

# Adoption Annual Report

## 2023/24



### Executive Report

adoption  
now

Together we make a difference

Bolton  
Council

ROCHDALE  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Oldham  
Council

BLACKBURN  
DARWEN

Bury Tameside  
Metropolitan Borough

## 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.

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. Blackburn with Darwen children's cases are held by Adoption Now social workers from Placement Order onwards.

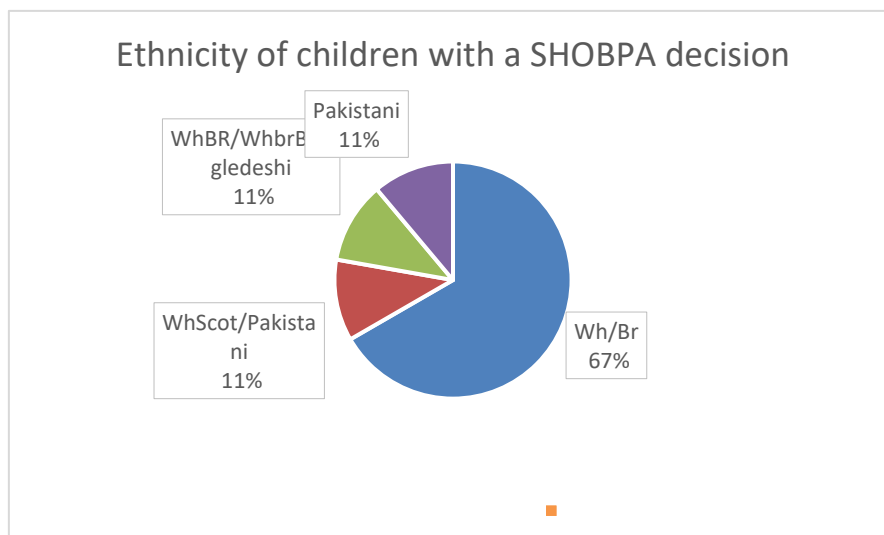
Data in this report relating to children is local data relating to Blackburn with Darwen children however, adoption support and recruitment data covers the whole Region. It covers the period 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

## 2. Adoption Agency Business - Children

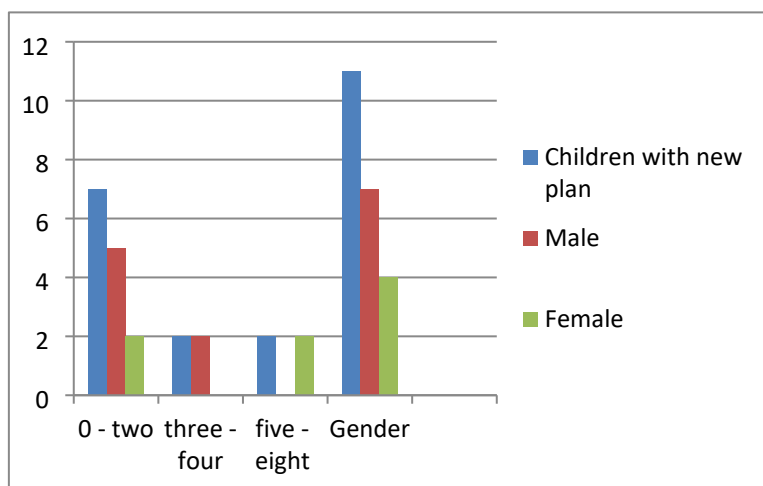
### 2.1 Children with an Adoption Plan

During the first six months of the year 11 children were made subject to a decision that they should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA). This figure represents a decrease in comparison to the same period last year when the figure was 16.

Three of the 11 children were of non-White British ethnicity, these children represent a diverse range of ethnicities between them.



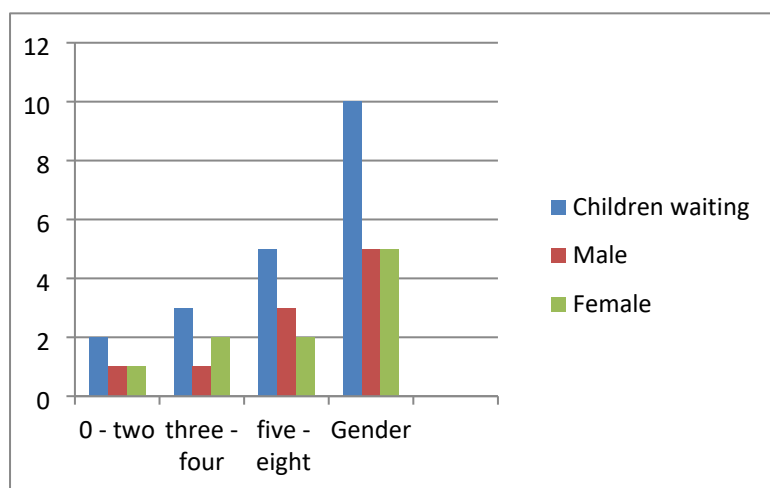
The majority of the children (7) were under the age of three when a decision was made with 5 of these being male and 2 female, very similar figures to the same period last year. Of the remaining four children two were boys aged between 3 and 5 years, and two were females aged 5 years or over. There was only one sibling group of 2 in this cohort.



## 2.2 Children Awaiting a Match

On 30<sup>th</sup> September, there were 10 children with a plan for adoption (subject to a placement order) awaiting placement and not yet matched, a reduction of 7 since the end of the previous year. Whilst all were of White British ethnicity, significantly all except one of these (who had only had a Placement Order made two weeks earlier) were children who we might expect to wait longer by virtue of age, being part of a sibling group, significant medical and/or developmental needs, emotional and behavioural needs, or a combination of a number of these factors. As seen below, age was a significant factor, but the cohort also included three sibling groups of two, five children who had significant emotional and behavioural difficulties including two for whom Autism and/ADHD was under investigation, and two children who had significant medical/genetic factors affecting their health and development.

### Age and Gender of children waiting



Whilst only four of the 10 children are currently progressing with matches, given the complexities outlined above, this is an extremely positive outcome. Of the remaining 6 children, 2 had only been waiting for under 2 weeks, one had been waiting under 6 months and the other three had been waiting between 6-12 months since the making of a Placement Order.

None of the children waiting currently has a plan for reversal of their plan and family finding efforts are ongoing for all without current links. Given the complexity and age of some of the children however, this is kept under regular review and there are plans to start assessments for 3 of these children shortly if families have not been found to consider whether adoption remains in their best interests and to explore the alternatives.

### **2.3 Family Finding Activity**

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches. Link Maker continues to be used as a key tool in-house as well as externally to allow adopters to see the children who are in need of a family for themselves. Filters are used on Link Maker to ensure that the best use is made of in-house families before decisions are made to look externally, whilst also ensuring that this is done in a timely fashion to avoid unnecessary delay for any child. This continues to be a useful tool with some adopters expressing interest in children who we might not have immediately considered for them based on their preferences. The regional placement group continues to operate, meeting on a 6 weekly basis to encourage matches with local voluntary adoption agencies as we recognise the advantage both in terms of children's identity and in terms of support in children being placed within the North West.

Profiles for children who are waiting longer or who we anticipate are likely to wait longer are shared monthly with Regional Adoption Agencies across the North West, and we continue to plan and run joint Activity/Fun days for children and adopters waiting across the North West region alongside the Voluntary Adoption Agencies in the area. Currently these are being funded by the DfE who recognised the innovative work being done by Adoption Now and North West RAA's in terms of this collaborative working.

All Adoption Now approved adopters, regardless of their location are immediately available to Blackburn with Darwen children, and most place profiles on Link Maker whilst progressing through Stage 2 of their assessment to enable early links to be made.

It is our practice to search for a family within Adoption Now in the first instance and then to look further afield to other RAA's or Voluntary Adoption Agencies. For all children, but particularly those who we anticipate will wait longer, initial in-house searches are completed anonymously pre-Placement Order to avoid delay once an order is made.

### **2.4 Children Placed for Adoption**

There have been 16 children matched and 17 children placed with adoptive families in the first half of this year, which is an increase in comparison to the same period last year when 12 children were matched and placed.

In the first 6 months of this financial year, 59% of Blackburn with Darwen children placed were placed with RAA adopters, more than double the percentage for the same period last year. These placements do not incur an interagency fee. These children included 3 sibling groups of two including two children who are White British/White British Bangladeshi, one child placed under FfA initially who is White British/White British Jamaican, one girl who was 6 years of age at the point of placement and one further child who had initially been placed under FfA.

The remaining children were placed with adopters approved by Voluntary Adoption Agencies and included a sibling group of 3, an older sibling group of two who had previously experienced significant emotional and behavioural difficulties, one child who was placed initially been placed under Concurrency and a single boy aged 4 at the point of placement.

## 2.5 Children Adopted

There were 17 adoption orders granted in the first six months of this year which included one sibling group of 3, an older sibling group of 2 and two single older boys. However it also included a significant cohort of children initially placed with their adopters under Early Permanence fostering arrangements as a result, the average timescales for this period are extremely positive.

The scorecard data for children adopted between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023 is as follows:-

<b>Measure</b>		<b>Blackburn with Darwen average</b>
Placement Order to Matching (A2)	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	115
Child entering care starting adoption placement (A10)	Scorecard indicator – 426 days	467

Whilst the A10 average is over the target indicator this was largely due to 2 children who were originally placed on care orders with parents or other family members but were subsequently removed or relinquished after which further assessments took place followed by applications for Placement Orders. A further two children were originally placed in Local Authority Care under S20 before Interim Care Orders were sought, after which the court process was long and extended due to the involvement of the Official Solicitor and additional court ordered assessments.

Adoption Now continues to fulfil the statutory requirements and to support 26 Blackburn with Darwen children in 17 families who have been placed for adoption but not yet adopted.

## 2.6 Adoption Disruption

When a child moves in with adopters but is unable to remain there and moves out prior to an adoption order being made, this is classed as a disruption. There have been no disruptions involving a Blackburn with Darwen child in the first half of this year. This is positive as it suggests matches are appropriate and families are being well supported. Equally there were no disruptions within the previous year either which is a very positive outcome.

## 2.7 Early Permanence Placements

Blackburn with Darwen have not placed any children with Concurrent or Fostering For Adoption carers between 1<sup>st</sup> April and 30<sup>th</sup> September. This is a significant change to previous years with 4 having been placed with Early Permanence foster carers in the first half of last year, and seven over the 2022/23 period as a whole. Whilst early planning and intervention remains a strength within Blackburn with Darwen, proactive, supportive and systemic working appears to be leading to also to higher numbers of children for whom early permanence would likely have been considered, remaining with birth parents and either not progressing in care proceedings or remaining with at least one parent throughout proceedings.

Four FfA referrals were received in relation to 5 Blackburn with Darwen children during this period, however 3 were still pending (either still unborn or child with parents) at the end of this period and the fourth relating to a sibling group of two, was unsuccessful due to a lack of families both in-house and externally who felt able to meet the needs of these children.

## **2.8 Staffing**

Blackburn with Darwen children are transferred to Adoption Now's Care Planning and Family Finding team once a Placement Order has been made. These cases are mostly held by social workers seconded from Blackburn into the Regional Adoption Agency, with 3 FTE posts in seconded into this team. Over the past year however, due to difficulties in recruiting to vacancies and difficulties in securing agency cover, there have been a number of periods where there were only 2 social workers in post. As a result social workers from across the Care Planning and Family Finding team have frequently been used to support or case hold, with some working additional hours paid by Blackburn with Darwen and some doing this within their existing roles. At the end of this period there are three social workers in post with all cases being held between them. These do however only include one permanent member of staff at present with two experienced agency social workers also covering.

Blackburn with Darwen children's cases have received overall management oversight by the Deputy Head of Service during this period (who was the seconded Blackburn with Darwen Team Manager) with line management support from one Deputy Manager and one Advanced Practitioner within the Care Planning and Family Finding Team.

The Care Planning and Family Finding Team as a whole consists of:

- 2 Team Managers
- 3.5 Deputy Managers/Advanced Practitioners
- 19.6 (FTE) Social Workers
- 2.4 Child/Family Support Workers

### 3. Adopter recruitment

#### 3.1 **Headline Data**

**106** enquiries taken in the period from **87** couples and **19** single applicants.

**84** Initial visits undertaken to **73** couples and **11** single people.

**9** Viabilities undertaken with foster carers and sibling adopters.

**46 new** applications (Registration of Interest's) taken.

**25** Stage 1's ongoing at 30.09.23

**40** Stage 2's ongoing at 30.09.23

**22** assessments present to panel resulting in 22 approvals

**68** active pre order support cases: (**26** new matches supported in house and **42** further families with children in placement).

**26** approved and waiting families being supported at 30.9.23

#### 3.2 **Analysis**

An annual target of 100 adopter approvals has been set for Adoption Now over the past few years.

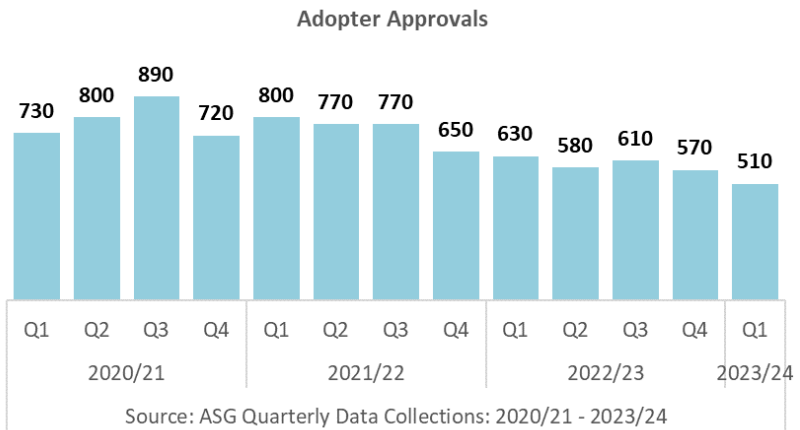
In this half year period (01.04.23 to 30.9.23), **22** assessments have been presented to panel, all with positive recommendations resulting in approvals. This is significantly lower than the actual target number of **50** at this halfway period. Despite concerted efforts year on year, this ambitious target has yet to be reached.

In the same period last year and the previous year, 28 approvals had been made during this same period, therefore this does represent an impactful reduction this year. Whilst it is difficult to state categorically why numbers have reduced, there are indications both locally and nationally that the ongoing cost-of-living crisis is impacting upon people's confidence in starting or growing families through adoption. It is noted that due to the Adoption Strategy the level of complexity within assessments has increased resulting in longer assessment periods. Added to this the learning from Serious Case Reviews, in particular from the CSPR in respect to Leiland-James has also led to increased scrutiny within assessments which unavoidably has led to further delays. The Agency has also paused active recruitment of Asian families due to the large numbers already approved and waiting.

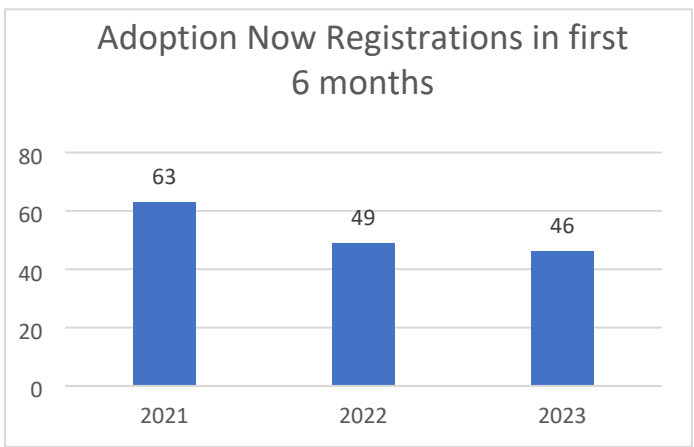


This drop in adopter approvals is in line with the national picture both in the previous and current year, which saw an overall drop (7%) in adopter approvals (ASG Quarterly Data Collections) in Q1, as evidenced below.

Q2 data has been submitted but not yet available for comparison.

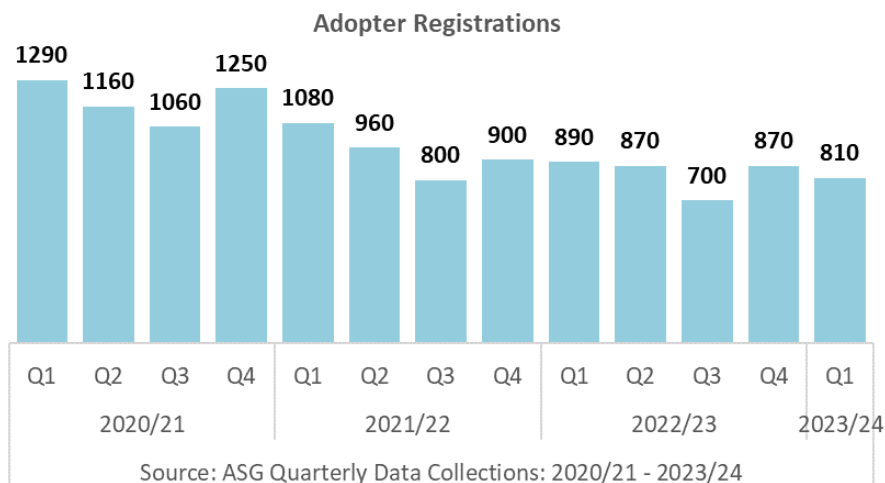


Summary of applications accepted by the agency during this period:



There has been a significant drop in applications in the last two years compared with 2021. The drop in adopter applications is also being experienced nationally as seen below.





However, compared to our local neighbours Adoption Now has the second highest number of registrations within the six agencies in the Northwest Region as reported in ASG Quarter 1 data. This is an indicator that our recruitment and marketing strategy is working to attract families to Adoption Now, particularly as the RAA with the highest number of applications has a more affluent demographic.

Like other Agencies, however, we are seeing adopters entering the system but withdrawing at various stages. There have been 18 families who have withdrawn after applying within this period and a further 28 who have withdrawn from the system pre application. Again, this is commensurate with the pictures regionally and nationally based on Q1 ASG data where it is clear from 2020/21 to date that withdrawal numbers have mostly doubled.

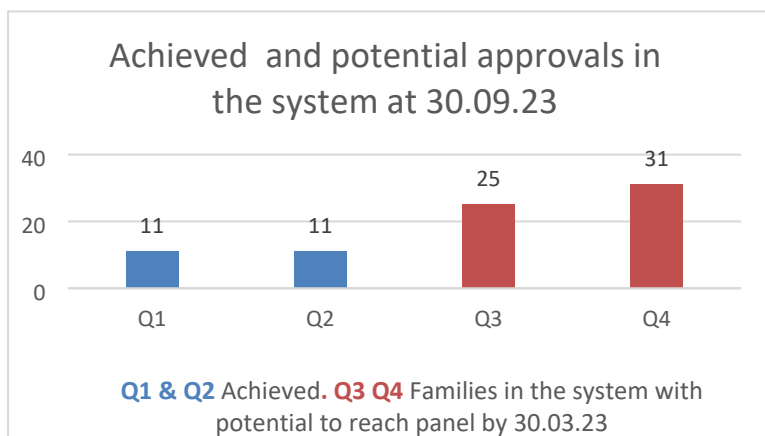


Interestingly withdrawals begin to spike in Q4 2021/22 coinciding with the introduction of the National Adoption Strategy (July 2021). This is an indicator that whilst the strategy has been positive and welcomed by agencies in respect of more inclusive criteria at the front door, this has also presented challenges in more complex and time-consuming stage 1 work (much of which is invisible), alongside withdrawals, a factor recognised and reported by other RAA's and VAA's in the region.

This continues to be a challenge for the agency and there are still a high number of assessments 'stuck' in stage 1 due to outstanding medicals, or due to complexity arising from checks and references which have meant that like last year adopter numbers in this first half of the year have been impacted detrimentally.

Team Managers and social workers continue to work closely with business support to highlight the priority of adopter medicals to GP practices to progress stage 1 assessments. Significant efforts are also made to unpick complexity in as timely a way as possible. The service goal being to ensure a regular flow of adopters.

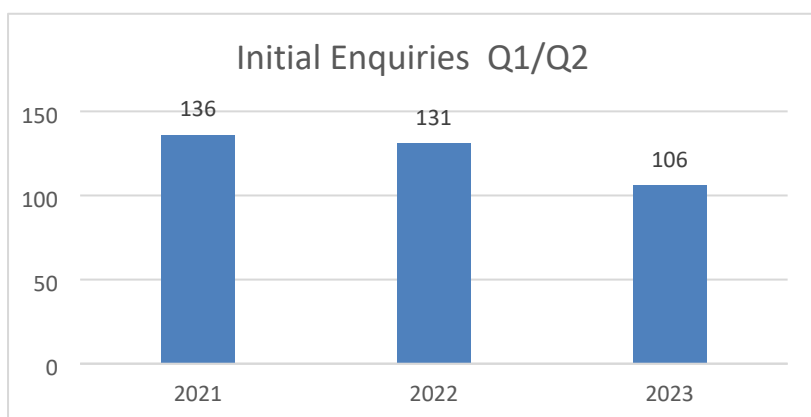
Predicted adopter approvals at this half year point:



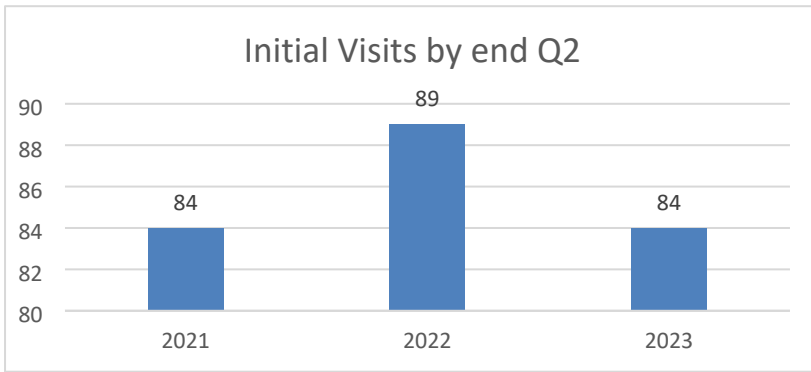
Current adopter numbers indicate that more adopter approvals are projected (**78**) than the **69** achieved last year and taking the agency more in line with previous years. However, this figure is reported with caution and does not account for delays/ complexities within assessment or closures due to factors inhibiting progression. Last year **90** approvals were predicted at this point in the year however **21** of these assessments did not make it to approval in expected timeframes due to these factors.

As highlighted in the 2022/23 Annual Report, the challenge for the service this year was the need to increase the numbers of enquiries and resultant applications (ideally a minimum of **16** applications per month) to allow for this drop out, alongside ensuring that as many of those could meet the ongoing needs of our children who are waiting.

Sadly, despite strategic marketing efforts (outlined later in this report) enquiries have dipped in this first half of the year.



However, conversion to Initial Visits has increased to **79%** (compared with 68% in 2022 and 62% in 2021).



**54%** of Initial Visits have then converted to application. In respect of applications, whilst the agency continues to hold its own in the region, the number of applications is averaging at **8** per month, half the assessed need taking into account the withdrawal rate. A key focus of the Agency's recruitment strategy continues to be increasing opportunities to raise the profile of adoption and the agency to attract more potential families to the Welcome Team in a climate where people are concerned about finances and the instability of the economy. Adoption UK research (January 2023) highlighted 9 out of 10 prospective adopters stated the cost-of-living crisis was affecting their decisions about adoption.

### 3.3 Matches

In the first half of the year **58** children from across the 6 Local Authorities were matched with **48** families. (1x 3, 8x2 and 39 x1)

**42 of those 58** children were matched with **36** RAA families (30 singleton placements, 6 placements of 2 children) meaning that 75% of the families were Adoption Now approved families. This is up on last year when **28** children had been matched with **27** RAA families with only one placement of siblings.

There are also currently **5** RAA families offering early permanence (FfA) placements to **5** children that will progress to match subject to final orders being made.

### 3.4 Matching factors

The challenge to recruit sufficient adopters willing to consider siblings placed together, children 3 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.

**Age of children:** Of the 22 families approved **13** were willing to consider children 3 years or older. This means **9** families approved were only considering babies, however **5** of the **9** were for named children (**3** sibling adopters and **2** foster carers) and **2** were able to offer FfA. Therefore only **2** of the **22** approved families had the limited approval criteria of one child 0-2 years.

**Siblings:** In this half year **9** families were approved to adopt siblings. This is **41%** of all approved families. (Down from **46%** last year). The service continues to promote stretch to families where appropriate; the sibling training having been developed with the purpose of encouraging this.

**Single/LGBTQ+:** Of the **22** families approved in the agency, there was **1** single applicant and **3** LGBTQ+ couples. (Down from **5** single applicants and **7** LGBT couples last year).

**Early permanence:** Prospective adopters are advised about early permanence options with a focus on recruitment for Fostering for Adoption (FfA) from first enquiry onwards.

All adopters now attend a mandatory full day of Early Permanence training in addition to the 2-day adopter preparation groups that are delivered in person. This is particularly relevant in the drive to encourage consideration of Early Permanence for older children.

In this 6 month period, **8 (36%)** of the **22** approved families offered FfA placements. (Down from **11 families 39%** last year)

**Ethnicity of adopters:** In this year the service has continued to see diversity in new enquiries, with **25%** of applicants being other than White British; **6** families were of Southeast Asian heritage, and **1** family Black Caribbean. There continues to be a focus on recruiting Black families as there is a recognised local and national need. However, SE Asian children are currently under-represented in the care system and very few Asian children are awaiting adoption. Conversely, the Agency has **13** Asian families approved and waiting already, some of them making very broad offers in terms of their matching criteria. Those waiting are offering placements for early permanence, siblings, and older children; many are willing to consider children of a different ethnicity or religion to their own, yet some have waited over two years already.

At this time therefore it is only possible to progress applications from families of SE Asian ethnicity who are able to meet the needs of children waiting, namely those with significant complexity or larger sibling groups (3+).

### 3.5 Quality assurance

**Timeliness:** Of the 22 approvals in the period **14** were fast track (no Stage 1 required). Of the remaining **8** assessments that necessitated a Stage one process **none** were completed in the 61-day target timescale; down from **31%** last year. As discussed previously the majority are delayed by GP medicals however other applications are being delayed due to other non-medical issues. The aforementioned increased scrutiny in assessments following Serious Case Reviews, whilst absolutely necessary is also having an impact on timescales.

**14** of the **22** Stage 2 assessments were completed in timescale (**63%**), up on last year where it was **52%** of all approvals.

**Quality of reports to Panel:** Of the **22** approvals in the period, **68%** of reports were judged good or excellent by adoption panel members. (Down from **86%** for the same period last year), however the majority of these were judged excellent (**50%** of all). The remainder were deemed to be satisfactory and fit for the purposes of decision making. Whilst the seeming drop in quality is disappointing, the low numbers overall do contribute to the percentage values being more sensitive. More importantly, as the complexity of the assessments being completed increases (as detailed earlier in this report) along with the increased level of scrutiny by all there is arguably more scope for panel members to feel the need to highlight areas where further clarity might be needed.

### 3.6 Adopter Recruitment /Marketing activity

Varying from past years, the marketing strategy now works on a quarterly rotation for **recruitment campaigns** with two recurring 'sets' of marketing activities and platforms. This provides the opportunity to be creative and plan effectively whilst also giving the flexibility to consider the Agency's needs that are identified by monthly internal tracking. Over the past six months two focussed campaign themes have been run;

- April – June – the #EveryStep campaign, focussed on 'Support' throughout the adoption process. Starting from the first call potential adopters make to the point of a child being placed and beyond.

This campaign utilised Adoption Now's social media platforms and podcasts to share the messages of support whilst also utilising advertisements in local magazines, banners in local authority areas and a door-to-door leaflet drop across all six local authorities. Local authority communications teams were also engaged with campaigns, sharing them across their social media and internal platforms to gain a larger reach.

- July – September – the 'I'm not too old' campaign, focussed on 'Our Children'. The campaign highlighted the need for adopters for older children (3 years+) challenging the idea that these children are 'too old' by focusing on their needs. The campaign highlighted how many "firsts" the children still had to go through and the importance of these moments, sharing them with families.

This campaign used creative and 'thought-provoking' messaging as well as outdoor advertisements on buses, billboards, and train station adverts. It also included a roadshow in shopping centres across the 6 Local Authorities utilising Adoption Now's website, social media, and press to gain more coverage.

Two **information events** are run virtually each month, one lunchtime and one evening event. There have also been two weekend information events in April and June and a later weeknight event in August to give prospective adopters, who may struggle to attend the usual time sessions, the opportunity to come along. The process for information events has been streamlined making it easier for prospective adopters to access these by introducing an online event booking system 'Eventbrite'.

Feedback on these events is continually sought, currently by way of a survey tool, to help ensure these are meeting the needs of those attending. At present the feedback states that 67% of people prefer these events to be during the week, with 45% of people preferring them to be in the evening. At present 64% still prefer the events to be held virtually. This feedback is used to shape delivery and is continually reviewed to ensure these events are meeting the needs of applicants and the service.

**Adopter recruitment** has been targeted in the six Local Authority areas and some surrounding/border areas over the past six months. The aim of this approach is to continue increasing the number of applicants from all backgrounds. Adopters who can support the high need groups, those being adopters who can consider siblings, children with complex needs and disabilities, older children, Global Majority backgrounds and early permanence, are specifically targeted. There is also an ongoing focus on applicants who can support children of white British heritage as this continues to represent the majority of children that are seeking adoptive placements within Adoption Now despite the high diversity of the minority.

The Agency supported the **national campaign** from #YOU CAN ADOPT which ran in June 2023. This campaign was not specifically recruitment based and focused on the many different shapes and sizes families come in. It also focused on the various ways adoptive parents can find support throughout their adoption journey. The campaign aimed to reassure those considering adoption and encourage them to adopt children who typically wait longest for adoption, including children aged five or over, children with additional and/or complex needs, brother and sister groups, and those from a black and mixed heritage background. It also showcased the range of support available from adoption agencies, social care workers, charities, employers, friends, relatives, and peers, shining a light on those children waiting the longest to be adopted.

The campaign materials were utilised across the Agency's social media platforms and also shared with Local Authority communication colleagues to widen their reach. During the campaign there was a 20.4% increase in visits to Adoption Now's website.

A wide range of marketing tools continue to be used including outdoor advertisements to increase brand awareness and more subconscious messaging alongside more targeted tools such as Google, social media, and digital radio. These work well together in covering larger bases, enabling the Agency to capture a wider audience. The more focussed platforms do allow for targeting by demographic or geographical area so are good value for investment.

Data continues to be gathered on how applicants arrive at the Adoption Now website or duty phone and additional ways are being sought to measure the success of specific marketing strategies and tools. Survey tools are now being used to ask applicants in follow up emails how they have found Adoption Now and the exact route, or marketing tool they have seen. The outcomes of these will be used to help shape future activity to ensure value for money and successful marketing. In addition consideration is being given the current barriers to families and individuals coming forward to adopt so that relevant support can be highlighted.

Looking forward to the **next six months**, in view of the unprecedented decline in enquiries being experienced across the region and North of England plans are in place to increase the innovative ways in which the Agency's marketing can increase these numbers, with a particular focus on the benefits of Radio campaigns. The overall upcoming campaign themes for the remainder of the year are:

- October – December: Diversity/Holiday season
- January – March: Our agency/generic new year-new start messaging.

October will see the National Adoption Week with further national messaging occurring across the region in the coming months, all of which will be used and supported by the Agency to ensure that coherent messages are being delivered. Whilst the plan for the remainder of the year is already in place, there remains scope for seeking and utilising new opportunities during this next period in line with the needs of the service to help increase the numbers of adopters applying and being approved.

### 3.7 Staffing

The Recruitment and Marketing Teams are responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and support of prospective adopters.

2 Team Managers responsible for:

2.5 Advanced Practitioners

13.5 FTE social workers

3 FTE Marketing Workers

0.8 FTE Welcome Team Practitioner (2 workers, 2 days each per week)

Commissioned assessors also provide services to the agency.

Despite the lower number of approvals, the Recruitment and Assessment Team continues to be very stretched in terms of capacity for a number of reasons. There are a number of ongoing vacancies and absences some of which have agency cover but not all. In addition, the complexity and delays within assessments demands more hours of work, and the 'hidden' work being carried out with applicants who later withdraw is also impacting. With higher levels of complexity in adopters also comes the need for high levels of support once children are placed pre Adoption Order, and often increased delays in Adoption Orders being delayed mean that cases are not closing to the team in a timely manner.

## 4. Adoption Support

### 4.1 Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

The changes implemented by the ASF in 2022/23 in relation to the payment of funds (being paid in arrears through claims via the ASF portal on receipt of invoices for completed work and surrendering unused funds via the ASF portal) has not yet seen a reduction in the workload or a simpler system. There was much confusion experienced by providers around submitting final invoices in time for year end, calculating whether all funds had been used and some errors in surrendering incorrect amounts of funding back to the ASF – all of which have had an impact on the workload for year end and preparation for the current financial year. Preparation will commence in January 2024 for auditing ASF for the current year end.

<b>Total monies claimed 01/04/2023 – 30/09/2023</b>	<b>£968,227.23</b>
<b>Surrendered funds to date:</b>	<b>£14,874.18</b>
<b>Number of children currently receiving therapy funded via ASF</b>	<b>279</b>
Post order applications (by Child)	247
Pre order applications (by Child)	23
<b>Number of applications made to the ASF</b>	<b>288</b>
Post order applications (by ASF application)	268
Pre order applications (by ASF application)	19
<b>Number of Group applications made to the ASF</b>	<b>1 – for 7 children</b>
Post order – by child	7

The total monies claimed already is significantly higher than at any previous mid-year or year end point - this was £644,931.43 at mid-year 2022/23 and has exceeded the total amount claimed in 2022/23, which was £930,750.63.

To date, £14,874.18 has been surrendered back to the ASF and in the main this is because of therapy or provider changes as opposed to unused funds. In these instances, the funds are surrendered to allow for a further application to be made with the funds immediately being re-claimed.

At year end 2022/23, £763,064.62 was the actual spend from the £930,750.63 with £205,162.61 being returned/surrendered to the ASF. Much of this was re-claimed immediately from 2023/24 funds which will account for some, but not all of the significant increase in funds already claimed in this period. The ASF do not allow funds to transfer between financial years, so where a package of support is delayed for whatever reason, any funds remaining beyond 31 March must be surrendered and reapplied for from the next financial years funds.

Not surprisingly, the number of applications and numbers of children receiving support via ASF has also significantly increased compared to 2022/23 mid-year, with 288 applications for 279 children, compared to 193 applications for 191 children at mid-year 2022/23.

In this period to date, Adoption Now has made 1 group application and 8 child/ren applications to the Adoption Support Fund for packages of support provided by Adoption Now. These applications have been for the in-house Therapeutic Parenting Course, RAMP (Reducing Anxiety Management Programme) and Early Support Packages. After expenses (venue hire etc) these have generated the following income for the agency:

**Adoption Now Intervention**

Therapeutic Parenting Course  
RAMP  
Early Support Package

1	
2	
6	
	£20,629.67

A further Therapeutic Parenting Course will take place in October 2023 with a further course scheduled for the New Year, totalling 3 across the year. There are also further Early Support Packages planned for children who have more recently/or will be moving in the coming months.

**Match Funding** is required when the cost of a package of support goes beyond the fair access limit of £5000 per child within the financial year. The agency then funds half the additional cost whilst the ASF funds the other half. The agency refers to Adoption Now in post adoption order cases and refers to the placing LA in pre-adoption order cases.

**Total monies paid for Match Funded Applications – 01/04/2023 – 30/09/2023**

**Local Authority Breakdown:**

**BwD**

**Tameside**

**Bolton**

**Oldham**

**Rochdale**

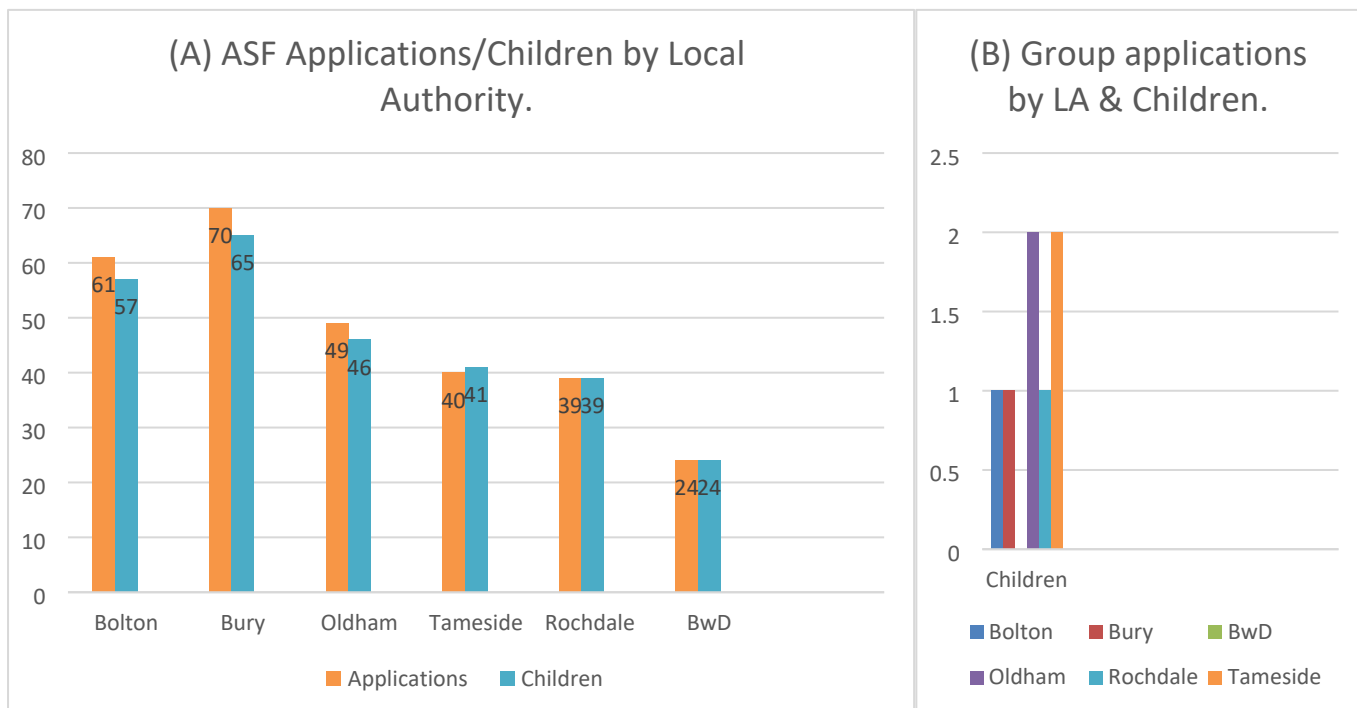
**Bury**

<b>£1476.70</b>
£1476.70
<b>1 for 2 children.</b>

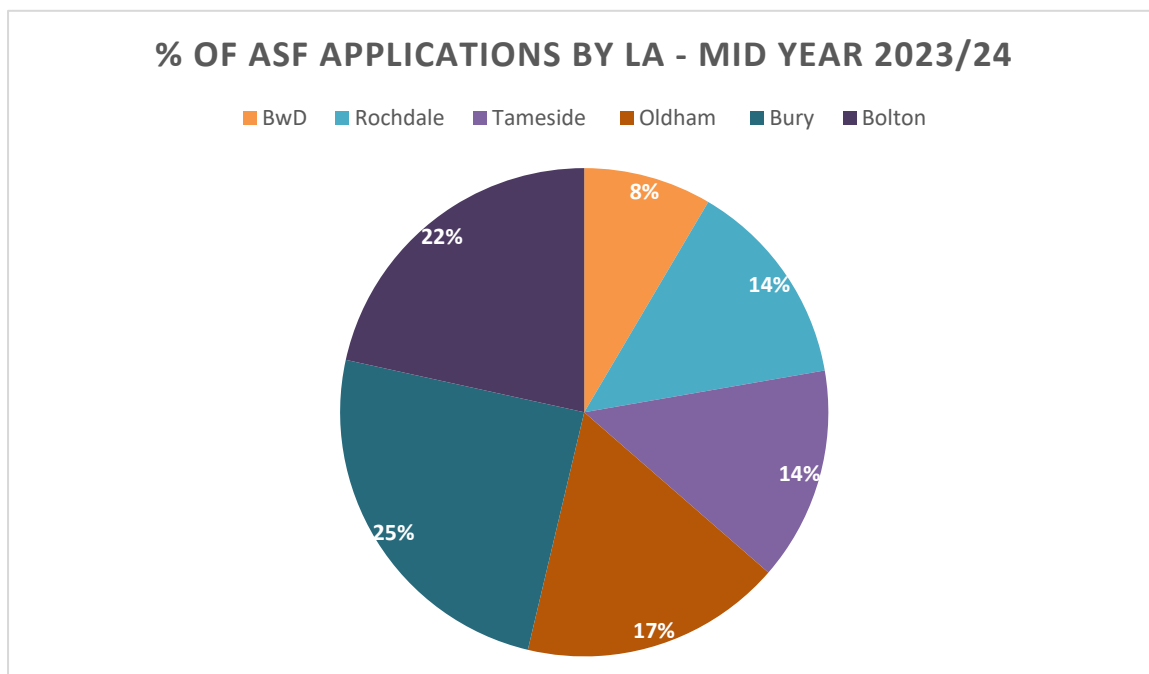
In addition, there has been one match funded application, match funded by Western Bay Adoption Service (South Wales) for a child placed within the Adoption Now region.



## Local Authority Breakdown of ASF Applications/Children



The illustrations above and below show a consistent pattern seen in previous years in terms of ASF applications by Local Authority. Whilst the numbers are increasing across all 6 Local Authorities, Bury continues to be the highest user of ASF with Blackburn with Darwen the lowest. Chart B illustrates the numbers of children by LA within the group applications, which Adoption Now will analyse further as this service provision continues to grow and develop.

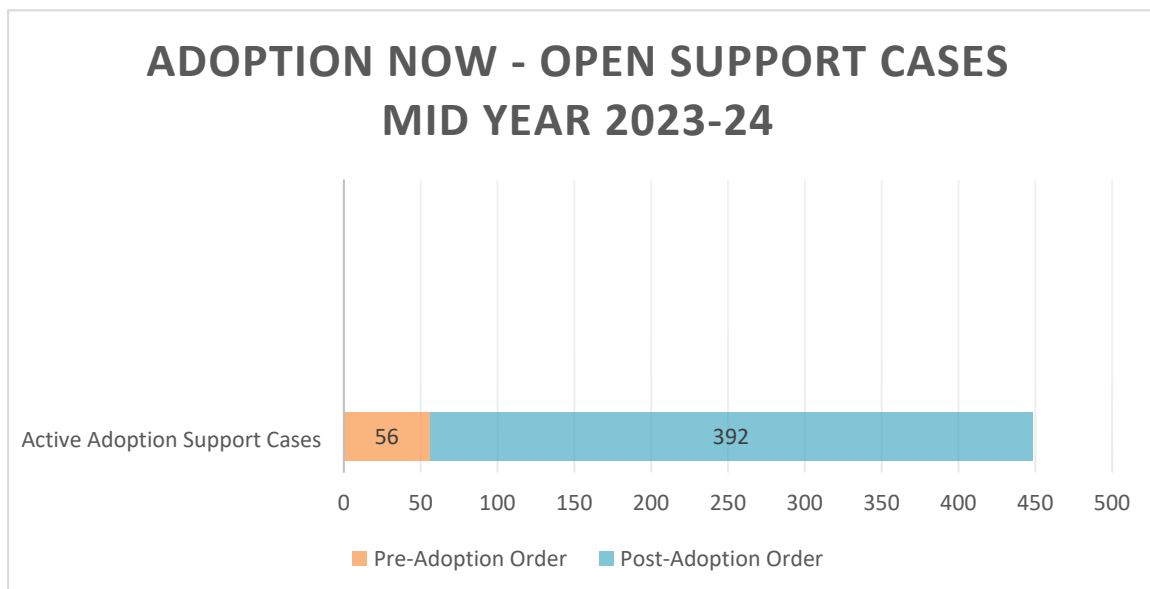


For some considerable months, the agency has been working with Bolton's Commissioning Team and Corporate Procurement to create a commissioning framework – a Flexible Purchasing System (FPS) for services commissioned via the Adoption Support Fund (ASF). The FPS will be available for Adoption Now to support adoptive families as well as for the 6 Local Authorities to commission services for children with

Special Guardianship Orders. The application process for providers to join the FPS has recently gone live and will close in November with a view to the framework being operational in January 2024. Current indications show that whilst there are some applications and lots of questions, there will need to be further rounds to ensure all the providers currently on the 'preferred provider list' transfer to the FPS.

## 4.2 Adoption Support Cases

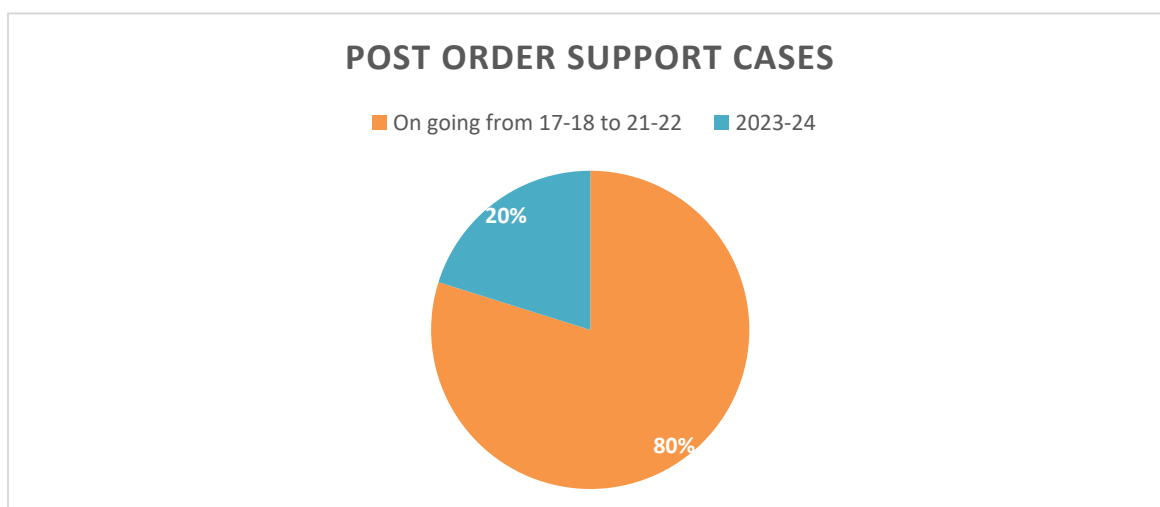
The service continues to record and report on the pre and post order support data separately.



At 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023, there were a total of 448 cases open – this reflects the number of children receiving adoption support, both pre and post adoption order and represents an increase from 423 at year end 2022/23. Whilst this is a steadier increase, there currently continues to be a high volume of referrals being received each week. There has been a slight decrease in pre-order cases, from 62 at mid-year 2022-23 to 56 at this mid-year period. Post order cases have seen a slightly more significant increase from 351 to 392.

### Post-order support:

The number of open post-order cases is 392, which is made up of 79 referrals open in this mid-year review period and 313 ongoing cases as illustrated below:



The number of referrals received in the first half of this year mirrors the same period last year, however whilst those ongoing from previous years had decreased at year end 22-23 to 191, this has now increased to 313 and is reflective of the high volume of referrals over the past 18 months.

**Assessments:**

In this mid-year period, the number of completed assessments of adoption support need is slightly lower than at the same point in 2022-23, down from 51 to 43. Active assessments has also dropped just slightly, with 29 compared with 37 at this same period last year. Six families have withdrawn from an assessment during this period.

**Assessments:**

**01/04/2023 – 30/09/2023**

**Completed Assessments**

**Active Assessments**

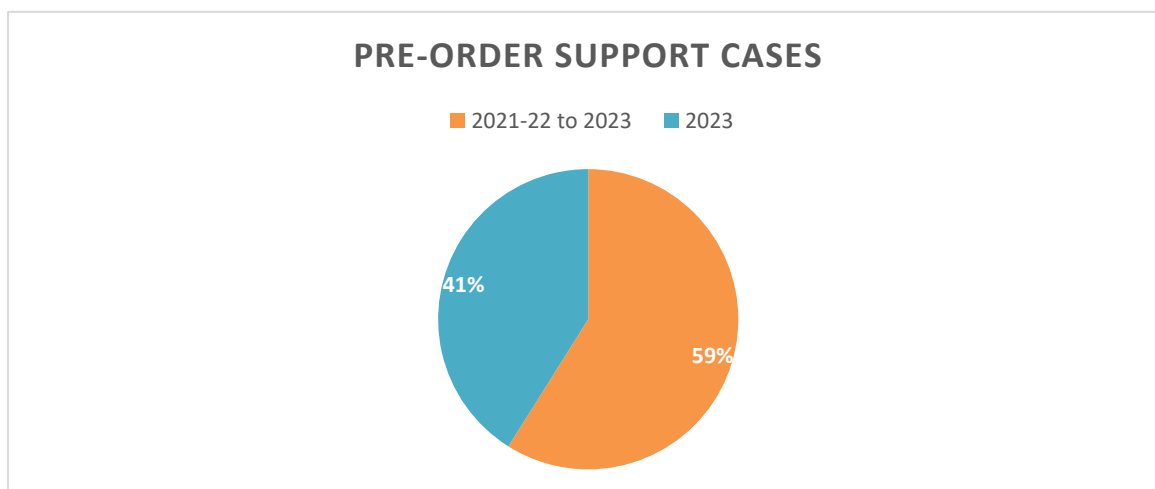
**Withdrawn at Assessment**

Completed Assessments	43
Active Assessments	29
Withdrawn at Assessment	6

**Pre-order Support:**

The number of open pre-order cases is 56, which remains steady from last mid-year period at 62.

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. This pre-order support continues to show that needs are being identified sooner and appropriate support being given at an earlier stage.



**Adoption Support Consultations:**

**01/04/2023 – 30/09/2023**

**Adoption Support Consultations:**

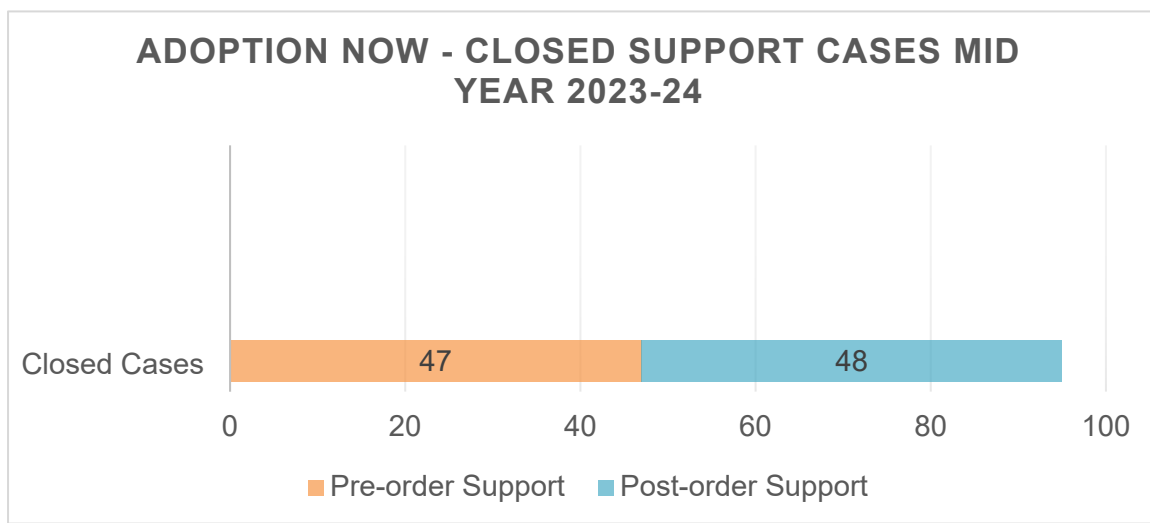
**NFA following consultation:**

**Receiving on-going Adoption Support**

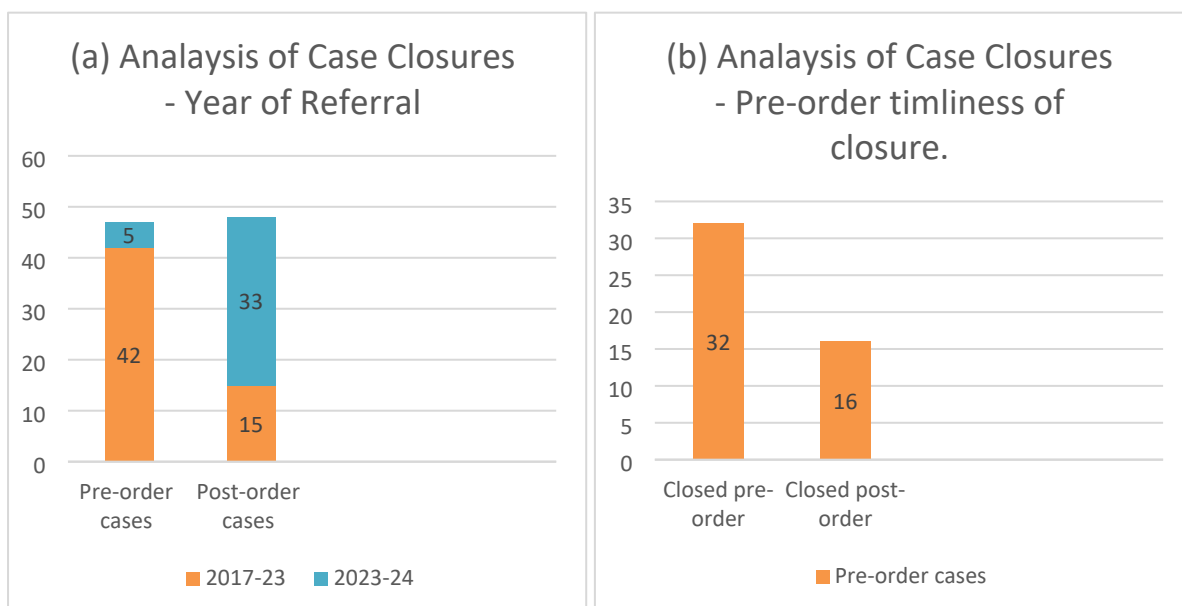
Adoption Support Consultations:	51 (for 66 children)
NFA following consultation:	44
Receiving on-going Adoption Support	56

Mid-Year 2023-24 sees a similar picture in the number of 51 **initial** adoption support consultations held, with 59 held at this period last year. As reported during the last review period, reviews are being actively requested for a number of cases where the outcome of the initial consultation was No Further Action. This, alongside increased numbers receiving early support packages/interventions is a positive indicator that the consultation process and early support are becoming more embedded in practice and more accessible for adopters.

Early support packages are currently underway with 6 families and whilst it is early days, the support is proving to be successful in all cases with further packages with more families being planned in the coming months.



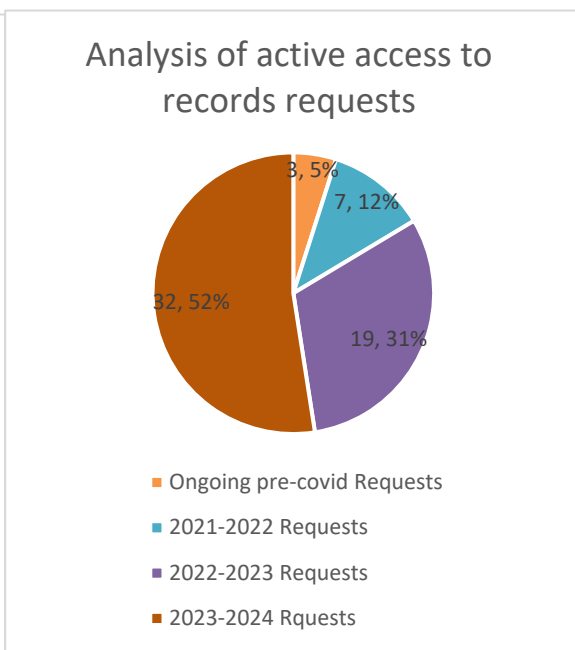
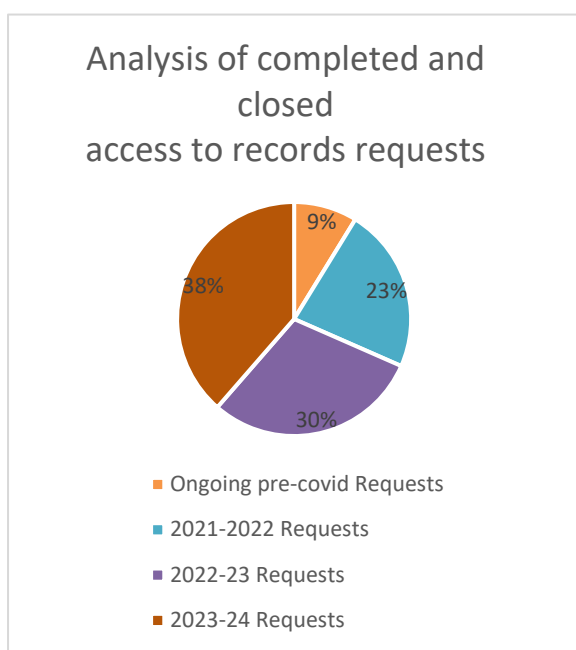
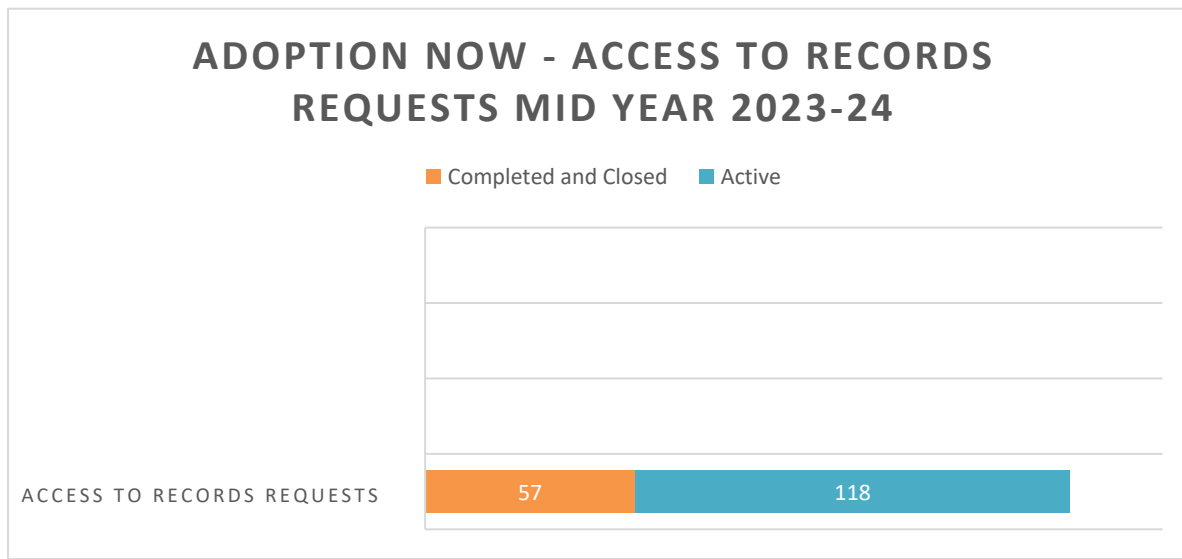
Case closures at this mid-year point are slightly higher at 95, compared with 91 at the same point in 2022-23. The make-up is significantly different with almost double pre-order case closures than at previous mid-year and may account for the decrease in pre-order cases currently active.



Further analysis of the case closures in chart (a) shows that 33 post order referrals received in 2023-24 were closed within the same period. A further 79 post order referral cases remain open at the end of this period, evidencing a total of 112 referrals within this mid-year period resulting in adoption support services being provided. Chart (b) illustrates that 32 cases receiving adoption support no longer required active support prior to the Adoption Order and 16 closed following the order being granted. 15 of these 16 have immediately been re-opened post order (in their adoptive identity). It is imperative with so many new referrals that cases are closed when possible and it also indicates that interventions are succeeding in supporting families to the point that they no longer need active interventions. Some families will need help at different stages in their adoption journey and cases can be opened again as and when required.

### 4.3 Access to Records

As reported in the previous Annual Reports, this area of work was significantly impacted upon due to the pandemic and a recovery plan to clear the work waiting had commenced towards the end of 2020/21. The illustrations below show a significant increase in completing these requests and indicates the continued success of the recovery plan, with only 3 such cases remaining. Of those outstanding, one is awaiting legal advice, another is waiting on a summary from another RAA and the third is nearing completion.



Adoption Now have received 54 new access to records requests within this mid-year review period. Of those waiting, from both current requests and those on-going from previous financial years 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 12 to 24 months and has been a similar pattern in previous years.

The agency has seen an increase in Access to Information requests from therapists and/or adoption support social workers, supporting children placed outside of Adoption Now by one of the agencies 6 LA's. These requests fall under Section 62 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and the agency has reviewed the wider

Access to Records process to include these requests to trial a clear process for managing and facilitating requests from professionals for the purpose of delivering adoption support services.

#### **4.4 Contact and Letterbox Service**

The transfer of the letterbox service from the six local authorities is now complete with almost 1500 active letterbox exchanges/files transferring to Adoption Now.

The contact co-ordinators are steadily responding to more requests to review contact arrangements and for support to progress contact arrangements – this might be to include photographs through indirect arrangements, supporting direct contact between siblings, birth parents and birth grandparents. Definitive data remains unavailable due to delays and errors in relation to LCS (database system) and the Letterbox Pathway. Whilst the mechanism to open the Letterbox/Contact Pathway from a contact is not yet available, a temporary alternative process has been created by LCS, however, there are some early errors/issues to be resolved.

The accurate data in relation to the numbers of letterbox files transferred, archived, and created since Adoption Now have been responsible is also delayed for the same reasons but once available will be analysed further, with details being included in the 2023-24-year end annual review.

#### **4.5 Staffing**

The Adoption Support Team are responsible for supporting families pre and post Adoption Order as well as acting as consultants through family finding, matching and placement to ensure that children's needs are supported and planned for. In addition, the Team has responsibility for Access to Records and post adoption Contact arrangements. The Team consists of:

1 FT Team Manager, 1 FT Senior Practitioner, 0.5 Advanced Practitioner, 10 FTE Social Workers and 2 family support workers (1.1 equivalent).

At this mid-year point, the team continues to manage with 3 social work vacancies (1 FT and 2 PT) and whilst there is some agency cover in place this does not fill the gap completely. In addition, there are 2 full-time workers on long-term sick leave, including the full time Advanced Practitioner.

It continues to be an unprecedented period for the team as in addition to staff vacancies and sickness, a significant number of the team have been experiencing external pressures, such as health and family issues that have impacted individuals' well-being and subsequently work at times. Whilst those affected have demonstrated considerable resilience, this has required consistent support from managers. Alongside the increased need for adoption support seen over the past 18 month period, the team are feeling the strain of the ongoing additional work pressures.

### **5. Core Offer Support – Training, Workshops, Groups and Events**

#### **Pre-Approval training**

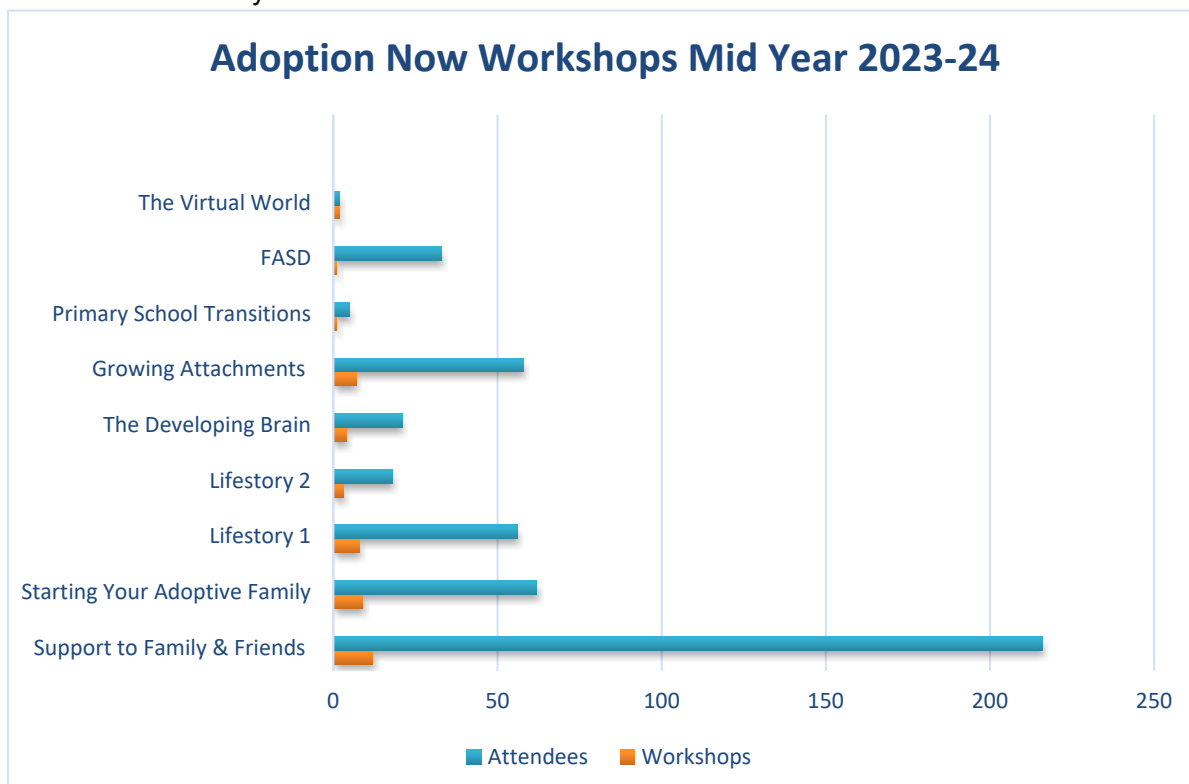
This is delivered regularly throughout the year. In this review period the following have been delivered:

- 5 Adopter Preparation Groups, each run over 2 days in person
- 2 Returning Adopters/Foster Carer Preparation Groups – 1 day courses
- 3 Considering FfA training courses – 1 day courses

## 5 Considering Siblings training courses – ½ day courses

### Workshops

These are mixed to offer both virtual and face-to-face options in some instances with The Virtual World running virtually as delivered PAN regionally and Support to Family Friends also running virtually to capture wider and distant family networks.



The table above shows the number of each workshop held over the annual period, together with the total number of attendees overall for each workshop. Support to Family and Friends received a record number of attendees with 29 at one event for a second time, indicating that running this workshop virtually enables more of the adopters' networks to attend, and from far and wide.

In addition, Network Meetings have been piloted during this six month period. These meetings involve gathering adopters and their support networks to consider the type and extent of support that can be offered from within this group. They have been trialled with a variety of cases and at different points in the process including during adopter assessments, at the point of matching with a child/ren and after a child/ren has joined a family. For some, review meetings have also taken place. The feedback and analysis evidences that these are been a great success and, whilst there is not capacity to offer these to every family or at every stage, the use of these meetings going forward will be considered in every case and used as and when most appropriate.

### Support groups and Events

**Single adopter group** – Monthly virtual meeting.

**FFA Support Groups**- run regionally across North West RAAs with 2 held during this period.

**Nurture Group** – Run twice monthly at 2 venues across the region.

**Teen Group** – The Teen Group launched in August 2022 with the group recently voting on the group name 'The Youthful G's'. The group runs monthly and is gathering regular attendees.

**Summer Event 2023** – Summer Picnic = 38 families/50 children.

**Easter Event 2023** – Chocolate Egg Hunt = 51 families/78 children.

**Mentor Support Groups** – 1 in person and 1 virtual held every 3 months

### **Therapeutic Parenting Course**

There has been 1 x 5-Day Courses in this period = 7 families, with one due to start in October 2023. As part of this intervention, Adoption Now has formed a regular call back/support group, which has run 6 times through 2022-23. This has been positively received and well attended with each group having new participants from the ongoing therapeutic parenting courses.

### **Reaching Out**

Adoption Now's bulletin/newsletter that is published to the mailing list quarterly with some additional special editions.

## **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.

The panels quality assure paperwork being presented. When matches are considered, panel members scrutinise Adoption Permanence Reports which consider the needs of the child and how the adopters can meet these needs, Adoption Support Plans which look at any additional support needed to meet the needs of the child, and Child Permanence Reports which look at the needs of the child including the background of their family and parents and the reasons why adoption is the appropriate plan. 80% of the Adoption Permanence Reports and Adoption Support plans present to panel were rated good or excellent, and 60% of the Child Permanence Reports. The remaining documents was deemed to be satisfactory and fit for the purpose of decision making.

## **7. Inter-country adoption**

Inter-country adoption services are sometimes requested in Blackburn with Darwen and 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 who continue to be consulted to support service development. Creative ways continue to be used to encourage participation from children who access post adoption support as well as those children who are awaiting adoption, especially, but not exclusively, those who are verbal. The Nurture Teens Group has led to some more meaningful engagement/consultation although due to the nature of the young people involved it is still relatively early days.

## **9. Complaints**

Adoption Now has not received any formal complaint in relation to Blackburn with Darwen children or families during the first half of the year.

## **10. Allegations**

There has been one allegation made relating to a Blackburn with Darwen child placed with adopters during this period. This was investigated and deemed to be unsubstantiated on balance. Concerns relating to prospective adopter of another Blackburn with Darwen child are currently being assessed with the outcome pending.

## **11. Overall Staffing**



Working across the service, the following staff have been seconded from Blackburn with Darwen throughout the past 6 months: 1 Team Manager (working in Deputy Head of Service role), 1 Deputy Team Manager (working as Panel Advisor, 8 FTE social workers and a family support worker. A number of these posts have been vacant for all or part of the last 6 month period.

## **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 since the formation of Adoption Now (except for the addition of the Letter Box function) which has put ongoing pressure on some budget lines and in particular the staffing budget lines.

There are costs associated with posts in the RAA and operational costs paid to the host Local Authority that had no budget line to support them from the outset. Money is generated when children from outside of Adoption Now are placed with Adoption Now adopters as this attracts an interagency fee, and this, along with some savings has enabled the books to be balanced year on year. At present however it is increasingly necessary to draw on reserves to help meet costs and this is therefore an area which is being regularly reviewed by the Board of Directors.

A total of £82,780 was spent on placing Blackburn with Darwen children with outside agencies during the first half of this year with forecasted expenditure for the full year being £333,300 which is a forecasted underspend against the budget of £6,900.

## **13. Service 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.

There has been one all staff development day during this period. This focussed on the Child and Adopter journeys, with opportunities for workers to become better acquainted with work and developments across the service as a whole. In addition, the Care Planning and Family Finding Team had a team development day which focussed on achieving timely matches for children, as well as exploring together areas where further development was needed.

Managers also took the opportunity to have a development day together which particularly focussed on how to further develop a joined-up service. Out of this day a joint training calendar for adopters from preparation through into post adoption has been compiled and there is now greater working together across the teams in delivering training to adopters to make best use of the skills and experience of workers throughout the service. Progress is ongoing in this area with regards to full joint ownership and the Agency is constantly looking for better ways to work together across the teams to provide the best service possible to our children, adopters and families.

For the past two years Adoption Now has commissioned a variety of online training from CVAA. Those workers who attend these events are then tasked with feeding the learning into their wider teams so that the benefit is spread across the service.

Adoption Now runs regular training for foster carers from the six Local Authorities and any external foster carers who are caring for the Local Authority's children on Moving Children On, with a particular focus on the relationship-based model used by Adoption Now. In addition, training is provided to foster carers before each Adoption Fun Day to prepare them and help them to prepare and support the children attending.

Training on the writing of Child Permanence Reports is offered regularly by Adoption Now throughout the year to Local Authority Social Workers responsible for writing these. Training regarding Early Permanence has previously been delivered by Adoption Now (sometimes alongside the Concurrency Team) but has not occurred over the last 6 month period. New Early Permanence Champions have been appointed within Adoption Now, and following a period of addressing processes within the service, they will shortly be ready to start rolling out some training/workshops to Local Authorities to help social workers and managers in particular to better understand the purpose, routes and processes.

Adoption Now recognises the need to further embed the modernisation of contact in adoption. Some staff members and managers attended a national conference in September on this subject where the enormity and complexity of the task was recognised, and further work is planned in the coming six months to skill up staff to better consider contact plans for children in the immediate and longer-term future.

Where there is opportunity for joint learning with counterparts regionally and nationally, these are regularly taken up particularly by the management team but also, as appropriate, by other workers within the service.

Work has been completed by the agency to improve documents relating to the matching of children with adopters. One form used to consider whether to formally proceed with a match, and looking at all aspects of what would be needed to achieve that has been brought into use during this half year. Training has been delivered regarding two further documents (Adoption Placement Report and Adoption Support Plan) has been delivered at the end of this 6 month period with a view to launching these in the coming months. It is anticipated that these will add further robustness to the thinking and planning around matches and new placements, as well as better informing adopters of any support they can expect once a specific child is in their care.

#### **14. Mentoring Service**

The mentoring service now has a total of 18 mentors. All of the mentors are adopters and between them offer a good spread of diversity in terms of ethnicity, sex, sexuality and family make up, although greater diversity with regards to ethnicity is always needed. The mentors primary focus remains on adopters who are being approved, through matching and into the earlier stages of children joining their family, however they also work alongside Adoption Support with some families are experiencing difficulties post adoption.

**Katrina Williams**  
**Interim Head of Service**  
**November 2023**