

Half Year Adoption Report
Including data from
1st April to 30th September 2018

Executive Report



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 has been operational for almost 1 year and as a Regional Adoption Agency provides adoption services on behalf of six Local Authorities – Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside.

The 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 first half of the year, 11 children, including a sibling group of 4, were presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a Should Be Placed for Adoption decision (SHOBPA) decision. This is similar to the numbers in the previous year. All of those children are aged 5 years or under and all are white British. Four of these children are matched and placed, and another two have matches identified which are progressing. One child has significant health needs, and another requires ongoing therapeutic work before proceeding to match. One child is still mid proceedings and a Placement Order has yet to be made.

| Age of Children presented for SHOBPA Decision | |
|---|------------|
| Under 12 months old | 6 children |
| 2 to 5 years | 5 children |
| 5 to 7 years | 0 |

The age profile of the children presented is broadly similar to that of 12 months ago with regards to the predominance of younger children; however, it is important to ensure that adoption continues to be considered positively for older children.

The ethnicity profile of the children presented continues to show a predominance of white British children having a plan for adoption. It is unusual however for there to be no children from other ethnic backgrounds.

Children Awaiting a Match

On 30th September 2018, there were 15 children with a plan for adoption (subject to a placement order) awaiting placement which is a similar number to those waiting as of 31st March 2018. Of those waiting, there are six single older boys one of whom has experienced a disruption and has been separated from his siblings in the last six months. There are two sibling groups of two, one child whose foster carers are being assessed as adopters and one child with significant developmental delay. There are six of the fifteen children waiting with a match pending. 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).

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 first half of the year, Blackburn with Darwen referred 11 children to the register.

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Blackburn with Darwen | 11 children referred |
| Bolton | 3 children referred |
| Bury | 5 children referred |
| Oldham | 4 children referred |

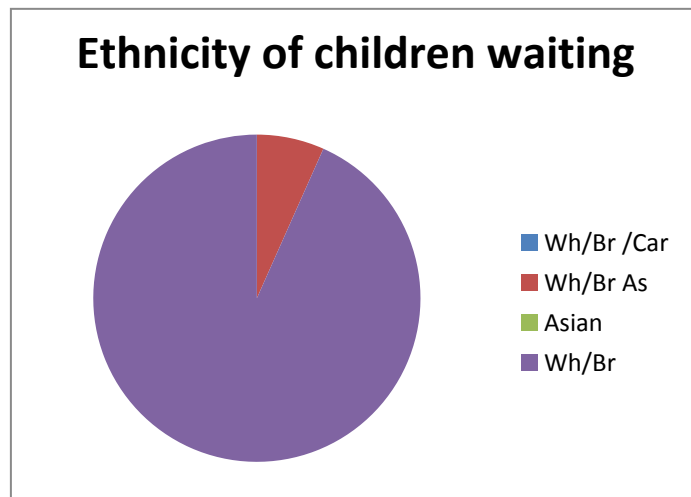
| | |
|----------|----------------------|
| Tameside | 6 children referred |
| Rochdale | 32 children referred |

The numbers referred by Blackburn with Darwen is reasonably high reflecting the fact that some children have waited for a match beyond the three month period. The number includes two sibling groups of two and seven single children.

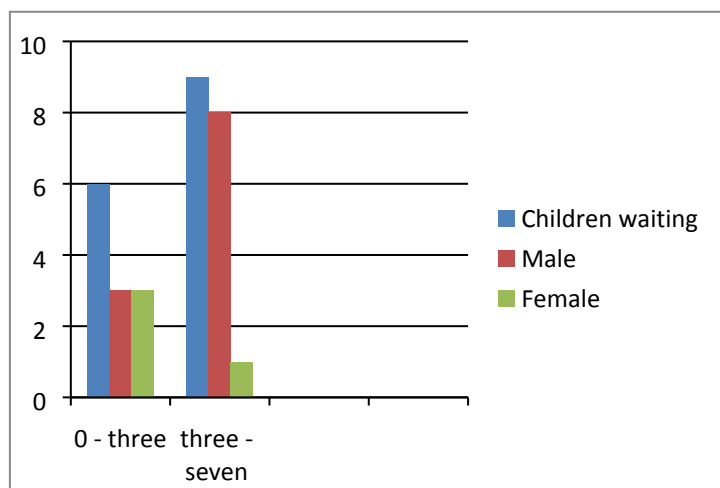
The number of approved adoptive families awaiting placements varied across the North West in the second half of the year. The six Adoption NoW local authorities have five families on the register three of whom live in the Blackburn with Darwen area.. These numbers are low because children are as far 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.

Four of the children waiting have experienced a disruption. There are three boys over the age of five years and one female baby whose prospective adopter was sadly diagnosed with cancer very shortly after placement.

One of the children waiting is of dual heritage and the rest are white British. It is quite unusual for there to be a such a predominance of white British children.



Age and Gender of children waiting



The age and gender profile of children waiting has changed slightly from the end of 2017/18 with a return to a predominance of older boys waiting. There are matches being considered for all but one of the younger children and the one without a potential match has uncertainties around future health and development. 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 twice per year. Several Blackburn children were profiled at the recent Activity Day including two of the older boys and two sibling groups of two.

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.

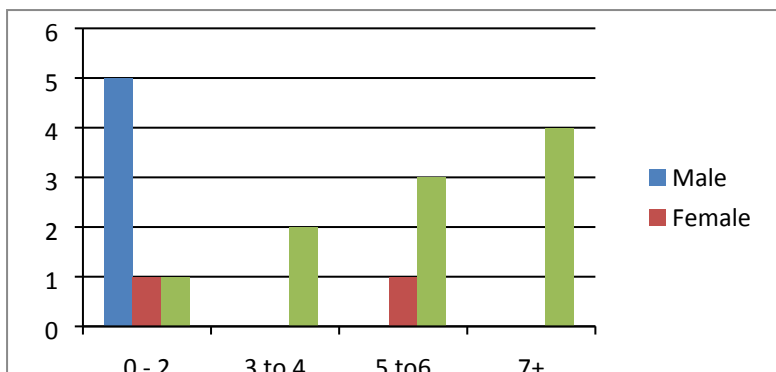
The development of Adoption NoW means that families that would have been approved by the six local authorities are all part of the same organisation and are immediately available to Blackburn with Darwen’s children. In the first half of the year, 87% of children matched have been with Adoption NoW adopters (six out of seven). These placements do not incur an interagency fee.

Children Placed for Adoption

There have been 7 children placed with adopters in the first half of the year. This number is lower than usual in a six month period, although there are another five children about to be matched and placed with adopters.

Five of the children placed were of white British heritage, one of British / Caribbean heritage and 1 child of other than white British heritage.

Age and gender of children placed: -



Six out of seven children were placed with RAA adopters and the other child with other local authority adopters.

15 children were presented to panels for matching in this half of the year. Four of these were with concurrent or fostering for adoption carers. Of those matches presented to panel, 60% met the A1 target and 47% the A2 target. Two were judged by panel to be very good, eight were good and five were satisfactory.

The scorecard data for children placed and adopted within this six month period is as follows : -

| Measure | | BwD average |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| Placement Order to Matching (A2) | Scorecard Indicator - 121 days | 111 |
| Child entering care to 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 first half of the year, 12 children were adopted.

11 children met the scorecard timescales for A2 and 9 met the A2 timescales with two being slightly (by 4 days) over timescale. All but one of the children adopted are white British; the other is mixed heritage white Asian.

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

Adoption Disruption

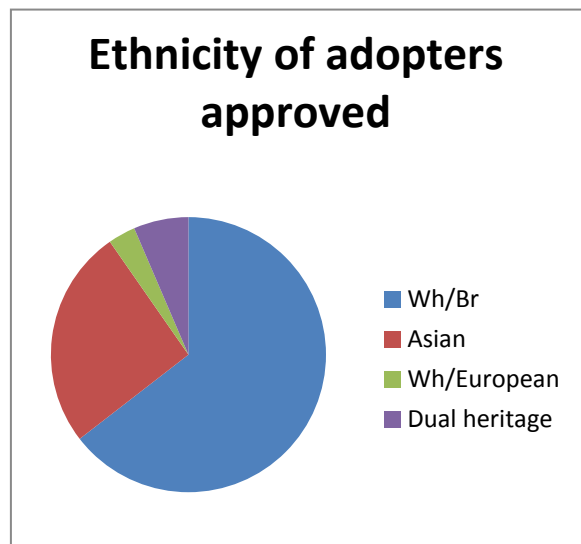
There has been one disruption in the first half of the year. Within a couple of weeks of placement, an adopter was diagnosed with cancer. The baby girl returned to her previous foster carer at the request of the adopters and is about to be placed again with new adopters.

A disruption meeting is being arranged.

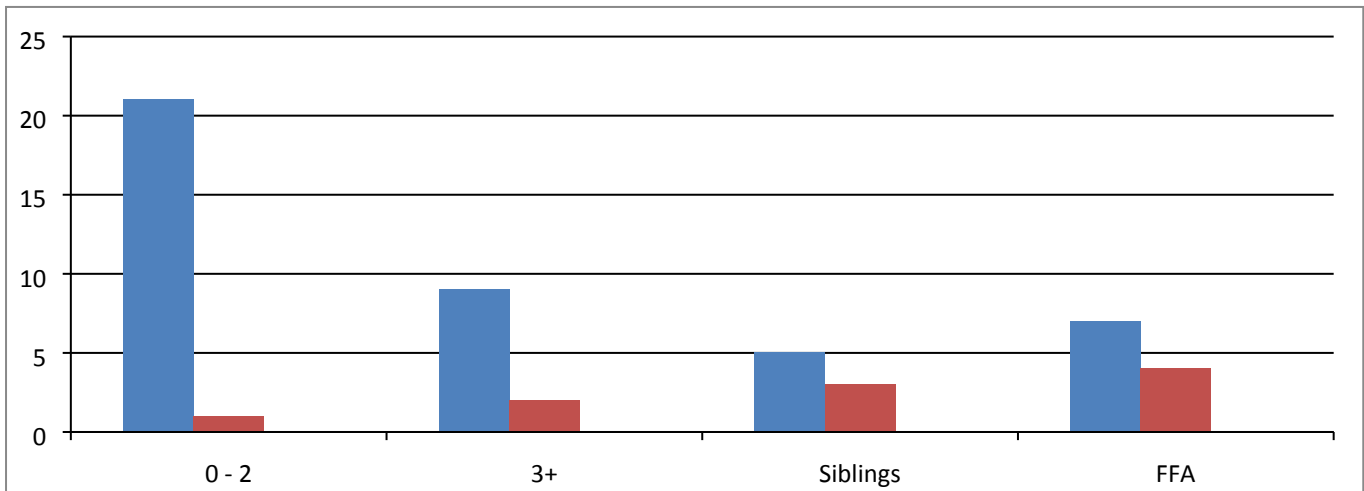
Adoption Agency Business - Adopters

Adopter Recruitment

Adopter recruitment transferred to Adoption NoW from 20th November 2017. Recruitment of adopters now covers a much wider geographical area. Since the 20th November 2017, 67 adoptive families have been approved by Adoption NoW. As of 30th September, there were 30 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. Sixteen families have waited for at least 6 months 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.

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.

There are increasing numbers of adopters enquiring and as of 30th September there were 54 sets of adopters within the assessment process. 34 at stage 1 and 13 at stage 2 with some awaiting approval at panel.

The target number of adopters being approved has risen to 100 for the financial year 2018/19.

There are timescales for the approval of adopters and as of the end of Quarter two, 71% of all approvals were within timescale. For the majority outside of the timescales, the delays were adopter led although in some cases delays in receiving statutory checks has been the cause of the delay.

40 families were approved at panel in the first six months of the year.

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 became fully staffed in June 2018 and recruitment campaigns have significantly increased in that timescale with attendance at 14 local events across the six local authority areas and beyond over the summer months, bill board campaigns, bus campaigns, a radio campaign and significant

social media advertising. Early signs are that this activity has increased enquiries from prospective adopters.

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

Adoption Panels

The adoption panels are all 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.

A six month panel report has been compiled by the independent chairs of the 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 – therapy 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 is based together in Bolton; however, it continues 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 provides a variety of services including supporting birth parents, adoptive parents and children with contact arrangements, facilitating direct contact for a number of children with their birth families, providing an access to records service for adult adoptees, and providing 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

| | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Total open cases | 401 |
| Assessments completed | 39 |
| Support cases open | 325 |
| Access to Records | 76 |

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

Total monies applied for from the ASF in this period is £347,743 and it supports adopters as follows:-

| Local Authority. | Number of children receiving funding for therapeutic support. | Pre-Adoption Order | Total |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------|-------|
| Blackburn with Darwen | 21 | 2 | 23 |
| Bolton | 23 | 4 | 25 |
| Bury | 26 | 2 | 28 |
| Tameside | 35 | 4 | 39 |
| Oldham | 19 | 0 | 19 |
| Rochdale | 46 | 3 | 49 |

This money provides a variety of therapeutic interventions including Specialist psychological assessments, psychotherapy, therapeutic parenting programmes, attachment focussed parenting programmes, DDP, play therapy, theraplay, sensory processing integration therapy, therapeutic life story work, art therapy, drama therapy, EMDR, safebase programmes and After adoption camps.

On 31st March, a total of 401 cases were open to Post Adoption Support. This is a significant increase from the 311 open as of 31st March 2017.

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 children and young people at its launch event in May. Services being designed are 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.

A survey is planned as we approach the 1 year anniversary of Adoption NoW and smaller groups have run to continue to ascertain the views of adopters and young people.

Complaints

Neither Adoption NoW nor Children's Services have received any complaint in relation to Blackburn with Darwen children or families.

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 are now seconded to Adoption NoW and support a much larger service.

The Service is fully staffed at present, although two workers have requested that they go part time so a full time post will be advertised in recruitment and assessment.

Budget

Net expenditure of £147,000 was incurred during the first half of the year, both on placing children with outside agencies and on regular adoption allowances. This is a reduction on the equivalent six month period from 2017/18 when expenditure was £200,792. Expenditure has reduced because Adoption NoW is more able to place children in house.

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

The operational budgets supporting adoption were transferred to Adoption NoW and combined with the budgets from the other five local authorities.

At the six month stage, there has been £220,000 income generated from adopter inter agency fees and the operational side of the budget is currently predicting some underspend. There are costs associated with posts in the RAA that had no budget line to support them; however, these are more than covered by the income being generated.

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. In the last six months, there has been a two day course on therapeutic life story work run by Richard Rose, panel annual training and training in GDPR. Further training is planned for the coming six months including training in DDP, non violent resistance training, attachment based assessments and foetal alcohol syndrome. 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 – Transfer good practice with regards to Child/Young People Participation into Adoption NoW and ensure 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 manager's 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.