

Adoption Annual Report 2021/22



Executive Report



Together we make a difference



1. 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.

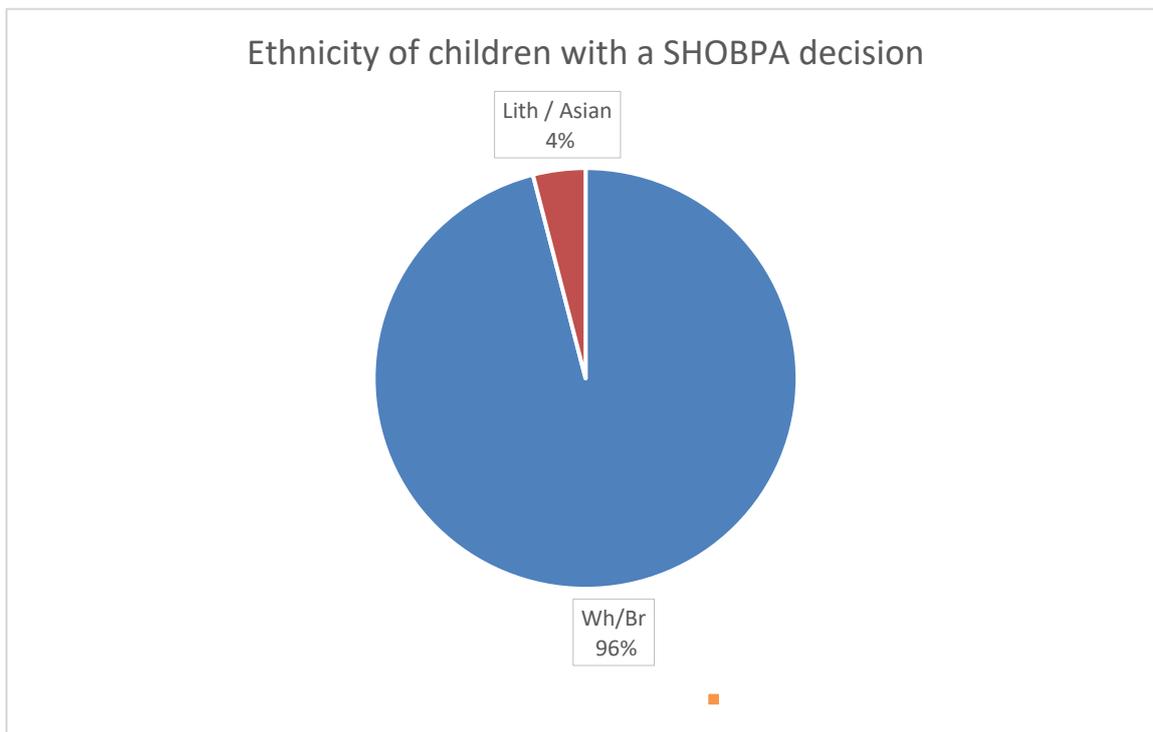
Almost 5 years ago there was a significant change in the way that adoption services were delivered as Adoption Now went live on 20th November 2017. Adoption Now is a Regional Adoption Agency providing adoption services on behalf of six Local Authorities – Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside.

Data in this report relating to children remains local data relating to Blackburn children however, adoption support and recruitment data now covers the Region

2. Adoption Agency Business - Children

2a. Children with an Adoption Plan

During the year 24 children were subject to a decision that they should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA), The children who did receive a SHOBPA decision were primarily of white British origin (see chart below) although with a significant proportion from other (primarily Asian or dual heritage backgrounds).

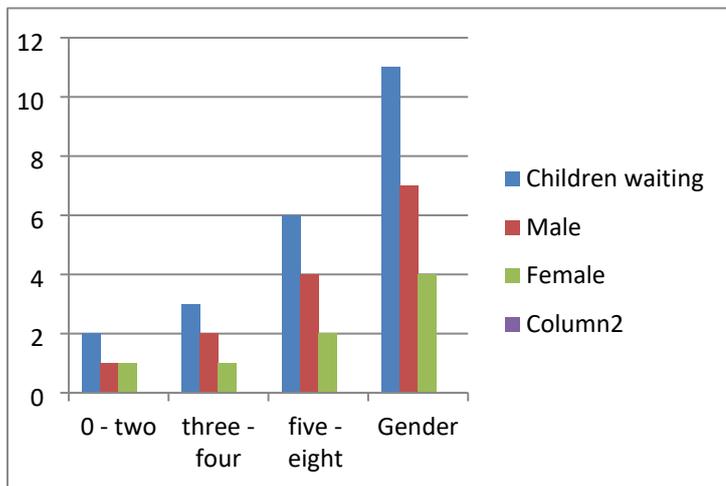


Of the 24 children, 9 children were in the 0 – 2 age range, 8 in the 3 to 4 age range and 7 aged over 5.

2b. Children Awaiting a Match

On 31st March, there were 11 children with a plan for adoption (subject to a placement order) awaiting placement and not yet matched. Of these children 9 were linked to adopters and awaiting a match, 1 child was waiting to be placed with a sibling and one child's foster carer was being assessed as adopters for them.

Age and Gender of children waiting



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 has also been used whilst Covid rates were high. This is an innovative alternative to an activity day devised by Adoption Now staff. A Northwest regional activity day also took place in February 2022 and a further day is planned for later in 2022.

2c. Family Finding Activity

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches. In the past year Adoption Now have started to put all children onto Link Maker alongside all approved adopters to enable adopters to see for themselves the children waiting. This seems to be positive resulting in some adopters expressing interest in children then hadn't previously thought they would consider. The regional placement group meeting continues to operate on a monthly basis to encourage matches with local voluntary adoption agencies.

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 Blackburn's children. In this year 75% of Blackburn's children placed were placed with RAA adopters (12 out of 16). These placements do not incur an interagency fee.

It is 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

2d. Children Placed for Adoption

There have been 16 children matched with adopters this year.

There were 14 adoption orders granted in the year.

The scorecard data for children adopted between 1st April 2021 and 31st March 2022 is as follows:-

Measure		Blackburn average
Placement Order to Matching (A2)	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	21/22 363
Child entering care starting adoption placement (A10)	Scorecard indicator – 426 days	608

These figures show that during the year timescales are above the target for A10 and for A2.

Within this cohort of children are 3 sibling groups of 2 who were all older children and some with additional needs, 2 children with significant learning needs and 1 child who had experienced a disruption and was then adopted by his subsequent foster carer. One child was also delayed in being placed due to the first covid lockdown.

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.

A10 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.

2e. Children Adopted

14 adoption orders were made during this period. It is these children for whom the score card data refers.

2f. Adoption Disruption

There has been one disruption of an adoption placement during 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. The child concerned was older and a disruption meeting has been held to try to understand the reasons for this and learn any lessons.

2g. Early Permanence Placements

At the end of the year there were 4 children placed with Early Permanence carers awaiting the outcome of care proceedings.

These placements are in the fostering phase but are placed with carers who will adopt them should the court plan ultimately be adoption for the child so they will not incur another move unless it is back to the birth family.

3. Adoption Agency Business - Adopters

Recruitment

3a. Staffing

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

- 2 Team Managers
- 1.5 Advanced Practitioners
- 14.5 FTE social workers (10 part time, 9 full time)
- 3 Marketing Workers

Last year the workstream experienced unprecedented levels of staff sickness and absence. This trend continued in the first six months of 2021 with 7 staff having absence of a month or more and two social work posts vacated. We have recruited to 5 vacated social work posts in total this year (26% of assessing social workers).

At no point in the last 12 months has the team been fully staffed and this continues to be our most significant operational challenge.

3b. Headline Data.

76 Adopters approved, a 13% reduction on last year but less than the national trend at 16%.

24 (32%) of those 76 adopters were offering Fostering for Adoption (FFA) at the point of approval (a rise on last year).

55 (72%) of those 76 families were offering singleton placements. This includes 7 second time adopters motivated to adopt a sibling and 4 foster carer approvals.

21 (28%) of those 76 were offering sibling placements (a significant rise on last year at 16%).

45 (59%) were offering placements to children over 2 years. 30 families within the 2-4 years age range and 15 within the 4-7 years range.

15 (20%) were returning adopters; the majority second time applicants, one returning for a fourth time.

13 (17%) of those 67 were LGBT couples

10 (13%) of those 76 were single applicants

96% of PAR reports deemed Excellent or Good by the adoption panel, a rise on last year

14 Fostering for Adoption (FFA) placements made with RAA approved families, an increase of 40% on last year (10 placements) and a 100% increase on 2019/20 (7 placements).

68 RAA children matched with 62 RAA families (6 sibling groups of 2).

70 % of the 95 placements made across the RAA were with RAA approved families.

Conversions to applications from enquiries rose to 46% this year compared to 35% in 20/21. The Agency had 117 applications this year compared to 122 last year with 90 less enquiries. The evidence suggests that the surge in enquiries during the pandemic did not increase applications.

Analysis

3c. Approvals

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

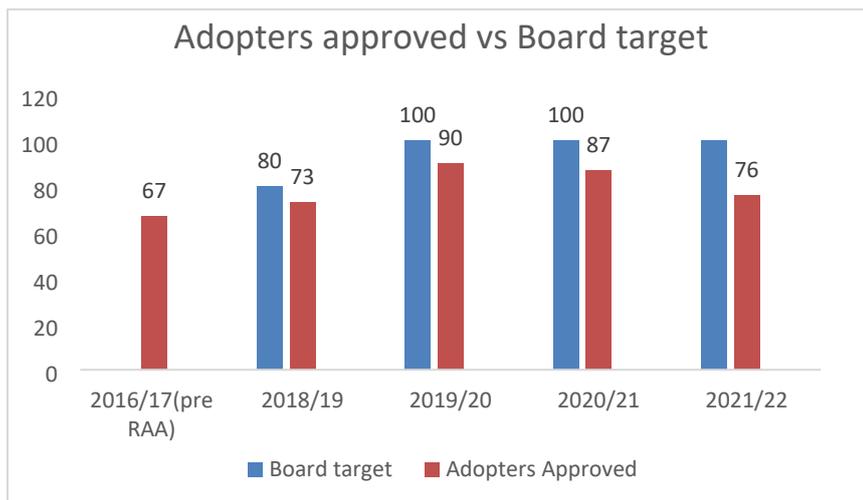
In the **first** full year of RAA operation (1st April 2018- 31st March 2019), **73** adopters were approved and 91 RAA children were matched with 84 RAA families.

In our **second** year (1st April 2019-31st March 2020), **91** families were presented to panel 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.

In our **third** year (1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021), **87** families were presented to panel and approved (two others were panel ready, 1 family withdrew, 1 had an unexpected admission to hospital). 79 RAA children were matched with 70 RAA families (9 in groups of two).

In this our **fourth** year (1st April 2021 -31st March 2022), 77 families were presented to panel, and **76** were approved, one not approved. A further nine families were panel ready, but circumstances prevented them from progressing within the year.

There have also been 3 children placed with 3 RAA families from external agencies, generating an income of £81,000. A further sibling assessment has been completed by Adoption Now, where court proceedings have not yet concluded. An initial payment of £9,000 has been requested in the interim to cover work completed, totalling £90,000 in anticipated recharges for the year.



This year (2021/22) the team was again given a target of 100 adopter approvals and achieved 76. In the three years of operation, the workstream has yet to meet the adopter approval targets set by the board but there has been a continued improvement in the number of adoptive families approved that was achieved by the 6 agencies working separately (67 as last reported in 2016/17.) Importantly there has been a significant increase in recruiting adopters who can meet the needs of siblings, older children, and those needing early permanence.

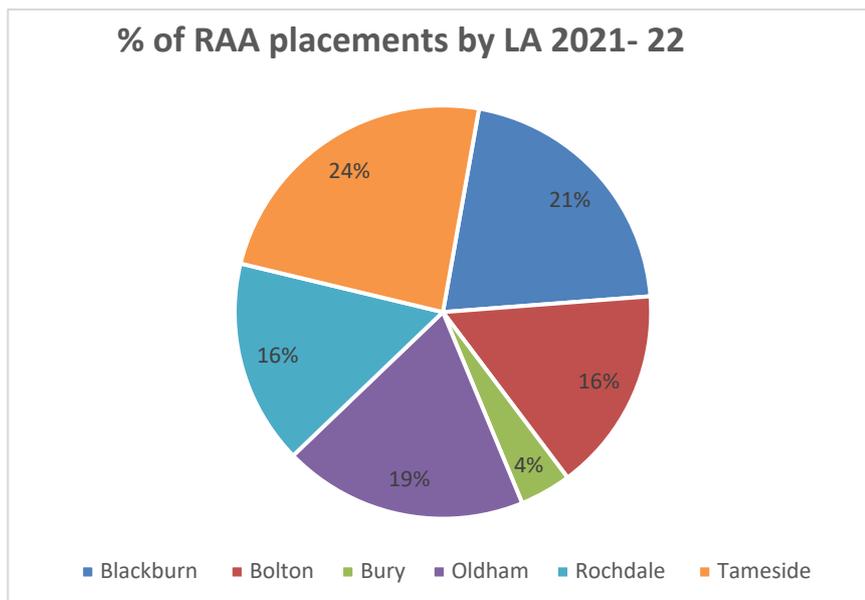
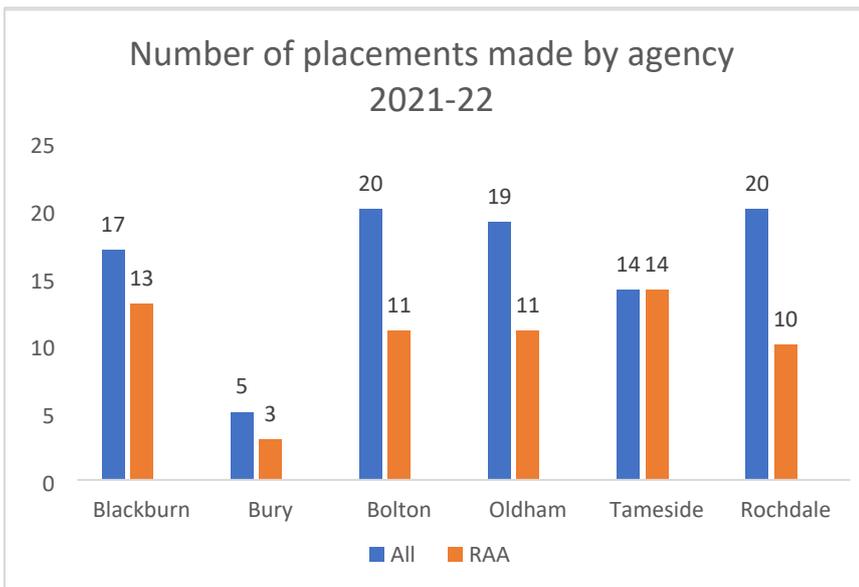
Enquiries from prospective adopters continued throughout the pandemic, some months in significantly higher numbers to the norm. However, this trend changed in 2021/22 with a significant decrease in enquiries from the previous year, **341** compared to **251**. Despite this, conversion of enquiries to applications rose from 35% to 46%. This is likely to be a result of the National Recruitment strategy which has opened the criteria for accepting applications. Whilst positive, this has also resulted in more complex assessments resulting in delays in either stage 1 or 2, or both.

Projections for the forthcoming year are not too dissimilar to the same period in the previous year; **12** approvals are anticipated in Q1, **41** approvals anticipated in Q2, and currently **10** approvals predicted in Q3 (totalling 63). The team target for 2022/23 is again 100 adopter approvals. To reach this target a further 37 applications must be accepted and in the system by 31st September 2022 (unless returning adopters who can be fast tracked through the process in four months). However, this figure does not account for delays or complexities within assessment, therefore realistically a further 50 to 60 applications need to be in the system to allow for this give. The challenge for the Agency is therefore increasing the number of enquiries and resultant applications during the next four months (ideally a minimum of 13 applications per month), alongside ensuring that as many of those as possible can meet the ongoing needs of our children who are waiting.

3d. Matches

This year 115 children were matched from the 6 LA's with 95 families. (78 singleton placements, 15 placements of 2 children, 1 placement of 3 and one of 4.)

65% of the 95 placements were made with RAA approved families.



3e. Adopter Recruitment Data 1.4.21- 31.3.22

	Numbers	Notes
Applications presented to Panel and approved 1.4.21 – 31.3.22	76	77 families presented to panel and achieved ADM. 76 approved, one not approved. 9 further assessments were panel ready. 1 family withdrew due to a negative recommendation, 2 needed more time to ensure finances were ready, five had complexities that ensued at the end of assessment, 1 family factored in an unexpected house move.
Adopters Approved and waiting for a match at 31.3.21	26	The high number of approved adopters available this year is due to a reduction in the numbers of children waiting with a Placement Order due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on court time scales.

Adopters Linked or Matched on 31.3.21	11	
Adopters with Children in Placement on 31.3.21	46	
Initial enquiries 1.4.21 -31.3.22	251	196 couples, 55 single adopters. A number of those are now in the system for approvals 2022-23. This figure is a significant decrease from numbers of enquiries received for the same period last year when still in pandemic conditions (341). However, interestingly conversion rates to applications this year have significantly increased.
Applications accepted 1.4.21 – 31.3.22	117	This equates to a 46% conversion rate as of 31.3.21 . This compares to a 35% conversion rate last year where 341 enquiries resulted in 122 applications. A number of the 251 enquiries are still in the system and may register an application after 31.3.21. It is noted that there are still families from this cohort whom we would welcome registering their interest with us who have not yet returned their application.
Total Adopters currently on track 22/23.	63	Q1 12 Q2 41 Q3 10

3f. Matching factors

The challenge to recruit sufficient adopters willing to consider siblings placed together, children 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.

Siblings: In 2021/22 year 21 families were approved to adopt siblings. 20 of those were offering placements to 2 children and one was offering a placement to three children. This is 27% of all approved families, a significant rise from 16% in 2021/22, and only 7% in 2020/21.

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 holding a specific session monthly, aimed at encouraging families to consider siblings and 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. For some time, LGBT applicants were known to be statistically more likely to have older or more complex children or sibling group placements (in part because they often came with fewer preconceptions of baby placements). Increasingly however subjective preferences for two parent heterosexual couples have been eroded and now these groups are increasingly likely to express similar preferences for singleton younger children.

Of the 76 families approved in the agency, there were 10 single applicants and 13 LGBT 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.

Since May 2020 virtual group sessions have been delivered by the team bi 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. It has now become a full day of Early Permanence training in addition to the three day standard preparation that is delivered (1 day virtually and 2 face to face) for all first time adopters.

This year, 24 (32%) of approved families offered FfA placements.

16 children were placed on an FfA basis with RAA approved adopters this year; an increase of 60% on last year (10 placements) and a 129% increase on 2020/21 (7 placements). One of the 16 FfA placements disrupted and in another case the child placed was returned to the care of a birth relative.

On the 31.03.22 there were eight families available offering FfA who were unmatched.

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 38% of our applicants being other than White British. We see 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.

3g. Timeliness

This year 32% of Stage 1 assessments were completed within the two-month timescale compared to 47% in 2020/21. The reduction in Stage 1 outcomes have been impacted by the removal on the 30th September 2021, of the *Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020*. These amendments gave management discretion regarding progression to stage 2, where there were delays in achieving adopter medicals, during the pandemic.

Timeliness of Stage 1 have also been impacted locally and nationally by the Government's National Adoption Strategy, which is leading to more complexities in stage 1 assessments and resultant delays in checks and references being returned.

64% of Stage 2's assessments (47 out of 76) were completed within the 4month timescale compared to 80% in 2020/21. Increased Stage 2 delays have resulted from complexities arising in assessment, life events, and staff sickness and absence.

3h. Quality of reports to Panel

Of the 76 approvals, 96% of reports were judged good or excellent by panel members.

3i. Complaints

There were two formal complaints to the agency in the period. The complaints were addressed internally at Head of Service level.

3j. Disruptions

Adoption placements with RAA families continue to evidence stability, despite the additional challenges of the pandemic. Of the 68 RAA children matched and placed with 62 RAA families, there has been one disruption with RAA adopters in the period involving a Rochdale child.

There has also been one disruption pre panel of a Blackburn 5 year old placed FfA direct from birth mothers care (where the FfA carers gave notice, a few days into placement) and one Rochdale child placed FfA who was successfully returned to birth family care, with the support of the FfA carers.

3k. Team and service development

The last annual report concluded with a recommendation to address issues in relation to recording and data management issues in the workstream. This has become even more pressing with so many new staff joining the team who are unfamiliar with our systems and processes. Poor recording inevitably leads to inaccurate reporting from the system. To address this, we have worked with Liquid Logic colleagues to deliver three virtual training sessions mandatory for all staff. The training was recorded for sharing with new social workers to the team. The Liquid Logic workstream manual has also been updated by our Advanced Practitioner, who is also mentoring staff and providing workshops.

In respect of the pandemic restrictions, since March 2021 the relaxation of regulations and the opportunity for vaccines for keyworkers enabled the gradual resumption of face-to-face service delivery in the workstream, which was welcomed by the team. Any virtual working is now used, where sensible, for operational efficiency rather than necessity. Assessments sessions between prospective adopters and social workers are largely face to face, and 'in person' preparation groups have been redeveloped and are delivered monthly.

The new 'hybrid' Adopter Preparation Groups, developed by the team this year, consist of Day 1 materials, delivered virtually and Days 2 and 3 are delivered in person. This format means prospective adopters now start face-to-face groups with some underpinning knowledge of adoption. This enables more engaging experiential learning and group work over the two days rather than 'chalk and talk' delivery. This new style has been very well received by groups to date. In addition, those considering children 0-2 are required to attend the Early Permanence (Fostering for Adoption) training delivered in the team, one day bimonthly. Specialist training for prospective sibling adopters is also offered. Both have positively encouraged adopter interest and confidence in considering these routes, as evidenced in these years increased outcomes.

Dedicated second time adopter training (delivered in person) has been developed and starts later this year.

Other groups delivered by the team include Information events, delivered virtually, twice a month at lunchtimes, evenings and weekends, to try and capture people's availability.

Cornerstones Virtual Reality (VR units) are a valuable resource bought in by the Agency and they are well used in assessment and preparation of adopters. Feedback from the team and adopters highlights the significant impact that the units have in increasing insight / understanding of a child's lived experience. The majority of staff have had the opportunity to attend training to ensure the units are used appropriately to ensure best outcomes.

4. Marketing Activity

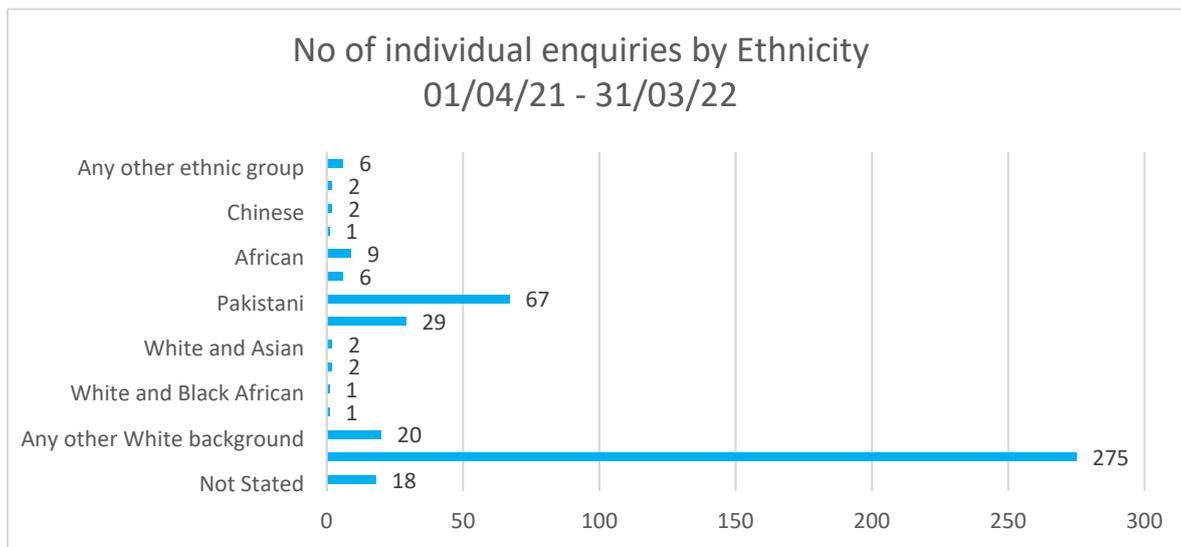
There are three members of the team who work exclusively on recruitment and marketing activity for Adoption Now.. The team also organise and attend Information Events, Link and Play Events, Adoption Days and manage internal tracking and reporting of Adopter and Children's cases to enable targeted marketing, and oversee the management of the Website and Social Media.

Adopter recruitment continues to be targeted with a wide reach across the 6 Local Authorities over the past 12 months with a view to building up a diverse profile of adopters to meet the needs of the children needing families. There is a targeted approach aimed to meet the needs of priority groups: those who can consider

siblings, children with complex needs, older children, BAME backgrounds and early permanence. There have also been more focused recruitment drives in respect of BAME and siblings as part of the National Recruitment Campaign but also driven by local need. There has also been a focus on recruiting more female LGBTQ+ adopters and single male adopters by podcasts, targeted information events and imagery. Marketing also continues to assess need based on the information provided at the monthly children’s tracking meetings to ensure adopters are recruited to meet the specific needs of children within the Agency. Also analysed are enquiry rates including sources of enquiry, ethnicity of enquirer, enquiry by LA and conversions to help build future marketing drives.

CHART 1: Adopter Recruitment by Ethnicity

**Chart figures are individual count (i.e. If a couple each person is counted)*



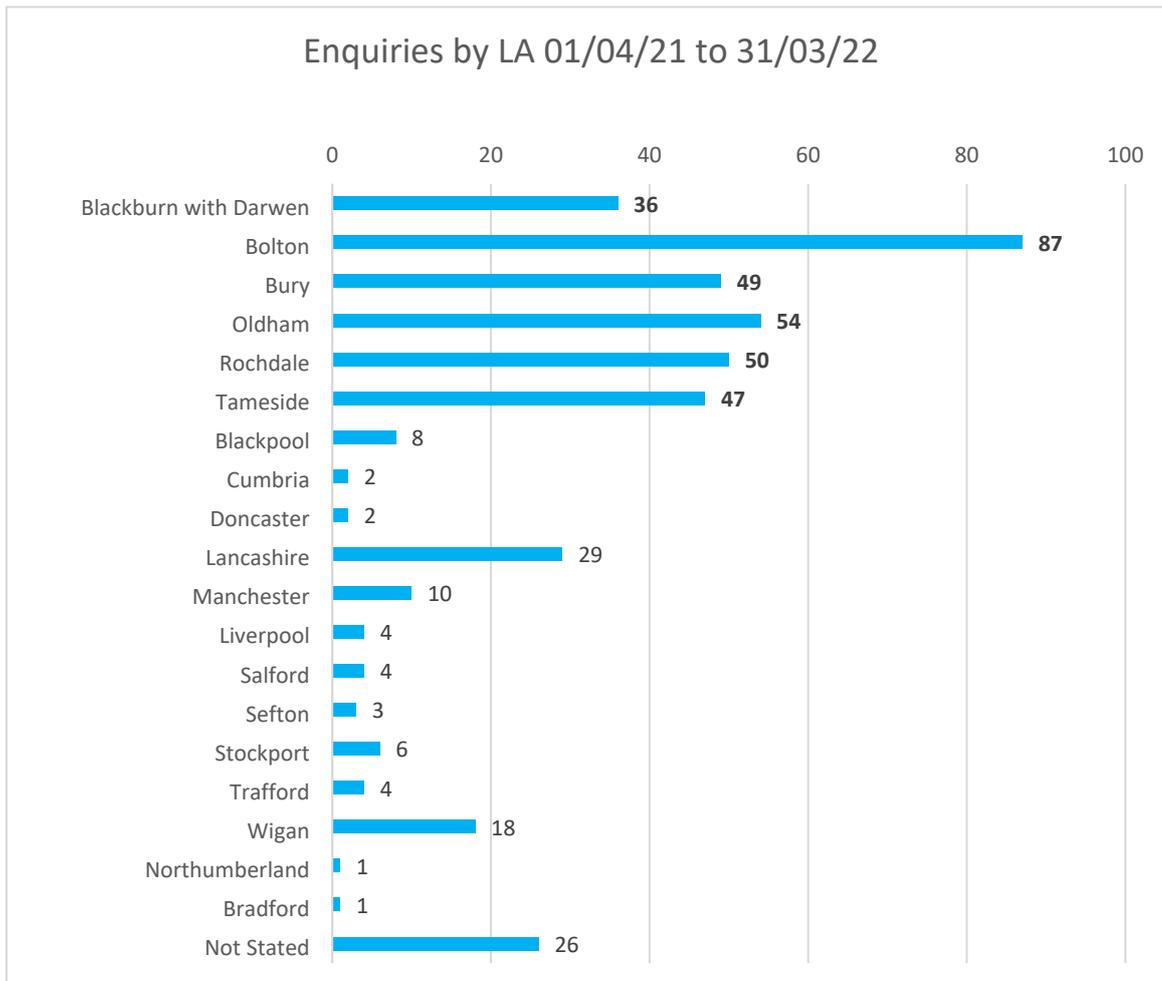
The highest proportion of enquiries continue to be from WB families at 62%. Due to the BAME campaign held Oct 21, as part of the National Recruitment Campaign (which gained us regional TV coverage) we saw an increase in Black African adopters. Almost 40% of applicants are now from backgrounds other than White British. This increasing diversity may be due to the development of targeted podcasts and interviews delivered by Adoption Now adopters of different ethnicities and social media advertisements and campaigns featuring various ethnicity images.

Our advertising has primarily focussed on images of BAME, children with additional needs, older children, and sibling groups. There has also been a positive shift in enquiries slightly outside the LA’s due to a wider reach of the marketing activity.

CHART 2: Adopter Recruitment by Local Authority

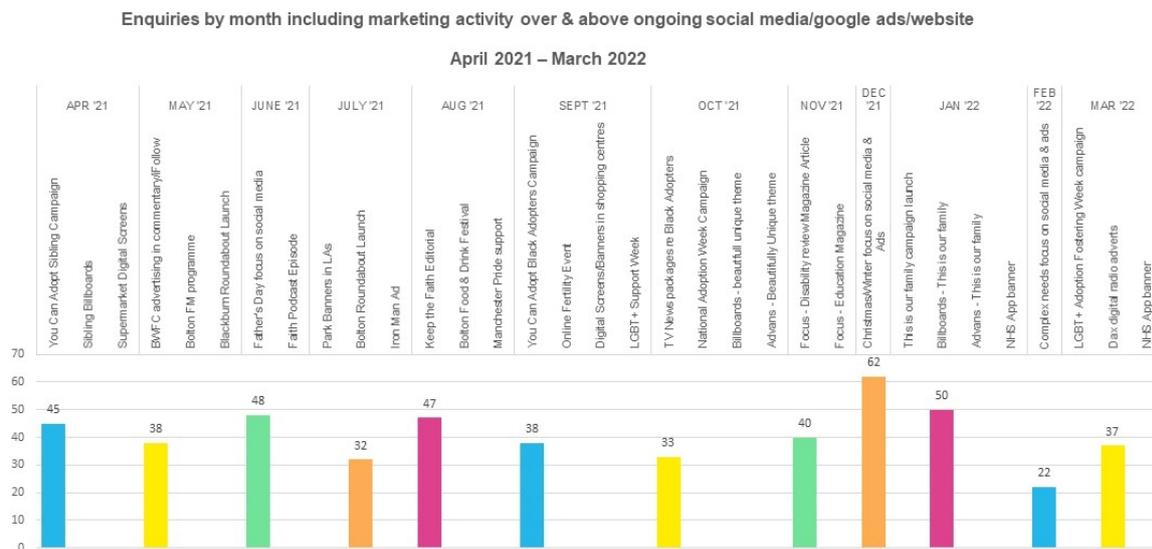
**Chart figures are individual count (i.e. If a couple each person is counted)*

Enquiries by LA 01/04/21 to 31/03/22



Bolton has had the highest number of enquiries. This could be down to the head office and telephone number being within this LA. The marketing has been split equally over the 6 LA's however as Blackburn with Darwen enquiries remain lower than other LA's, additional marketing activity has included a roundabout sign, town centre billboards and Shuttle magazine. We are currently also looking into trailing boosted socials with them. There has been an increase in enquiries from areas outside of our 6 LA's, in particular from Lancashire and Wigan. Social media advertisements and use of wider reach marketing tools such as Advans, Supermarket billboards, Roadside billboards and DAX may have increased these out of area enquiries.

CHART 3: Number of enquiries received by month in line with additional marketing activity. (chart based on TOTAL number of marketing enquiries by source)



The above chart shows relevant enquiries taken on the duty line and email/web enquiries. Not all of these are transferred to Liquid Logic particularly if they are looking for information only at the time of contact.

December saw an uplift in enquiries likely to be due to the inclusion of online Information Event bookings as a relevant enquiry, which will be continued in reporting from then on as we are seeing more people using virtual information events as their starting point rather than contacting duty. There was also increased activity flow from National Adoption Week and the time of year being family focussed.

The pandemic continued to present a change in marketing strategy for the team as again many local and major events were cancelled. The team had planned to attend major events including Manchester Pride,

Fertility Event and Muslim Life Expo. All of which proved successful in 2019 based on enquiries generated. However, they were either cancelled or an alternate format held. The Fertility Event was online, and an online stall was manned but this was less successful. Recently a partnership with St Mary's fertility clinic has developed and this is positive.

In April 2021 the team commenced virtual Information Event presentations and stepped up the social media plan alongside additional Google and Facebook advertisements. The Virtual Information Events have proved highly successful averaging 13 attendees per session twice monthly (various weekdays and some weekends). The events were recently rated excellent by a mystery shopper and marketing are contacting attendees following the events, to encourage conversion to Initial Enquiry.

In October 2021, the National Adopter Recruitment Campaign was launched with an emphasis on recruiting adopters from BAME backgrounds. Alongside this, we ran a local campaign, with coverage on radio, press, internal and external newsletters, outdoor billboards and buses. We maximised use of social media and enhanced the website with podcasts, videos, and other supporting materials, focussing on BAME adopter stories. We were also successful in acquiring TV slots on Granada and BBC North West whereby one of our BAME adopters was interviewed gaining a positive social media reaction.

To drive targeted recruitment, we also had articles in the Disability Magazine and Keep the Faith. We also have had the NHS app running targeting NHS workers as they access their payslips / holiday info etc., this ceases in Oct 'Bill22.

This year has seen us working even more closely with all the LA comms teams who have supported us with input in newsletters, web banners on the council websites, banners in all the LA parks, press articles, social media and submitting our articles in resident magazines. We meet up regularly with the LA comms teams and have a face-to-face meeting planned in June to update on our recruitment strategy and share ideas for promoting adopters in their area to come forward.

We also trialled different marketing method to increase our target reach including DAX (streamed radio with a targeted call to action) and Advans. Both these methods of marketing had positive feedback from adopters. Hard however to ascertain if enquiries were generated from these sources however due to subliminal reach.

In April 21 Adopter Stories by Adoption Now podcast series was introduced onto the podcast hosting platform Anchor.fm. This switch enables us to release each episode of our podcasts simultaneously on the major podcasting platforms like Spotify, Apple Podcasts and Google Podcasts. To date we have released 25 episodes, with each one also embedded onto our website, racking up a total of over 4,000 plays.

Social Media

The agency has a presence on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. These are updated regularly and followers are growing increasing the reach. The Local Authority Communications teams often post items or follow messaging which increases the reach significantly.

Website Sessions By Device

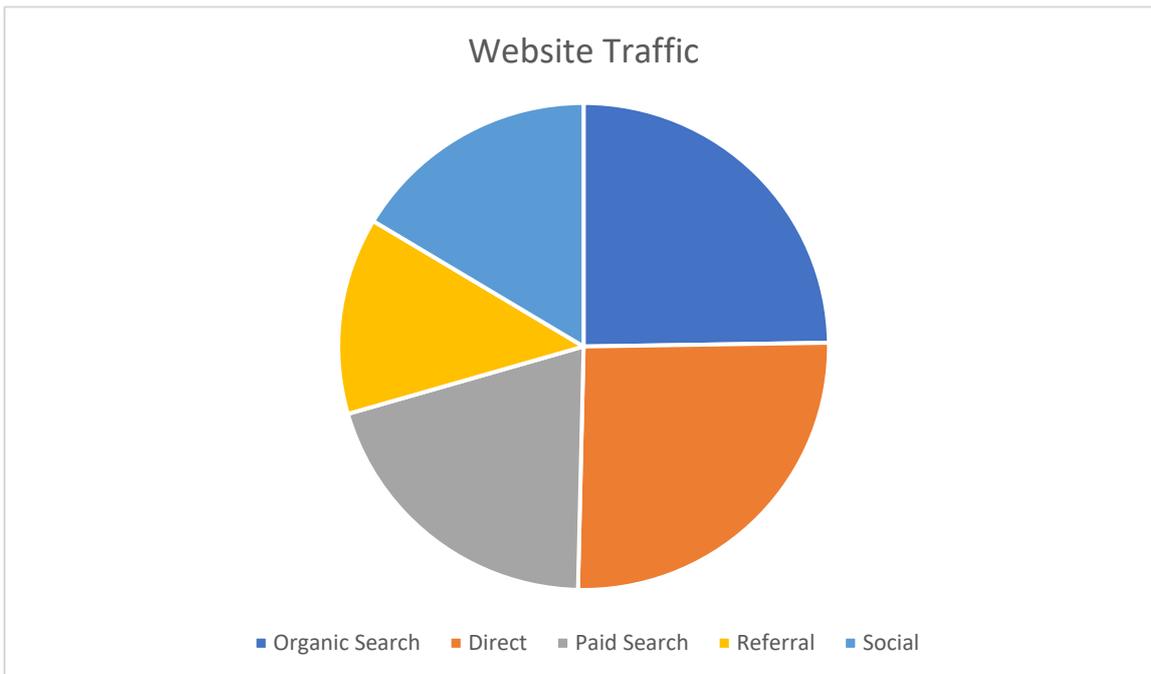
For this period, viewing of the website on a mobile device (phone) remains the most popular way amongst visitors with 72.7% of visitors choosing to view this way. Meaning that we continue to ensure that our website and any content that we upload to the site is optimised for the mobile viewing experience.

Website

In the period 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022, there were 701 website forms completed and 456 downloads of our Information Pack. It is worth noting that the downloadable Information Pack has only been available online since the 2nd of February 2021 however, it continues to climb in terms of downloads.

Website Traffic

For the period 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022, direct and organic searches brought in the most traffic and new users to the website, which shows that continued focus on Search Engine Optimisation is really working in our favour. A quarter of users came direct to the site without using a search engine to find us.



Aside from our Contact Form the FAQ's, Adopter & Child stories and our Podcast pages all continue to be the most viewed on the website.

There has been good support from the Local Authority Communications Teams across the 6 Local Authorities and these links are important to increase the marketing reach of the service.

There is a separate recruitment and sufficiency strategy that details the future plans for ensuring that adopters are recruited to meet the needs of the children needing to be placed.

5. Adoption Support

5a. Team Structure:

1 FT Team Manager, 1 FT Senior Practitioner, 0.5 Advanced Practitioner, 10 FTE Social Workers and 2 family support workers (1.5 equivalent).

5b. Staffing, Team building and transitions:

Whilst the impact of covid is very much still present, the last 12 months have seen a welcome period of stability in comparison to 2020-2021. The Adoption Support Team has experienced several staffing changes in this time, including the 2 part-time senior practitioners leaving the service, the part-time advanced practitioner becoming full-time and one of the social workers currently acting up in part-time vacancy. The service has seen new recruits to the 1.5 family support worker roles as well as a recruit to a part-time social work post.

The support team is currently managing with 1.5 social work vacancies, whilst there is some agency cover in place this does not fill the gap completely. In addition, there are 2 part-time social workers who have returned from long-term sick periods not yet back to capacity.

The most significant change has been the addition of 2.5 letterbox and contact coordinators joining the support service with the transition of the letterbox service to Adoption Now. However, this has been managed with 1.5 since April 2022 due to maternity leave with the post not yet covered.

Despite the changes and challenges, the support team have pulled together to support one another and continued to offer a consistent service to meet the needs of all the Adoption Now families.

5c. Developing the service:

Adoption Support continue to deliver, in the main, a calendar of 'virtual' support for both workshops and support groups. There are aspects that are gradually returning face-to-face, such as the Nurture Group and the return of the Adoption Now Events. The first being a Winter Walk in December with a few of the team mapping out a trail around the lake at Heaton Park, dressed as Elves and a gift from Santa to finish! This was followed by an Easter Egg hunt in April and was very well attended, with over 50 children.

As reported in the last annual review, the starting point was to review each aspect of the core offer (workshop, group, training session) to explore what areas might work better as a hybrid model and what areas need to return to face-to-face. In February, the service saw the return of face-to-face prep training resulting in the focus of the review being on 'Starting your Adoptive Family' and 'Support to Family and Friends' – this is to explore content as well as the most effective way to deliver the workshops. However, planning is progressing to return 'Introduction to Theraplay and PACE/Growing Attachments' face-to-face soon, to ensure the workshop effectively demonstrates theraplay activities and enables adopters to participate and practice these.

As detailed in the mid-year review, Adoption Now has recommenced the in-house Therapeutic Parenting Course. This has run twice to date with a third course commencing in July 2022. The course has been reviewed and re-written to create a more interactive intervention, providing an opportunity for parents to have space for reflection, promoting positive and secure attachment relationships, to increase development of knowledge and therapeutic parenting skills, to enable parents to support their children to develop emotional literacy and regulation, and decrease difficulties around oppositional behaviour, attention and concentration, and build relationships with other adopters/adoptive families. This is being delivered face-to-face with families and feedback from families participating is very positive, specifically the 'call back/re-grouping'. This is yet to have a name/title, but the opportunity for participants to re-group, with one another and future group participants is being positively received and well attended. It is envisaged this will create an ongoing support group that will continue to grow, with this next group having first and second group participants. The social workers who have developed and facilitated the course are now working with other members of the support team to expand the learning and development across the adoption support service with a view to increasing the number of facilitators, frequency of the course, as well as developing an Adoption Now parenting teens course.

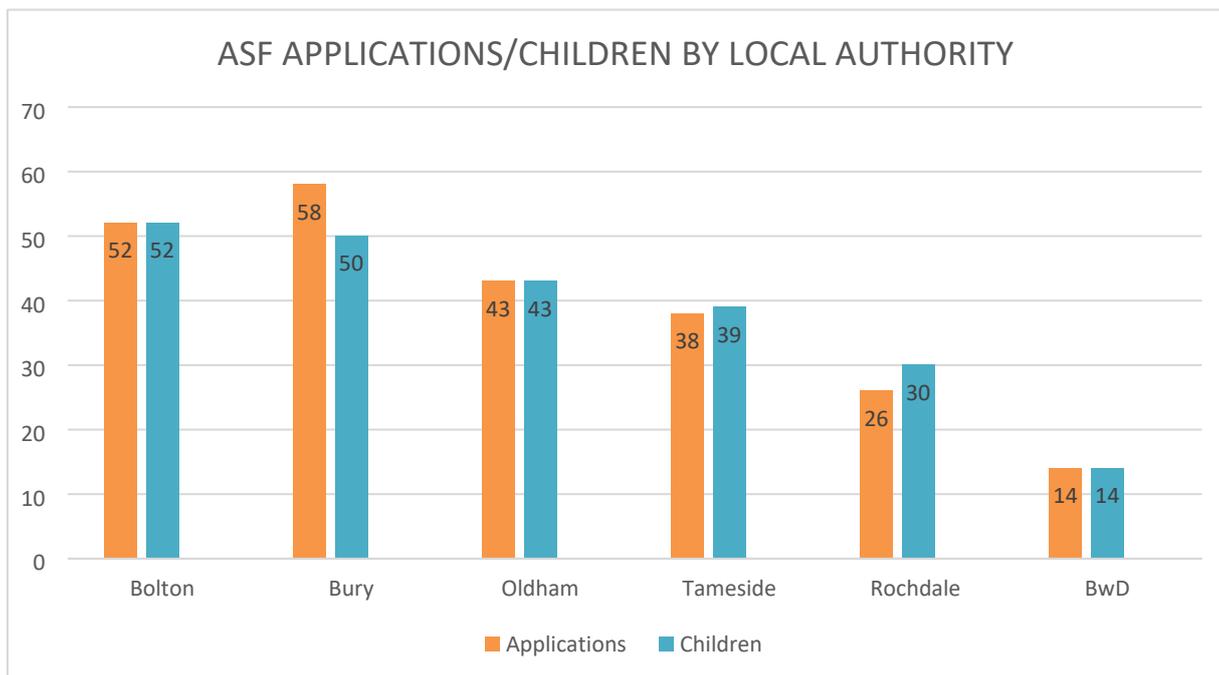
Adoption Now continue to undertake adoption support consultations for pre-matching, pre-placement support and early placement and these are becoming standard practise. They continue to be very positive and are invaluable in supporting the development of and the strengthening of adoption support plans. Whilst in infancy, there is a small group working on the adoption support plan with a view to an Adoption Now template for adoption support plans to create one consistent document that can be used from match support planning through to post order support planning. Positive and constructive feedback regarding the consultation process continues to be received from panel, from VAA's and from adopters, both within the RAA and outside. In addition, Adoption Now continues to share the progress and experiences with fellow RAA's. The reduction of disruptions pre adoption order is the evidence that this is successful.

5d. Adoption Support Fund:

Confirmation was announced earlier this year that the Adoption Support Fund will continue for the next 3 years. There are some changes being implemented in relation to payments – approved funds have previously been paid upfront; these will now be paid in arrears on receipt of invoices for completed work. This has brought the introduction of a further process on the ASF portal to release the funds as invoices are received. Whilst this has generated further work, it is anticipated this new process will reduce work around completing spend confirmations.

Total monies received 01/04/2020 – 31/03/2021	£728,245.88
Number of children currently receiving therapy funded via ASF	241
Number of applications made to the fund	233
Post order applications	204
Pre order applications	27

Local Authority Breakdown of LA ASF Applications/Children



Total monies paid for Match Funded Applications – 01/04/2021 – 31/03/2022	£ 9,676.00
Local Authority Breakdown:	
BwD	
Tameside	
Bolton	
Oldham	
Rochdale	£ 2,653.00
Bury	£ 7,023.00
Number of applications/children	5

In addition, there has been one match funded application, match funded by Western Bay Adoption Service (South Wales) for a child placed within the Adoption Now region.

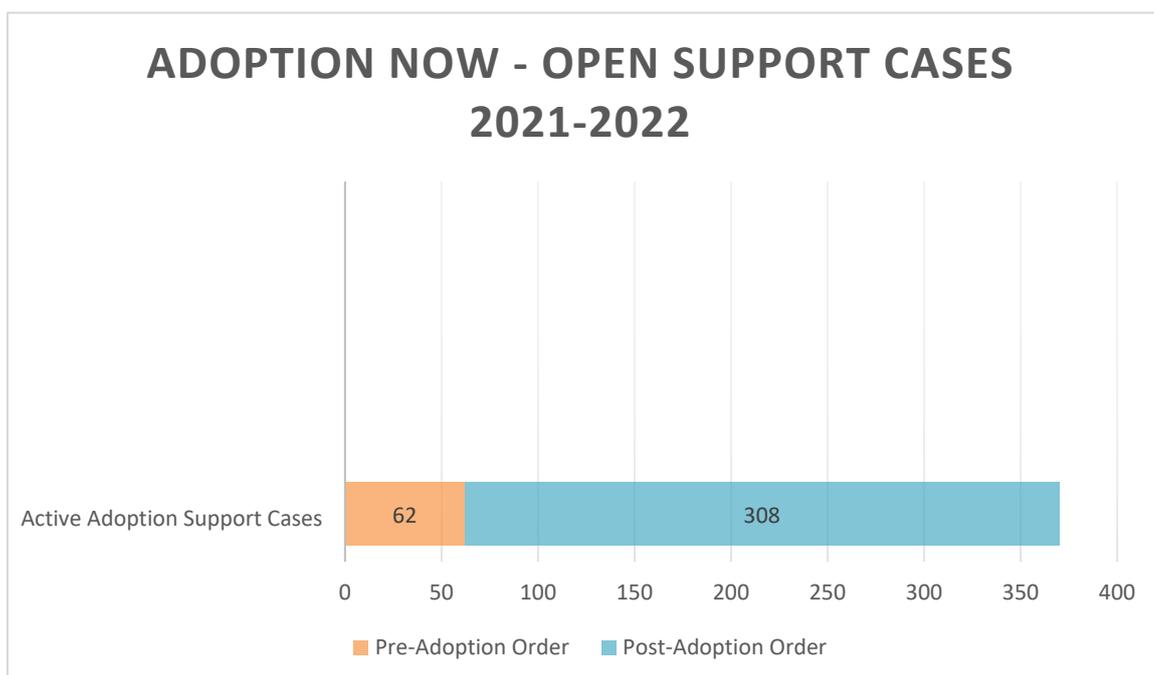
In this period, Adoption Now have made two applications to the Adoption Support Fund for packages of support provided by Adoption Now. Both applications have been for the in-house Therapeutic Parenting course, totalling £13,000.

The total monies claimed from the ASF in period has significantly increased from last year, 2020/2021, which was slightly less than in 2019/2020. However, the total ASF monies received in 2021/2022 is the highest since the formation of the RAA. The number of applications continues to increase with a bigger jump from 206 last year to 233 this year. The number of applications being made pre-adoption order are also increasing, from 18 last year to 27 this year.

As was the situation last year, a full review/audit of all ASF applications/cases has been undertaken to ensure Adoption Now comply with the ASF regulations and this continues to be a significant and timely task to complete. It is hoped that the introduction of the new payment system will reduce the time required for this annual task in 2022/2023. Whilst the total is not yet known, it is anticipated that Adoption Now will have returned more funds to the ASF this year than last year and in nearly all instances where this has been required a further ASF application has been made immediately to re-claim from the 2022/2023 budget to ensure there are no service/support breaks for the families.

5e. Adoption Support Cases/Workload:

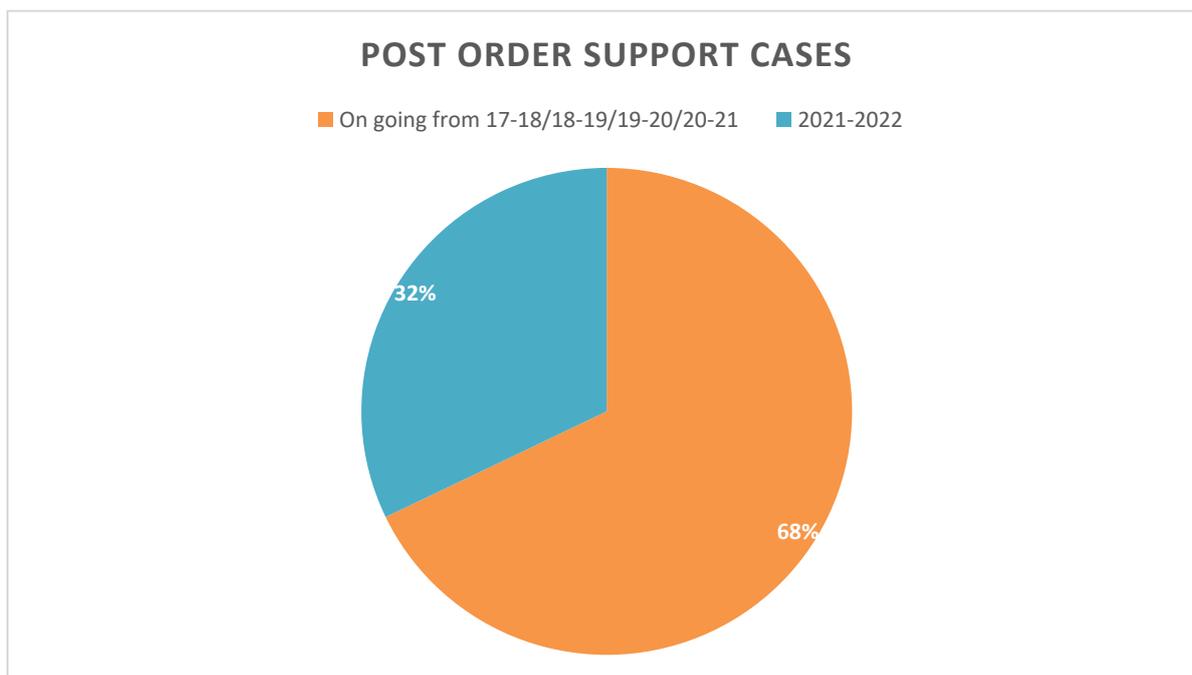
In previous annual reports the service has reported on the pre and post order support data together, however, separate data is now required for the ALB and to ensure consistency, this data will be presented separately for the mid-year and annual reports also. As has been the developing pattern with pre -order support, the work is increasing each year and as such it is important to monitor and analyse this area of work separately to inform future practice and development.



The current open case total is 370 – this total reflects the number of children receiving adoption support, both pre and post adoption order.

5f. Post-order support:

The number of open post-order cases is 308, which is made up of 99 referrals open in this annual review period and 209 ongoing cases as illustrated below:



5g. Assessments:

In this period the number of completed adoption support need assessments is slightly less than in 2020/2021, being 65. However, there are slightly more still active, 35 compared with 29 at this same period last year. Additionally, there have been 9 families withdraw from the assessment once commenced, which has previously been a rare occurrence.

**Assessments:
01/04/2020 – 31/03/2021**
Completed Assessments
Active Assessments
Withdrew at Assessment

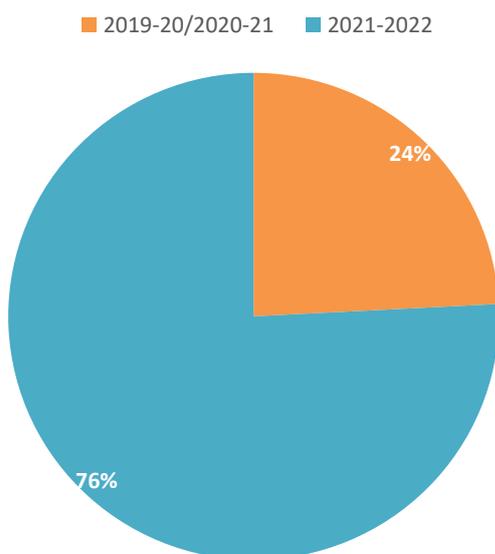
Completed Assessments	62
Active Assessments	35
Withdrew at Assessment	9

5h. Pre-order Support:

The number of open pre-order cases is 62, which is made up of 47 referrals open in this annual review period and 15 ongoing cases as illustrated below:

This total reflects the number of children receiving adoption support pre-adoption order. This could be allocated with direct support from within the team, ASF commissioned support packages or tracking through early placement with regular consultation reviews.

PRE-ORDER SUPPORT CASES



5i. Adoption Support Consultations:

01/04/2021 – 31/01/2022

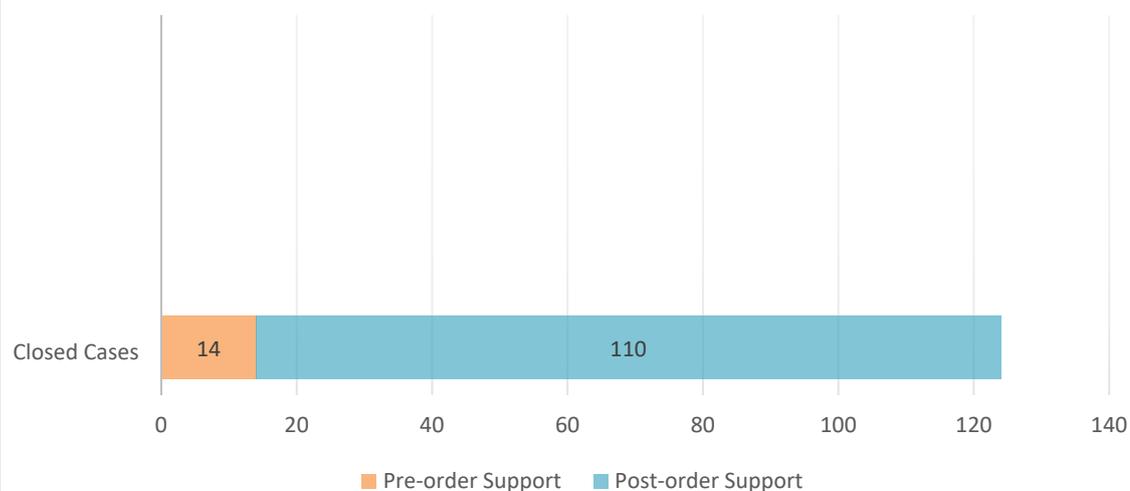
Adoption Support Consultations:

NFA following consultation, placement, or adoption order:

Receiving on-going Adoption Support

Adoption Support Consultations:	99 (for 120 children)
NFA following consultation, placement, or adoption order:	73
Receiving on-going Adoption Support	47
Total	120

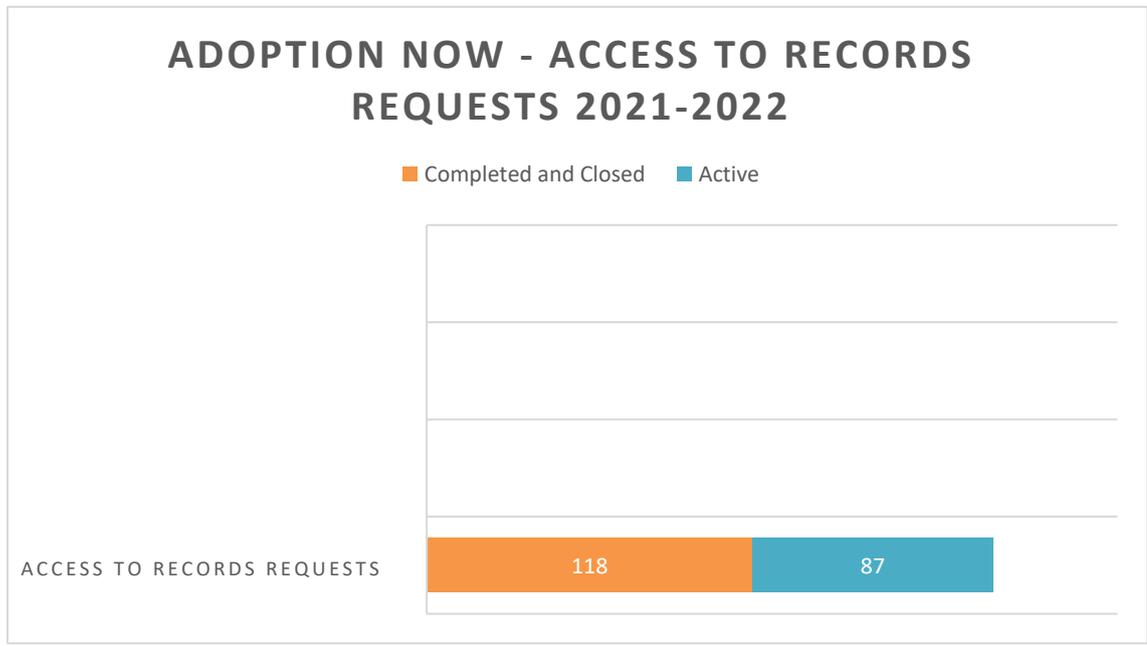
ADOPTION NOW - CLOSED SUPPORT CASES 2021-2022



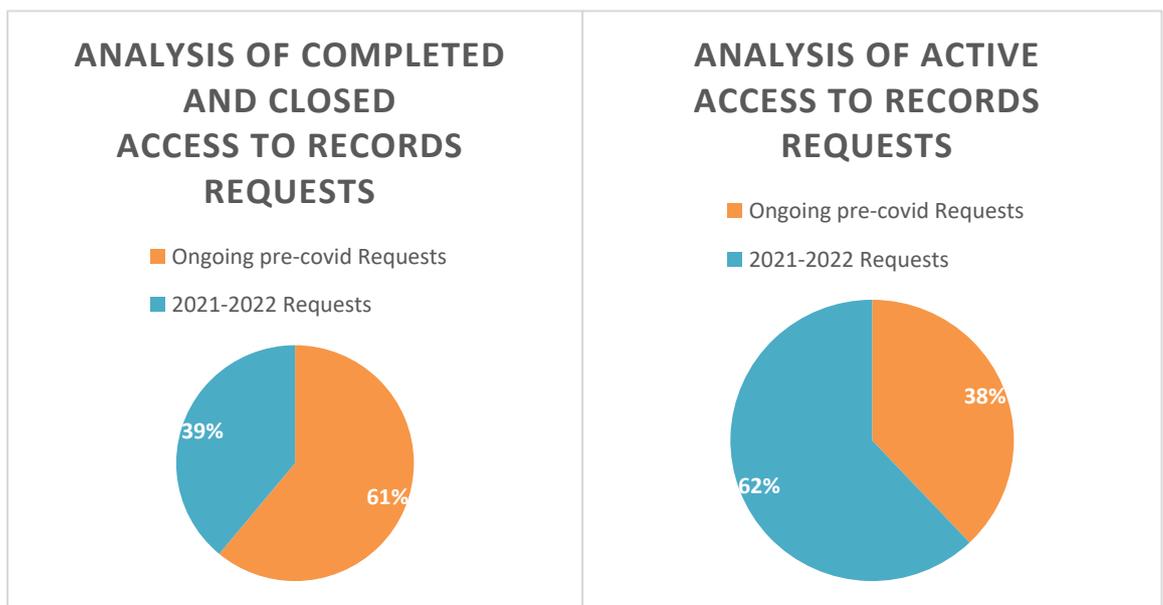
Whilst the number of closed cases has dropped in this year, from 162 to 124, the number of open cases has increased from 332 to 370, which is a significant increase.

5j. Access to Records:

As reported in the last annual review, this area of work has been significantly impacted upon due to the pandemic and having no or little access to local authority offices and files. A recovery plan for Access to Records work had commenced towards the end of 2020/21 and the illustration below shows a significant increase in completing these requests and indicates the success of the recovery plan as at the end of 2020/2021, the service had managed to complete 20 of the requests waiting and has successfully increased this to 118 completed requests through 2021/2022.



Adoption Now are seeing an increase in new requests for accessing records as is illustrated above and when comparing these figures to last year. At the end of 2020/21, whilst only 20 requests had been completed, there were 111 requests overall, whereas now, at the end of 2021/22 there have been 205 requests overall.



As can be seen in the charts above, a high percentage of requests on hold or received during the pandemic have now been completed, together with a significant number of new requests for 2021/22. Most requests ongoing are from 2021/22, indicating that the service is now successfully working through the backlog. Of the 38% ongoing, some relate to younger adopted adults, however, many relate to cases where the records are

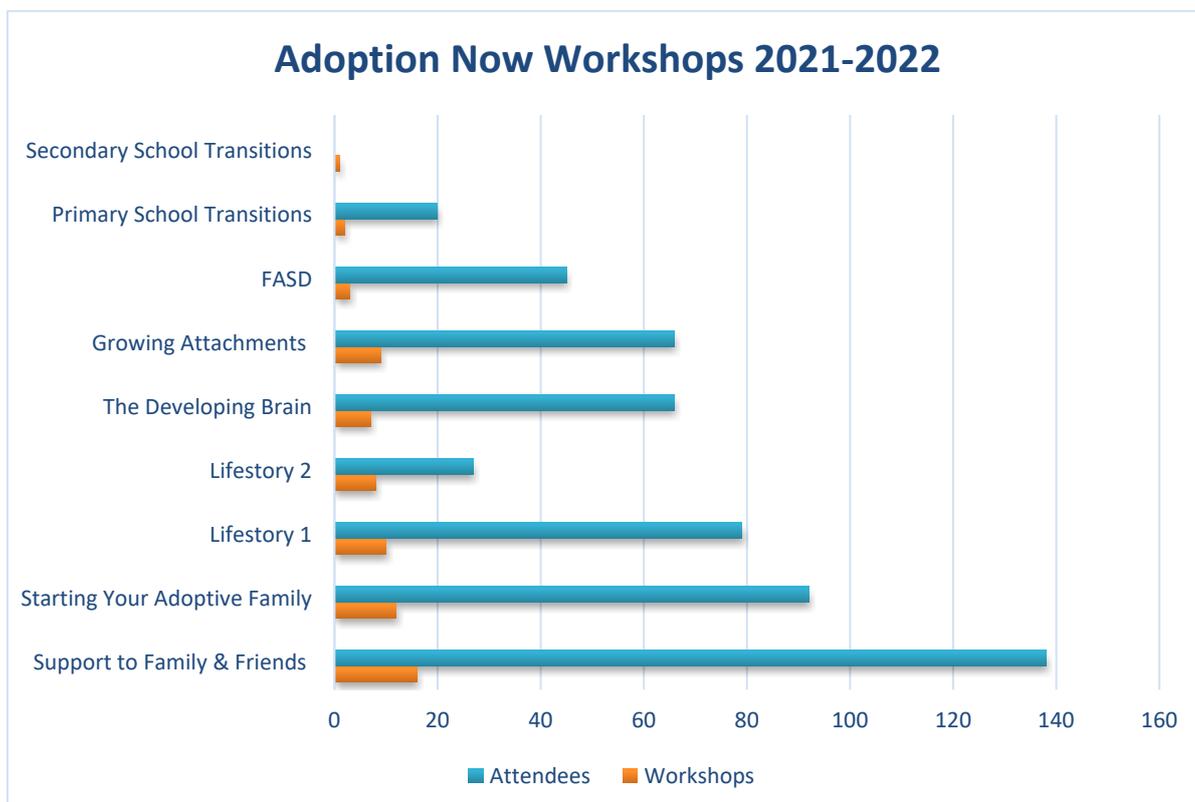
not held by one of the Adoption Now authorities and await a summary from another RAA. In some instances, this wait can be over 12 months.

5k. Core Offer Support - Groups, Workshops and Events:

Reaching Out – Adoption Now’s bulletin/newsletter that is now a permanent fixture and is published quarterly with some additional special editions.

Therapeutic Parenting Course – has run twice in 2020/21 with a total of 13 families. The numbers were required to be low to comply with social distancing rules, however, as the first course approaches for 2022/23, the maximum number of people per course is increasing.

Workshops – all virtual.



The table above shows the number of each workshop held over the last 12-month period, together with the total number of attendees overall for each workshop. In addition, there have been 12 bespoke sessions re life story and starting your adoptive family workshops where timeframes for matching and introductions have meant the next workshop would be difficult to attend.

What is not evident from the table is number of workshops cancelled due to low numbers or non-attendance – of which there has been at least one of each workshop topic and 2 cancelled for ‘Starting your Adoptive Family’. The review being undertaken in relation to workshops, is therefore not only focusing on virtual versus face-to-face but is also focusing on frequency and content, with a view to publishing a calendar for at least 6 monthly intervals, if not through to end of March 2023.

Support groups –

- Single adopter group – Monthly virtual meeting
- Nurture Group – Monthly and has returned to face-to-face with developments to return to 2 groups across the region. Currently, the group meets at a local park or play centre, however, a permanent venue for each group is now being sought.
- Young Person/Tweenies and Teen Groups – These are currently in development, with exploration of reforming ‘Club Awesome’, the over 5’s group and the creation of a Teens Group. The focus group are looking to hold 2 events/activities for Adoption Now’s young people over the summer period to gather views and create an established group. The focus group have also been liaising with nearby RAA’s and have visited some established groups to inform the development.

Therapeutic Parenting Course – 5-day TP Course scheduled for July 2022 with families currently being identified. As part of this intervention, a regular call back/support group is in formation – this is yet to be named, however, this has been positively received and well attended with the next group having participants from the first and second therapeutic parenting course.

Birth Parent Support Development – As reported within the mid-year review, Adoption Now has worked in collaboration with Oldham’s Aftercare team to provide an 8-week birth parent support group. This was specifically aimed to support care leavers aged 18-21. Additionally, Adoption Now linked up with a local group for Birth Parents called Rise Up. This is being run from a community-based Church in Bolton. The leader of the group is extremely experienced, who has shared skills and experience with the staff members setting up the Care Leavers Birth parent group in Oldham.

There is a small focus group evaluating and exploring how best to bring these experiences together with the PAC-UK birth parent support group with the longer-term vision of a support group for birth parents in each of Adoption Now’s 6 local authorities, either linked to the RAA directly, like the Oldham Care Leavers project – or through a more loose affiliation, as with the Rise Up group but ensuring an established link with one another to maintain understanding, awareness of the services across our region and inform further developments.

The Letterbox Service – As previous reported, Adoption Now assumed responsibility for the Letterbox in late August 2021 with 2.5 letterbox and contact coordinators joining the service. The transition remains ongoing with all children, birth relatives and adoptive parents involved in the cases transferring from the local authorities now created on the Adoption Now LCS system. Files from Bury, Blackburn with Darwen and Rochdale have now fully transferred with Letterbox Pathways being created, with Bolton almost complete. The transfer of Tameside files will commence next and is likely to take a little longer as all the files are paper files, however, the scanning of files has commenced.

Processes and templates have been created and the first workshop with the Care Planning Team was held on 18th May 2022, to introduce any new aspects and support the set up. Further workshops are scheduled and will include the Recruitment Team once all the Care Planning workers have attended.

Whilst this transition has had many challenges, the feedback from families, birth and adoptive, is already positive, with many finding it easier to contact letterbox co-ordinators, receiving more timely responses and having any issues resolved.

Work continues in relation to LCS and the Letterbox Pathway with regular meetings with the Liquid Logic team to review and monitor the process and resolve any issues. The mechanism to open the Letterbox Pathway from a contact is not yet available, however, it is hoped this will be available soon to be able to collate data as new letterbox exchanges are set up. Accurate data in relation to the numbers of letterbox files transferred, archived, and created since Adoption Now have been responsible will be reported once the transition of all the files is complete.

6. Adoption Panels

Adoption panels continue to operate four times per month with an option to run a fifth panel if required. A bi-annual panel chairs report exists which summarises the work of the panels. In this period all panels have taken place remotely with a plan to return to face to face panels when it is safe to do so.

The panels quality assure paperwork being presented. 75 % of matches presented on Blackburn with Darwen children were of good quality or better during the year.

7. Inter-country adoption

Inter-country adoption services are rarely requested in Blackburn 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.

8. 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.

9. Complaints

Adoption Now has not received any complaint in relation to Blackburn children or families.

10. Allegations

There have been no allegations in the last year.

11. Staffing

Over the last year the service has operated with a core team of 8 social workers,(fte equivalent), 0.8 family support worker, a Deputy team manager and a Team manager from Blackburn with Darwen. The staff are now seconded to Adoption Now and support a much larger service. During this period there have been 2 staff off long term sick likely to retire on grounds of ill health and also staff on maternity leave. These staff now work as part of Adoption Now and support a much larger service.

12. 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. This budget has not been increased this year which has put pressure on some budget lines and in particular the staffing budget lines.

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.

It has been possible to meet the increasing financial demands due to income from adopters who are used by other agencies and pay a fee for that and due to some economies of scale when the RAA came into being.

The Adoption Now budget was underspent by £40,000 due to the invoice for new lap tops not coming in within the financial year. They will now be funded from the reserve budget. There is a financial plan in place to ensure that costs are covered until 2022/23 without incurring any additional costs to the Local Authorities.

A total of £131,087 was spent on placing Blackburn with Darwen children with outside agencies this year.

13. 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 next one of these is due to go out in 2022.

Staff training remains a priority with full staff teams being trained in the Beth Nield research around moving children on. Training around modernising contact in adoption took place in November 2021. Managers attended Coram BAAF training on lessons from serious case reviews relating to children adopted or in Special guardianship or foster care placements. There are plans for a full staff event in June 2022 on the theme of Early Permanence placements for children and a plan to commission safeguarding refresher training for all staff. There is a block purchase of training from CVAA which allows staff to access courses specific to adoption and training has been delivered to marketing colleagues as part of the national recruitment work. In addition, staff have access to a range of training available through their local authorities.

One of the biggest challenges 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. There are currently adopters waiting however not for the children that currently need placements.

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

As of 1st September 2021 Adoption Now took on responsibility for the adoption mailbox arrangements across the 6 Local Authorities. What will follow is a review of contact arrangements and the furthering of plans to modernise contact in adoption.

Regionally RAA 's are working together to deliver some training, develop best practise and look at service delivery that may benefit from economies of scale.

Head of Adoption Now continues to chair two ambition groups for the National Adopter Recruitment campaign and is on the governing body for the RAA National leaders' group. This ensures that Adoption Now has a national voice in policy development and planning.

14. 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. Mentors link in with prospective adopters from early on in their adoption journey and support through assessment and early placement. They can also link in with families struggling and needing support after the adoption order has been made.

Karen Barrick
June 2022