

adoption counts



Salford City Council



MANCHESTER Adoption Service – Annual Report 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Report

This report fulfils the obligations in Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002 to report to the “executive side” of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in the report below.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of **31 March 2023**. Plans for children are dynamic and develop every day and the picture will have changed at the point that this report is read.

2. Working with Manchester Council

Since going live in 2017, Adoption Counts has undertaken to discharge Manchester’s responsibilities as an Adoption Agency. The working relationship between the local authority (LA) and the RAA (Regional Adoption Agency) has been fundamental to the success so far of the partnership working. Established processes in maintaining good working relationships and communication is necessary. The Deputy Strategic Director sits as a member of the Adoption Counts Board. The Assistant Director who is ADM for adoption is a member of the six weekly Operations Group meetings chaired by the Head of Service of Adoption Counts, this provides an opportunity for operational issues to be raised and shared with equivalent managers from our other partner local authorities and with the senior managers in the RAA. ADM Manchester meets regularly with the Operations Manager and Team Managers who cover family finding for Manchester children. This communication ensures a shared ownership of the agenda, whereby a range of issues are discussed with positive communication and outcomes for children as a result. This meeting is a two-way dialogue, with Manchester ensuring that the RAA is fulfilling its responsibilities as well as the RAA being able to offer feedback about any emerging themes or issues in care planning for children.

Team Managers liaise with Case Progression Managers to feed into the permanence planning for younger cared for children in Manchester with a potential plan of adoption. Adoption Counts holds monthly children’s tracking meetings when requested focussing on timeliness of achieving permanence through adoption, there is always the opportunity for Service Managers from Manchester to join the tracking meetings. Adoption Counts recognises the importance of maintaining positive working relationships with our Manchester colleagues and continues in working with the senior management team offering advice, guidance, and support in relation to any adoption related issues.

The Adoption Counts tracking meetings focus upon:

- Children now adopted to ensure that life story books and later life letters are received
- Children placed for adoption but not yet adopted to track the progress of placements and the timeliness of adoption order applications
- Children where a family has been identified to ensure that there is no avoidable delay in the shortlisting and matching process and through into the planning of introductions and placement

- Children subject to a Placement Order where a family has not yet been identified. These children are discussed to ensure that the family finding strategy is being carried out effectively and is the forum for escalation of agreements regarding family finding within the RAA, other LAs or in the voluntary sector.
- Children in care proceedings where there may be a plan of adoption as their final care plan. These children are tracked closely both in the LA and the RAA to ensure that there is timely progression of the plan from Agency Decision that they Should Be Placed for Adoption, through profiling and the identification of a family.
- Children under the Public Law Outline where there may be a plan of adoption should care proceedings be initiated.

The RAA tracking meeting enables any children whereby drift and delay in care planning for adoption are escalated and discussed with Manchester managers. This can range from children adopted but with no life story work or later in life letter, to children waiting for care planning decisions to be implemented and is also used to provide updates about children for whom family finding has not been successful and these children wait longer for a permanent family.

As of 31 March 2023, we were tracking the plans for 167 children on Adoption Counts tracker. These meetings are productive when care planning feedback is received from the local authority verbally or on the recording system as this ensures a robust joint approach. We are continuing to track children where later in life letters and/or life story books are outstanding.

The team manager in the RAA linked to Manchester attends the monthly tracking meetings and she, alongside the family finders, are based in one of the Manchester offices (South) alongside some of the social work teams, they attend legal gateway meetings and final care planning meetings to provide advice and a view where required on adoption.

Priorities for Manchester's children over this reporting period were highlighted as CPR (Childs Permanence Report) quality to be improved including evidence of all connected carers to the child having been ruled out as potential permanent carers. Later Life Letters followed up in a timely way, early permanence training package to be introduced to Manchester social workers. Also high on the agenda, Black Adopter Recruitment, and Race and ethnicity training rolled out to prospective adopters.

Update on Priorities

- **More rigorous challenge around children's family members and connected persons being ruled out as potential carers for a child at an earlier stage in care proceedings.**

There is an improvement in social workers ruling out connected carers prior to FCPM. Practice in planning for children needs a constant focus as when a child's plan for SHOPBA decision leads to a deferral to allow time for extended family to be contacted and considered, this leads to unnecessary delay for the child. There is evidenced improvement in genograms in the CPR being more extensive, this needs to continue for each child.

- **Quality of CPR's to be incrementally improved with support from family finding social workers prior to SHOBPA.**

The completion of good quality, child centred CPRs is an ongoing piece of work within the children's teams. Family finding social workers offer an initial audit of the CPR prior to the child being presented to SHOBPA, then a final audit takes place by the AC team manager. This is shared with the social workers and FF's once SHOBPA has taken place and is reviewed by the family finders prior to matching panel.

The aim is to have work from the audits completed prior to SHOBPA therefore an updated process re: timescales of CPR's to be submitted to be considered. The quality of CPRs continues to be a focus in relation to support offered to social workers on an ongoing basis considering the churn of staff in some of the children's teams.

- **Early Permanence (EP) Planning for children and unborn children to be supported with regular and updated training.**

Family Finding social workers are available to discuss early permanence planning for children in each locality and this is advertised each month re: availability.

AC Team Managers have the opportunity to meet with Case Progression managers regarding children with a plan or potential plan of adoption to consider EP. This includes early allocation to family finders of unborn children who potentially may have a plan of adoption. Training from EP workers from AC for children's social workers in relation to early permanence care planning is available also.

There is an opportunity for early permanence for children to be discussed at legal gateway also and children and unborn children to be allocated to a family finder at this point if early permanence is a potential option.

- **Life Story Books and Later in Life Letters for children who have joined an adoptive family - backlog to be addressed.**

Current figures are as follows (September 2023):

South Locality - 6 later life letters and 5 life story books outstanding.

Central Locality - 13 later life letters and 13 life story books outstanding.

North Locality - 4 later life letters and 4 life story books.

This is a significant improvement from last years annual report and the trend continues to reduce which is positive.

FF social workers offer **training** opportunities to social workers and can provide examples of templates for LSB's and LLLs to ensure good quality narrative regarding a child's life.

- **Focus on recruitment within the Adoption Counts Sufficiency Plan of adopters from a Black or mixed ethnicity heritage for children who wait longer of the same heritage.**

This is covered in 5.6 Marketing and Recruitment Campaigns

- **Ensure the diversity of the Agency's Panel Central List members to be more representative of the children being matched.**

The Panel Advisor continues to ensure we recruit representatives from a diverse background to the Adoption Panel Central list who represent the children from within the LA's adopters.

- **Thematic review of those children who wait over 12 months for an adoptive family.**

The thematic review focused on children who wait longer to achieve a permanence plan through adoption Four of the five children considered had been subject to plans for non-agency adoption by foster carers. Whilst for three of these children the initial request was supported by the local authority, the assessments of two foster carers were concluded negatively. In addition, there is evidence of delay in respect of understanding the approach to non-agency between both CSC and Adoption Counts. This lack of knowledge and the lack of formal escalation resulted in delays for children.

Interface with Fostering Service on when foster carers are being assessed as an adopter with a focus on timely support and intervention with clarity in respect of roles and responsibilities.

Performance

3.1 Children made Subject to Should be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decisions.

Number of children made subject to SHOBPA decisions per month							
Manchester	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	
	5	3	6	7	3	5	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total

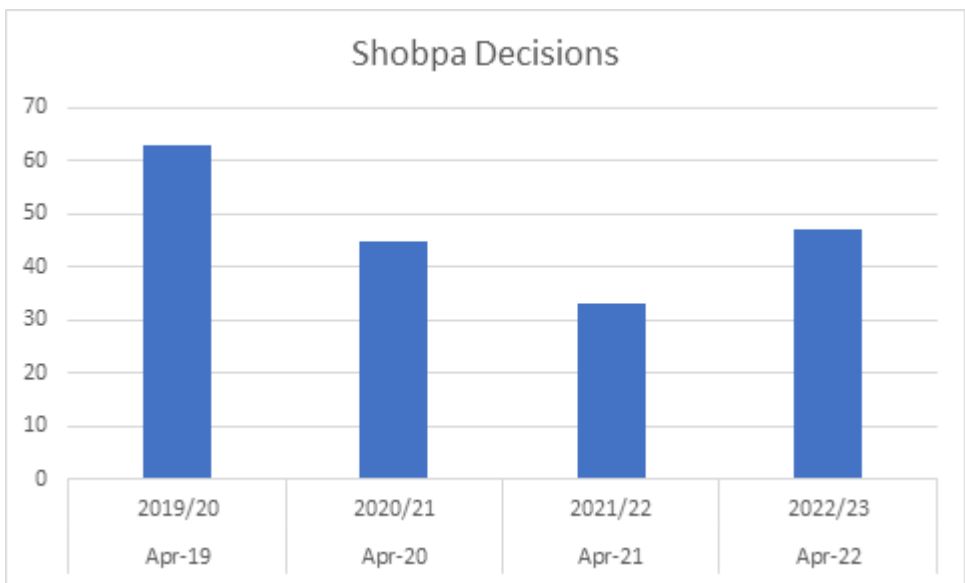
	5	1	3	2	4	3	47
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The decision that adoption would be in the child’s best interest was made following the local authorities final care planning meeting (FCPM) with all other permanence options for the child being ruled out.

Thirteen of these children are in sibling groups. (5 sibling pairss and one sibling group of 3).

Seven children were placed in a FFA (fostering for adoption) placement.

The number of SHOBPA decisions agreed as part of the children’s care plan in this period has risen by 42% YOY.



3.2 Children subject to Placement Orders

Number of children made subject to Placement Orders per month							
Manchester	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	
	1	2	4	4	2	7	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
	2	7	3	2	2	2	38

Thirty-Two of the children who were granted Placement Orders (PO’s) within the period have subsequently been placed with their adoptive families, including five sibling groups of two.

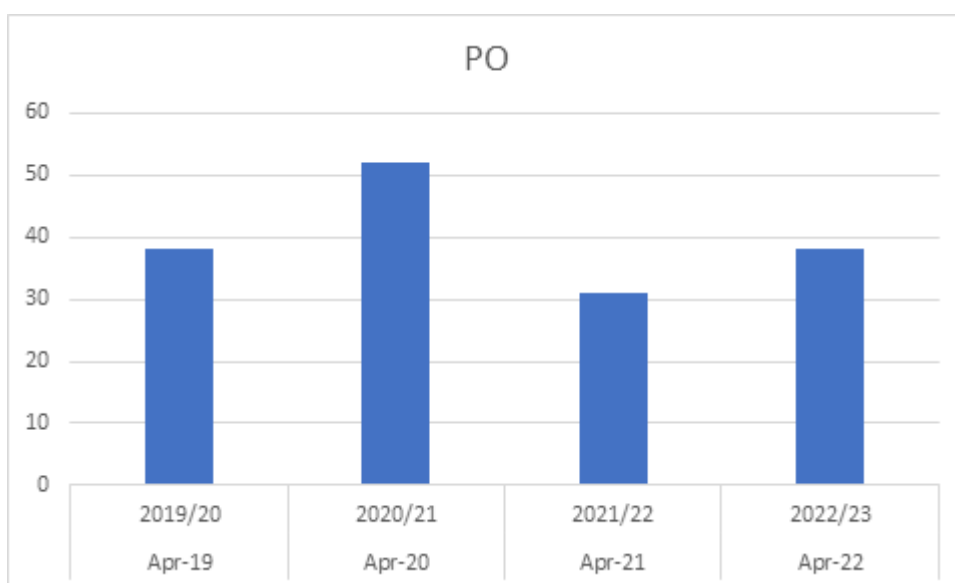
Nineteen (59%) of these children were placed with families within the A2 threshold of 121 days, the length of time from Placement Order to having a match approved by the ADM.

Thirteen (41%) of children were placed outside the A2 threshold:

Date of Placement Order	A2 – days from Placement Order granted to match	Comments
05/07/2022	210	This 6-year-old was matched with his family 89 days over the A2 121 threshold. They can be considered as a child who waits longer as a boy who is older.
18/5/2022	139	Two brothers who were 18 days outside the A2 threshold of 121 days. The boys joined an inter-agency adoptive family. Potentially these boys could have been considered as children who wait longer as a sibling group of boys, one child has been diagnosed with autism and they are of far Eastern heritage.
18/11/2022	123	This child was only two days above the A2 121 days threshold.
05/07/2022	210	Agency decision to adopt was made in Dec 2021. In February 2022 paternal aunt was assessed however, disengaged. May 22 foster carer expressed their wish to be assessed as adopters. They then had to go through the adoption approval process before the match was agreed at Panel in February 2023.
13/09/2022	164	This child's adoption plan was agreed 43 days over the A2 threshold however, she was previously cared for by her carers on a Foster for Adoption arrangement so there has been no move for the child.
28/07/2022	221	Prospective adopter withdrew from the match December 2022 following panel and before ADM. Further match agreed February 2023
01/06/2022	250	November 2022, adopters withdrew from potential match as updated information received re: siblings' diagnosis of ASD. Further match agreed February 2023.
06/10/2022	147	This child's match was agreed 26 days over the A2 threshold. They are of Black African and White British heritage and could be considered as a child who may typically wait longer.

29/06/2022	176	Foster carers being assessed as prospective adopters, however, withdrew October 2022. This impacted on A2 figure
15/12/2022	134	These siblings were only 13 days above the A2 threshold of 121 days.
14/09/22	239	This child was granted a placement order with a plan to place with their siblings' adopters. These adopters needed to be re assessed and were not approved until February 2023.

There has been a 23% increase in the number of Placement Orders for Manchester children compared to last year, but the figures are still not as high as 20/21.

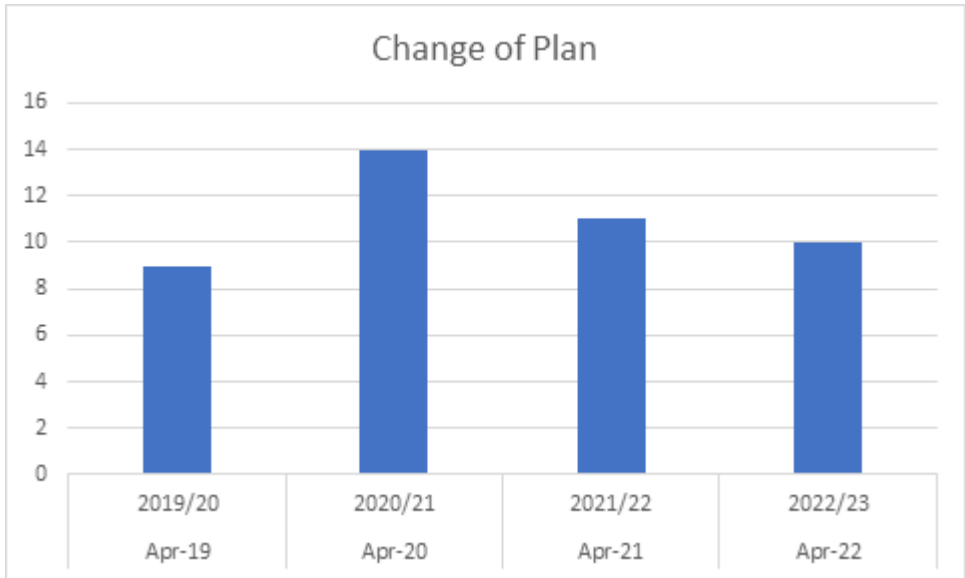


3.3 The Numbers of Children who had a Change of Plan in the Period

There were 10 children who had a change of care plan, including two sibling groups of 2.

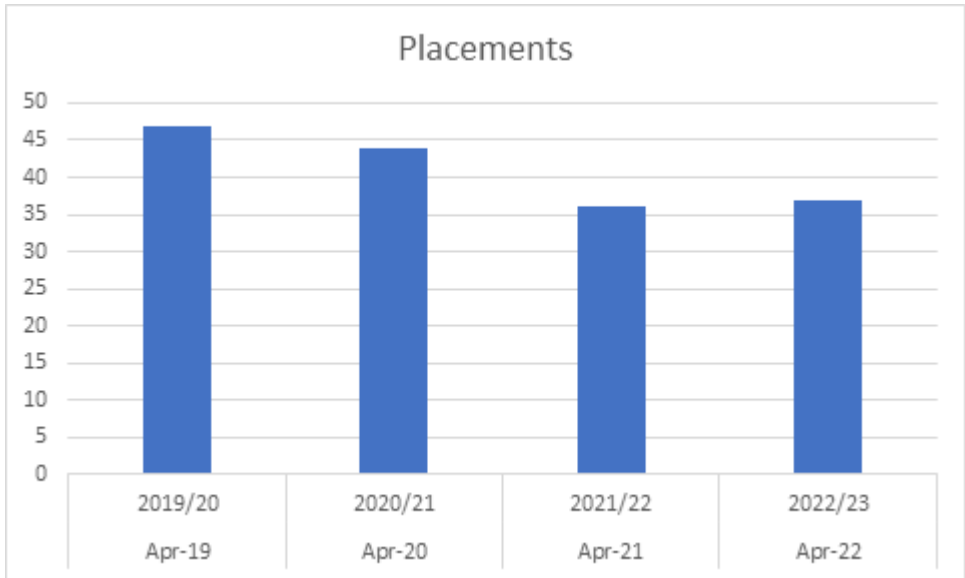
- 4 children had a change of care plan and returned to birth parents
- 3 children had a change of care plan to long term foster care
- 2 children had an SGO granted to their aunt and uncle
- 1 child had an SGO granted to their foster carer

There are 9% less children who have had a change of plan compared to last year.



3.5 Number of Children Placed for Adoption during period.

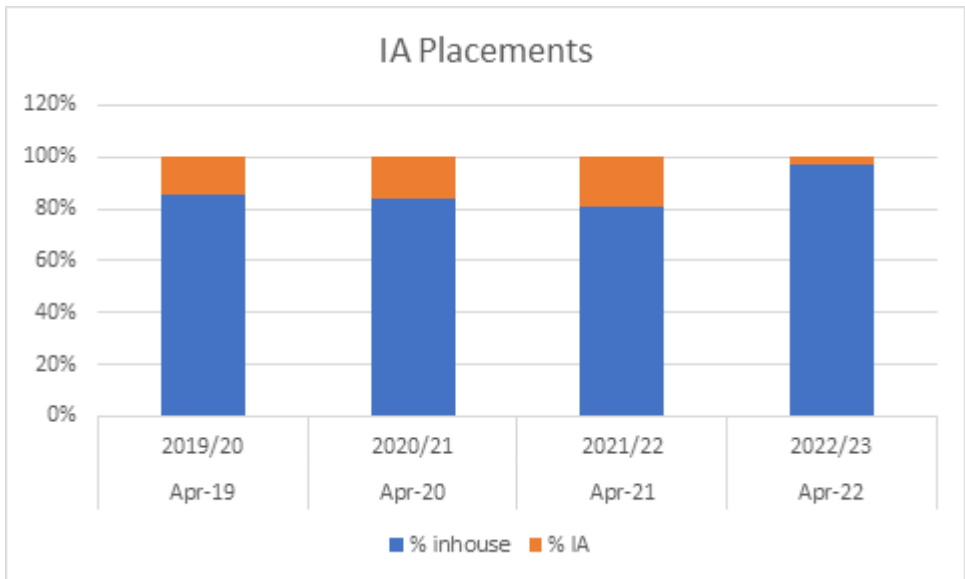
Number of children placed for adoption per month							
Manchester	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	
	3	3	0	4	1	4	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
	2	3	3	6	3	5	37



Placements were up just 3% compared to last year.

Thirty-six children (97%) were placed with Adoption Counts adopters and just one was placed with interagency adopters.

7 children were placed inter agency in 2021-2022 and the in-house percentage for the period was 81%.



For the 37 children placed for adoption during this period, the average A10 measure (days from child entering care to being placed for adoption) is 477 days (51 days over the threshold) and the A2 figure (days from Placement Order being granted to a match being found) is 137 days (15 days over the threshold). The national average for A10 and A2 timings in this period were 480 days and 197 days so we performed better than the national average on both these timings. This was impacted by two children with timings of 874 days and 920 days. If we take these figures out the A10 timing goes down by 19 days to 453.

Nineteen children placed with adoptive parents were above the A10 threshold of 426 days. This included two sibling pairs.

Sixteen of the children were placed above the A2 threshold of 121 days.

Placed in adoptive Placement	A10 – days from Child entering care to Placement	A2 – days from Placement Order granted to match	Comments
28/04/2022	874	143	Court dates were delayed whilst awaiting birth of sibling, ongoing assessments, and birth parent appeals. A2 figure 22 days above the threshold of 121 days.
05/09/2022	920	546	First adoptive placement disrupted after 9 months. They were subsequently placed again with a new family in August 2023. This has impacted significantly on the A2 figure.
13/04/2022	579	212	Connected persons assessment of grandma during proceedings, who then withdrew, impacted on the A10 figure. Foster carers then explored adoption allowances prior to being assessed as adopters, impacting on A2 figure.
11/07/2022	725	94	Siblings – one had Shobpa delayed whilst ISW assessment of grandmother was ordered by the Court.
11/07/2022	518	94	Once the placement orders were granted they were matched with adopters below the A2 threshold which was positive.
02/09/2022	515	72	SHOBPA delayed due to birth father being identified. The final hearing was then delayed due to other family members being explored. Child went on to be matched with adopters below the A2 threshold.
02/11/2022	651	139	These siblings had family in Far East being assessed. The assessment was negative and the international element impacted on timescales.
31/08/2022	439	301	Foster carer raised concerns regarding child's needs and adopters requested a delay to placement until medical needs were confirmed. Also, consideration of sibling's adopters was also pursued. These impacted on the A2 threshold.

29/03/2023	477	221	Adopter withdrew prior to ADM decision following matching Panel, therefore family finding had to resume for a second time.
06/02/2023	563	62	A10 - Family of older siblings wished to adopt this child however, this did not progress. Court ordered that birth father be located. Both impacted on A10 figure. Child was matched below the A2 threshold of 121 days.
12/01/2023	575	85	Paternal grandmother assessment did not progress. Court ordered birth father be located re: DNA test. Both these issues impacted on Court proceedings. One Placement Order was granted child was matched below the A2 threshold of 121 days.
03/03/2023	557	250	A10 SHOBPA delayed as child had been very poorly with meningitis. A2 impacted as siblings' adopters approached however, due to father being assessed as high risk an interagency adoptive placement was sought.
24/02/2023	549	164	This child was placed in a foster for adoption placement in Aug 2022. A10 impacted awaiting birth father DNA being confirmed then paternal grandmother assessment which was negative. Delay in Court due to Guardian sickness. Child was 43 days above the A2 threshold.
31/01/2023	735	210	A10 – Siblings - Assessment of aunt did not progress as she disengaged. Adoption Psychology involved re: assessment of whether the siblings could live together. Contested final hearing. A2 – Foster carers were assessed as adopters impacting on timeliness.
31/01/2023	734	210	
23/01/2023	444	176	A10 Birth father not able to be engaged. Paternity not confirmed until April 2022. Foster Carer initially requested to be assessed as adopter, however, this did not progress and the LA did not agree, impacting on A2 figure.

15/03/2023	677	147	A10 impacted by grandparents being assessed however, negative outcome. Child was 26 days over the A2 threshold.
01/09/2022	435	110	Child was below the A2 threshold and 9 days over the A10 threshold.
28/04/2022	351	143	Court hearings delayed due to unborn sibling and plans to be considered for the siblings. A2 was 75 days over the A10 threshold birth father appealed which delayed introductions to adoptive family.
27/05/2022	332	177	A2 Adopters of sister's older siblings wanted to be assessed.
25/07/2022	395	173	A2 above the threshold due to consideration of unborn sibling and plans to be together or apart in an adoptive home. Child could be considered as a child who would wait longer as their ethnicity is unknown and potential FAS.

Manchester and Adoption Counts will ensure opportunities to secure legal permanence for children via adoption are considered at the earliest opportunity by monitoring the A10 and A2 figures.

3.6 Number of children adopted.

Number of children made subject to Adoption Orders per month							
Manchester	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	
	2	6	1	3	3	1	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
	3	4	2	0	5	6	36

For the 36 children adopted, the average number of days for A10 is 611 which is 185 days above the threshold.

Twenty-six children were outside the threshold including three children with A10 figures of 1163, 1309 and 1043 respectively. Taking these children out the A10 figure would reduce by 53 days to 558.

The average A2 figure for these children is 155 which is 34 days above the threshold, but 42 days under the national average. Twenty-Two children were outside the threshold including one whose A2 figure was 364 days.

Date Adoption Order Granted	A10 – days from Child entering care to Placement	A2 – days from Placement Order granted to match	Comments
21/02/23	1163	65	A2 figures well below the 121-day threshold.
21/02/23	1309	65	A10 above the 426 thresholds. Birth mother applied to revoke the care order which caused a delay in care proceedings.
22/04/22	859	215	A10 – Children are British Black Caribbean which would make them children who wait longer for an adoption match. Interagency agreement obtained and children placed with interagency adopters.
03/10/23	537	111	A2 figure below the A2 threshold A10 Court adjourned due to contested final hearing re: placement order. Child returned to live with mother on a care order. Sibling born during this time. Following child sustaining an injury a foster for adoption placement was identified.
05/05/22	1043	364	This child had two failed adoptions prior to joining his adoptive family, this accounts for the high A2 and A10 figures.
30/05/22	841	146	A2 25 days above threshold of 121 days. A10 Court proceedings recommended adoption then aunt came forward for assessment. This was positive however she lacked commitment to the child and agreed contact arrangements. Court re-timetabled due to Covid. Child was matched with interagency adopters.

25/07/22	680	185	<p>A10 – Initially lived with mother in a parent and child foster home. Care plan was to remain with mother.</p> <p>Plan changed as mothers care of child deteriorated and SHOBPA then agreed.</p> <p>Genetic testing was outstanding therefore uncertainty of their needs for matching.</p> <p>Final hearing delayed. Connected carers ruled out.</p> <p>Interagency funding agreed and a single adopter identified; however, this did not go ahead as adopter pulled out due to uncertainty.</p>
13/05/22	479	263	<p>Genetic testing confirmed micro deletion which would make them a child who would wait longer for adoption.</p> <p>Moved foster carers whilst family finding at the request of the initial foster carer.</p> <p>No in house links found initially but an interagency placement was identified in July 2020. This did not go ahead due to child's needs.</p> <p>Matched with adoption counts adopters.</p>
10/12/2021	704	245	<p>Child of Black African ethnicity which would make them a child who could wait longer.</p> <p>Connected persons assessments completed and it was agreed child would be cared by their grandmother however, she did not fully engage.</p> <p>Birth mother appealed to the Court as she did not want child to have immunisations.</p> <p>Delay in Court also due to Covid restrictions.</p> <p>Child went on to be matched with interagency adopters.</p>
19/10/2021	823	139	<p>A2 18 days above threshold of 121 days.</p> <p>A10 Court Delay due to covid and then Finding of Fact could not be completed virtually.</p> <p>Birth father requested further drug tests therefore proceedings delayed.</p>

03/06/2021	720	145	<p>A10 Court timetable delayed as grandmother put forward for assessment then mother in hospital.</p> <p>Mother then requested ISW assessment.</p> <p>Grandmother withdrew from assessment.</p> <p>A2 24 days over threshold which is positive.</p>
28/04/2022	874	143	<p>A10 Parent and baby placement, parenting course delayed because of Covid.</p> <p>Impact of Covid assessments not completed as needed a translator. Extension of Court proceedings agreed.</p> <p>Immigration status of birth mother needed clarifying.</p> <p>Child of Eastern European heritage, relatives screened, however. Negative.</p> <p>A2 - 22 days above threshold.</p>
10/06/2021	496	171	<p>A10 Birth father unknown and birth mother of far Eastern heritage.</p> <p>Delay in Court timetable, interpreter required delayed for 3 months.</p> <p>A2 Delayed matching due to ethnic match of adopters being sought.</p> <p>In house adopters were identified (not an ethnic match).</p>
13/04/2022	579	212	Reported in section 3.5
17/01/2022	703	203	<p>A10 – Sibling group of three. SHOBPA delayed improving quality of CPRs.</p> <p>Sibling assessment requested for all three children.</p> <p>Re-assessment of father requested by Court (older two children) assessment was negative.</p> <p>Plan to place three children with adopters which potentially makes them children who could wait longer.</p> <p>A2 Interagency placement sought for the children however, adopters approved by Adoption Counts were found.</p>

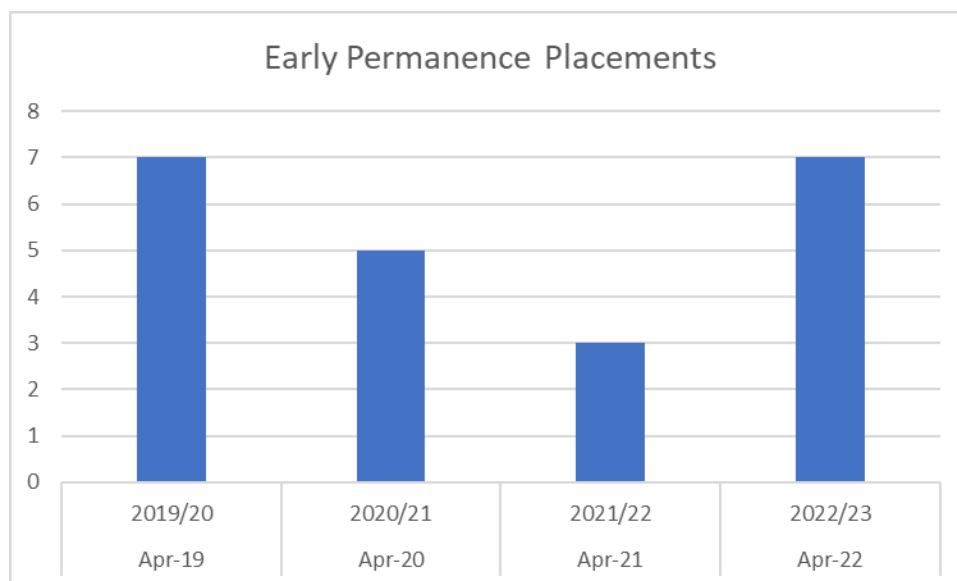
28/03/2022	525	83	<p>A2 under the threshold of 121 days.</p> <p>A10 Assessment of parents and connected persons and child returned home to birth mother.</p> <p>Concerns about care were raised.</p> <p>A different birth father was confirmed requiring birth father family to be further explored.</p> <p>Parents and family ruled out but only after independent social worker assessment of paternal grandmother was withdrawn from court.</p>
29/03/2022	558	202	<p>A2 Childs father is Nigerian and Mother Indian therefore this would potentially make them a child who waits longer. Also, parents have significant health problems.</p> <p>No connected persons were assessed.</p> <p>Interagency placement agreed linked with adopters in London however, they changed their mind.</p> <p>Child went on to be placed with an adoption counts family.</p>
11/07/2022	725	94	Reported on in section 3.5
02/11/2022	651	139	Reported on in section 3.5

3.7 Early Permanency

Seven children were placed in an early permanence placement during this period. The children were placed with carers temporarily approved by Manchester's Agency Decision Maker as foster carers under regulation 25A of the Care Planning Regulations.

Number of children placed in a Foster to Adopter placement							
Manchester	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	
			1	1	1	3	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
						1	7

Early Permanence placements were up 133% compared to the previous year when only 3 children were placed in an early permanence placement.



1. Quality of Reports

CPRs (child permanence reports) are audited by the Adoption Counts Team Manager family finding Manchester, prior to SHOBPA consideration for the child and then again by either the Team Manager, Family Finding social worker or Senior Practitioner before matching panel. This is to ensure that CPRs are graded as being 'Good' as a minimum and that the final report is submitted to panel rather than reports still requiring amendments. The CPR is then graded by the panel considering the match.

42 child permanence reports (CPR's) audits have been completed during this period. Of those:

Rating	Outstanding	Good with Outstanding Features	Good	In Need of Improvement	Ungraded
SHOBPA	0	0	21	16	5
Panel	1		33	6	0

2 items not submitted to Panel

Childrens CPR reports presented to adoption panel consider gradings at the child's match, as opposed to the gradings prior to matching panel from the team Managers. The figures presented above are based on panel gradings, given their independence and impartiality.

Support and training are offered to children's social workers in completing children's CPR's. This includes specific training that can be delivered to teams, one to one support with social workers and advice with a robust quality assurance system with the ADM and Panel Adviser to SHOBPA. As can be seen by the figures above, the improvement of children's CPR's from SHOBPA to Adoption Panel is significant, with increased focus on achieving good quality CPR's for SHOBPA. We have agreed with Manchester ADM that we will review the timescales for submission of CPRs in order that QA can be thoroughly completed prior to the SHOBPA meeting.

Recruitment of Adopters

5.1 Approvals

There were 42 families approved as adopters during the first six months of this year (1.4.22 – 30.9.22) and 37 families approved as adopters during the last six months of this year (1.10.22 – 31.3.23) 79 families approved in total. This is a decrease of 8 families (9%) from the year before when 87 families were approved.

At the end of the period (31st March 2023) there were 42 families in Stage One, 8 in between Stage One and Stage Two, and 35 in Stage Two; a total of 85 families in the assessment process. There were 86 families in the assessment process at the end of last year so this evidence the level of business is maintained at a relatively consistent level. This is positive and is a strong position from which to enter the new year.

Enquiry numbers have significantly increased with 803 in first 6 months of year and 1013 during second half of the year, 1816 for the full year. This is 388 more than the previous year where there were 1428 enquiries in total. This is the largest number of enquiries we have ever seen and continues the trend from last year. From the feedback we have collated, the increase in enquiries seems to be due to our social media campaigns alongside the messages from the #YouCanAdopt campaigns. It is worth noting that a high percentage of the enquiries are just asking for information packs and not proceeding with an assessment, this could indicate that they are not yet ready to proceed but are exploring adoption earlier than they perhaps would have in the past.

1.

SOURCE	2021/2022	2022/2023
Online (includes Google Ads/organic Searches)	1058	1373
Local Council referral (online and offline)	103	91
Other	16	10
Recommendation from friend and family	32	36
Previous Adoption Enquiries	76	93
Social Media	120	182
Second Time Adopters	11	15
Outdoor Advertising	7	5
Event/Info Stand	1	9
Radio	4	2
TOTAL	1428	1816

Numbers of initial visits have remained constant, with 74 taking place in the first 6 months of the year, 97 during the last six months, so 171 in total. This is a decrease of 2 from the previous year (2021 – 22) when 173 initial visits took place and 214 in the year 2020 – 21.

Registrations of Interest received in this financial year (the formal application to be assessed as prospective adopters) have also decreased by 13%, 43 in first 6 months, 64 in second part of the year, 107 in total from 123 the previous year (2021 – 22).

Our performance should still be viewed in the context of an ongoing national shortage of adopters. It suggests that the strategies implemented through our Recruitment and Marketing plan continue to be effective in terms of our adopter sufficiency, although of course we are not complacent and continue to strive to increase our numbers further. We will continue to raise the profile of our agency to achieve adopter sufficiency for our children across our five local authorities, with a surplus to generate income and offset the cost of inter-agency placements for our children who need them.

Monthly Adopter Sufficiency meetings continue with the Head of Service, the Operations Managers, the Recruitment and Enquiries Manager and the Marketing Officer meeting to plan and review our progress.

5.2 Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

No referrals were made to the IRM during this period.

5.3 Partner/stepparent adoption enquiries

Our Recruitment Team received 48 partner / step-parent adoption enquiries in the first six months of the year and 57 in the second half of the year, 105 enquiries in total. This is an increase of 17% on the previous year when 90 enquiries were received in total.

Enquiries	1.4.22 – 31.3.23	
LA	Number	Approx. Percentage
Manchester	5	5%

10 enquiries resulted in an office meeting taking place with a social worker, for information gathering and advice, in the first six months of the year. 13 enquiries resulted in an office meeting taking place in the second half of the year. 23 office meetings took place in total. This is 5 less than the previous year when numbers rose dramatically that year following the pandemic.

Office Meetings	1.4.22 – 31.3.23	
LA	Number	Approx. Percentage
Manchester	1	4%

7 applications were accepted during the first six months of the year, and 7 in the second six months, 14 in total.

	1.4.22 – 31.3.23	
LA	Number	Approx. Percentage
Manchester	3	21%

5.4 Information events

Before the pandemic, these were held on a fortnightly basis at locations around the region. Since then, these events have been held 'virtually', currently on a bi - weekly basis, where potential adopters watch from their own homes.

These have continued to be very successful indeed.

We had 136 families attending information events in the first six months of the year, and 172 in the second six months, 308 in total. This is an increase of 26 families (9%) compared to last year when 282 families attended events.

5.5 Training groups

During the last 12 months, 3 day adopter preparation training groups have been held monthly, with additional tasks/modules being given to applicants to do in the evenings. These are now held in person, replacing the virtual sessions which were presented just after the pandemic.

93 families attended these groups during this period, with 36 attending the first half of the year and 57 in the second half of the year. This figure is 18% less than the previous year when 114 families attended training.

Regular reviews of how the training is delivered have taken place and a work group has been set up to ensure information given is constantly up to date.

5.6 Marketing and Recruitment Campaigns

Our marketing activity remained consistent this year. We continued with a high presence of digital and social media advertising, and continued with outdoor advertising (billboards, etc.), radio advertising, magazines specifically for certain communities/locations, leaflet drops, etc.

We also commissioned the Manchester Evening News for set time periods of online/media advertising. This has been very successful as not only was there targeted Facebook advertising, but there was also a high additional digital presence.

We have continued with targeted Facebook advertising to specifically reach out for members of the Black Community to come forward and think about adoption, and we attended specialist certain events with this aim in mind.

This year was the first since the pandemic that we were able to return to attending outdoor public events, and our attendance at these included Pride events, Bob Expo, etc.

The national #YouCanAdopt summer campaign took place this Summer, and the website and social media hashtag #YouCanAdopt was used widely. We were able to use the resources from this campaign to assist us with online and social media marketing.

Additional marketing was booked for National Adoption Week, which took place between 17th – 23rd October 2022. We ran our own advertising during the entire campaign period, to go alongside the national campaign, using the same message, content, and useful podcasts, aiming to make Adoption Counts stand out amongst our competitors and drive applicants to our website.

6. Compliments, comments, and complaints

Description – compliments
Feedback from an adopter who advised their adoption to support social worker had been fantastic.
Positive feedback received from prospective adopters about their supervising social worker.
Feedback from an adopter who said their supervising social worker has been excellent with the right balance of pragmatism, practical advice, and sensitivity. They have always found her to be approachable and non-judgemental.
Positive feedback from someone attending Friends & Family training. 'The session was very well put together and delivered, set everyone at ease while sharing naturally difficult by appropriate material and helped prepare families for long-term support.'
Praise for Adoption Support SWs for their 'incredible support' in helping with therapeutic approaches to parenting
Feedback for Adoption Support SW who supported an adoptive parent on several occasions by visiting the child's school to try and educate them on how to deal with adoptive children and trauma.
Positive feedback from a new adopter regarding the transition process, from both her point of view and that of the foster carer.
Description – complaints
A complaint from a company director in relation to payment processes for therapeutic work commissioned for children and families. The complaint was upheld in part.
Complaint from a potential adopter who had a match with a child withdrawn post shortlisting and approval. They criticised the Adoption services lack of transparency during decision making.

7. Practice Developments in Adoption Counts

Family Finding

7. Practice Developments in Adoption Counts

Family Finding

We continue to hold monthly strategic matching meetings which are attended by all our family finders and recruitment and assessment social workers. These meetings enable us to profile all our priority children (children with a final hearing in the next month and children with a Placement Order) to ensure links and matches are prioritised for all our children waiting. We are currently in the process of completing a review of our strategic matching process to ensure best outcomes for all our children and prospective adopters.

In addition to strategic matching we will also be working in partnership with CoramBaaf from April 2023 to pilot a collective matching project.

Collective matching is a strategic solution to family finding that builds on existing individual practice and aims to use our supply of adopters as efficiently as we can to maximise the number of children we find families for.

We will be applying this to all our priority children we are aiming to match and using the data supplied by CoramBaaf to inform our strategic matching processes.

The image below shows two sets of adopters and two sets of children and the perceived 'strength' of the matches between them.



Under current practice, the likelihood is that the ‘very good’ match would be pursued, leading to only one match being made. Taking a Collective Matching approach, we would progress the two ‘good matches’ so that two matches are made.

The table below compares the characteristics of the traditional approach to family finding with those of Collective Matching:

Traditional approach	Collective Matching
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family finding is done on an individual basis – a child is allocated to a social worker and they search for appropriate families for that child • It tends to maximise the number of ‘best’ matches made – social workers look for the strongest possible match • We are already using technology to support us in searching for families • Practitioner and QA role are essential in determining whether a match is suitable • Adopters can choose not to adopt a child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A centralised approach to identifying potential matches • It aims to maximise the number of children for whom a match is found • It uses technology to look at all the children and all the families and assess the ‘strength’ of each possible match • It would replace the initial sifting step of family finding by identifying potential matches for each child, so that family finders do not have to review multiple PARs • Practitioner and QA input would remain in place so that matches are still suitable

We have continued to hold adoption picnics and have held 2 virtual picnics where we profiled children using a range of video clips. Adopters can access these video clips of children for a limited period via a secure Adoption Counts website on our SharePoint site.

During this period we have featured 17 children with 54 households attending resulting in 15 expressions of interest. One match resulted from this event for a sibling pair, both children are now placed. We had planned to hold a face to face picnic in February 2023 but this did not go ahead as all but 2 of the children we were intending to profile were linked / matched. We will be holding a face to face picnic event in June.

Our adopters have also been invited to and attended several profiling events and we feature our children at a regional activity events. We worked in partnership with the NW RAA consortium to hold an adoption picnic in March, this resulted in several EOI's for our children. We are working with CoramBaaf to hold an activity day in Manchester in April 2023.

The family finders have continued to meet on a quarterly basis as a group to discuss practice issues and developments. During our last three development days, we have discussed a range of issues including performance data, sharing best practice, early permanence, peer support, race and ethnicity and matching

considerations. Our next development day will be a joint event with our recruitment and assessment colleagues in June.

The Adoption Counts annual report for 21/22 highlighted that our children who wait longer are continuing to wait. It was agreed that we needed to look at each individual child to ascertain the reasons behind the delay and to reflect on any approaches that may reduce further delay. The themes which have arisen from the meetings taken place to date include:

- Delays in court timetabling which have impacted upon care planning decisions.

Courts have directed additional independent social work assessments to be completed both in terms of parenting assessments and in relation to assessments of connected carers.

For several children connected carers have come forward at a late stage in proceedings.

- Completion of sibling assessments.

A sibling group of three experienced a break down in introductions. Further assessment of the children's needs was subsequently completed with a recommendation to place each child separately. The importance of understanding the effects trauma bonds and adversity can have upon sibling relationships was highlighted.

- How we can enable prospective adopters to gain practical parenting experience and a real understanding of children's lived experiences.

We continue to work in partnership with other regional adoption agencies within the northwest and attend the northwest early permanence consortium meetings held on a quarterly basis. We have worked together as a group to offer 6 weekly peer support groups / meetings for all our early permanence carers. A member of our staff has been appointed to develop national early permanence procedures in line with the strategy to promote early permanence opportunities for children aged 4 and over.

A national practice guide with resources for early permanence is in the process of completion.

We will be offering the opportunity for ten of our early permanence carers to receive individual mentoring via a peer support system offered via Adoption UK during 2023.

Recruitment and Assessment

Enquiry numbers to assessment data relating to numbers and approved adopters is detailed in section 5.1. The conclusions we can draw from this data is that we have approved the least number of adopters since Adoption Counts became operational in 2017, we have approved 79 adopters in this reporting time period.

Performance in relation to timescales for Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the assessment process are as follows:

- Stage 1 - 27% were within timescales.
- Stage 2 - 70% were in timescales.

The delays in stage one has been related to statutory checks taking longer, the additional counselling references that are now requested following the Cumbria CSPR, overseas checks causing delay and previous partner references. In relation to systems and processes the Business Support Manager has reviewed these and support from one of the Team Managers has got us back on track in completing statutory checks in a timely way. This will not account however, for the delays in some checks as detailed above.

Adopter tracking meetings have (currently) been introduced to focus on the timeliness of Stage 1 & Stage 2 assessments whereby individual social workers report on the key dates and progress in relation to assessments being completed. The impact of these meetings will be measured each month to ensure any barriers to meeting timescales are considered.

Applicants withdrawing from the assessment process were all considered appropriate by the agency and the adopters, with reasons being change of circumstances, reflective learning changed the adopter's perspective and matching considerations not correlating with the needs of the children waiting.

Recruitment and Assessment social workers target (FTE) is to complete 8 assessments per year. We have reviewed this figure in line with the caseload weighting for a FTE social worker as this was previously 9. This was compared with other RAAs in the region and was felt to be a realistic achievement.

Sufficiency meetings focus on the number of adopters needed to meet the needs of children with a plan of adoption, if this needs to be reviewed strategically plans will be put in place to consider the number and type of adopters needed to meet the needs of children.

In relation to assessments, Adoption Counts have six staff who are trained in Adult Attachment style interview (ASI) training. One is an Operations Manager one Advanced Practitioner and four social workers. ASI interviews are completed families in assessment if it is considered this tool can enhance the assessment. The attachment style interviews are a model of practice that offers a conversational style interview which questions adoptive applicants about their current relationships with their partner (if a couple), family of origin and with two adults close to the applicants. The interview looks at general styles of relating to other adults in terms of self-reliance and how easy it will be for them to get close and be at ease in accessing help. This will be a clear indicator of how as adoptive parents they will reach out for support during the parenting of a child or young person through adoption.

In relation to the quality of assessments this is high on the agenda. The robust QA system in place whereby Prospective Adopter Reports (PARs) are quality assured by Team Managers, Panel Adviser and Panel chairs. This three tier process ensures that assessments are thorough, child centred and clear in adopters skills and abilities to meet the needs of children.

Approved adopters are given the opportunity to complete an Interactive profile to demonstrate their skills and abilities in offering a child permanence through adoption. This enhances the matching process and hopefully assist those who wait longer for a match as family finders for children will see a different dimension to them. Some approved adopters are reluctant to go down this path however, social workers are encouraging in this way of profiling.

Preparation Training continues to be delivered face to face by social workers within the Recruitment and Assessment teams along with colleagues from family finding and adoption support. This offers a holistic view of adoption and co-production evidenced from the three areas of service.

We will continue with all R&A SWs as part of the Preparation Training rota to facilitate the training with the support of their colleagues.

Top up Training is offered for prospective adopters in Stage 2 of the approval process and for approved adopters, is jointly delivered by the recruitment and assessment team, family finding team and adoption support. This is a comprehensive programme of training for applicants and adopters increasing their knowledge and preparation of parenting their child or children through adoption. Feedback from approved prospective adopters both pre-and post-approval is positive.

We plan that all prospective adopters will attend the Race Matters training to not only widen their thoughts and understanding of parenting a child from a different ethnicity but also about parenting children having a deeper knowledge and acceptance of diversity.

Adoption Panels

Information regarding Adoption Panel activity will be covered in full in the Chairs reports.

Sheila Davies

Operations Manager

26 September

Adoption Support

Adoption Support remains integral to our delivery for adopted children, new and established adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults, recognizing the lifelong journey. We remain committed to supporting families in the early transition stages of a placement, through to Adoption Order and beyond. We recognize that new challenges may emerge throughout a child's life requiring varying levels of tailored support to ensure successful outcomes for children. We have based our service delivery on a graduated approach, with our Adoption Psychology Service forming the foundation of our delivery.

Adoption Psychology (Centre of Excellence for Adoption Support)

Service Overview

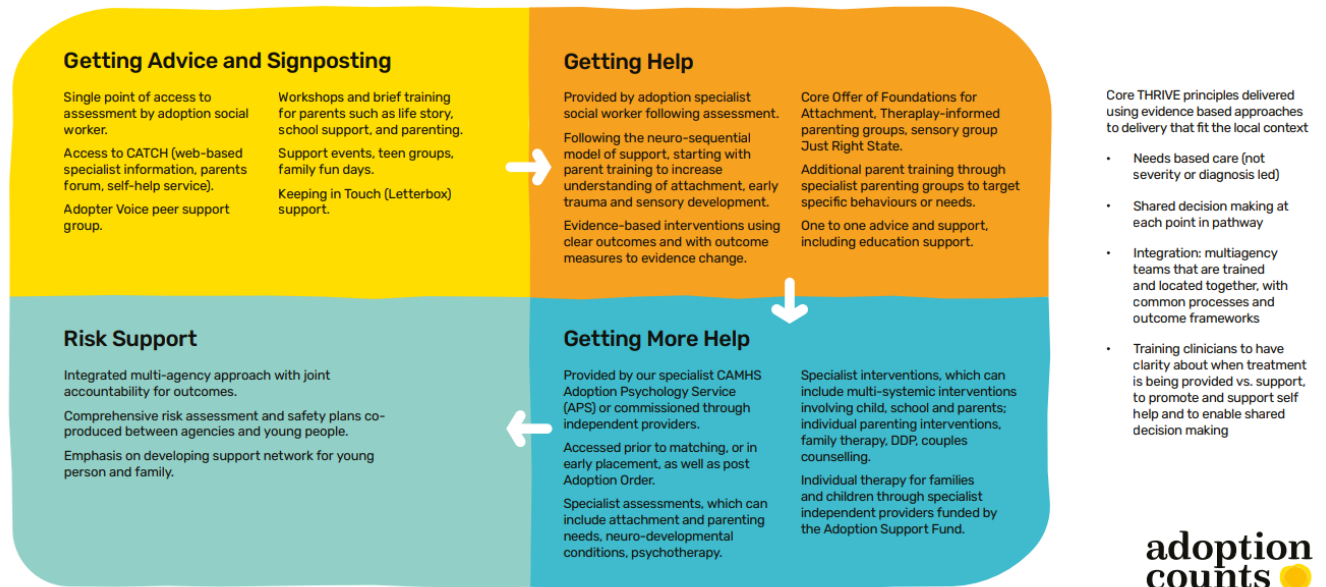
The short-term funding for this service has been agreed by the board until March 2023, with negotiations with Clinical Commissioners to secure longer term funding on a joint basis moving forward. Due to a freeze on funding any new services during the pandemic there has been no opportunity to present this business case to CCG's until this year. This process is underway with our Greater Manchester and Cheshire East NHS commissioning colleagues and a renewed request will be made this year. CCGs no longer exist and have become Integrated Children's Boards.

5.1 The Adoption Psychology Team is an assessment, consultation and therapeutic CAMHS and Educational Psychology partnership service for adopted children, their parents, carers and workers. It is a partnership between Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, One Education and Adoption Counts. The service is multidisciplinary including clinical psychology, therapeutic social work, child psychiatry and educational psychology.

The service enables a coordinated approach to the mental health and emotional wellbeing and develops the skills of the social work teams through consultation, training and joint working. It is consultation and referral-based and offers timely and flexible appointments. The

updated iThrive model below shows how the Adoption Psychology and Adoption Counts Adoption Support Service fit together.

i-THRIVE Model of Care - Adoption Support



5.2 AP Service outcomes

1. Adopted children have good mental health
2. Adopted children have healthy relationships
3. Adopted children have stable placements
4. Adopted children and their parents have a positive experience of care and support

5.3 Service Aims

- Children who have a Placement Order and an adoption plan are offered, where necessary, assessment and intervention to support decision making and make recommendations to inform their placement needs. Transitions consultations has been developed to identify the right support pre- and early placement.
- Adopted children and families have access to assessment and interventions to improve their relationships, emotional and behavioural regulation and engagement with learning.
- Children and families placed in their adoptive placement can access group-based approaches as part of an early intervention package to enable families to have a good start on their adoption journey.
- Children who have been placed in their adoptive placement are able to access specialist assessment and intervention up to age 12.
- Adoption social workers, family finders and children's social workers can access Specialist Consultation for adopted children up to the age of 18 for advice and signposting.

- Prospective adopters and adoptive parents are offered training, consultation and evidence-based interventions to enhance their understanding and management of the psychological needs of children who have experienced abuse and neglect.
- Adoption Social Workers are offered training and consultation to enhance their understanding, assessment skills and knowledge of attachment, mental health difficulties and interventions

The adoption psychology annual report is available which details the services offered, take up from families and measurable benefit of the services delivered.

[APS Annual Report 2022-23 final .docx](#)

The **Multi Agency Resource Panel**, continues to consider complex cases that require Adoption Support Fund (ASF) match funding from the Local Authority. This has enabled more consistent and transparent decision making across the region. The panel consists of representative from CAMHS, Virtual Schools, and Social Care, and enables professional challenge and support to make the best use of resources in our agency.

In this period the panel have considered 26 requests for match funding, for therapeutic work which costs over and above the Fair Access Limit of £5000 per child per year. Further details are in the table below regarding ASF applications.

5.4 Adoption Support Fund Applications

We have continued to access the ASF to provide additional therapy for adoptive families. This has enabled families to receive specialist support that we would not have been able to provide in house or access from other universal services.

The ASF continued to offer funding for specialist assessments and therapeutic support. This year 541 applications were made (compared to 2021/22 this is a 19% increase). Funds drawn down for adoptive families increased to £1,912,477.

As anticipated the majority of applications were made in Q4 and a significant increase in the number of applications year on year (456 increasing to 541). This may reflect the social workers ability to plan ahead this financial year which was hindered by the ASF late renewal date in February 2022.

	2021-2022 total	Current year total 2022-23
Number of applications made	456	541
Amount in £	1,672,387	1,912,477 Includes 48,562.76 matched funding for the highest need families

Manchester ASF applications in 2022-23 are detailed below:

LA	Number of applications	Amount	Applications approved with match funding	Match funded amount paid by LA
Manchester	119	418,599	5	15,557.50

The ASF pilot project, requesting outcome measurement tools at the start and end of therapeutic interventions, ended in October 22. Adoption Counts made the decision to continue to ask providers to complete outcome measures for all applications. This was because we felt it was best practice. The ASF also indicated that this would be rolled out to all applications from April 23, so we felt it was best to continue with the requirements we had from our providers. The ASF have since postponed this national roll-out to later in 2023.

5.5 Referrals / Enquiries for Adoption Support

The team has 930 open cases. These cases are:

	Previous year 2021-22	Q1 2022	Q2 2022	Q3 2022	Q4 2023	Comments
Open cases (these are broken down into categories below)	853	897	898	956	930	First Response, Long term and adopted adults cases
First Response	185	198	199	206	199	
Long term	465	516	501	538	529	
Adopted adults open cases	203	183	198	212	202	
Letterbox (not in figure above)	1298	1266	1385	1367	1360	See breakdown below

Further information about the case numbers, including specialist workers:

	Previous year 2021-22	Q1 2022	Q2 2022	Q3 2022	Q4 2023	Comments
Therapeutic social worker (cases counted in long term team above)	72	81	81	93	82	2.5 FTE
Education advisor	39	39	45	42	39	0.5 FTE
Adoption "Surgeries" completed	126	25	25	25	25	

In the year 2022-23, demand has increased by just under 10% for adoption support services, which includes assessment, therapeutic support and ongoing social work provision. Due to increased demand, the waiting period for an assessment has increased this year.

All families who ask for support, and require an adoption support assessment, are currently offered an appointment within 12 weeks of their initial call, with 2 appointments a week being available. (This period has varied between 8-17 weeks this year). Calls are triaged by First

Response team with those needing more urgent help receiving support on the initial call and signposted to early support services such as CATCH. At the point of assessment, families are given a named social worker who supports them in accessing the relevant support, often from the ASF.

Note, very few birth families contact First Response for advice as they would get in touch directly with their KIT (letterbox) coordinator, with whom they already have a relationship; or with PAC-UK directly, to receive independent support.

	Referrals for Adopted Adult	New referrals for Adoptive Families	Birth Family	Advice & Signposting
MANCHESTER	44	40	0	5

Analysis for Manchester including case examples

This year, there has been a steady demand for services for adoptive families. We had 40 new requests for support from adoptive families and 44 new requests for support from adopted adults. On behalf of Manchester families we made 119 ASF applications, drawing down £418,599 for specialist assessments and therapy. On 5 occasions this was matched funded (totalling £15,557.50) by the LA.

Referrals for letterbox services increased where nearly all children placed for adoption had a referral made for indirect contact via the (then) letterbox team.

Case examples for Manchester children:

Child was placed in February 2022, and parents were referred for therapeutic social work advice following concerns about the child's presentation (possible ASD behaviours) which had not been seen in foster care. The therapeutic social worker observed child with his adopters and offered advice about this, including playful activities, education and attachment in relation to child's trauma and loss. Parents were invited and attended Theraplay-informed parenting groups and are receiving further advice around disrupted sleep. (Child 8987)

Family moved to Manchester, referred by their previous agency in 2019. Family receiving therapeutic parenting support and Theraplay. Occupational Therapy advice offered alongside education support, resulting in EHCP in place. Specialist assessment sought to identify any additional needs. (child 8075)

Young person is aged 15 and receiving CAMHS support due to serious self-harming behaviours. They have FASD, and have not been able to access school for some time. Parents were struggling to make sense of the young person's behaviours and feelings, therapeutic social work support was offered to maintain child's family life and access education; letterbox support given to consider young person's identity needs. Therapy was identified (child 8831).

Referrals for letterbox services remains steady with a small increase from 264 to 272 this year.

	Previous year 2021-22	Q1 2022	Q2 2022	Q3 2022	Q4 2023	Comments
Manchester	392	378	405	358	367	

The Keeping in Touch Team (Letterbox) team are holding all contact referrals; this has 1367 active exchanges, with some having exchanges several times a year involving multiple birth family members. We write to all who reach 18 and have an active letterbox arrangement and offer ongoing support, so a small number of the cases above relate to young people aged 18+.

We continue to be part of the letterswop pilot alongside 4 other RAA's. The Letterswop service is a digital platform to exchange information between adoptive and birth families; again, this is part of our focus on Keeping in Touch and maintaining relationships for children. The pilot period has been extended and additional features, such as voice note and video exchanges, have been trialled. There has been particularly good use of this platform by a Salford adoptive and birth family, who have exchanged information including birth parent wishing their child a happy birthday, and adoptive parent responding shortly afterwards to share the birthday activities and thank them.

Process

The Board granted an additional 2.5 staff on a temporary basis in recognition of the historic under-resourcing of Adoption Support, and to manage the increasing demand post-Covid. 1 joined in November 22 and left in Mar 22, with replacement joining in April; and the others in January 23. These staff have settled into their roles and have offered a benefit for the service to enable:

- Enabled development and delivery of a teen group for young people
- Enabled development and delivery of a sensory attachment programme for children (Just Right State group)
- Increased opportunities to deliver additional therapeutic group support to adopters and children
- Slowed the increase in the waiting times by offering additional assessment "surgeries"
- Increased therapeutic social work availability to extend the transition support for early placement
- Improved morale in the social work group by enabling a small reduction in caseloads
- Enabling a return to monthly evening workshops, and monthly peer support drop-in sessions for parents and children

A report will be shared with the Board for September to consider the benefits these workers bring to adopters and children.

Management support has been increased as a senior practitioner role was dissolved, and a post created in a management position. This individual moved into the new post.

The therapeutic social workers has been boosted by an additional social worker, and we have seen benefit to the services offered to pre- and early placement support with the majority of the 93 families being supported being in early placement. We have observed increasing demand from early placement and this may reflect factors including:

- Increased awareness of adoption support from preparation training
- Better recognition of emerging need by social workers and prospective adopters
- Increasing complexity of children being placed for adoption

Closing cases and signposting families on to other services continues to be a challenge, as families often have a need for adoption support for long periods while change can be slow, and pressures on family high. We continue to look at options for closing cases, including reviewing outcome measures to identify goals achieved. We are also offering more face-to-face events and groups and anticipate this will alleviate some anxiety for families who can still access the service regularly, without needing to have an allocated social worker.

We encourage the use of CATCH, which is an online platform from Adoption UK which offers specialist online support, training, and a forum for families. As this was not used as extensively as expected, we reduced our contract with the provider this year. We hope to increase usage for all families in early placement as well as those more established families. We have so far not seen extensive take-up from families, but those that do use CATCH report they find this really valuable and these are often the families accessing our universal offer. We will continue to advertise this in the newsletter as well as at events with families and at the top-up training.

The core offer of therapeutic groups for all families in the early stages of placement continues. We ran therapeutic parenting groups “Foundations for Attachment” and the “Theraplay-informed parenting groups” for parents and children together. We have invested in training for our therapeutic social workers so they can deliver these groups without the need for external providers; this will give more flexibility and increase service income.

5.7 Birth families

First Family delivered through PAC-UK are our current provider of support to birth families following a decision for their child to be adopted.

The clear and easy referral process is increasing the number of families who access the service.

PAC-UK offer our independent birth parent counselling for all 5 LA's. We continue to have a positive working relationship with PAC-UK. The 44 new referrals to the service in Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 represents 88% of the annual target of 50.

Through PAC-UK, birth mothers and fathers have the opportunity to attend a support group at the end of their intervention. This is used as an exit strategy for birth parents to continue to access support but to also build upon peer support. We value this as an important step in our maintaining contact agenda. In practice we see birth parents who have received good counselling support, are more able to manage reunions with adopted teens, and this benefits the young person and their adoptive family.

A focus for PAC-UK in the year ahead is to increase referrals for birth fathers earlier on in the adoption process. A birth fathers focus group meeting therefore took place in March 2023 to look at how PAC-UK can reach birth fathers at an earlier stage. Some really helpful discussions took place, and themes have emerged for PAC-UK to consider moving forward.

First Contact

90% of Q4 referrals were contacted within 14 days.

First Family Facebook Group

This closed and well monitored group is allowing birth parents to share thoughts and feelings around adoption as well as for PAC-UK to post useful links to help and resources

around eg mental health and domestic violence. A number of Adoption Counts birth parents are members.

Further detailed information is available in the PAC – UK annual report, which can be shared on request.

5.8 Support Groups

This year we have been able to return to in-person events and activities. Adopter Voice feedback informed us that they would like an online and in-person offer so this was developed.

We have delivered:

- Monthly play and stay (coffee drop in) sessions for families
- Fun days at Tatton Park and Z-Arts
- Teen group
- Evening workshops on therapeutic parenting, education and sensory need, both in person and online
- Developed alongside North West RAA partners “keeping safe online” training

8. Practice Developments in Adoption Counts

Developments within the service include:

- The Education Psychology team have created education advice for children moving to adoption
- Establishing a regular meeting with our virtual schools to explore topics which benefit adopters
- Developing a group for adopted teens
- Developed a sensory group
- Created and continue to develop direct contact procedures and good practice guidance
- Adapted and delivered adoption support top-up training

We undertook an Adoption Support “blueprint” assessment in September 2022 with Independent consultant Stephanie Bishop, who evaluated each aspect of our adoption support offer. She gave feedback and development ideas which we have taken forward to improve our service and offer. For example, developing information about post-commencement access to records; developing a clearer intake process and differentiating between teams. This report is available on request.

Kristen Roberts

May 2023

Adoption Panel Chair's 6 monthly report 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023

1. Introduction

This report is a biennial report completed in rotation by the Independent Panel Chairs for Adoption Counts. The statistics used in the report and the quotations from the Panel feedback process are supplied by the Panel Administration Team, the Data Coordinator and the Panel Advisor for Adoption Counts. Thanks are expressed for their hard work in bringing the information together.

2. Overview of Panels

The 'temporary' arrangements for Panels brought about by the Covid pandemic situation have continued and Panels are still being held virtually using Microsoft Teams. This has been seen as the "normal way" to conduct panels with many members and adopters having a preference for this arrangement, however in person panels have been re-introduced and 3 have been undertaken although in recent months the planned in person panels have had to take place virtually due to availability and time constraints of panel members. Panel Chairs have been available.

Panels are held every two weeks on Fridays; every three weeks on Thursdays; every six weeks on Wednesdays and every six weeks on Tuesdays. This pattern of timings is consistent with arrangements pre-Covid and the usual locations of Panels are used as a reference.

Room availability post lockdown has been problematic and there are only available rooms for in person panels at Etrop Court or Unity House (however Unity House cannot commit to a consistent room as this depends on room availability)

Panels usually begin at 9.15 /9.30am, can cover from one item to a maximum of five items and generally happen on a weekly basis. The frequency of Panels supports the timeliness of approvals and matches. There remains the option to arrange additional Panels should that be necessary.

Sometimes items are removed from the agenda by the chair, in discussion with the agency advisor, before other panel members have had sight of the documentation, however this is rare. Items are usually taken off the agenda early rather than later because of outstanding checks, references or other key documentation.

3. Panel Membership

During the reporting period there were 42 panel members on the Central List. The make-up of the list is as follows:

4 Panel Chairs, 1 Vice Chair, 14 Local Authority and/or Adoption Counts Social Worker representatives, 18 Independent members, 3 Medical Advisors, 1 Elected Member, and 1 NHS member.

The independent members are made up of Adoptive Parents, and/or people with a background in Health, Education, Youth Work and the Police

9 of the Social Workers are from Adoption Counts, 1 is from Stockport, 1 is from Salford, 1 from Cheshire East and 2 are from Manchester.

Panels do not have to have a fixed membership or a maximum number of members and there is no limit to the number of people whom it considers suitable to be members of an adoption panel. These members need to be suitably qualified and/or have the experience to consider these cases. We are fortunate in that our members do have the expertise and experience to make recommendations however our ethnicity is that of predominately White British and we need to proactively encourage new members that reflect the diversity of the area that Adoption Counts serves.

During this period, we have had regular attendance by one of the Local Authority's Paediatricians and this has been very much welcomed, however this is sometimes limited to the start of the meeting and if any new medical information arises during panel we are left without that level of expertise.

It would be beneficial if this function was shared between the 5 authorities to ease the burden of this on the 1 paediatrician that currently supports our work and this might allow them to commit to the full panel meeting.

Similarly social workers from the 5 authorities should commit to releasing at least 2 from the 4 smaller Authorities that make up this RAA and 3 social workers from Manchester to again ease the pressure on the existing volunteers that we have from them and to ensure that we have representation to cover for sickness and leave. On rare occasions the panel advisor has had to step in and be the social worker representation which leaves panel without an advisor.

Panel Member Appraisal

2 appraisals took place during the reporting period. All remaining appraisals will take place during the next 6 months with any 1 of the 4 chairs.

Panel Member Training

No specific adoption related training days in this period. However various members of staff undertook training on GDPR, DBS undertaken, and Safeguarding training. The learning pool has continued to develop.

Panel Chairs have continued to meet up quarterly with agency senior managers. This has been meaningful and allows all parties to discuss any issues, both good practice and areas for development in a constructive manner. The meeting is enriched by the attendance of ADMs joining the meeting, this supports good discussion about issues pertaining to all 5 authorities and promotes consistency. Comments from ADMs are particularly useful and much valued, however not all ADM's attend and their ability to influence practice and resources can be limited.

The Panel Member Learning Library is still active and available to all panel members via SharePoint. This resource contains a wide variety of learning material including policy and procedure documents, information leaflets, training slides, information re: adoption support; recruitment and assessment and family finding.

All Panel members are required to keep a record of their learning and research, which should be reflected on and discussed during their appraisals to ensure their commitment to continued professional development. For panel members that are social work trained this CPD can be used to meet the requirements of their professional registration

4 Panel Business Cases considered by Panels (1 October 2022- 31 March 2023.)

Total number of Panels: 26
Number of approvals heard: 40
Number of approvals agreed 38
Number of approvals deferred 0
Number of single adopters approved 4 out of 5 presented
Number of couples approved 34
Number of matches heard: 43
Single children matched 36
Sibling groups of two matched 7 (14 CPR's in total)
SHOBPA's 3 (1 child presented twice due to deferral)

There has been 2 less panels in this quarter than last and a slight decrease in number of adopters approved (38 approvals, last quarter 42).

However there has been over 30% increase in children (43 matches to 31 last quarter) being matched this quarter with increases seen in both single children (36 to 28 previously) and sibling groups , sibling groups over 50% rise (7 sibling groups to 3 previously)

There has been 3 SHOBPA's on the agenda for 2 relinquished children.

Data

CPR/PAR

For the above period, 53 CPRs were presented to Panel (this included seven sibling groups of two) and 40 PARs.

RAA data on quality of reports at final audit. All agencies					
Matches 53 CPRs			Approvals 40 PARs		
Outstanding	8	15.09%	Outstanding	5	12.5%
Good with outstanding features	2	3.77%	Good with outstanding features	5	12.5%
Good	31	58.49%	Good	26	65%
Satisfactory	1	1.88%	Satisfactory	1	2.5%
In need of improvement	9	16.98%	In need of improvement	3	7.5%
Ungraded	2	3.77%	Ungraded	0	0%

Agency policy requires all CPRs and PARs presented to Panel to be graded at least Good at second audit. The percentage of CPRs graded Outstanding, Good with outstanding features or Good is marginally less at 77.35% than last quarter's figure of 79.41%, however we are now seeing some CPRs that are outstanding.

The outstanding CPR's give a robust analysis of the options available that have been considered by the agency for the future care needs of that child whilst consideration is given to the Welfare Checklist at all times.

PARs graded Outstanding, Good with outstanding features or Good has risen from 58.14% in the previous quarter to 90%. Some of the reasons behind this improvement are better analysis and information on relevant and current issues coupled with the inclusion of adopter's emotional well-being/ risk assessment post Leiland-James Corkhill review .

SHOBPA

Local Authority data on quality of reports at time of SHOBPA					
	Cheshire East	Manchester	Salford	Stockport	Trafford
Outstanding	0(1)	0	0	0	0
Good with outstanding features	1(0)	0	1(1)	0(2)	0
Good	12(2)	12(8)	2(4)	3(3)	0(2)
In need of improvement	2(2)	7(8)	1(4)	2(3)	4(2)
Ungraded or not applicable	0	5	0	0	0

The figures in brackets show the quality of these reports at the end of the previous reporting period.

Local Authority data on quality of reports at time of SHOBPA as a % of total reports					
	Cheshire East-	Manchester-	Salford-	Stockport-	Trafford-
Outstanding	0	0	0	0	0
Good with outstanding features	6.67(0%)	(0%)	25% (3)	3% (5)	(0)
Good	80% (5)	50% (21)	50% (11)	60% (8)	(5)
In need of improvement	13.33% (5)	29.16% (21)	25% (11)	40%	100% (5)
ungraded	0	20.83%	0	0	0

There appears to be far more consistency across all 5 authorities in producing Good paperwork for SHOBPA, what we need to see is more Good with outstanding features and Outstanding reports.

This will ensure that all children in the future will have a better understanding of their need for a permanent placement outside of the family and the decision-making process that led to this.

5. Panel Scrutiny – timescales

Matches

A10 met	20	41%
A10 not met	22	46%

A2 met	27	56%
A2 not met	19	40%

Breakdown by LA

	Children Matched in Period	A10 Met	A10 not met	A2 Met	A2 not met
CE	14	6(43%)	7(50%)	9(64%)	5(36%)
Manchester	24	11(46%)	11(46%)	13(54%)	10(42%)
Salford	3	2(67%)	1(33%)	1(33%)	2(67%)
Stockport	5	1(20%)	1(20%)	3(60%)	1(20%)
Trafford	2	0(0%)	2(100%)	1(50%)	1(50%)
Total	48	20(42%)	22(46%)	27(56%)	19(40%)

Don't have timings for all children - A10 1 children not placed in period

Don't have timings for all children - A10 2 children not placed in period & A2 1 has no PO

Don't have timings for all children - A10 3 children not placed in period & A2 1 has no PO

Don't have timings for all children - A10 6 children not placed in period & A2 2 have no PO.

The statistics model used for A10 and A2 performance give only an average performance indication based on local and national trends, however this is the same for all RAA's and Authorities.

A10 in this period has again seen improvement on the last reporting period (41% compared to 38% in April 2022 to September 2022).

The A2 performance has dipped from 68% to 56% As always, there have been a few children where there have been protracted care proceedings, outside the control of the Local Authority or the Agency, and carer assessments put forward late.

These statistics need to be seen in the general context of increases in Special Guardianship Orders and a reduction in numbers of Placement Orders leading to adoption, reflecting the view of only to be made where nothing else would do , where no other course was possible

in the child's interest, i.e. that the least interventionist approach should be adopted by the judiciary.

Approvals

Of the 37 Adoptive families that were approved in the period:

- None completed Stage One within 8 weeks. All were outside timescales.
- For the 31 that were still ongoing in Stage One at the end of the period, 15 (37%) were still within timescales and a further 16 (63%) were out of timescales.
- 9 approved Adoptive families completed Stage Two within 16 weeks (24%); 28 were completed out of timescales (76%).
- For the 27 families that were still ongoing in Stage Two at the end of the period, 19 (48%) were still within timescales and a further 8 (52%) were already out of timescales.

Some of the reasons for delay have been due to sickness, change of social worker and where applicants have changed jobs, had imminent house moves or had sudden bereavement. However, what is causing most of the delay is obtaining reports / information about any counselling that prospective adopters may have had (recommendation from Leiland -James Corkhill review) in the past.

Where it has been impossible to get that information a risk assessment must be completed that is agreed by the Head of Service and countersigned.

Both PARS and CPRs should have been quality assured before panel and of a good standard.

A number of PARs and CPRs have been sent for Panel consideration which, although graded 'Good' by the auditor, are not considered to meet that standard by the Panel Chair. A discussion will then follow with the agency advisor and, possibly, the relevant Operational Manager as to whether the report should be withdrawn for further work or allowed to proceed to avoid delay. Lack of proof reading is often an issue making reports difficult to read. The general rule being that the CPR/ PAR must contain sufficient information for panel to be able to make a decision with further work undertaken prior to match will usually suffice to prevent delay.

It is a shame for staff that in some instances the very high quality of the pre-Panel social work is not reflected in the quality of the reports.

Progress from recommendations from previous Chair report:

Work has been undertaken to promote the notion that a CPR should be written **to** the child, or as a minimum, all of section 9. This has been fed back to the team managers within Adoption Counts to be distributed to family finders and the Local Authorities. This will also be noted in each feedback to ensure the message is being shared.

Additionally, the panel advisor has put together a tool for auditing CPR's that has been shared with Adoption Counts as well as the 5 local authorities. The tool clearly outlines what is expected in each section. The existing audit has been updated to be section specific to enable more explicit audits to be completed that support workers.

Although it has been agreed that in Foster to Adopt placements coming for a match should give information about transition and how the child is settling with the adopters this is not consistent across the RAA. Some of it can be gleaned from the foster carers report but again the quality can vary.

6. Attendee Feedback

Both the social workers and adopters attending Panel are asked the following questions: which are then graded from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent)

Feedback from evaluations

Only 12 evaluations were completed for this half year. (Last quarter in brackets)

Adopters	Adoption social workers	Children's social workers	Family Finders
1?			

11 S/W's in total (unsure of what part of the service they represent) +1 adopter.

Question	Score
Before attending panel were you clear about panel's function?	4.67 (4.7)
Were you given sufficient notice about the date and time of panel?	No Data (5.0)
Were panels members introduced to you?	5.0 (5.0)
Did panel members treat you with courtesy and respect?	4.67 (5.0)
Did panel members seem familiar with your case?	4.8 (4.4)
Were panel member's questions relevant to the issues they were considering?	5.0 (5.0)
Were you given the opportunity to clarify points raised?	4.6 (5.0)
Were the recommendations made by the Panel Chair clear?	4.8 (5.0)
Overall gradings	4.6 (4.7)

A slight decrease in satisfaction and this appears to be from one participant all the way through his/her evaluation, however it is important to know how that experience "was" for him/her.

Most felt well prepared however it is noted that external members may need additional support and information.

On one occasion an adopter social worker felt that the panel chair was dismissive and thought comments were on this occasion unprofessional however was still able to give a much more balanced view of that chair generally.

The rest of the feedback was positive about how panel made people relax and how they warmly welcomed people on their arrival. The feedback gives clear messages that introductions are very important and that all panel members need to keep their camera's on at all times, and where someone is not on camera an explanation must be given.

Engagement by panel was seen as a strength and panel's understanding of the reports and issues, which is an indication of how well they had read the panel papers .

"This was a very positive meeting and I felt everyone understood the gravity of what was at stake for the child and the perspective adopters".

"I think they were well prepared and had read the paperwork".

One social worker, who appeared to have a more challenging time at panel , was unhappy when panel gave a recommendation for 1 child as opposed to 2 children and suggested that this conversation, if possible ,should have happened before panel thus giving her more time to evidence the PAR. As a chair it can be difficult to know how a panel may respond and sometimes issues evolve from discussions. As chairs we would agree to discuss this with the Panel Advisor immediately if this was evident on our first reading of the paperwork but this is not always evident immediately.

There was some confusion by one of the social worker's that arose from panel's ability to defer / abstain from making a recommendation and probably there is a learning opportunity here for social workers attending panel.

All in all, most social workers thought the process was clear, panel was well informed, and it was a smooth and stress-free experience.

"I felt the panel process was straight forward as was the actual meeting".

"I felt the panel members understood the case and their questions were pertinent. This was a very serious meeting that its life changing for some. It was taken extremely seriously however there was also room for a little humour which I found very helpful. Everyone was fair in their comments which were appropriate. There was also positive feedback for the professionals which is very welcome and in my experiences unusual".

"Panel were extremely patient in listening to the nervous couple; who wanted to make sure they said enough to explain their understanding".

Most Social Workers are positive about their Panel experience and see panel's level of scrutiny essential. However, it has been mooted that sometimes the questions that Panel asks are already covered in the paperwork. While the issue may be mentioned in the reports, Panel members may still feel that the issue has not been fully explored, or needs clarification or more analysis is needed i.e. The so what question?

The social worker should update the PAR/CPR with any addition of information that arises from questioning as well as any changes to reports recommended by Panel.

Given that adopters do not need to attend panel all questions that would form part of the assessment process or that are challenging should be submitted to the social workers.

In the event where the panel and ADM do not agree on the recommendation it is essential that panel can see the "workings out" of the ADM so that learning can occur.

Again, for learning, panel should always be given the opportunity to be noted of any disruptions to an adoptive placement to enable them to understand what went wrong and could anything have been done differently or was something missed?

Adopter Feedback

From the body of the feedback, it was difficult to extract the adopter feedback as it wasn't clearly defined, however, it is apparent from this comment that an adopter has been part of this feedback

"Everything went as smoothly, and positively, as we imagined it would be. Panel members were warm and seemed delighted to meet our little girl and ourselves and were genuinely happy to pass on the good news that we'd been approved for our match.

All chairs try to relax adopters as we all know how nerve-racking the process can be and equally try our best to keep to time to try to alleviate some of this pressure on them , however for very good reasons sometimes panel will over-run due to the need for debate/discussion or simply people being late or technical problems.

Conclusion

In summary this last 6 months has seen a number of changes, the most obvious one is the successful recruitment to 4 panel chairs each one bringing expertise in their own right. The panel advisor has also changed but is extremely competent, well able to advise on agency policy, practice and procedure and give any general advice requested in relation to any case. The panel is served well by panel administrators and produces accurate minutes.

These 6 monthly periods has been productive where we can see the quality of reports improving, however the turn-over of staff has meant delay for both adopters and children and in some instances, it can be seen that reports have had more than one author which is not ideal. Generally, the trend is that of an improving picture for quality and all 5 agencies are equally responsible for this.

Although the agency has approved slightly less adopters in this period there has been an increased number of children matched and this includes siblings.

Recommendations: The agency should consider,

- 1 Increase the number of children's social workers within the adoption pool, I would suggest 2 of each for Trafford, Salford, Cheshire East and Stockport and 3 from Manchester to lessen the burden on staff already committed to the pool.
- 2 Increase the number of Paediatricians available to support the panel.
- 3 Actively promote the use of the Learning Library - panel has new members who may not be aware of this resource or how to find it. Similarly, there are new social workers who also may not know about this useful resource.
- 4 Ensure CPRs explicitly explore in their summing up the Adoption Welfare Checklist and to include all placement options for permanency.
- 5 Facilitate more consistency in the style of CPRs and PARs and ensure that the CPR is written **to** the child, or as a minimum, section 9, , as well as improving their quality
- 6 For all staff from all 5 Local Authorities to commit to a thorough quality audit/ proofreading prior, to prevent poor quality work coming to panel and the possibility of delay
- 7 When social workers are unhappy with a panel member or have general concerns about a particular panel, for the agency to arrange a meeting with the panel chair and advisor as soon as feasible.

- 8 To re-invigorate the relationships between panel and all 5 Local Authorities, - consideration of joint training sessions.
- 9 Consideration of a brief questionnaire immediately after panel to capture feedback from adopters.
- 10 Consideration of a leaflet for external visitors to panel on roles and what to expect at panel.
- 11 Proactive recruitment of panel members that reflect the diversity of the community we serve.
- 12 An expectation that some panels will be face to face and be committed to the delivery of that.

Kim Scragg

Adoption Counts Panel Chair

September 2023