

**Annual Adoption Report**  
**Including data from**  
**1<sup>st</sup> October to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018**



**Executive Report**

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## **Introduction**

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

In the last half of the year there has been a significant change in the way that adoption services are delivered as Adoption Now went live on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2018. 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.

This report will reflect those changes. Data relating to children remains local data relating to Blackburn with Darwen children however, adoption support and recruitment data now covers the Region.

## **Adoption Agency Business - Children**

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

During the second half of the year 13 children were presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a Should Be Placed for Adoption decision (SHOBPA) compared to 21 children presented in the same period 12 months ago. This includes a sibling group of 2. In May a SHOBPA decision was reversed for siblings following a disruption of their adoptive placement and successful return to long term foster care which is now their plan for permanence.

Age of Children presented for SHOBPA Decision	
Under 12 months old	9 children
2 to 5 years	3 children
5 to 7	1 child

The age profile of the children presented is broadly similar to that of 12 months ago with the largest number being in the under 12 months age group though 12 months ago there were 6 children presented in the age 5 years plus age group.

Ethnicity of children presented for SHOBPA decision	
White British	11 children
Dual heritage African Bengali / Pakistan	1 child
Dual heritage White British / Asian	1 child

The ethnicity profile of the children presented has not changed in the last 12 months with the vast majority being white British.

### **Children Awaiting a Match**

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018, there were 14 children with a plan for adoption (subject to a placement order) awaiting placement compared to 23 children waiting on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017. In the last 4 years the number of children waiting has been as high as 38 (2013 /14) and as low as 13 (2015/16).

Nationally there has been a decrease in the number of children with placement orders awaiting placement by 4%.

There is a requirement to refer children waiting for placements to the Adoption Register (Adoption Match) within 3 months following the adoption decision should they not have a placement identified in this time. In the second half of the year Blackburn with Darwen referred 5 children to the register. Between the 6 Adoption Now local authorities 62 children were referred.

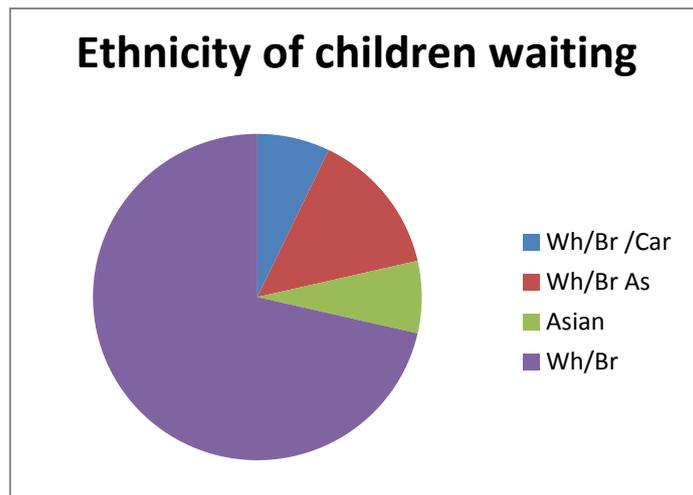
Blackburn with Darwen	5 children referred
Bolton	15 children referred
Bury	3 children referred
Oldham	8 children referred
Tameside	8 children referred
Rochdale	23 children referred

The low number referred by Blackburn with Darwen reflects that most children have an identified match within the 3 month period.

The number of approved adoptive families awaiting placements varied across the North West in the second half of the year. The six Adoption Now local authorities referred 12 adopters between them and 5 of these were referred by Blackburn with Darwen. These numbers are low because children are as far as possible matched with in house Adoption Now adopters and there is therefore little need to refer adopters to the register as they generally have children placed soon after approval.

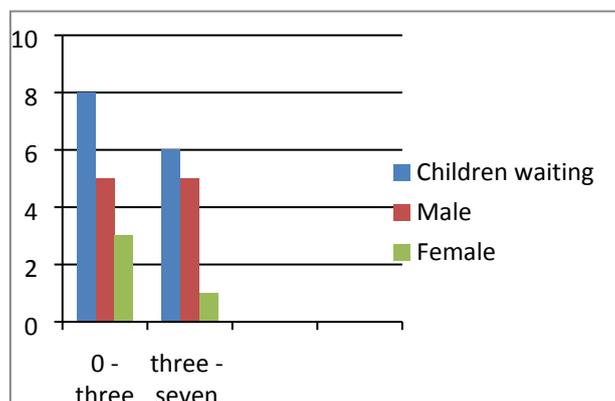
Two of the children waiting are part of a sibling group, the plan for all these children is to place them in single placements. Three of the children (including the sibling group of two) have experienced a disrupted adoption placement but are now being profiled again. Three of the children have additional needs and one of them is likely to be adopted by her foster carer.

Ten children are of white British heritage and one of Asian heritage. There are three children from mixed ethnicity backgrounds.



The ethnicity of children waiting is broadly similar compared to the same period in 2017 when the majority of children waiting were white British.

**Age and Gender of children waiting**



The age and gender profile of children waiting has changed slightly from that of 12 months ago when the largest group of children waiting were boys aged 5 plus. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 there were as many boys in the under 3 age group waiting as there were in the 3 to 7 age group. However, there are matches being considered for all of the younger children but at this stage not for the older children. Continued efforts to match them 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 an Activity day if this is appropriate for them. These run nationally and will also be run locally by Adoption Now in the coming months.

Of the children waiting 2 children came back into care following the disruption of their adoptive placement and one child was matched but didn't proceed because of issues that arose just before the start of introductions. One child has very complex health needs but an assessment of her foster carers who wish to adopt her has commenced. Another child had been matched and delay occurred as a result of adopters wanting further medical information.

**Family Finding Activity**

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches, especially within those local authorities and voluntary agencies which are now part of Adoption Now. The regional placement group meeting has been redesigned and continues to operate on a monthly basis to encourage matches with local voluntary adoption agencies. Link Maker continues to be a useful tool, and children are also placed immediately on Adoption Match once a placement order is made if there are no families able to be explored from within Adoption Now.

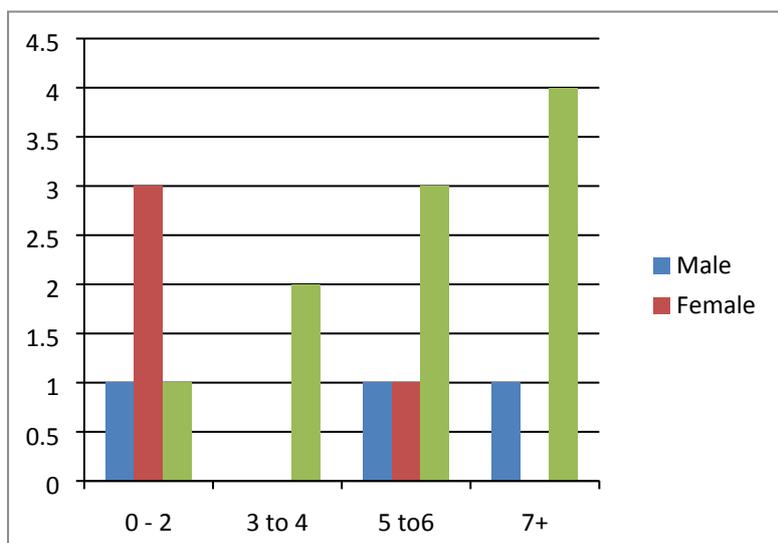
The development of Adoption Now means that families that would have been approved by the six local authorities are all part of the same organisation and are immediately available to Blackburn with Darwen's children. Since November when Adoption Now went live 45% of children matched have been with Adoption Now adopters. These placements do not incur an interagency fee.

**Children Placed for Adoption**

There have been an additional 7 children placed with adopters during the second half of the year bringing the total for the year to 22. In the same period last year 12 children were placed for adoption and the total for the year 2016/17 was 24.

There was a sibling group of 4 placed together which was a real achievement as finding families for large sibling groups is very difficult. There was also a sibling group of 2 placed and a single male child all of whom were 2 or under. All the children placed were of white British heritage.

Age and gender of children placed: -



One child was placed with RAA adopters and the others with other local authority adopters.

Of matches presented to panels in this half of the year there have been six involving 10 children (sibling group of 4, sibling group of 2, and four single children). Two of these were with concurrent carers which is a commissioned service that attracts an interagency fee. The sibling groups were both placed outside of the RAA due to lack of availability within the RAA, the other two will be placed with RAA adopters therefore not attracting an interagency fee.

The scorecard data for children placed and adopted within the year is as follows: -

<b>Measure</b>		<b>BwD average</b>
Placement Order to Matching (A2)	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	111
Child entering care starting adoption placement (A1)	Scorecard indicator – 426 days	457

These figures show that during the year timescales were met between placement order to matching and the indicator is slightly over the national average for the scale measuring entering care to placement with adopters. The Scorecard measures are not 'counted' until the year after an Adoption Order has been made, therefore these positive figures will not influence the published Scorecard results for some time yet.

### **Children Adopted**

In the second half of the year only 4 children were adopted taking the years total to 19. This is a decrease on the number of children adopted in 2016/17 when the total for the year was 34, 14 of these were in the second half of the year.

All four children met the scorecard timescales for A2 and one child was over timescale for A1. Three of these children were of white British heritage and one of dual heritage.

Two were aged 2, one aged 4 and one aged 5. They are three girls and a boy.

It is uncertain why the number of adoptions was low in the second half of the year however, there have been some court delays and a number of adoption orders made in the first part of the new financial year.

Most adoption orders have been made in a timely fashion despite birth parents requesting leave to contest on the majority of cases.

The indicators this year are extremely positive with improvements to A2 in particular. The three year average moves more slowly but both measures show improvements.

### **Adoption Disruption**

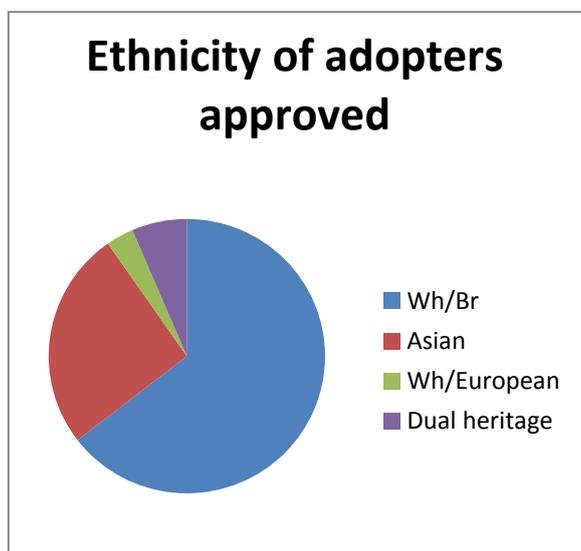
There have not been any disruptions in the second half of the year. In the first half there were two placements that broke down. In the first case the children were in placement for a very short time when the adopter decided that he no longer wished to parent and that he was finding it particularly difficult to bond with one of the children. In the other, the Department took the decision to remove the children after just a few weeks due to a series of significant concerns regarding the adopters honesty, openness, integrity and ability to offer safe and appropriate care to the children.

Disruption meetings have been held in respect of each of these and there was no criticism of the local authorities matching process.

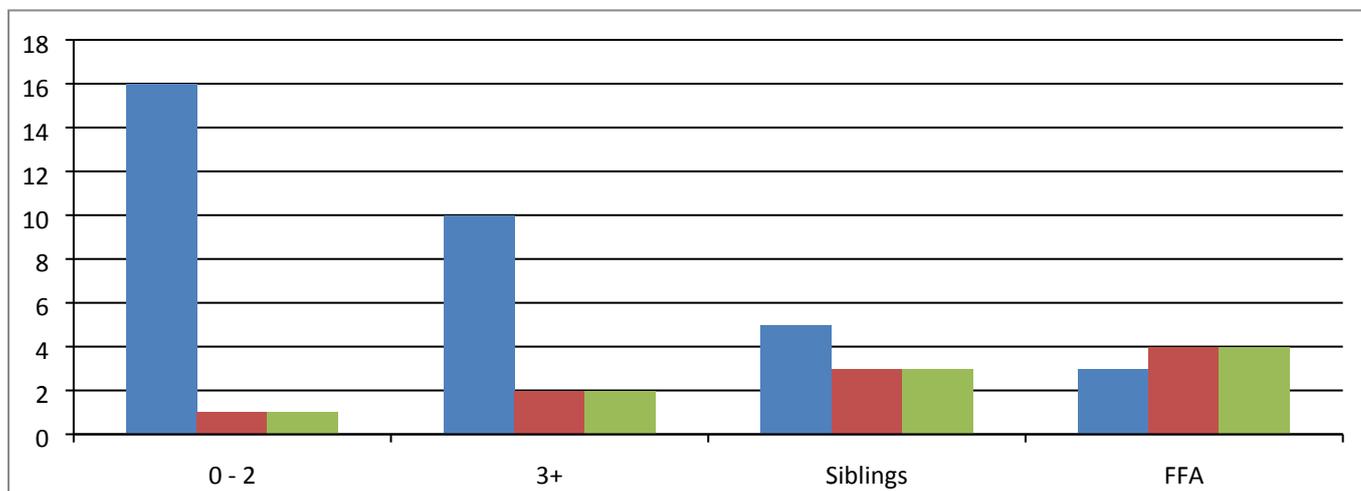
## Adoption Agency Business - Adopters

### Adopter Recruitment

Adopter recruitment transferred to Adoption Now from 20<sup>th</sup> November 2017. Recruitment of adopters now covers a much wider geographical area. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> November, 21 adoptive families have been approved by Adoption Now. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 there were 31 adoptive families approved and available for a variety of children. The ethnicity of adopters does broadly reflect the ethnicity of children available for adoption however there are insufficient numbers being approved to meet the needs of all children across the Regional Adoption Agency.



Sorts of children adopters wish to take



Most of the adopters waiting were approved within the previous six months however, some have waited for a placement and this has been for various reasons. Some Asian families have waited because they specifically want to adopt young babies and there have been a limited number available. Some of the dual heritage families have wanted to wait for a child who reflects their existing family rather than take a child from a different ethnicity. Other adopters had waited a while when they transferred to Adoption now and we do know that adopters who have already waited a good while tend to be viewed more suspiciously by family finders. We are working hard to find children to place with them.

Most adopters are still wishing to take young babies with few long term concerns in relation to their wellbeing. The need is to recruit more adopters who can offer homes to older children up to the age of eight

years old, those who can adopt brothers and sisters in groups of 2, 3 or 4 and those who can consider children with additional needs.

## **Recruitment Activity**

Nationally there is a shortage of adopters and numbers of children available are rising again as the looked after population nationally and locally rises. This happened shortly after many adopters had had to wait for long periods as a consequence of case law that changed the practise of the courts in terms of agreeing adoption plans for children. The message to the public was and still is to some extent that there are few young children available for adoption and that numbers have fallen significantly.

The recruitment strategy of Adoption Now has been to dispel this myth going live with a campaign that visibly showed with balloons how many children there were available in this area alone.

The new recruitment team will be fully staffed by early June 2018 and recruitment campaigns are scheduled three times per year with considerable presence at local events across the six local authority areas and beyond over the summer months.

The target is to increase numbers of adopters being approved by at least 20 families per year by the end of year 2.

A recruitment strategy and annual recruitment plan exists to support the need to recruit more adopters.

## **Adoption Panels**

The adoption panels are now run by Adoption Now and there is a panel at least weekly and when demand is high five times per month. One of the panels sits in Blackburn and the others in Rochdale and Bolton. The panels consider adopter approvals, matches and de registrations from all six local authorities. In all cases in the last six months, the panel recommendations were agreed by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

For every panel, panel members received the papers in sufficient time to enable them to read the papers thoroughly and in all Blackburn with Darwen cases they had received sufficient information to consider the case and reach a conclusion. The majority of reports in relation to matches and approvals were considered to be good or excellent. Support plans were found to be appropriate to the child's needs. Timescales for approvals and matches were considered and the panel were satisfied with the explanations provided regarding any delay.

The need to improve timeliness of adopter assessments is part of the annual development plan for that service area. There is also a need to be more consistent with the matching paperwork across the six local authorities and this is also a focus of improvement activity over the coming year.

There are three panel chairs who operate across the panels. Panel members from each of the six local authority areas were pooled and many have continued to service the newly arranged panels.

## **Adoption Agency Business – Adoption Support**

### **Training and Support to Adoptive Parents**

Preparation training for prospective adopters being assessed continues to run at least once a month across the region. Adoption Now facilitate these groups. In addition Adoption Now has run preparation groups for second time adopters twice as this enables them to consider the specific issues around bringing a second child into the family. This has received positive feedback from adopters attending.

The Adoption Service recognises the value of ongoing training and support for adopters at different stages in the adoption process and their child's/children's development, to prevent family breakdown in later years

and add quality of life to adoptive families. Post approval and post adoption training is now delivered by Adoption Now and is spread across the region.

During the last six months there has been a launch of adoption now which over 200 people attended from the region. There has also been training delivered for adoptive parents on e-safety, promoting positive attachments – theraplay and PACE, the developing brain and starting your adoptive family. In addition there have been coffee mornings, the continuation of a young people’s group called Club Awesome and the establishment of a new therapeutic toddler group to add to the ones already running (as these are very popular).

There is a plan to deliver more social type events and training in accordance with the wishes that adopters expressed at the launch event when they and young people were consulted about what they wished to see running in order to support them.

### **Post Adoption Support**

The adoption support team combines workers from across the six local authorities. Some staff had therapeutic training and there were also staff new to adoption support work. The team are based together in Bolton however, they continue to deliver services locally to where families live.

The benefits of becoming a much larger service are that it is easier to match a family’s needs with staff with the relevant skills, duty can be delivered on a daily basis so families can always get in touch if they need support and it is possible to run a wider variety of support groups and training events for adopters.

The Post Adoption Support Team provide a variety of services, including supporting birth parents, adoptive parents and children with contact arrangements; facilitate direct contact for a number of children with their birth families; provide an access to records service for adult adoptees; provide assessment of need and more individualised support to those adopted children and their families who are in greater need and respond to lower level queries with advice and one off support.

#### **Adoption support work**

Open cases	311
Assessments completed	40
Pre order support	11
Access to Records	56

All the assessments led to a service being provided and most resulted in applications to the Adoption Support Fund for therapeutic services.

On 31<sup>st</sup> March, a total of 311 cases were open to Post Adoption Support.

In addition, birth parent support is offered through surgeries that occur weekly in each of the six local authorities. If birth parents require additional support then they can be referred to After Adoption who are commissioned to provide that independent support.

### **Fast Track Adoption and Permanence Team**

The fast track psychologist sits within the Revive team which offers therapeutic and psychology services to Blackburn with Darwen children who are open to Children’s Services whether at a Child In Need, Child Protection or Child Looked After level. This includes children progressing with plans for adoption and other permanence plans. The Child Support Officer who was previously part of the Fast Track Team has been seconded to Adoption Now and she continues to be busy offering therapeutic support and advice to Blackburn with Darwen children and their carers.

### **Adoption Agency Business - Other**

#### **Non-agency adoptions**

There have been no adoption orders made in the last six months in relation to a step parent adoption.

### **Inter-country adoption**

Inter-country adoption services are rarely requested in Blackburn with Darwen but the Local Authority has a statutory obligation to provide or commission a service. The Borough remains part of a regional commission for inter-country adoption services provided by the Inter Country Adoption Centre.

### **Participation of Young People**

During the last six months, Adoption Now has consulted with a large group of young people at its launch event. Services being designed will be in line with their expressed wishes. Creative ways continue to be used to encourage participation from children who access post adoption support as well as those children who are awaiting adoption, especially, but not exclusively, those who are verbal.

### **Complaints**

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

In the last six months there have been three complaints all of which were resolved at Stage 1 of the complaints process. The complaints related to a contact issue, a process taking too long for adopters and an issue about a child's ISA. Over the full year there were 5 complaints in total.

### **Allegations**

There have been no allegations in the last six months.

### **Staffing**

Over the last 6 months the service has operated with a core team of eight full time equivalent social workers, one child support officer who works 32 hours per week, a deputy team manager and a team manager. These staff have now been seconded to Adoption Now and support a much larger service. There has been sickness affecting the staff group in the past six months and two staff have left. Some staff then made choices to move to different work areas and this created vacancies in the family finding and care planning work stream which was problematical when Adoption Now went live.

The service is now fully staffed again.

### **Budget**

A total of £212,760 was spent on placing children with outside agencies in the second half of the year, a slight reduction on the first half of the year. The total spent for the year over all is £502,094. Income from placements made with Blackburn with Darwen adopters has fallen in the second half of this year to £29,250 bringing the total income for the year to £196,250.

In the second half of the year £63,207 was spent on therapeutic support to adopted children. For the whole year this amounted to £74,036. In the second half of the year £14,959 was claimed back from the Post Adoption Support Fund to cover these costs bringing the total claimed for the year to £72,962. The £1,073 difference are costs incurred by match funding as the PASF now has a cap of £5,000 per child and any additional costs incurred have to be match funded by the local authority.

The operational budgets supporting adoption were transferred to Adoption Now and combined with the budgets from the other five local authorities in line with the agreed financial model. The model adopts a three stage approach over the short, medium and long term which allows for a gradual transition of resources from the Local Authorities to Adoption Now over a two and a half year period. Full establishment of the finance model is expected by April 2020.

## **Team Development**

Adoption Now hold fortnightly team meetings where staff learn together and develop practise. In addition there has been team building training in each of the work streams and training on access to records delivered by Coram BAAF. Training planned includes training in DDP, Non-violent resistance training, GDPR training and how it affects us in adoption and therapeutic life story work training. This is a benefit of the new regionalised approach in that pooled budgets allow for staff to be better equipped to manage children and families coping with transition and trauma.

A decision was made to reserve some 'set up' budget in order to skill staff up to meet the needs of families requiring support. This should prevent escalation of difficulties and enable staff to have a better understanding of the issues facing families to ensure the correct support is offered at the correct time.

## **Update on actions for the last 6 months**

**Action** – Gather and implement learning from the two placement disruptions following the disruption meetings.

Progress – disruption meetings took place and there were no major learning points for the Local Authority.

**Action** – Fully engage with the launch of Adoption NoW and adjust working accordingly.

Progress - Staff have been seconded to Adoption Now and the service has launched successfully.

**Action** – Create and implement electronic files for all areas of the adoption service, and fully implement all strands within Protocol consistently across Adoption NoW

The RAA IT system is in place and operational. There is still work to do with regards to ensuring it is used consistently by all staff.

**Action** – Work with Safeguarding colleagues and others to ensure that all appropriate systems and procedures are in place and are understood by all to ensure that good practice is not lost as the adoption service moves over to Adoption NoW.

A document exists to assist local authority staff to know who to contact in Adoption Now and when they should do so. Some staff remain in the Blackburn office and liaise continuously with safeguarding teams.

**Action** – Ensure the smooth handover of staff to new managers by completing joint supervisions in order to achieve continuity for staff well-being and for the cases that they hold.

Joint supervision did take place and staff are in their new teams,

**Action** – Transfer good practice with regards to Child/Young People Participation into Adoption NoW and ensuring that work with regards to incorporating their voice on panels is not lost – incorporate into the new panel member training and development programme.

Blackburn with Darwen's Participation Manager has attended a managers meeting at Adoption Now and progress will be made to ensure that Investors in children is awarded to the RAA. Young people were consulted prior to the RAA going live and have been consulted since at the launch event. Services are being designed on the basis of what they have told us they want.

A development plan exists within adoption now to ensure continuous improvements are made to the service.