level enquiries have been dealt with without opening on the database. The reduction is also as a result of a smoother flowing mailbox system resulting in fewer more complex enquiries.

**Number of Referrals Received**

Assessment and Support	10
Contact/Mailbox issues	0
Information and Advice	0
Access to Records	3

Twenty-three applications to the Adoption Support Fund have been accepted providing therapeutic support to 18 children. Three further applications are currently awaiting approval. Four children have received therapeutic input directly from the in-house psychologist and/or a therapeutically trained Post Adoption Support Social Worker from the Ream and claims are made to the fund for this work. The remainder of the work has been commissioned due to geography, adopter choice or to ensure that therapists with the correct qualifications and skills to meet the need are used.

On 30<sup>th</sup> September, a total of 54 cases were open to Post Adoption Support.



### Number of open referrals at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017

Assessment and Support	44
Contact/Mailbox issues	7
Information and Advice	1
Access to Records	2

Seventeen birth parents have accessed some level of support through Birth Ties (a service which Blackburn with Darwen commissions through After Adoption) over the past six months.

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

A new psychologist has recently joined the Service, however this service no longer exists in its previous format. The psychologist sits within the Revive Team, which offers therapeutic and psychology services to Blackburn with Darwen children who are open to Children's Services whether at a Child In Need, Child Protection or Child Looked After level. This includes children progressing with plans for adoption and other permanence plans. The Child Support Officer who was previously part of the Fast Track Team continues to sit within the Adoption Team and has been busy over the last six months offering therapeutic support and advice to fourteen children and their carers including four who have experienced adoptive placement disruptions. Advice is sought from one of the psychologists within the Revive Team as and when needed and clinical supervision is available from the same source.

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

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

There has been one Adoption Order made in the last six months in relation to a step parent adoption.

##### **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, the Adoption Service has been awarded the Investors in Children Award. Creative ways continue to be used to encourage participation from children who access post adoption support as well as those children who are awaiting adoption, especially, but not exclusively, those who are verbal. The Participation Champions continue to collate evidence of this in a quarterly report.

##### **Complaints/Compliments**

There have been two formal complaints within the last six months. One was from a persistent complainant and was found to be ungrounded – a full explanation was sent. The second was upheld in part and an apology sent along with an explanation regarding procedures. There have been four formal compliments made all regarding work which was considered outstanding by the recipients. All of the compliments have been from adopters, although one child also sent in a lovely card of thanks.

##### **Allegations**

There have been no allegations in the last six months.

##### **Staffing**

Over the last 6 months, the Service has operated with a core team of eight full time equivalent social workers, one child support officer who works 32 hours per week, a deputy team manager and a team manager. During this period, one person has retired with a replacement due to start in October, leaving a gap of three months in between, and one person has just returned from maternity leave which was not covered in her absence; therefore for most of the period, the Service has been operating with a reduction of one fulltime social worker, and half of the time with a reduction of two full time social workers. This, alongside a slight increase in the number of children with plans for adoption, has resulted in increased caseloads and the need to commission some adopter assessments in order to avoid delay for adopters.

There has inevitably been some impact on service, however high standards have continued to be maintained as much as possible through the good will of the Team as a whole.

### **Budget**

A total of £289,334 has been committed on placing children with outside agencies in the first half of this year, a slight reduction on the same time last year. The total committed expenditure includes £57,334 for the two disrupted placements. Whilst the adopters' agencies have a right to charge this amount under the terms of the standard agreement (two thirds at point of placement), it is not yet clear whether they are planning to charge due to the specific circumstances of these two disruptions. Expected income from placements made with Blackburn with Darwen adopters has fallen in the first half of this year to £167,000.

In addition, £48,125 has been claimed from the Adoption Support Fund for further assessments and therapeutic work as detailed previously. Most of this work was commissioned externally, however £5,425 was claimed for work being provided directly by the Local Authority. These figures are significantly lower than the same time last year (less than half the amount of total funding received and a fifth of the income for internal work). This is due largely to the nature of referrals received and the needs being met which have not required such large amounts of spending. It is also due, however, to the cap that was introduced of £5,000 per child per year. Whilst some children have met the criteria for further funding above this cap, the fund then only provides 50% of the excess amount.

### **Regional Adoption Agency**

The final phase of planning for the formation of the Regional Adoption Agency has taken up much time particularly for the Adoption Team Manager and Deputy Team Manager over the past six months. Many of the practical functions of Adoption NoW are already up and running with Adopter Preparation groups being run collaboratively across the region, Panels being shared and post adoption support training and support groups being co-ordinated centrally and offered to all within the region. Most of the policy and procedures for day to day working have been agreed on some level, although tweaks are anticipated once the Agency goes live.

One of the final phases has been agreeing the secondment details with staff affected and as of the 30<sup>th</sup> September, the consultation period was still live. It is still anticipated however that Adoption NoW will be launched on 6<sup>th</sup> November, although it is likely that in practice there will be some gradual movement of services across from each local authority as the finer details are addressed.

Plans are afoot with Blackburn with Darwen to ensure that there is no loss of or negative impact on service during or after the change, and the Adoption Team Manager will remain available for as long as needed to help with the smooth transition of some elements of service from the Adoption Team to other appropriate members of the Department.

This will be the last six monthly report in this format as adopters, Panels and post adoption support will come fully under Adoption NoW from November 2017. Whilst the children's social workers within the Adoption Team will also be seconded to the RAA, it will still be possible to collate data specifically regarding Blackburn with Darwen children, and these cases will only be held by social workers employed by Blackburn with Darwen; therefore, future reports will focus on these elements only, with Adoption Now preparing its own reports to present progress on the other areas of service.

### **Team Development**

There have been fewer opportunities for staff development over the past six months due to work pressures and the focus on being RAA ready, however individual staff have continued to take advantage of training that is offered across Children's Services, as well as taking part where possible in developing the ground work for Adoption NoW.

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

**Progress** – The launch has now been put back to 6<sup>th</sup> November 2017 but much of the processes and procedures have already been agreed through the workshops and further working together has been implemented over the last six months.

**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.

**Progress** – This target has nearly been achieved with eleven adopters approved but others still in the assessment process. Whilst there is still a preference for younger children a number of those recruited feel able to consider a sibling group of two, others are able to consider Fostering For Adoption and some are more open in terms of their matching criteria, being open to a greater amount of uncertainty. In addition, those recruited are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds with a high percentage being outside of the Local Authority's boundaries.

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

**Progress** – The timescales for those children placed and for those adopted within the last six months are extremely positive – the best ever since the scorecard began. There are a number of children awaiting placement who have been waiting for a longer period but with the prospect of very positive outcomes. Those who have experienced disruptions will also affect the average timescales if they go on to be adopted, however, once again, this outcome would be extremely positive for each child involved if it is achievable.

**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.

**Progress** – Progress has been made on this with fewer cases remaining open for long periods of time awaiting closure, however further work is needed to move to a fully electronic system to reduce the amount of time needed for social workers to complete children's files.

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

**Progress** – Adopter recruitment is now flowing more smoothly on Protocol allowing data to be collated and reviewed more easily. There are still technical difficulties in implementing the full change for children's cases but this should be eased in part by having dedicated business support within Adoption NoW as the system often requires named people to progress work. Further training will be received in October across all areas to ensure consistency of use.

**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.

**Progress** – Sadly it has not been possible yet to identify a date for Panel training in order to involve the young people in this and subsequently incorporate their questions as a standard within Panels. Further training for the Regional Adoption Agency Panels is planned in the near future and this will be incorporated in so that it is not lost.

**Action** – Collate and implement learning from audits.

**Progress** – Due to the relatively low numbers of adoption cases (children, post adoption support and adopters) there have been difficulties in creating enough data and information from adoption audits to uncover any systemic or consistent difficulties within the Service. Where trends or themes have been identified, learning from this has been passed onto the Team and implemented.

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

**Action** – Gather and implement learning from the two placement disruptions following the disruption meetings.

**Action** – Fully engage with the launch of Adoption NoW and adjust working accordingly.

**Action** – Create and implement electronic files for all areas of the Adoption Service, and fully implement all strands within Protocol consistently across Adoption NoW.

**Action** – Work with Safeguarding colleagues and others to ensure that all appropriate systems and procedures are in place and are understood by all to ensure that good practice is not lost as the adoption services moves over to Adoption NoW.

**Action** – Ensure the smooth handover of staff to new managers by completing joint supervisions in order to achieve continuity for staff well-being and for the cases that they hold.

**Action** – Transfer good practice with regards to Child/Young People Participation into Adoption NoW and ensuring that work with regards to incorporating their voice on Panels is not lost – incorporate this into the new Panel member training and development programme.

**Katrina Williams**  
**Adoption Team Manager**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> November 2017**