

# Adoption Annual Report

## 2020/21



Executive Report



Together we make a difference

Bolton Council

ROCHDALE  
BOROUGH COUNCIL



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. Adoption Now is a Regional Adoption Agency formed in 2017, providing adoption services on behalf of six Local Authorities – Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside.

Data in this report relating to children remains local data relating to Blackburn with Darwen children however, adoption support and recruitment data now covers the Region. This report covers the period April to September 2020.

## **Adoption Agency Business - Children**

### **Children with an Adoption Plan**

During the first 6 months of the year 10 children were subject to a decision that they should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA). This compares with 18 in the same period last year and represents quite a drop in numbers. It is possible that Covid has had an impact on numbers.

Those children who did receive a SHOBPA decision were primarily of white British origin. In terms of age, 4 children were in the 0 – 2 age range, 3 were in the 3 to 4 age range and 3 in the 5 + age range.

### **Children Awaiting a Match**

On 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020, there were 10 children with a plan for adoption (subject to a placement order) awaiting placement and not yet matched. Of this number 5 children had no potential links identified, and the other 5 were either linked, had a plan to be adopted by a foster carer, or were subject to a change of Care Plan to return to their birth family.

This number of 10 waiting included two sibling groups of 2, one child was older with significant additional needs, the other included a much older child. One child was in the upper age range and of dual ethnicity.

Continued efforts to match all children waiting will include them being profiled at Exchange Days where adopters can come and discuss children available for adoption and all will be invited to attend a Family Adoption Day run by Adoption Now if this is appropriate for them. A new virtual event called 'Link and Play' is being used to facilitate such events while Covid rates are high and groups cannot meet in person. This is an innovative alternative to an activity day devised by Adoption Now staff.

### **Family Finding Activity**

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 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 to promote profiles of children waiting for adoption.

In the first 6 months of the year, of the 6 children placed for adoption, 3 of them were placed with Regional Adoption Agency families classed as 'in-house' placements (50%). These placements do not incur an interagency fee. In addition 2 children were placed with concurrent foster carers, these are not adoption placements at this time but will become adoption placements should the court make a placement order.

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

## Children Placed for Adoption

There have been 6 children placed with adopters in this 6 month period and 2 children have been placed with concurrent carers. This number included a sibling group of 2 with additional needs, and a child with significant additional needs.

There were 10 Adoption Orders granted in this period. The scorecard data for children adopted between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020 is as follows :

Measure		BwD average
Placement Order to Matching (A2)	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	20/21 86
Child entering care starting adoption placement (A1)	Scorecard indicator – 426 days	341

These figures show that during the half year timescales, local figures are well below the target for A1 and A2 and the first 6 months of the year represents a significant improvement in both measures. 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

10 Adoption Orders were made from April to September 2020/21. It is these children that the score card data refers to. The number will be lower than usual as courts have not prioritised Adoption hearings during the coronavirus period, especially if birth parents have requested leave to contest.

## Adoption Disruption

There have been no disruptions of adoption placements during this review period. A disruption is identified as a placement where the child has moved in with adopters, and then the placement has failed. This figure is positive as it suggests matches are appropriate and placements successful.

## Adoption Agency Recruitment

This report addresses the activity and outcomes of the Recruitment and Marketing work stream during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021. It should be noted that this six month period began with the unprecedented uncertainty of how the Covid-19 pandemic would impact our workforce and adoption practice going forward. The service began operating remotely through lockdown from 23 March 2020 and was delivering a fully operational, but still a largely virtual service, at the beginning of September 2020.

## Staffing

The Recruitment and Marketing work stream 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

At no point in the last six months has the team been fully staffed.

## Headline Data Overview

In the full year preceding the formation of the RAA, (1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017), the local authority adoption teams in the six agencies approved 67 adopters collectively.

In the first full year of RAA operation (1<sup>st</sup> April 2018- 31<sup>st</sup> 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 our second full year of operation (1<sup>st</sup> April 2019-31<sup>st</sup> March 2020), 91 families were presented to panel and 90 were approved (1 deferred and then withdrew) ; 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 types of placements was £166,000.

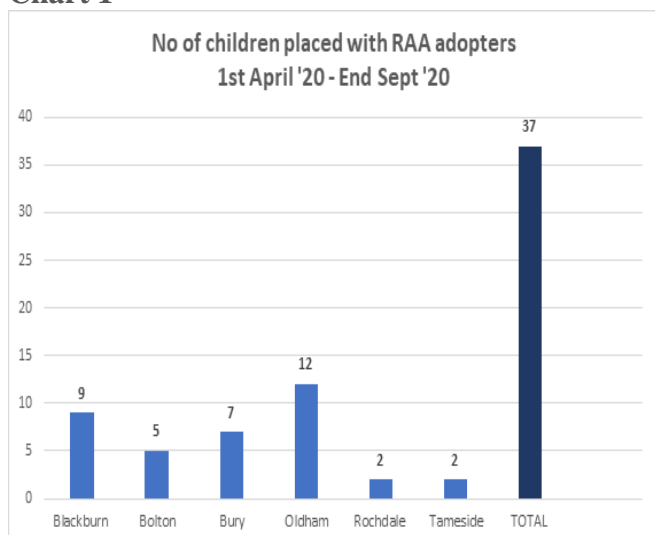
This year in 2020/2021 the Board have set an aspirational target of 100 adopter approvals. By the end of September 2020, 27 new families had achieved approval at panel. There were 21 approvals in Quarter 2 2020 which is positive.

Despite the challenges created by offering training and assessment sessions virtually, the recruitment team continue through uncertain times, and projections are positive. Projections for the second half of the year are **25** approvals anticipated Q3, with **47** approvals anticipated in Q4. There is a higher percentage of families anticipated in Q4, partly due to the Agency receiving 46 applications from July onwards (compared to 30 for the same period last year).

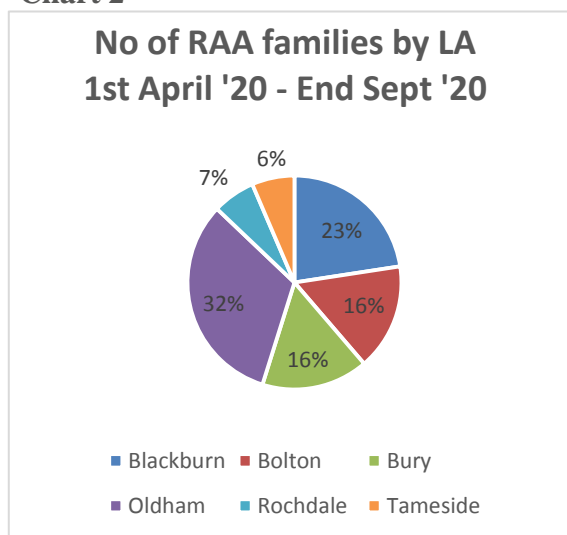
It is also positive that despite the pandemic 37 RAA children have been matched with 31 RAA families.

In respect of the 37 children matched with **31 RAA families**, 6 were in sibling groups of two. The distribution of RAA placements across agencies is shown below.

**Chart 1**



**Chart 2**



## Matching factors

The challenge to recruit sufficient adopters willing to consider siblings placed together, children who are 5 years plus, 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.

**Matching Siblings:** This year, 6 adopters have been matched with sibling groups of two. There are a further 5 approved families offering a sibling placement to two children and seven coming through in assessment with a similar offer. Compared with last year's 12-month data, where only six families were matched with siblings, this is a strong indicator that the recruitment drive to encourage more families to consider more than one child is effective. Since May 2020, the recruitment team have been delivering virtual group sessions twice monthly for adopters in the assessment period, to encourage more families to consider siblings. Current indications are that this is having a positive impact.

**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 and adoptions. LGBT applicants were known to be statistically more likely to have older or more complex children or sibling group placements.

Of the 27 applicants approved in the agency at this half year point, there were only 2 single applicants and one LGBT couple. However, this number does increase in our projections for the next six months with a further three single applicants and seven LGBT couples booked onto panel. The single applicants are all female, and whilst there have been some tentative enquiries from male applicants this year – they have not converted to applications. This remains a significant target area. Seven of the eight applications from LGBT couples are from male applicants. Again, this highlights the need to reach out to more female LGBT couples and will form part of the recruitment strategy in the forthcoming months.

**Early permanence:** Prospective adopters are advised about early permanence options with a focus on recruitment namely Fostering for Adoption (FfA) from first enquiry onwards. Since May 2020, virtual group sessions have been delivered by the team twice monthly for those adopters in assessment wishing to consider early permanence by FfA. Since August 2020 this training has been made mandatory for all those considering children 0-2 years of age. Of the 27 families approved between April 2020 and September 2020, there were 8 were willing to offer FfA. Six children were placed with RAA approved families under FfA in the same period.

**Ethnicity of adopters:** Routine tracking of children with adoption plans across the RAA gives the agency an informed perspective on the demographic of adopters we would ideally like to recruit to meet the needs of our children. In this year we have continued to see diversity in **new enquiries**; with 40% of our applicants being other than White British. There has been a steady flow of Asian/Pakistani families but we continue to target Black African families where we know there is a local and national need for adopters from this group.

Our ability to target and recruit from Polish and Eastern European groups has continued to be a strength since the appointment of an assessing social worker able to speak multiple languages, assisting greatly with access to specific communities and churches, translation of marketing materials and assessments where English is a second language.

### Timescales

Last year, 58% of Stage 1 assessments were completed within the two-month timescale and 86% of Stage 2 assessments were within the 4 month target timescale. At this half year point, the team performance for timeliness has so far reduced only slightly despite the pandemic: 52% of stage 1 assessments and 81% of stage 2 assessments have been within timescale. Stage 1 delays are more often related to statutory checks since March 2020 and have been Covid-19 related. Stage 2 delay has been due to complexities arising in assessment or life events, again in a number of cases exacerbated by Covid-19.

### **Quality of reports to Panel**

Of the 27 approvals at this halfway juncture, 85% of reports were judged good or excellent by panel members. This is a significant achievement considering all assessments have been presented to panel during the current Covid-19 pandemic and the vast majority of them have been completed largely virtually.

## Complaints

There was one formal complaint to the agency in the period. The complaint was addressed internally at Head of Service level.

## Disruptions

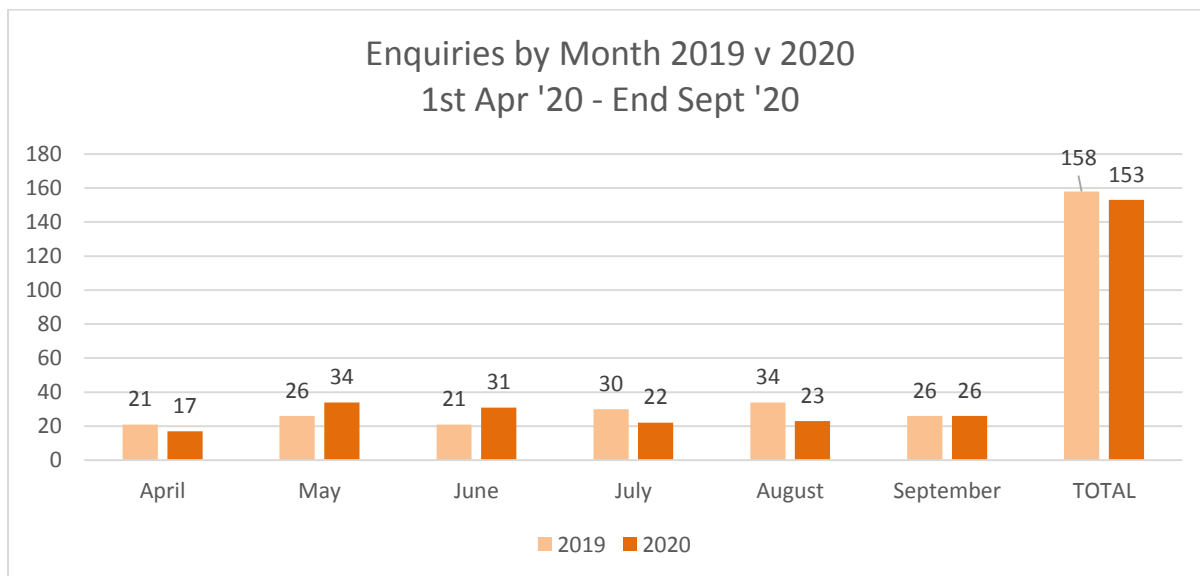
Adoption placements with RAA families continue to evidence stability. Of the 37 RAA children placed with RAA families, there has been one disruption in the period April to September 2020. This one disruption involved a young child, and Covid restrictions impacting upon a single carer were partly responsible

## Adopter Recruitment /Marketing activity

There are three members of the team who work exclusively on recruitment and marketing activity in the RAA. One member of the team has been on maternity leave from March 2020 returning January 2021.

Adopter recruitment has been targeted at a wide reach from our 6 LA's over the past 6 months with a view to building up a profile of adopters from various backgrounds and ethnicities. Some targeted marketing has been driven specifically towards Asian, LGBTQ, Polish and BAME adopters.

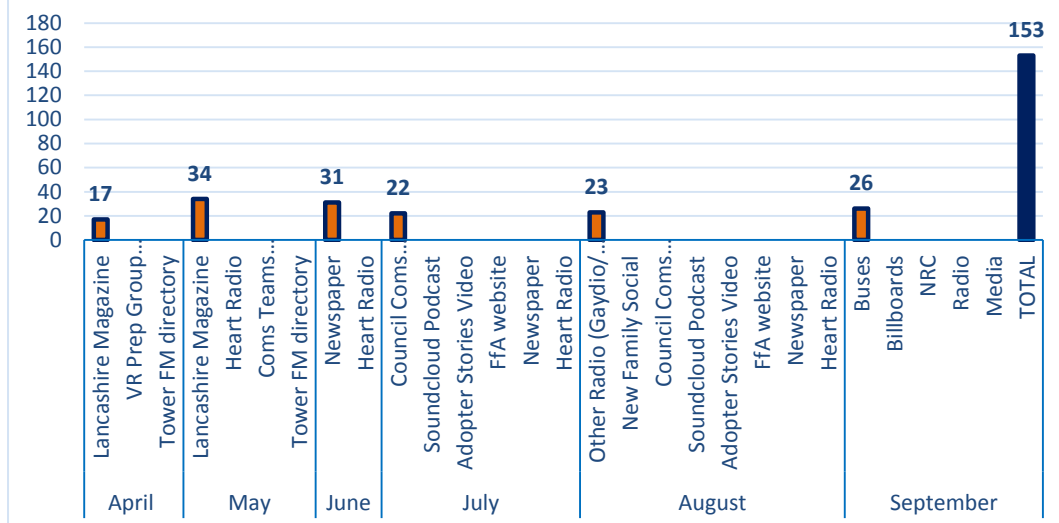
## Comparison of enquiries by month 2019/2020 (does not include contacts from families wanting information only).



The chart above shows 153 families have made contact and gone on to make a registered enquiry in this period. Additionally, there were 64 enquiries from those only seeking information at the point of contact. This totals 217 enquiries in the period April to September which is positive.

The chart below shows where the recruitment has been targeted and where enquiries have been generated.

## Enquiries by month including marketing activity over and above ongoing (social media ads / google ads / website / ) 1st Apr '20 - End Sept '20



The chart above shows spikes in enquires during periods of heavy marketing activity including radio campaigns, social media activity and outdoor advertising – buses and billboards; key to driving the brand. We saw an increase during lockdown periods perhaps due to families having time to consider their options or feeling the loneliness of lockdown.

A major impact of Covid from a marketing activity perspective, has been inability to attend local and regional events which were planned to include Polish Fairs, Manchester Pride, Muslim Lifestyle Expo. As such we have adapted by increasing our social media ads to promote awareness weeks related to such and inform that despite the pandemic Adoption Now are still fully operational as an agency for adopter recruitment. We have also had additional support from our local coms team recently, by featuring in internal and external newsletters as these have been a key information tool to communities more recently.

During September 2020 we supported the #youcanadopt campaign using collateral provided by the national campaign, also during this time we launched further activity during National Adoption Week gaining free local and regional radio and media coverage including MEN. We had bursts of outdoor coverage in all LA's during this period and have similar planned for January 2021

The key driver for contacts into the Agency is via Google search engine. This is noted as the largest source of enquiry; however the search could relate to having seen another form of advert which may have prompted the search.

Since March 2020 and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have increased our focus and attention on our digital marketing strategy across our social media channels and on our website. With a combined following of over 1,200 and growing across our platforms, along with utilising links with the local authority coms teams we have been able to increase our reach to more potential adopters. We have refined our content and posting times to maximise impact; with each piece of content posted across our platforms being signposted back to our website.

[www.adoptionnow.org.uk](http://www.adoptionnow.org.uk) is the front door and we are constantly looking at ways to make it as welcoming and informative as possible. Along with directing potential adopters to the website via organic posting Adoption Now are also focusing on targeted Facebook Ads and Google ads to bring more visits to the website. SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) has been a priority, from increasing content and revolving the content to create brand new location pages that will increase online 'search-ability'.

## **Service Sufficiency Strategy & Marketing Activity**

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.

The national picture at September 2020 indicates that the number of children with placement orders has been reducing since March 2020 possibly due to court delays as a result of the pandemic.

### **Team and service development**

With little warning prior to lockdown in March 2020 the team 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, new standard letters. Video open evenings, virtual training groups for adopters, initial visits and virtual assessments have been operating throughout and service developments are continuing throughout these extraordinary times.

### **Adoption Support**

The last 9 months have been unprecedented and challenging for all, and whilst the adoption support service has continued to experience various staffing issues, including some significant periods of sick leave, it has been possible as a service to have continued to meet the needs of families during this time.

People have worked together to support each other, finding creative ways to cover duty that not only supports adoptive families who need services but also enabling staff to work who were suddenly juggling childcare, home schooling and other caring responsibilities.

Much of the face-to-face core offer of support has remained on hold, however, the team are all developing confidence in the virtual world and are now successfully delivering most of the workshops and support groups virtually, including some new additions.

Adoption Now have produced a fortnightly bulletin called 'Reaching Out' for parents, sharing hints, tips, and ideas, with therapy informed activities and mindfulness for parents which in the main has been well received. Parents and mentors contribute to 'Reaching Out' and have started to deliver this monthly, which will be something which is continued beyond the pandemic. There have been some tentative discussions about how we might be able to offer our Therapeutic Parenting Courses virtually.

In the last report, adoption support consultations for pre-matching, pre-placement support, early placement guidance and advice were increasingly being utilised. More recently, it has become Adoption Now wide policy to have a consultation for all children moving on to their adoptive families. In the main, these are very positive and are valuable in supporting the development of and in strengthening adoption support plans.

Since starting the consultations in late May 2020, 56 consultations have been considered in relation to 72 children.

### **The Covid 19 Fund:**

The DfE allocated up to £213,000 for Adoption Now to claim, in order to provide a package of additional support for Adopters and Special Guardians, and that the funding would remain in place until the end of September 2020. This has since been extended until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020. A varied package of support was sourced and commissioned and 9 successful applications were made to the fund that have been supporting families on an immediate and needs led basis.



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 and access a more targeted support package on request.

The Manchester Occupational Therapy Service were also commissioned to produce a series of Sensory Processing video's – this included 7 sets of 3 videos, each set will be based around one of the 7 sensory systems. These have now all been produced and are being shared with families on an unlimited basis and will be a valuable resource beyond Covid 19.

A referral process was implemented 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-teen/teens and young adults
- Sessional support – DDP/Theraplay and NVR
- Grandparents Plus tier 2 support
- Attachment Informed Sensory Regulation Consultations as part of therapeutic parenting support.

**May 2020 – October 2020**

**Number of families accessing Covid 19 fund support packages via Adoption Now:**

**152 families**

**Breakdown:**

***Adoptive families:***

***Pre order -***

30

***Post order -***

77

***SGO families:***

10

**SGO families accessing support packages direct from Grandparent Plus**

**35**

The subscription-based support from NATP and Grandparent Plus is now widely being utilised by families, with the NATP take up now being around 150 subscriptions/families. We continue to promote the NATP membership through adoption support consultations and via 'Reaching Out', including the prepaid training

and courses available via Inspire. This has also included their 6-week de-escalation therapeutic parenting programme being run specifically for Adoption Now families.

The individual LA's promote the Grandparent Plus membership to their SGO families.

We have now utilised almost all the support packages with capacity remaining for Relax Kids (including Chill Skills for Teens and Relax Adults) and Consultations with a Clinical Psychologist. We anticipate that we will use all this resource by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.

### **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 continued, with the spending review being rescheduled for November 2020.

Whilst we are currently in the transitional phase of this spend review, there is speculation that the fund will remain unchanged for a further year, until March 2022.

<b>Total monies received 01/04/2020 – 31/10/2020</b>	<b>£439,088.80</b>
<b>Number of children currently receiving therapy funded via ASF</b>	156
<b>Number of applications made to the fund</b>	146
<b>Post order applications</b>	133
<b>Pre order applications</b>	13
<b>Local Authority Breakdown:</b>	
<b>Blackburn with Darwen</b>	10
<b>Bolton</b>	23
<b>Bury</b>	37
<b>Oldham</b>	18
<b>Tameside</b>	28
<b>Rochdale</b>	30

In this period, we have been able to make just one small application to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) for packages of support provided by Adoption Now staff who are certified practitioners or working towards certification.

Although the total monies claimed from the ASF is greater for this period than in the same period in 2019/2020, the number of applications and children supported via ASF funding is lower in this same period. This is likely to be a result of the pandemic – in terms of therapy packages agreed prior to the pandemic many interventions have been on hold for periods of time, causing delay to time frames, funds have lasted longer with travel costs being converted to further sessions or session times being reduced where virtual interventions have been applicable. In terms of new applications for new children and families, again, some work has been on hold for applications made prior to the lockdown as commencing with a new family or commencing specialist assessments was not appropriate virtually.

**Cases/workload:**

**Adoption Support – Post Order**

The current open case total is 287 – 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:

<b>Ongoing cases from 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>01/04/2020 – 31/10/2020</b>	<b>42</b>
	<b>Total 287</b>

<b>01/04/2020 – 31/10/2020</b>	
<b>Receiving on-going Adoption Support Packages</b>	<i>267 (includes 39 assessments completed 01/04/2020 – 31/10/2020)</i>
<b>Ongoing Assessments</b>	20
<b>Cases closed</b>	72
	<b>Total 359</b>

**Adoption Support - Pre Order**

<b>Ongoing cases from 2019/20</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>01/04/2020 – 31/10/2020</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>Total 43</b>

01/04/2020 – 31/10/2020

<b>Receiving on-going Adoption Support Packages</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Cases closed</b>	<i>52 (10 now open post order and 42 NFA following adoption support consultations).</i>
	<b>Total 95</b>

### Access to Records

**01/04/2020 – 31/10/2020**

**Ongoing**

<b>90</b>

The RAA successfully rolled out a 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 referrals are still being taken, these are not being progressed due to Covid 19. Letters have been sent to all adopted adults who were in the progress of accessing their records with Adoption Now and they will continue to receive support from their allocated social worker where required. We are currently working on a recovery plan to be implemented in the New Year, to progress and complete these pieces of work where possible.

### **Support groups/Events:**

#### **Workshops:**

- Reaching Out – bulletin/newsletter that we created to keep in touch with our families. This started on a fortnightly basis and has now reduced to monthly.
- Virtual workshops/training –
  - 10/06 – Support to family and friends – 8 attendees
  - 11/06 – Support to family and friends – 8 attendees (including a grandparent in Florida!)
  - 14/07 – Support to family and friends – 7 attendees (daytime session)
  - 22/07 – Support to family and friends – 8 attendees (evening session)
  - 28/07 – Support to family and friends – 9 attendees (daytime session)
  - 27/07 – Life story/introduction – 8 attendees (evening session)
  - 28/07 – Life story/introduction – 9 attendees (daytime session)
  - 29/07 – Managing contact – 8 attendees
  - 08/09 – Starting your adoptive family – 7 attendees (evening)
  - 22/09 – Support to family and friends – 9 attendees (evening)
  - 29/09 – Nurturing Attachments – 9 attendees (daytime)
  - 20/10 – Starting your Adoptive Family – 9 attendees booked (evening)
  - 21/10 – Developing Brain – 10 booked (full daytime)

- Up and coming –
  - 10/11 – Life Story part 1 – 10 booked (this should have been part 2 but additional part 1 as waiting list)
  - 17/11 – Nurturing Attachments – 5 booked so far
  - 24/11 – Developing Brain – 10 booked (full – evening)
  - 23/11 – Support to family and friends – 8 attendees booked (evening)
  - 25/11 – Starting your adoption family -

In addition, individual sessions/consultations regarding life story work and support for returning to school continues.

#### **Support groups:**

- Single adopter group – Monthly virtual meeting
- Nurture Group – is going live (virtually) later this month and will be a monthly group.

**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.

Adoption Now continues to provide support through the Duty Service and continues 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 we 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.

#### **Adoption Panels**

Adoption panels continue to operate four times per month with an option to run a fifth panel if required. An annual panel chair report exists which summarises the work of the panels. Since the end of March 2020, all panels have operated remotely via either SKYPE or TEAMS.

They continue to be busy and in this period 2 Panel Chairs resigned and two new panel chairs have been recruited, which means there are still 4 panel chairs available although for a limited period this was reduced to 2. The panel is quality assured as is 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. 100% of matches presented on Blackburn with Darwen children were of good quality or better during the 6 month period (10 matches in total).

#### **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 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 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 has not received any complaints in relation to Blackburn with Darwen children.

### **Allegations**

There have been no allegations in the last six months.

### **Budget**

All Adoption Support fund applications are dealt with by Adoption Now. The operational budgets supporting adoption are transferred to Adoption Now at the beginning of each financial year and combined with the budgets from the other five Local Authorities.

There are additional pressures on the budget this 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.

There are costs associated with posts in the RAA that had no budget line to support them from the outset however, these are 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.

It is envisaged that in this financial year and the need to absorb additional expenses, that there will be no deficit budget. Early indications suggest there may be some unspent budget due to Covid restricting some activities that usually incur costs.

A total of £124,000 was spent on placing children with outside agencies in the 6 months to September 2020 compared to £192,000 for the same period last year. Current forecasting shows expected expenditure on inter-agency adoption fees in 20/21 of £274,000 against the available budget of £323,500, a forecasted underspend of £49,500. The Adoption Service as a whole is currently forecasting an underspend of £56,300.

### **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 2020 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 is 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. There has been a recent unusual situation whereby the RAA had quite a number of adopters waiting for placements. This appears to be due to delays in courts finalising care proceedings and therefore children not being available for placement.

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.

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.

In September a virtual activity for family finding called 'Link and Play' took place to substitute for the activity days that have been unable to take place due to Covid 19 restrictions. This was an innovative event and resulted in links being found for over 80% of children profiled. All these changes have taken a huge amount of organisation but staff have risen to the challenge admirably.

### **Mentoring Service**

The mentoring service now has a full complement of 13 volunteer adopters and a coordinator which is proving very successful and of benefit to adoptive parents.

Karen Barrick - Head of Service for Adoption Now

Pamela Price – Service Lead Placements, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council