

Adoption Annual Report

2019/20



Executive Report

adoption
now

Together we make a difference

Bolton Council ROCHDALE
Borough Council

Oldham
Council

BLACKBURN
DARWEN

Bury Tameside
Metropolitan Borough

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.

In 2017 there was a significant change in the way that adoption services were delivered as Adoption Now went live on 20th November. 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. The data in this report is specific to Blackburn with Darwen children.

Adoption Agency Business - Children

Children with an Adoption Plan

During the second half of the year 10 children were subject to a decision that they should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA).

The total number over the full year is 28.

Those children were primarily of white British origin.

In terms of the age of those children in the first half of the year 55% were aged 0 - 2, 33% were aged 3 or 4 and 12% were over 5.

In the second half of the year 60% were aged 0 – 2, 20% were 3 or 4 and 20% were over 5.

The gender split was equal for children who have had a SHOBPA decision.

Children Awaiting a Match

On 31st March 2020, there were 16 children with a plan for adoption (subject to a placement order) awaiting placement and not yet matched. This number included 3 sibling groups of 2, all of whom have links being explored, a child with Huntington Disease in the family background who may also now have a link, a child with significant developmental delay where a link is being explored, and 3 young children due to be matched at panel.

These children are predominantly from the white British community with just one child of dual heritage Asian White British.

If the current links do not progress then continued efforts to match all of the children waiting will include them being profiled at Exchange days. Adopters come and discuss children awaiting adoption and all will be invited to attend a Family Adoption Day run by Adoption Now if this is appropriate for them. Similar National events are also run 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 Activity

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches, especially with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA's) who are partners of Adoption Now. The regional placement group meeting has been redesigned and continues to operate on a monthly basis to encourage matches with local Voluntary Adoption Agencies. Link Maker continues to be a useful tool, and children have been placed immediately on Adoption Match once a Placement Order is made if there are no families able to be explored from within Adoption Now in-house.

The development of Adoption Now means that families that would have been approved by the six Local Authorities individually are all part of the same organisation, and are immediately available to Blackburn with Darwen children. In the second half of the year, of the 14 children placed a total of 12 were placed within the Regional Adoption Agency and 2 with other agency adopters. Over the year that means that 80% of children were placed within the RAA. 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% children to be placed 'in house'. The figure is therefore above what was anticipated back in 2017.

It is good practice to search for a family within Adoption Now in the first instance and then to look further afield to other Local Authorities, RAA's or Voluntary Adoption Agencies. This is known as an interagency placement.

On 31st March 2019 the National Adoption Register ceased to operate. Prior to this it had 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 for a match. 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 and there has not been a significant impact from the Register ceasing.

Children Placed for Adoption

There were 11 children placed with adopters in the first half of this year and 14 children matched (the numbers of matched and placed children may be different 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, there were 6 Fostering for Adoption or Concurrency placements matched, a sibling group of 2, and a sibling group of 3.

In the second half of the year a further 14 children were matched with adopters. There were two sibling groups of 2 and one child matched with early permanence carers.

There have been 28 Blackburn with Darwen children matched with adopters this year 2019/20.

The **scorecard data** for children adopted between 1st April 2019 and 31st March 2020 is as follows : -

Measure		Blackburn average
Placement Order to Matching (A2)	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	186
Child entering care starting adoption placement (A1)	Scorecard indicator – 426 days	344

These figures show that during this year, timescales were under the target for A1, and over for the A2 target. This is due to some children being adopted having additional needs and taking longer to find a family. 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.

Children Adopted

20 Adoption Orders were made during the year 2019/20. It is these children for whom the score card data refers. Most Adoption Orders have been made in a timely fashion despite birth parents requesting leave to contest on the majority of cases.

Adoption Disruption

There have been 3 disruptions of adoptive placements during the year. A disruption is identified as a placement where the child has moved in with adopters and then the placement has failed. In the first half of the year there was just one disruption of an older child who 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 very historical.

In the second half of the year there were 2 disruptions, involving an older sibling group of 2. Sadly the disruption related to the female adopter becoming mentally unwell to such an extent that the placement could

not continue. A disruption meeting was held but there was little that could have been done differently from the perspective of Adoption Now.

Adoption Agency Business - Adopters

Adopter Recruitment

Nationally, there is a shortage of adopters and the number of children in the 'looked after' population rises both nationally and locally. This happened shortly after many adopters waited for long periods over the past few years, as a consequence of case law that changed the practise 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 very few babies and young children available for adoption. The recruitment strategy of Adoption Now has been to dispel this myth and focus on children waiting and timescales.

Context

Adoption Now, Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) became operational on the 20th November 2017. This report addresses the activity and outcomes of the Recruitment and Marketing work stream during the period 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020. It should be noted that the year opened optimistically with new agency targets for adopter recruitment, marketing and development plans, and ended with the uncertainty of how the Covid-19 pandemic would impact upon the workforce and adoption practice going forward. The service began operating remotely through lockdown from 23 March 2020.

Staffing

The Recruitment and Marketing work stream for the RAA is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and support of prospective adopters. The team comprises of 26 individuals:

2 Team Managers

1.5 Advanced Practitioners

14 FTE social workers (10 part time, 9 full time)

3 Marketing Workers

Staff continue to be seconded from Local Authority employees to form the RAA.

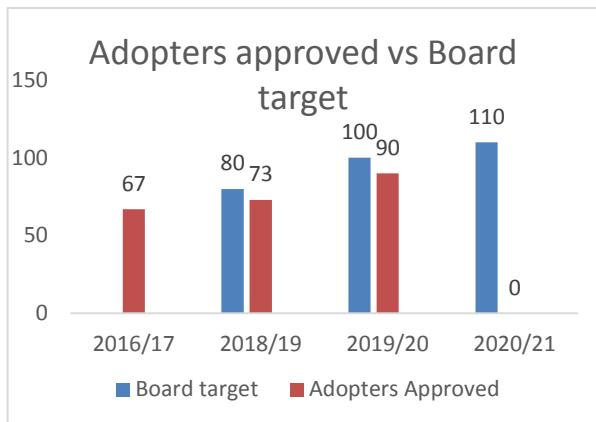
Headline Data.

In the full year preceding the formation of the RAA, (1st April 2016 - 31st March 2017), the Local Authority Adoption Teams in our six areas approved 67 adopters collectively.

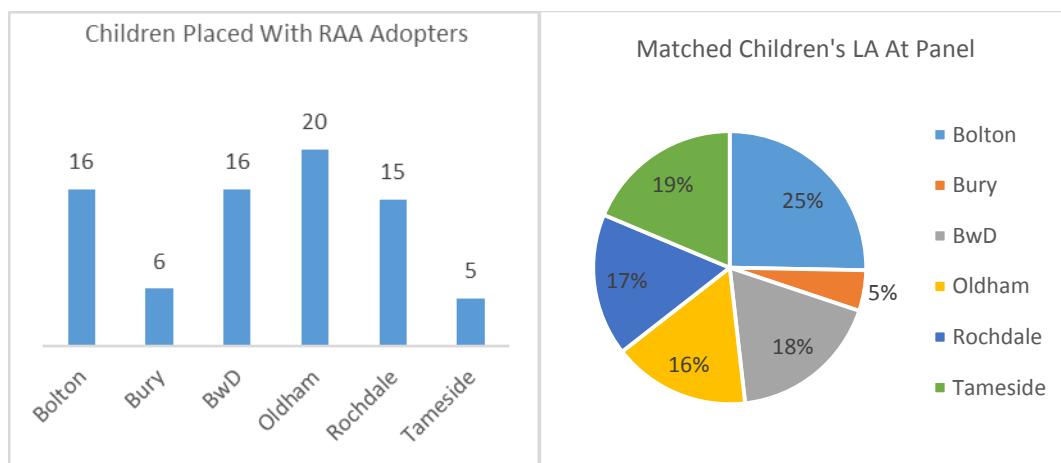
In the first full year of RAA operation (1st April 2018- 31st March 2019), 73 adopters were approved and 91 RAA children were matched with 84 RAA families. Additionally, 15 RAA families had 18 children placed with them from external agencies.

In this our second year (1st April 2019-31st March 2020), 91 families were presented to panel and 90 were approved; 78 RAA children were matched with 71 RAA families. (6 in groups of 2). Additionally, 3 RAA families had 4 children placed with them from external agencies. The total amount of income generated during the year from these placements was £166,000.

In the two years of operation, the work stream has yet to meet the aspirational adopter approval target of 100 set by the board. However, with no additional social work staff, this year's approval outcome represents a 34% increase in adoptive families than was achieved by the 6 agencies working separately as reported in 2016/17.



In respect of the 76 RAA children collectively, matched with 71 RAA families, 5 were in sibling groups of two. The distribution of RAA placements across agencies is shown below. The bar chart shows the total number of children placed and the pie chart shows the percentage by Local Authority as a proportion of all children matched within the RAA. Some Local Authorities have used more RAA adopters than others and this will be discussed in the family finding section of this report.



1. Adopter Recruitment Key Data 1.4.19- 31.3.20

	Numbers	Notes
Applications presented to Panel 1.4.19- 31.3.20	91	90 approved 1 was not recommended for approval; a recommendation supported by the Panel and the ADM.
Adopters Approved and waiting for a match at 31.3.20	21	The figure for approved and waiting adopters in the last 6 month report was zero. This significant increase in approved adopters available at year end, is because of the high number of families approved at panels in Feb/March 2020 (24 approvals in March 2020 alone). Families are still routinely being matched very quickly post approval and this figure is likely to be much lower in the next 6 month report. Despite the pandemic, linking and matching of approved adopters continues via virtual working and panel arrangements.

Adopters Linked or Matched on 31.3.20	70	The implications of the Covid 19 pandemic was already starting to be realised at year end with likely delays for this group of prospective adopters who were linked with children, not yet placed.
Adopters with Children in Placement on 31.3.20 (Children not yet adopted)	51	The likely impact of lockdown on this cohort of families at the end of March 2020 was still unknown. Inevitably it was recognised that newly formed families would be isolated from their personal and professional support networks.
Initial enquiries 1.4.19- 31.3.20	292	241 couples, 51 singles. A number of those are now in the system for assessment and approval in 2020-21. This figure represents a slight increase on initial enquiries last year.
Total Adopters in the recruitment process at 31.3.20	166	23 (Initial Visits), 30 (Stage 1), 23 (Stage 2), 90 (Approved) Only seven new families are anticipated Q1 2020. This is low as a result of the drive to approve families in Q4 19/20.

Matching factors

The challenge to recruit sufficient adopters willing to consider siblings placed together, children 5 years plus, and those with additional needs or those placed under early permanence, remains a priority locally and nationally. Whilst not a legal requirement, the ability to match children on the basis of their ethnicity remains an important consideration as is the need therefore to recruit from a broad demographic that reflects the backgrounds of our children.

Siblings:

This year, 5 of the 90 approved families were able to consider two siblings, and no approvals were for three children. The number of returning adopters (second/third time adopters) however was 12, with a number of those being prompted to return by a care plan of adoption for a sibling. Whilst siblings are therefore being kept together by naturally growing families the need for adopters able to take children together remains high and an ongoing recruitment focus.

Single/LGBT:

Single and LGBT applicants have been part of targeted national and local ‘myth busting’ marketing campaigns for a number of years with success in increasing awareness. Adoption numbers for both groups have grown steadily year on year. For some time, LGBT applicants were known to be statistically more likely to consider older or more complex children or sibling groups (in part because they often came with fewer preconceptions of baby placements). Increasingly however subjective preferences for two parent heterosexual couples have been eroded. Though these groups are still generally broader in their matching considerations, they are increasingly likely to express similar preferences for single placements and younger children.

Of the 90 applicants approved in the Agency, 8 were single applicants and 16 were same sex couples.

Early permanence:

Prospective adopters are advised about early permanence options with a focus on recruitment for Fostering for Adoption (FfA) from first enquiry onwards. This year 16 of the 90 assessments for approval concluded with the recommendation that the applicants would consider FfA, however only 7 of those 16 approved went onto take FfA placements, the rest accepting very young babies who already had placement orders.

Ethnicity of adopters:

Routine tracking of children with adoption plans across the RAA gives the agency an informed perspective of the demographic of adopters that the RAA would ideally like to recruit to meet the needs of our children. In this year 2019/20, due to targeted recruitment and marketing activity, we have seen greater numbers and ethnic diversity in new enquiries. Adopters with Indian ethnicity trebled from 2019/20. The 'any other' white background more than doubled as did Bangladeshi adopters. Enquiries from white British adopters remained relatively consistent with a slight increase in 19/20.

Our ability to target and recruit from Polish, Romanian and Eastern European groups has been considerably enhanced this year with the appointment of an assessing social worker able to speak multiple languages. She has assisted greatly with access to specific communities and churches, translation of marketing materials and assessments where English is a second language.

Foster Carer applications:

7 applications in the year were foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care. 6 were approved and one assessment went to panel with a recommendation not to approve. This was supported by the Panel and the ADM.

Timeliness

This year, 47% of the completed Stage 1 assessments were completed within the two month timescale and 80% of Stage 2 assessments in the 4 month target timescale. This compares to 32% of approvals made within target timescales by local authorities nationally. Our stage 1 delays more often relate to statutory checks, and stage 2 delays arise as a result of complexities or life events arising in the assessment period.

Quality of reports to Panel

Quality of Adopter Assessment Reports (PARs) are exceptionally high with almost 90% (82 of the 91 cases) being graded good or excellent by the Panel.

Complaints

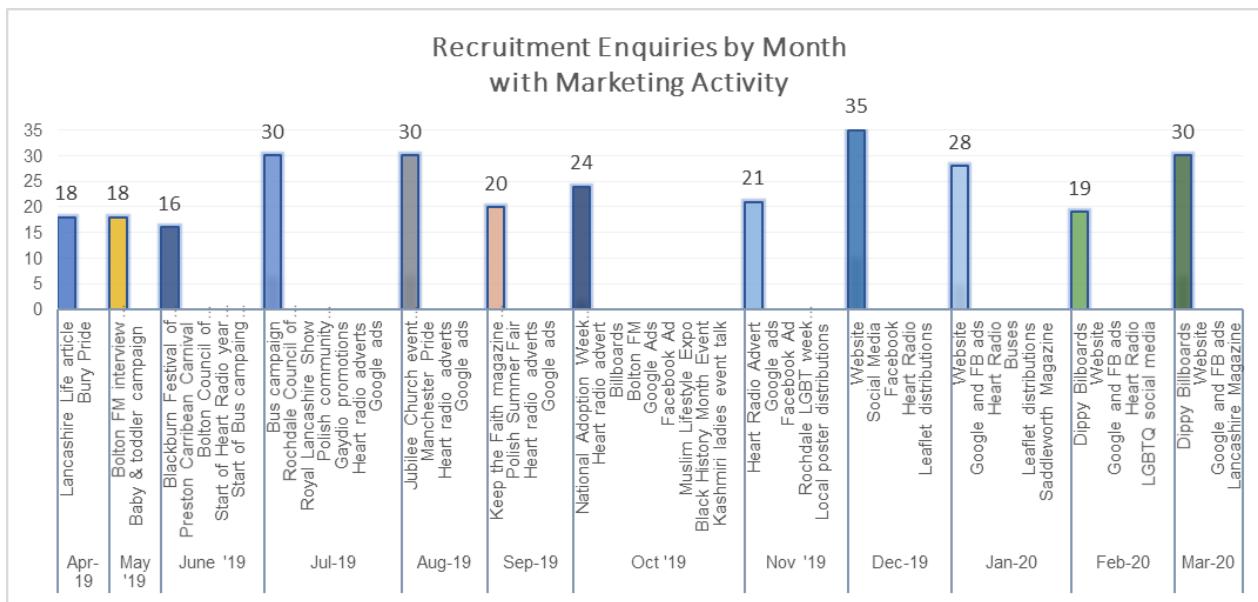
There have been no complaints reaching Stage 1 or 2 this year. The commitment and support of social workers in the team is generally recognised by the majority of service users. A number of compliments have been received from adopters in this period.

Adopter Recruitment /Marketing activity

There are three members of the team who work exclusively on recruitment and marketing activity in the RAA. One member left in October 2019 and the post was filled in January 2020. At the end of March 2020, one member of the team was on maternity leave until early 2021.

Adopter recruitment has been targeted at a wide reach from our 6 LA's over the past 12 months with a view to building up a profile of adopters with various ethnicities. Some targeted marketing has recently taken place specifically towards Asian, Polish, Muslim and LGBTQ Adopters (see recruitment activity chart below).

Number of enquiries received by month in line with marketing activity 01/04/19-31/03/20:



The chart above shows spikes in enquiries during periods of heavy marketing activity including radio campaigns, events, social media and outdoor advertising.

The recruitment team attended local and regional outreach events to increase awareness of the agency with residents to raise the profile of the agency. Targeted events attended include Polish Fair, Black History, African Church, Muslim CoM. Regional events attended include Royal Lancashire Show, Fertility Show, Manchester Pride, Muslim Lifestyle Expo. During National Adoption Week the team were present at landmarks in all LA's including libraries and leisure centres.

Using feedback and response rates the recruitment plan for the year 2020/21 was devised to include the most successful events alongside key marketing methods namely social media, website improvement, outdoor and transport-based campaigns. At year end, this was being reviewed due to the pandemic.

The aim is to be consistent and regular activity throughout the year around key campaign times i.e. National Adoption Week and New Year. There will also be huge focus around the National Adoption Campaign which has been postponed from the intended launch of March. This coming year will continue to see additional focus on the Adoption Now website and online advertising to drive enquiries, supported by ongoing social media messaging.

Despite some of the larger events being successful and increasing brand exposure, many have since been cancelled, this has resulted in a shift of event attendance to a focus on further developing our website and increasing our online presence including Facebook, Twitter and google ads as well as reinstating a new radio campaign with Heart Radio – ‘*Don’t stop looking! Adoption Now needs you!*’.

Adopter Sufficiency Recruitment and Marketing 2020/21

In developing the agency sufficiency strategy, Adoption Now pays due regard to children’s tracking data, particularly as the profile and needs of children in the care system change all the time in terms of ethnic diversity amongst the local authorities, gender, numbers of children needing to be placed, numbers of children with lifelong physical and developmental needs and those with specific diagnoses, for example, autism, Asperger’s, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. This informs the recruitment strategy.

It is clear that the total number of adopters approved within the agency is still not sufficient to meet the needs of our children waiting or those anticipated. The national picture in March 2020 indicates that once

published, figures for 2019/20 will report a slight upturn in adopter approvals across the country (allowing for the usual demographic anomalies). In our own agency, approvals are up 18% this year from last, which is likely to exceed the national upturn. Although still not reaching the Board target, this represents a significant RAA achievement on which to build. It is very unclear at this point what the impact of the pandemic will be on recruitment outcomes in 2020/21 but in preparing for lockdown the team have already demonstrated resilience and a commitment to delivering continuity of service.

This coming year we continue to recognise the need not just to recruit *more* adopters but to recruit to those *most needed* within the RAA. Whilst the new recruitment target of 110 adopters for 2020-21 would go some way to closing the sufficiency gap the expectation is that external placement will inevitably be required from our partner VAA's and beyond. All social workers within the recruitment team are aware of both this target and their own individual targets for the year.

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. We are mindful of our children's tracking data when planning recruitment activity. There has been increasing Marketing Activity since our Marketing Officers came into post and we have a developing data base of specific events and activities that result in measurable outcomes.

Families approved in the year have returned to Panel quickly with matches. The success in identifying early links is due to good working relationships between recruitment and assessment and care planning workstreams; adopters in stage 2 are also invited to RAA recruitment events (exchange days and Activity Days); a recruitment manager attends monthly children's tracking meetings to further inform the team on the children coming through the system and a placement meeting is held between recruitment and care planning teams on a monthly basis to further share details of priority children and available/upcoming adopters; early alert profiles are also prepared for both children and families and stored in a shared folder accessible to all workers.

Team and service development

Adoption Now have worked hard to build 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 in the year has involved 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.

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 year on year.

Prior to lockdown in March 2020, the team has developed a host of new resources including our own videos and training materials in order that we can continue to offer a marketing and recruitment service. These are supported by new processes and procedures. Virtual open evenings, training groups for adopters, initial visits and virtual assessments are now operating and developments are continuing throughout these extraordinary times.

Year one in the recruitment workstream largely focused on establishing the team and *processes*, year two built on those foundations with a 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 continually improving timescales for stage 1 and Stage 2, so we quickly approve those we attract to the agency is a priority. Adding to that challenge this year will likely be some inevitable delays as a result of the pandemic.

We have seen some improvements this year in monitoring, recording and reporting using adaptions to Liquid Logic but further work is planned and this continues to be an area for development. Once the new pathway changes are made, further training will be delivered to the team. We also have added capacity to develop online resources, videos and podcasts to further develop our website following the appointment of a new recruitment and marketing officer with expertise in this area. It goes without saying that targeted recruitment specific to the meet the needs of RAA children will be our primary focus for the year ahead.

Adoption Support

Staffing, Team building and transitions:

The adoption support service has continued to experience various staffing issues, including some significant periods of sick leave and the full-time senior practitioner reducing to part-time hours in January 2020 and currently being on sick leave.

Whilst we have continued to meet the needs of our 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 for a time.

On a positive note, the Advanced Practitioner returned to work in late Autumn, a full-time social worker is currently on a phased return following a significant period of sick leave and the part-time senior practitioner recruited has just commenced with the team.

Centralising/Developing the service:

Whilst we may currently be in unprecedented times with much of our face-to-face core offer of support being on hold, in terms of our workshops and support groups, we have been able to continue developing our support offer.

We have to date successfully delivered 3 Therapeutic Parenting Courses and we continue to receive very positive feedback from the families who completed this. We were looking to hold a further two courses in June and October and whilst there may be some delay, we will look to get new dates for these confirmed as soon as we are able to. At present we have commissioned an independent therapy service to support our development and delivery of the therapeutic parenting intervention, however, we envisage that following the next two courses that we will be ready to independently deliver and continue to develop this intervention, including a version for teenagers.

We are currently busy exploring how we can support our families more virtually and there is lots of creative and innovative work going on. We have produced a fortnightly bulletin called 'Reaching Out' for parents, sharing hints, tips and ideas, with theraplay informed activities and mindfulness for parents which in the main has been well received. Our next edition is to be a special edition from one of our adopters, sharing their tried and tested experiences that we hope will be well received with families as it was certainly enjoyed by the team.

We are exploring how we can offer a virtual support group/coffee morning and how we can continue to deliver our workshops more virtually – a session has been scheduled for our 'Support to Family and Friends' later this month with a Q&A section to trial how this works. We are working very closely with our recruitment and assessment colleagues, who are working to provide preparation training in this way. The adoption support consultations for pre-matching, pre-placement support and early placement guidance and advice are increasingly being utilised and the number of pre-order allocations in adoption support is steadily growing. There is work still needed here, with plans for joint training for staff to be developed with our panel advisor in relation to Adoption Support Plans and continued work on building early relationships with adoption support.

The Peer Mentoring Scheme is continuing to grow and develop with a further cohort of mentors being recruited in January/February.

The Cornerstone Virtual Reality equipment has been proving successful and an invaluable resource – from prep training and adopter assessments to adoption support workshops, training and in working with individual families.

The Covid 19 Fund:

The Covid 19 Government Fund is for adoptive and Special Guardianship families who need extra support as a result of Covid 19. This fund is not an alternative to an assessment of need or the Adoption Support Fund.

Families do not need to be open to services or need an assessment to receive the extra support but they must be in scope for the fund with needs arising as a result of Covid 19.

The DfE have allocated up to £213,000 for Adoption Now to claim against to provide a package of support, whilst all claims must be made by 9th June, the funding will remain in place until the end of September 2020.

We have secured a varied package of support services through 9 successful application to the fund that we envisage will support families in the 'here and now' situation.

The services available are:

All families have access to free membership to the National Association of Therapeutic Parents (NATP) including access to online training sessions and Special Guardians can subscribe free to Grandparents plus.

We have also commissioned the Manchester Occupational Therapy Service to produce a series of Sensory Processing video's – this includes 7 sets of 3 videos, each set will be based around one of the 7 sensory systems. The initial video will explain the sensory system, the second will offer outdoor activities to support the sensory system and the third will offer indoor activities. Each series will include a handout so there will be no need for parents to make notes and the videos will be no more than 15 minutes long. Once these are produced, they can be shared with families on an unlimited basis and will be a valuable resource beyond Covid 19.

Manchester Occupational Therapy Service have extended their consent for these materials to be shared wider amongst other Regional Adoption Agencies.

A referral process has been implemented and is now active for the following support services:

- Consultation with Clinical Psychologist
- Consultation with Education Psychologist
- Mindfulness for parents
- Access to webinars re managing teenagers and younger children in the current situation
- Therapeutic parenting support – various packages
- Adult/Couples counselling
- Relax Kids
- Sessional support for pre-teens/teens and young adults
- Sessional support – DDP/Theraplay and NVR
- Grandparents Plus tier 1 and tier 2 support
- Attachment Informed Sensory Regulation Consultations as part of therapeutic parenting support.

All the support is being delivered “virtually” with referrals from adoptive families being made through adoption support and SGO referrals through their respective Local Authorities. Referral progression, allocation, monitoring and evaluation processes are being managed by the Adoption Support service for adoptive and SGO families.

Adoption Support Fund:

The future of the Adoption Support Fund remains uncertain at present. A spending review of the fund was due in November 2019, however, for various reasons this was not completed, and the fund has continued, unchanged until March 2021.

The long-term future of the fund remains under review, which is now scheduled for November 2020. It is unknown how/if the current situation relating to Covid 19 will impact on this spend review.

Total monies received 01/04/2019 – 31/03/2020	£622,656.28
Number of children currently receiving therapy funded via ASF	254
Number of applications made to the fund	205
Local Authority Breakdown:	
Blackburn with Darwen	32
Bolton	51
Bury	40
Oldham	45
Tameside	45
Rochdale	41
Number of providers currently being commissioned by Adoption Now	49 from 66 registered with AN

Total monies paid by Adoption Now for Match Funded Applications – 01/04/2019 – 31/03/2020	£14,890.50
Local Authority Breakdown:	
BwD	£284.47
Tameside	£1,516.17
Bolton	£274.35
Oldham	£1937.19
Rochdale	£48.06
Bury	£10,830.26
Number of applications/children	13

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.

Total monies received 01/04/2019 – 31/03/2020 for Adoption Now Interventions	£40,600.00
Number of children – includes 3 Therapeutic Parenting Courses.	30

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.

NB: Our Therapeutic Parenting Course is £1,500 per family.

Cases/workload:

Adoption Support

The current open case total is 351 – this total reflects the number of children receiving adoption support. An overall breakdown of the current open cases in terms of when they came into Adoption Now is as follows:

**Ongoing cases from 2017/18 and 2018/19
01/04/2019 – 31/03/2020**

196
155
Total 351

01/04/2019 – 31/03/2020

Receiving on-going Adoption Support Packages
Ongoing Assessments
Pre-order support
Cases closed

280 (<i>includes 54 assessments completed 01/04/19 – 31/03/2020</i>)
33
38
128
Total 479

Access to Records

01/04/2019 – 31/03/2020
Completed and closed
Ongoing

55
65

We successfully rolled out our process for Pre-Commencement Adoptions across the wider team in January 2020 and the process for Post Commencement Adoptions remains in progress.

At present Access to Records are on hold – whilst we are still taking referrals and providing support and advice to adults wishing to access their records, these are not being progressed due to Covid 19. Letters have been sent to all adopted adults who were in the process of accessing their records with Adoption Now and they will continue to receive support from their allocated social worker where required.

Surgeries and Letterbox:

This is another area of work that is in the main on hold due to Covid 19 as surgery appointments cannot be held and supporting letterbox/indirect contact is limited as we are unable to access letterbox files. We continue to provide support through the duty service and continue to work with the letterbox co-ordinators to keep as many exchanges progressing as possible. We have many birth parents who require support to write letters and are anxious that their exchanges will be late, we are progressing any enquiries where are able to and offering reassurance that as soon as we are able we will arrange surgery appointments and will support exchanges outside of the set time frames due to any delays being outside the control of any of the parties.

Whilst in infancy, planning had commenced in relation to the management of all 6 letterbox/mailbox services moving into Adoption Now and unfortunately, this too is on hold.

Support groups/Events:

• Training Events:

In the last 6 months we have run numerous workshops with up to 25 attendees at each;
Starting your adoptive family x 2 (14 attendees and 18 attendees)
The developing brain (18 attendees)
Life Story Work – introduction (19 attendees)
Life Story Work – Part 2 (12 attendees)
Introduction to Theraplay and PACE (17 attendees)
Support to family and friends (16 attendees)

- **Annual Events:**

Sadly, our Easter event had to be cancelled this year, which is a shame as we were expecting a good turn out with many families signing up who we are beginning to see regularly at our events. It is likely that our summer picnic will not be able to go ahead either, however, for the first time since we became a RAA we have been planning a Winter Event – something that many families have been eager for us to arrange – we remain hopeful that this event will go ahead.

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

We hold 2 Nurture/Toddler groups (0-4years) 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 (4-11years) runs on a monthly basis and on average we have 10 families attending – in the few months prior to the lockdown we were seeing a steady increase in the numbers of children attending Club Awesome.

- **Progress on 2020 Developments:**

- We have reviewed our 'starting your adoptive family' workshop with the aim of running multiple times throughout the year. We managed to hold one prior to lockdown and this will be the first workshop we trial virtually in the coming week.
- A workshop focusing on Trauma and Attachment has now been developed and is ready to deliver.
- Adoption Now's Therapeutic Parenting Course successfully ran in March 2020 and 2 more cohorts will be rearranged from June/October as soon as this is possible.
- Development continues for a group based therapeutic intervention to support families with the teenage years and will draw on various therapeutic approaches, including Non-Violent Resistance.
- Development continues with building relationships with education and workshops/training for schools, both case specific and more general.

Adoption Panels

Adoption panels continue to operate four times per month with an option to run a fifth panel if required. An annual panel chairs report exists which 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 panel 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. 79% of matches presented for 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. BwD commission 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 late 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 nor BwD have received any complaints in relation to Blackburn with Darwen children or families in the period 2019/20.

Allegations

There have been no allegations in the last six months.

Budget

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

The operational budgets supporting adoption were transferred to Adoption Now and combined with the budgets from the other five local authorities. This budget has not been increased this year which has put pressure on some budget lines and in particular the staffing budget lines.

At the end of the financial year however there was a surplus budget of £276,000. This included income generated of £166,000 and underspends due to staffing vacancies in business support and half a year where there was no commissioned birth parent service due to After Adoption ceasing to operate suddenly at the outset of the year.

There will be additional pressures on this budget in the coming year due to 'on costs' being charged by Bolton to support the hosting of the RAA and newly committed expenses. In addition it is expected that the RAA will need to move its hub and this may also incur new costs.

Unspent reserves brought forward were an additional £350,000.

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.

A total of £... was spent on placing children with outside agencies this year (Adam to be confirmed if possible)

Team Development

A development plan exists within Adoption Now to ensure continuous improvements are made to the service. In addition this is informed by adopter surveys carried out at least annually. The last of these was at the end of March and over 120 people responded with ideas and suggestions – some of these were specifically related to the Covid 19 situation and the additional services that they required from the Covid 19 funding.

Staff training remains a priority with full staff teams being trained on such things as adopter assessments, Therapeutic life story work that was delivered to local authority staff as well as RAA staff, panel training and much more.

One of the biggest challenges we have is to be approving more adopters for a wider range of children. Whilst numbers approved are over 30% more than the combined LA's were approving prior to the RAA coming into existence this is still not sufficient. Another factor is also increasing numbers of children in care across the 6 LA's and certainly this year has seen an additional 20 children placed for adoption which may be what would be expected if a proportion of those additional children in care have an adoption plan.

Support for adopters continues to grow and develop with the introduction of therapeutic parenting programmes over the last year and the increased use of virtual reality which adopters are finding extremely helpful.

In the coming year the adoption mailbox will be centralised within Adoption Now which will be hugely beneficial for Blackburn with Darwen as this is managed by Business Support in the LA currently.

Covid 19 has generated a whole raft of new innovations including virtual adopter information events and virtual preparation groups and virtual adoption panels which had to be developed in less than a week in order to ensure adopters could still be approved in large numbers at the end of March. Additionally, a new therapeutic fortnightly newsletter out to adopters has been developed and a whole new range of services has been funded by the Adoption Support Fund to support families in this time of crisis. This has all taken a huge amount of organisation but staff have risen to the challenge admirably.

Karen Barrick
Head of Service, Adoption Now (RAA)