

Adoption Six Monthly Executive Report

1st April to 30th September 2019

Introduction

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

Almost 2 years ago there was a significant change in the way that adoption services were delivered as Adoption Now went live on 20th November 2017. Adoption Now is a Regional Adoption Agency providing adoption services on behalf of six Local Authorities – Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside.

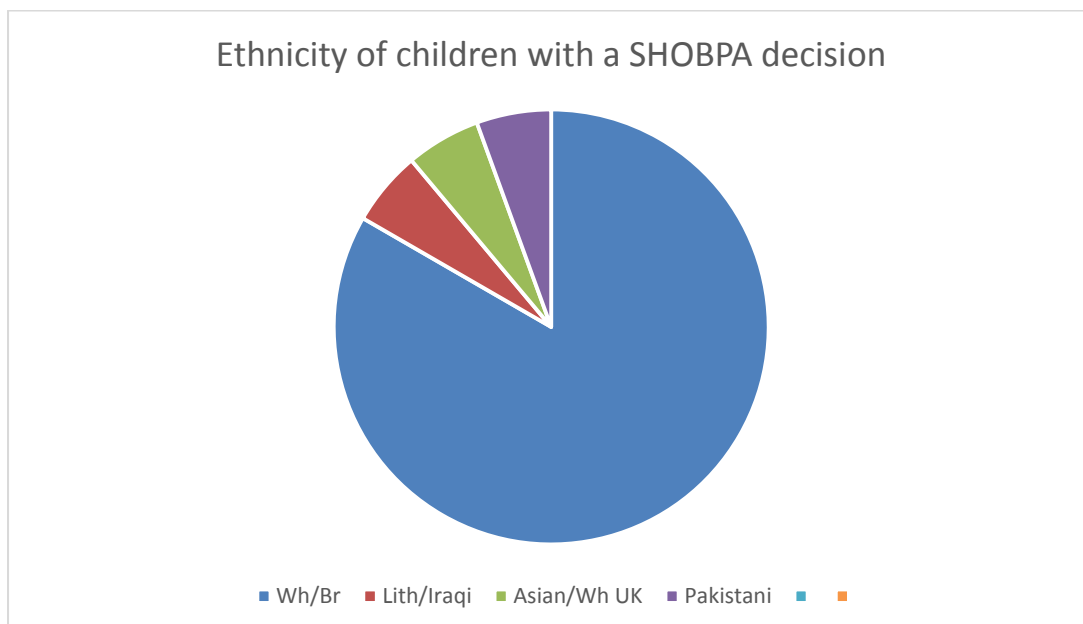
Data remains local data relating to Blackburn with Darwen children, and adoption support and recruitment data now covers the Region.

Adoption Agency Business - Children

Children with an Adoption Plan

During the first 6 months of 2019/20 from April to September 2019, 18 children were subject to a Local Authority decision that they should be placed for adoption (known as SHOBPA).

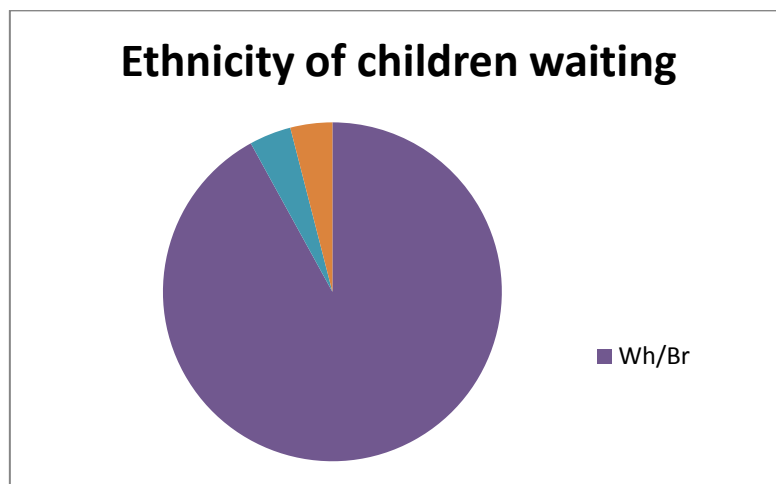
The ethnicity of those children is outlined as follows:-



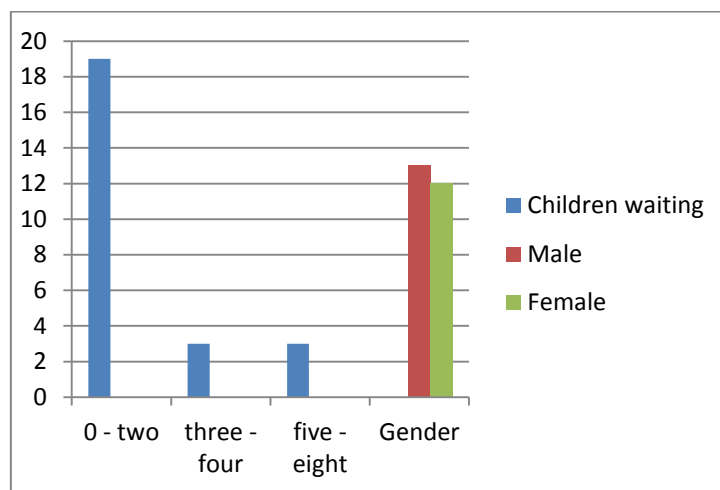
In terms of the age range, 72.2% were aged from birth to 2 years, 11.1% were 3 - 4 years and 16.7% were over 5 years old. The gender ratio was 7 males and 11 females.

Children Awaiting a Match

On 30th September 2019, there were 25 children with a plan for Adoption (subject to a Placement Order) who were awaiting placement. This number included 2 children where Foster Carers were being assessed as Adopters, with three children in a Fostering for Adoption placement. There were 2 children who had experienced a disruption. Children are predominantly from the white British community. Only 2 other children were of dual heritage (see chart below).



Age and Gender of children waiting



Continued efforts to match all of the children waiting will include them being profiled at exchange days and family days where Adopters can discuss children awaiting Adoption. National events are scheduled such as activity days. These are events where Adopters and children meet at a large party and get to know each other. It has proven very effective in finding families for some older children and those who are part of sibling groups.

Family Finding

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches, especially with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies, which are now partners of Adoption Now. The regional placement group meeting has been restructured and continues to operate on a monthly basis, to encourage matches with local Voluntary Adoption Agencies. Link Maker continues to be a useful tool used to help match children with families nationally.

The development of Adoption Now means that families that would have been approved by the six local authorities are all part of the same organisation and are immediately available to children in Blackburn with Darwen. In the past 6 months, 89% of children matched have been with Adoption Now adopters. These placements do not incur an interagency fee. The target for the 2 year point after the Regional Adoption Agency went live was for at least 60% of children to be placed 'in house' within the RAA. The current figure far exceeds this target of over 60%, which is positive for Blackburn with Darwen children as they are supported more effectively by Post Adoption Support and from a financial perspective.

It is good practice to search for a family within our own pool of Adoption Now Adopters in the first instance, and then to look further afield to other Local Authorities, RAAs or Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

On 31st March 2019, the National Adoption Register ceased to operate. Prior to this it has been a requirement for all children waiting for families for three months or more to be added to that Register along with Adopters who are waiting. There are some likely alternative proposals however none are imminent. A small number of links for children would have been made via the Register but Link Maker has been a much more useful family finding tool for Blackburn with Darwen children so we are not expecting there to be a significant impact.

Children Placed for Adoption

There have been 11 children placed with Adopters this year and 14 children matched. The numbers of matched and placed children may differ due to early permanence placements and children matched just before the end of the half year but not yet placed.

Of the 14 matches presented to Panels between April and September 2019, there were 6 Fostering for Adoption or Concurrency Placements matched, with 1 sibling group of 2 and 1 sibling group of 3 placed.

The scorecard data for children adopted since 1st April 2019 is as follows: -

Measure		Blackburn average
Placement Order to Matching (A2)	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	223
Child entering care to starting Adoption Placement (A1)	Scorecard indicator - 426 days	426

These figures show that during the last six months, timescales were exactly on target for A1 and over the A2 target. Scorecard measures are not 'counted' until the year after an Adoption Order has been made, therefore these figures will not influence the published Scorecard results for some time yet.

A1 is an indicator that can be affected by Court timescales and can vary hugely due to a variety of other factors. The A2 measure represents the family finding process for children. In this cohort of children there is a sibling group of 2 with additional needs being adopted and a child with significant disabilities for whom family finding had taken a long time. We know that these children do take longer to find families for and this impacts upon the figures.

Children Adopted

There have been 14 Adoption Orders made during the last six months from April to September 2019. The scorecard data refers to these children. Most Adoption Orders have been made in a timely fashion despite birth parents requesting leave to contest applications in Court in the majority of cases.

Adoption Disruption

There has been one disruption in the first half of the year. A disruption is identified as a placement where the child has moved in with adopters and then the placement has failed. This child was older when placed and had additional needs. A disruption meeting has taken place and learning from this case has been in relation to the need to share full information with adopters even if this is historical.

Adoption Agency Business - Adopters

Adopter Recruitment

Nationally, there is a shortage of adopters and the number of children has increased again as the 'looked after' population rises both nationally and locally. This happened shortly after many adopters had had to wait for long periods, as a consequence of case law that changed the practice of the Courts in terms of agreeing Adoption Plans for children. The message to the public was, and still is to some extent, that there are few young children available for Adoption and that numbers have fallen significantly.

The recruitment strategy of Adoption Now has been to dispel this myth, with a go live campaign visibly showing how many children were available in this area alone represented by balloons.

The Marketing and Recruitment Team became fully staffed in June 2018 and recruitment campaigns have significantly increased with attendance at 15 local events across the six local authority areas and beyond over the summer months of 2019. There have been billboard campaigns, bus, tram and train campaigns, radio campaigns and significant social media advertising. Early signs are that this activity has increased enquiries from prospective adopters.

In the first six months of this year (2019/20), 35 families have been approved, and 1 family has been to the Panel and is awaiting Agency Decision Making. One family withdrew post the Panel.

Since the 1st April, 40 RAA children have already been matched with 36 RAA families. Four of these have been sibling groups of two children. Three of these have been Fostering for Adoption placements. 2 RAA families are currently being matched with children external to Adoption Now.

91 families are anticipated to have been approved by the end of Quarter 4 2020.

Service Sufficiency Strategy & Marketing Activity

Adoption Now pays due regard to children's tracking data as part of the sufficiency strategy, particularly as the profile and needs of children in the care system change. This data reflects ethnic diversity amongst the Local Authorities, gender, the number of children needing to be placed, the number of children with lifelong physical and developmental needs and those with specific diagnoses, for example, Autism, Asperger's, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

It is clear that the total number of adopters approved within the RAA is not sufficient to meet the needs of our children waiting or those anticipated, and the national climate means that there is reduced availability of adopters in the external market. This is particularly prominent for older children, those with additional needs or in sibling groups. Whilst the Adoption Now Recruitment target of 100 adopters approved in 2019-20 would go some way towards closing this gap, the expectation is that some external placement will be required from our partner Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) and beyond. It is encouraging that of the children placed in the first 6 months of the year there were 67% with RAA families and 89% with either RAA families or our partner VAAs.

Since April 2019 the Marketing Team has been continuing to work on increasing awareness of Adoption and the need for adopters from all walks of life to meet the needs of local children awaiting families. There has also been more work undertaken to increase the brand recognition of Adoption Now.

April 2019 saw the launch of the Focus Family Finding Programme. This aims to build campaigns for children who have been waiting longer for placements, to create an in-depth *feel* for the children to bring out their personalities and hobbies with the aim of bringing them to life for potential adopters. To date the Team has focussed on an older child and published an advertorial in the Lancashire Life magazine which resulted in one enquiry. This child has since achieved a link with a family from the most recent activity day. Advertorials have also been published in Teaching magazines with the aim to recruit adopters for a sibling group.

A key area of recruitment activity has been, and will continue to be in the coming months, the recruitment of LGBTQ+ adopters. In July 2019, an advertorial profiling one of our families was produced for Gay Times. The Team attended the Bury Pride event in April 2019 and Manchester Pride in August 2019, the biggest LGBTQ+ event in the North West. This resulted in twelve requests for further information. A further advert for Gaydio radio has been produced to target 100,000 listeners per week across the North West. This went live in August, taking advantage of the high-profile Pride season. The station also aired an interview with one of our families during BME Week (July 2019).

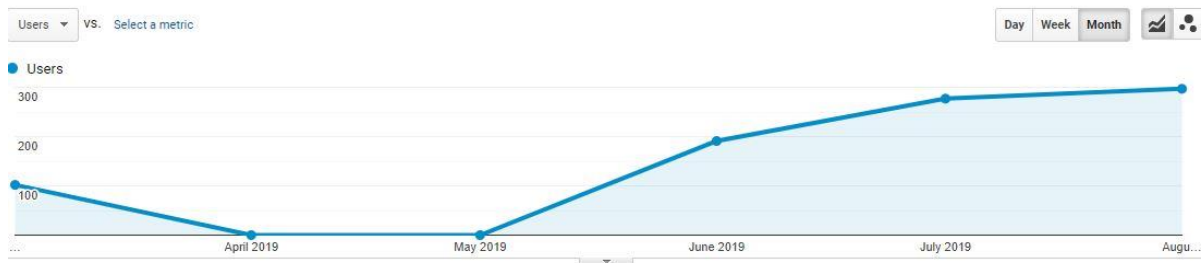
The RAA has seen an increase in children under the age of two years waiting for adoption so the Team ran a campaign in May 2019 to target those who want to adopt young babies or would consider Fostering for Adoption. This was promoted on social media, the RAA website and using the six Local Authority Communication Teams' external and internal resources. An information evening was also held for those interested in adopting young babies and adopters shared their stories at this event. Existing adopters on our mailing list have also been contacted with a view to encouraging returning applicants. We will continue to do this periodically throughout the year.

The Agency's large-scale campaign 'You don't have to be perfect to adopt' has continued and relaunched at the end of June 2019 on Heart Radio. The Agency is now a partner with the radio station and running a year-long campaign to instil a more consistent, drip-fed approach ensuring that messaging is always running to avoid any lulls in enquiries and increase brand recognition. A fresh advert will be aired in October 2019 to capture listeners over National Adoption Week (14th – 19th October).

Bus advertisements ran through June and July 2019 across all six Local Authority areas and in central Manchester due to their success in a previous campaign. This is repeated in Blackburn during National Adoption Week as enquiries have been noted to be lower in the Blackburn with Darwen Borough. The Team is exploring the use of Facebook Messenger and 'tweet a longs' to encourage direct chat as a new way of reaching potential adopters who see the national campaign activity, ensuring that we reach people both in person and virtually.

The Team is continuing to use local opportunities for marketing and has advertised on a large digital screen in Blackburn during the Festival of Making in the summer. Leaflets were distributed throughout all six Local Authority areas in Health and Leisure Centres.

We know that the Agency website is key to recruiting adopters as it holds important information and the ability to enquire online. All our marketing campaigns signpost traffic to the website so it is vital that we encourage visits. Therefore, a key focus in the past months has been the launch of pay per click advertising on Google and additional Facebook advertising which began in June. **In the past 3 months we have completed technical search engine optimisation of the Adoption Now website to improve organic rankings by Google. This has had an immediate impact on the search ranking for Adoption Now, with organic searches showing an increase on the previous three months (see chart below).**



Targeting adopters from a variety of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds is a key focus for Adoption Now. Since April specific work has been undertaken to target Asian communities with two information events delivered in conjunction with Mosques and faith groups based in Bolton and Rochdale. This has raised our profile within these communities and has resulted in 35 enquiries since April. The Team is also attending the

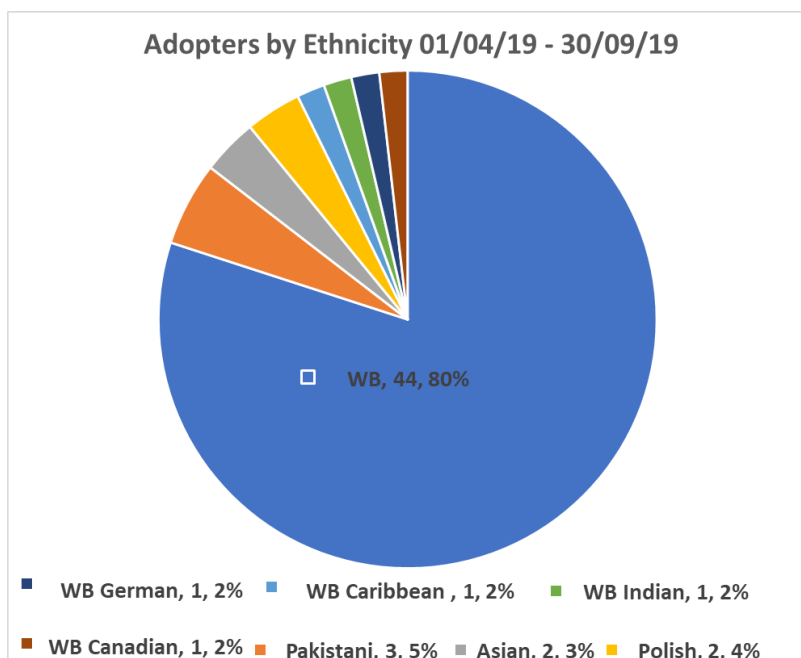
Muslim Lifestyle Expo taking place in Manchester in October 2019 as a new way of raising the profile of adoption to a younger demographic.

Children's recent tracking data indicates an increase in children waiting for adoption from African Caribbean, Polish and Eastern European communities. We continue to see an increase in children of dual heritage of both White British/other and Asian/other. Children's tracking data also reveals an increasing number of unborn children who may have a plan of adoption in addition to children with a range of complex needs including physical and emotional challenges.

Church groups around the six Local Authority areas have been provided with promotional leaflets and this is something that we are actively revisiting now, with Social Work presentations having taken place within Churches, including those with predominantly Polish and African Caribbean congregations. The Team also had a presence at a Polish family fun day (September 2019). There has been success in targeting the Polish community, resulting in 7 enquiries during August. One family is progressing to application, three have been offered an initial visit/information evening and three families are not currently ready to progress but have indicated that they would contact us in the future when their circumstances change. Further plans are in place to target Latvian and Congolese congregations. The Team continues to liaise with *Churches Together Lancashire* to ascertain which promotional events we may be able arrange with them and we have been to speak to a Methodist congregation in Prestwich in July 2019. The Team also attended the Preston Caribbean Carnival and has been proactive with leaflet drops and engagement with proprietors of African Caribbean/Polish/Eastern European community shops and access points. An advertorial has been published in the Keep the Faith magazine based on a sibling group who are waiting for a family to encourage the Black African, Christian community to consider adoption.

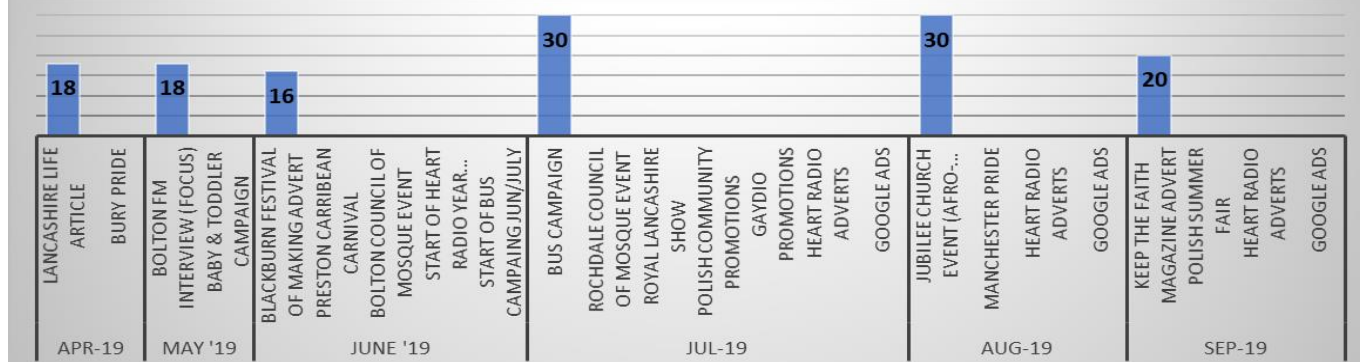
The summer months have been a busy time for recruitment activity, with attendance at local and regional events such as the Royal Lancashire Show, Manchester Caribbean Carnival and Manchester Pride.

Our current profile of adopters by ethnicity is as follows:-



The data below shows the number of enquiries received since April 2019 by month in line with marketing activity:

Enquiries by Month 01/04/19 - 30/09/19



The data highlights that the current marketing strategy has had a positive impact having led to a spike in enquiries in July and August 2019. There is a marked increase this year (60) from last year (38). We are also in a better position this year compared to last year in respect of the numbers of prospective adopters currently in assessment/approved. Last year we successfully approved 73 adoptive families by the end of Quarter 4. We currently have 95 families at some stage in assessment at the beginning of Quarter 3. Whilst there are likely to be inevitable losses, this number is encouraging.

The Marketing Team was also instrumental in the organisation of Adoption Now's third Activity Day on 14th July 2019 and the Marketing Team and most Recruitment Social Workers participated on the day or supported our own adopters in attendance. (14 Adoption Now families attended and 25 from VAAs).

Outcomes & Targets

Monitoring and tracking of Adopters currently in the system highlights that we still need to recruit ten to fifteen more Adoptive families this year to reach our target of 100, allowing for some inevitable losses in the process. As discussed in the sufficiency/marketing section we are also mindful of our children's tracking data when planning recruitment activity. There has been increasing marketing activity since our Marketing Officers came into post in June 2018 and we have a developing database of specific events and activities that result in measurable outcomes.

Those families approved since April 2019 are returning to the Panel quickly with matches. The success in identifying early links is due to good working relationships between recruitment and assessment, and care planning work streams. Adopters in Stage 2 are invited to RAA recruitment events (exchange days and Activity Days); a recruitment manager attends monthly children's tracking meetings to further inform the Team about the children coming through the system. A Placement Meeting is held between recruitment and care planning teams on a monthly basis to further share details of priority children and available or upcoming adopters; early alert profiles are also prepared for both children and families and stored in a shared folder accessible to all workers.

At 30th September 2019 there are no approved adoptive families waiting for links.

For the year 2019/20 current indications are positive. The Team target for 2019-20 is 100 approvals; at the beginning of Quarter 3, we currently have 35 families who have already been to the Panel and approved. One family has been to the Panel but is awaiting Agency Decision Making. One additional family withdrew post the Panel (ADM deferred). There are a further sixty families at some stage in assessment. There is every expectation therefore of the Team achieving significantly improved outcomes with the same resources. More families will be approved than were approved in the year proceeding the RAA and there is already guaranteed improvement on last year's RAA target. We are doing all we can to raise the challenge of the aspirational target set for this year. All social workers within the Recruitment Team are aware of both this target and their own individual targets for the year.

We have worked hard to develop a team identity by continuing fortnightly team meetings and establishing joint working in respect of delivering training and supporting marketing events and Activity/Exchange days. A great deal of our work involves evening visits to flexibly accommodate adopter availability and further evening and weekend recruitment responsibilities alongside our Marketing colleagues. We would not be able to deliver so many events without the general sense of good will, commitment and positivity that exists in the Team.

The Team continues to deliver monthly information evenings and three-day preparation groups. A duty system runs daily from 9.30am until 5pm. An answer machine captures potential enquiries out of hours.

Our recruitment and marketing officers are increasingly bringing a level of expertise and opportunity to adopter recruitment that our separate agencies would not have had. This is a developing resource as they have come to understand our Service and we realise their potential. The Marketing team workers have been trialling recruitment activity and plotting it against outcomes, meaning we will have an evidenced base for marketing activity going forward. Following the departure of a member of the Team, there is currently a vacancy leaving two full time marketing officers. The post is out to advert.

We have a good number of experienced social workers in the Team who can nurture and peer mentor less experienced staff. There is a lot of good will in the Team in respect of this.

The Team works hard to link adoptive families quickly to avoid delays for children being placed with their adoptive families. Good links have been developed with care planning colleagues to enable effective joint working for the benefit of our children. As can be seen by our data, it is the exception for families to be waiting longer than three months before being linked with a child.

Team members are regularly commended by the Panel for the quality of prospective adopter reports which have been noted by managers to have increased depth and integrity due to the incorporation of learning from the Adult Attachment training.

Areas for Development

Monitoring, recording and reporting using information provided by Liquid Logic continues to be an area for development. Migrating cases and unreliable inputting at the launch of the RAA resulted in considerable reporting challenges. There are still some process issues identified which have been flagged to Liquid Logic but we recognise that only reliable and timely recording will result in a system that accurately meets our growing reporting expectations. The Service has its own tracking systems, updated sometimes on a daily basis, therefore accessing historical information is reliant upon what Liquid Logic can tell us. Our performance management colleagues and Liquid Logic are aware of our current difficulties and are working with us to improve the quality of reports we can get from the system. Once the new Pathway changes are made, further training will be delivered to the Team.

Year one largely focused on establishing the Team and *processes*. Since April we have been building on those foundations to focus on our *outcomes*. We have some aspirational recruitment targets for the year ahead that need to be owned by the Team and individuals in it. Supporting recruitment activity and then improving timescales for stage 1 and Stage 2, so we quickly approve those we attract to the Agency is a priority.

Staffing:

Team Structure: The Service has a core team of 0.8 Family Support Workers, 8 (full time equivalent) Social Workers, 1 Deputy Manager and a Team Manager from Blackburn with Darwen. These staff are now seconded to Adoption Now and support a much larger service. Family Finding Workers are based largely at Duke Street, Blackburn.

We currently have an additional temporary social worker 2 days per week funded through the Adoption Support Fund to support with the development and embedding of our therapeutic parenting course.

The Adoption Support Service has been running since May 2019 with various staffing issues, including the part-time Advanced Practitioner being absent due to long term sickness, a part-time maternity vacancy not yet successfully recruited to, 2 full-time workers having been on sick leave and a full-time worker requesting to reduce to part-time hours.

Whilst it has been possible to meet the needs of families during this time, it's not been without its challenges. During this time, families have also been supported through the duty service where allocation has not been possible but this has only been for a very short time and where intervention has not been urgent.

Centralising/Developing the Service:

Following on from the Therapeutic Life Story Work (equivalent to the first module of the Diploma) and DDP1 (Dyadic Developmental Practice) completed by all staff last year, staff have now completed the Foundation level NVR Non-Violent Resistance (supporting families where child to parent violence is an issue). These opportunities have been available to the entire Team, resulting in the approaches being consistently used in our assessments and support of families.

Additionally, there are members of the Team who are continuing their developmental in these areas to become certified practitioners. Adoption Now is commissioning clinical supervision for certified practitioners and practitioners working towards certification in order to support and sustain this ongoing development.

Overview of Staff training and qualifications are shown below;

Theraplay

2 certified practitioners, 2 practitioners working towards certification.

DDP – Dyadic Developmental Practice

The whole Team have DDP 1

3 social workers with DDP 1 and 2 and working towards certification.

2 social workers completing DDP 2 (independently) this coming November.

2 practitioners have completed the Training the Trainer (or equivalent).

Therapeutic Life Story Work

Removing additional allowances from 1st April 2019 SGO applicants prior to this date, who have been awarded additional allowances, and removes allowances they previously received as a Family and Friends Foster Carer.

Therapeutic parenting courses:

We have successfully delivered our first Therapeutic Parenting Course, which received very positive feedback from the families who completed this with a second course set for November 2019.

The comprehensive therapeutic parenting programme includes;

- 1 x family assessment and parent feedback session
- 5-day parenting course

The aims of the programme are to help enhance the relationships and positive attachments between family members; helping parents to support their children to build trust and security to reduce difficulties and stress. Through the programme, parents will gain understanding of the key theories linked to child development, increase their understanding of what lies underneath their child's behaviour and develop confidence and skill in therapeutic parenting.

The family observation session is based on the model used by the Theraplay® Institute; The Marshak Interaction Method. The family session involves all family members attending the office to undertake a structured play session, which will be filmed. This will help identify how the child's early trauma and loss has impacted on their development and help build understanding of how this links to their behaviour.

Following the family session, parents will attend the office for a feedback session where the family session video is reviewed. Parents will gain useful understanding and insights into their child's behaviour and development. The strengths within the parents' approaches will be highlighted and specific advice and guidance on ways to help the child will be offered.

The first 4 days of the parenting course will run over 2 consecutive weeks. In the first week theoretical aspects, including attachment, brain development and trauma will be covered to enhance understanding of the needs underlying children's behaviours. There is a reflective focus to the course and as well as learning how a child's history and experiences have impacted on them, parents will have time to deepen their understanding of their own parenting styles, strengths and skills. The second week will focus on practical ways to support children and will cover themes including Life Story work, Theraplay, DDP and sensory processing with tips and strategies offered. The course has a positive focus, and will build on parental capacity and resources through Theraplay games, self-reflection and shared learning and discovery.

What our parents said about the course and what they found most helpful

"the feedback session following the family session helped to build on our understanding of the drivers under our daughters' responses and we gained new ideas on how to respond"

"I learnt a lot – loads of different techniques to help deal with various situations that I would usually get upset and angry about"

"the trainers were extremely good; their knowledge, experience, way of teaching and approachability have been excellent. The understanding and insight this course has given me is potentially life changing both for my son and me. I am so thankful to have been on the course so early into placement"

"the science behind the behaviours explained a lot"

Adoption Support Consultation

We have also introduced adoption support consultations to our Adoption Now colleagues in care planning and recruitment and to our Local Authority colleagues for pre-matching, pre-placement support and early placement guidance and advice. This can range from advice/support around preparing children for moving on, support with the Adoption Support Plan to allocating an adoption support worker to co-work alongside the child's social worker for a seamless transition of support beyond the adoption order as needed.

'First Family' – an independent service to provide birth parent counselling and support has been commissioned and is due to launch on 13th November 2019.

The **Peer Mentoring Scheme** is almost ready to launch, with 8 mentors and a mentor manager now appointed and all having now completed the 1-day training course.

Additionally 15 social workers across Adoption Now completed the Cornerstone Virtual Reality Trauma Aware Service – The Individual Child training. Adoption Now have 15 virtual headsets that are already being utilised in Adoption Support, Recruitment and training.

Adoption Support Fund:

The only certainty regarding the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) is that its future remains uncertain.

Whilst it has been announced that the fund will continue, unchanged until March 2021, the long-term future of the fund remains under review. There continues to be much speculation from ASF monies becoming the responsibility of RAAs, further reduced Fair Access Limits to the fund ceasing.

Adoption Now continues to prepare for every eventuality, from investment in staff training and development to widen our service provision in line with Adoption Now’s vision for a more self-sufficient and sustainable adoption support service to securing funding through our Local Authority resource processes where required.

Total monies received 01/04/2019 – 30/09/2019	£370,476.67
Number of children currently receiving therapy funded via ASF	235
Local Authority Breakdown:	
Blackburn with Darwen	33
Bolton	40
Bury	40
Oldham	32
Tameside	47
Rochdale	43
Number of providers currently being commissioned by Adoption Now	66

We have also been able to make some small applications to the Adoption Support Fund for packages of support provided by Adoption Now staff who are certified practitioners or working towards certification. It is important to note that some children do receive support throughout the Adoption process via Blackburn with Darwen’s REVIVE Service as well as the ASF.

Total monies received 01/04/2019 – 30/09/2019 for Adoption Now Interventions	£16,600.00
Number of children	12

Clinical supervision costs for certified practitioners and those working towards this are met with this income, together with various other costs, such as room hire for the parenting course where applicable.

Cases/workload:

Adoption Support

The current open case total is 327 – this total reflects the number of children receiving adoption support.

An overall breakdown of the current open cases is as follows:

01/04/2019 – 30/09/2019	
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Receiving on-going Adoption Support Packages	252 (includes 30 assessments completed 01/04/19 – 30/09/19)
Ongoing Assessments	33
Pre-order support	42
Cases closed	74
	Total 401

Access to Records

01/04/2019 – 30/09/2019	
Completed and closed	29
Ongoing	54

At the start of 2019 we commenced a piece of work to develop an Adoption Now process for Access to Records with our part-time Advanced Practitioner and one of our part-time social workers undertaking all the access to records requests in addition to working with our 6 local authorities to develop one process. It was hoped that this piece of work would be complete with access to records being rolled back out to the wider Team at the end of the summer. However, due to sickness this has been delayed – we have successfully developed one process for Pre-Commencement Adoptions which will be ready to roll out across the wider Team in January 2020, whilst a process for Post Commencement Adoptions is still in progress.

In addition to referrals for adoption support and access to records requests, the Service has taken 264 enquiries from 1st April 2019 – 30th September 2019. These enquires include step parent adoption; letterbox; requests from professionals to access files, intermediary requests/sign posts, access to records advice and enquires from birth families.

Surgeries and Letterbox: The surgeries remain an effective aspect of our Regional Adoption Support Service with the busier surgeries still being Tameside, Bolton and Rochdale. The majority of enquires coming through the surgeries relate to letterbox and to support birth parents/relatives.

Good working relationships with letterbox co-ordinators have been established with letterbox support being a significant aspect of adoption support. This remains problematic however for Blackburn with Darwen. Whilst there are plans for letterbox to become an Adoption now function, the time frame for this is yet to be determined. It is desirable from a Blackburn with Darwen perspective that the letterbox function transfers to Adoption Now given the impact upon Business Support

Both Rochdale and Blackburn with Darwen remain without an appointed Letterbox Co-ordinator, which significantly impacts on these two surgeries, which are both heavily supporting the day-to-day management of the letterbox service at present. Oldham and Bury both have full time, established letterbox co-ordinators in post, who hold positive working relationships with many of our regular birth parents needing support. Bolton previously had a part-time experienced letterbox co-ordinator; however, this has since changed and has seen an increase in the support needed from the surgery with occasions whereby two workers have been needed.

Support groups/Events: We are coming to the end of our calendar of events for 2019, including support groups, training workshops and events and our steering groups remain in place to further develop this core offer of services.

- **Training Events;**

In the last 6 months we have run numerous workshops with up to 25 attendees; Starting your adoptive family (21 attendees)

The developing brain (22 attendees)
Life Story Work – Introduction (26 attendees)
Introduction to Theraplay and PACE (19 attendees)
Support to family and friends (16 attendees)

- **Annual Events;**

We have held 2 events since April – an Easter event (Egg Hunt) with over 100 attendees (parents and children). We also held a Summer Picnic, which due to the weather required a last-minute venue change. Although over 80 attendees confirmed, over 60 still attended with some not hearing about the change in time.

- **0-11 Years Support Groups/Events;**

We hold 2 Nurture/Toddler groups (0-4 years) per month with an average of 12 families attending at each – with school holidays this often increases to an average of 15 families per session. Club Awesome (4-11 years) runs on a monthly basis and on average we have 10 families attending.

We held an annual Summer Picnic at a Church Hall with indoor activities, including a carpet picnic with a movie and popcorn for all. This was well attended and enjoyed by all given the positive feedback received.

The 2020 calendar will be ready to circulate in November 2019 and will be enhanced with the following developments:-

- *There is a review of preparation training currently on-going with adoption support workers being part of the focus group undertaking the review – the aim being to not only explore what should be included in prep training in relation to adoption support, but also to inform how our workshops follow on, enhance and support prospective adopters' development, into placement and beyond.*
- *Starting your adoptive family workshop – this is being reviewed in line with preparation training and will be launched in 2020, running multiple times throughout the year.*
- *A workshop focusing on Trauma and Attachment is currently in development and will launch in the 2020 calendar.*
- *Adoption Now's Therapeutic Parenting Course will run 3 times during 2020. This is currently provided based on assessed need.*

Additionally, two further group based therapeutic interventions are in development; one that will follow the therapeutic parenting course for families requiring further support or for families where its assessed that this maybe too basic for a family and will draw more on the DDP/PACE approach. The other will explore how we can support our families with the teenage years and will draw on various therapeutic approaches, including Non-Violent Resistance.

Attachment for school/classroom workshops are delivered with varying models, and an Adoption Now workshop is currently in development to ensure consistency.

Adoption Panels

Adoption Panels continue to operate four times per month with an option to run a fifth panel if required. A half-yearly Panel Report summarises the work of the Panels. They continue to be busy and two new Panel Chairs have been recruited which means there are now 4 Chairs available.

The Panels quality assure all paperwork being presented and it is evident that there is continued improvement in the quality and standard of both matching paperwork and Adopter Assessment paperwork. 73% of matches presented on Blackburn with Darwen children were of good quality or better.

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. Blackburn with Darwen commissions this service from The Inter Country Adoption Centre.

Participation of Young People

Services being designed are in line with the expressed wishes of some of our young people when they were consulted last year. 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.

Complaints

Adoption Now and the Local Authority has not received any complaints in relation to Blackburn children or families.

Allegations

There have been no allegations in the last six months.

Budget

New Adoption Support fund applications have transferred to Adoption Now (see above for the amount claimed).

The Operational Budgets supporting Adoption Services were transferred to Adoption Now, and combined with the budgets from the other five Local Authorities in 2017. The budget has not been increased this year. At the six month stage in September 2019 it is expected that the Adoption Now budget will have a slight underspend. There are costs associated with posts in the RAA that had no budget line to support them from the outset; however, these are more than covered now by the income being generated and savings achieved from other budget lines as part of the economy of scale in bringing the six Local Authorities together.

Children's Services no longer generate an income through Adoption as the Adopters recruited are within Adoption Now. The costs of placing children with Adopters outside of Adoption Now this year is predicted to be £472,000 against a budget of £266,700. These fees have resulted from placing 2 sibling groups of 3, 3 sibling groups of 2 and 8 single children some of whom were 'hard to place' due to their age or complex needs. The surplus budget developed by Adoption Now this year is to be used to meet the additional costs anticipated for the forthcoming year due to a change of premises.

Discussions are ongoing with the Board about the financial implication of bringing the letterbox function into the RAA which is quoted at approximately £12,000 per annum per Local Authority.

Team Development

Adoption Now hold regular team meetings where staff learn together and develop practise. In addition there has been team building training in each of the work streams. In the last six months there has been training in non-violent resistance (managing child to parent violence) for the full adoption support staff team, a course for recruitment staff on making good assessments and a variety of training for individual staff. Further training is planned for the coming six months and topics are those requested by the staff in line with service need. One of the benefits of the new regionalised approach is that pooled budgets allow for staff to be better equipped to manage children and families coping with transition and trauma. Often it is more economical to provide whole team training and equally the risk that trained people leave is therefore reduced.

A development plan exists within Adoption Now to ensure continuous improvements are made to the service.

Completed by Karen Barrick, Adoption Now

Additional Information provided by Pamela Price, BWD Service Lead for Placements