

adoption counts



Cheshire East

Adoption Service – Six Monthly Report

01.04.2023 – 30.09.2023

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 30 September 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 Cheshire East Council

Since going live in 2017, Adoption Counts has undertaken to discharge Cheshire East’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 and has been embedded within established processes to maintain good working relationships and communicate as necessary.

In addition, the Director of Children's Social care sits as a member of the Adoption Counts Board. The Head of Service with a link to adoption is a member of the six weekly Operations Group meetings which provides an important opportunity for operational issues to be raised and shared with equivalent managers from the other partner LAs and with the senior managers in the RAA.

The Operations Manager linked to Cheshire East is in contact with the Head of Service linked to adoption to discuss performance over the period and any issues or themes that may be arising. This is very much a two-way dialogue, with Cheshire East ensuring that the RAA is fulfilling its responsibilities as well as the RAA being able to offer feedback to the LA about any emerging themes or issues in care planning or working together.

Adoption Counts feeds into Cheshire East’s permanence tracking of their children, from the information collated at Adoption Counts tracking meetings when requested. There is always the opportunity for Service Managers from Cheshire East to join the tracking meetings. One of the Team Managers within the Cared for Children and Care Leavers service attends the monthly Adoption Counts tracking meetings and is an active participant. The tracking meetings are an opportunity for scrutiny and performance management following the whole cohort of Cheshire East children where there is or may be a plan of adoption.

The 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. This cohort is rigorously 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 form 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.
- 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 of concern to be escalated and discussed with Cheshire East 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.

We are currently tracking the plans for 121 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 15 children where later in life letters and/or life story books are outstanding. Workers have also been identified to complete this work.

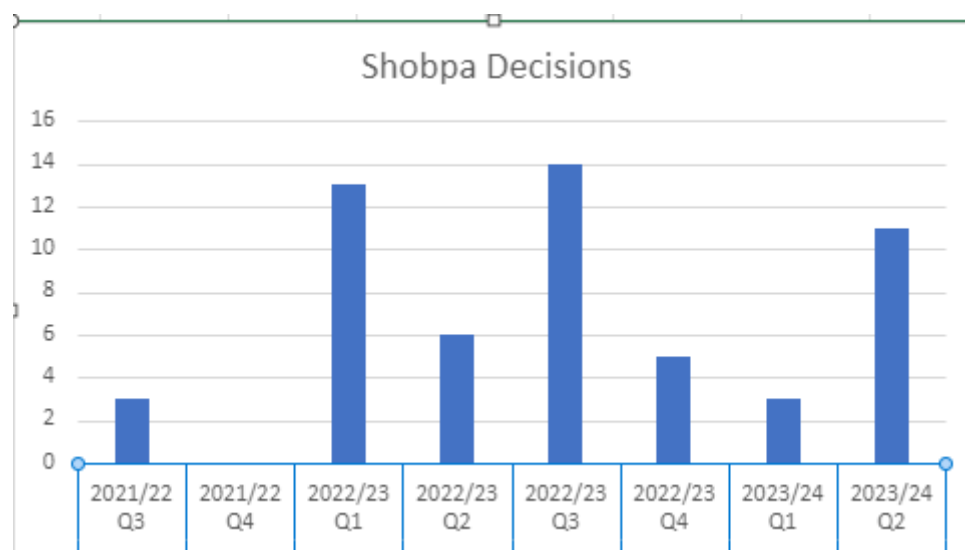
The team manager in the RAA linked to Cheshire East attends the monthly tracking meetings and she, alongside the dedicated family finders, work in the Cheshire East office bases alongside some of the social work teams, attend legal gateway meetings and pre-filing meetings to provide advice and a view where required.

Adoption Counts recognises the importance of maintaining positive working relationships within Cheshire East and continues in working with colleagues offering advice, guidance, and support in relation to any adoption related issues.

Performance

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

Number of children made subject to SHOBPA decisions per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Total
	1	2	0	3	6	2	14



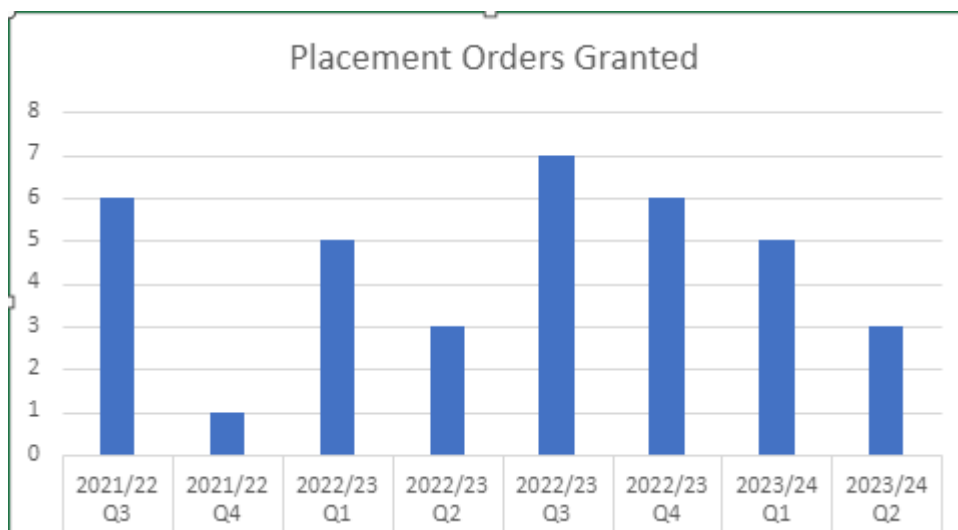
Fourteen children had a care plan of adoption and SHOBPA (should be placed for adoption) was agreed by the ADM (Agency Decision Maker). The decision that adoption would be in the child's best interest was made following all other permanence options for the child having been ruled out.

Five of these children (36%) are part of sibling groups.

The number of SHOBPA decisions agreed as part of the children's care plan in this period last year has decrease by 5 (26%), however, 30 SHOBPA decisions were agreed in total between 1.4.22 – 31.3.23 and the number of SHOBPA decisions in Q3 is up on last year so it should not be taken that SHOBPA decisions are on the decline.

3.2 Children subject to Placement Orders

Number of children made subject to Placement Orders per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Total
	1	3	1	0	2	1	8



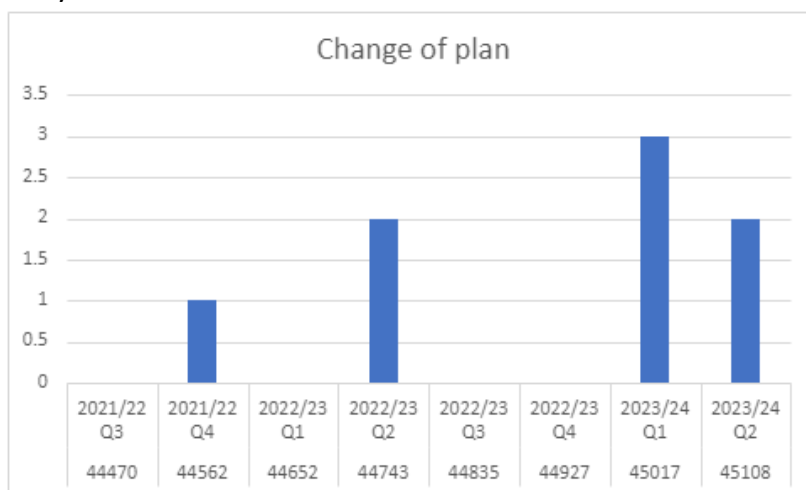
Eight Placement Orders were granted in the period - the same number were granted within this time frame last year.

Six of the children who were granted Placement Orders (PO's) within the period have subsequently been placed with their adoptive families, this includes three children who were originally placed in early permanence placements.

The average length of time from a child entering care to receiving their placement order (A20) during this period is 352 days, this has increased by 26 days compared to the same period last year. This figure was impacted by one child in particular whose care plan following a period of time in a mother and baby placement was initially one of rehabilitation home. Unfortunately, this could not be achieved and following a further assessment period, the child was then placed in a foster to adopt placement.

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

Five children had a change of care plan away from adoption, compared to three in the same period last year.



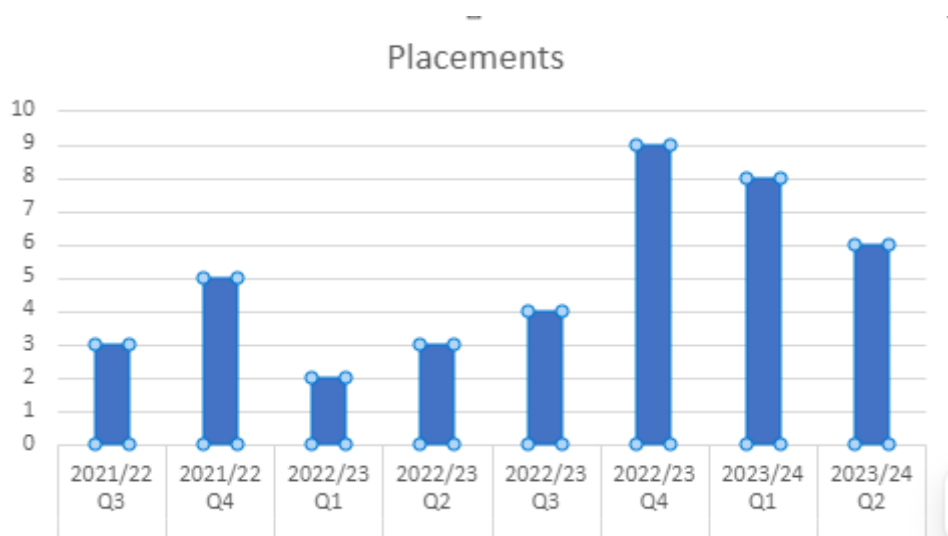
The children were two sibling pairs, one aged 8 and 6, and the other aged 5 & 2, these children had their SHOBPA decision reversed and have remained with their foster carers under a SGO. The remaining child was placed with an extended family member.

3.4 The Numbers of Children who wait longer than 12 months after PO for an adoptive family.

One child aged 7 years waited more than 12 months from Placement Order to be placed with their adoptive family. The child was part of a sibling pair and following assessment of the childrens individual needs, the decision was taken to place the children separately. The child needed to be placed externally and although several potential families were identified, it was not possible to progress with these links.

3.5 Number of Children Placed for Adoption during period.

Number of children placed for adoption per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Total
	2	2	4	2	2	2	14



Fourteen children have been placed for adoption in the period. This is nine more children (+180%) compared to the same period last year. 79% were placed with adopters approved by Adoption Counts.

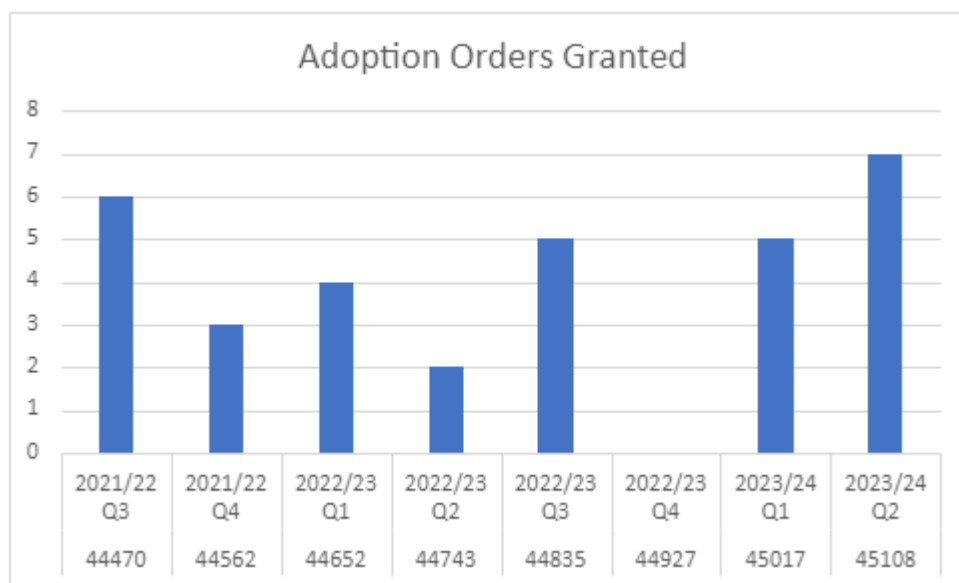
The A10 average for these children is 688 days. This is 262 days over the national indicator of 426 days and has increased by 63 days (10%) compared to the same period last year. However, more children were placed within the target A10 timing of 426 days than the previous year and the averages have been impacted by two children whose respective

timings are 1658 and 1453 days. One child was a 7 year old of African ethnicity who need to be placed in a family who could support direct contact with his birth family, the other is the child mentioned previously who waited over 12 months. Another child outside of the measure had experienced an adoption disruption and further assessment of his needs was required prior to re-commencing family finding. Another child outside of the measure had their placement order delayed to enable further parenting assessments to be completed and four children experienced delay in proceedings due to connected persons assessments.

The A2 average for these children is 254 days. This is an increase of 148 days (140%) from the same time frame last year and is 133 days above the national indicator of 121 days. However, the majority of these placements (eight children) were placed within the target of 121 days, timeliness for these eight children is excellent with an average of 81 days. The two children mentioned above were outside of the timescale for the reasons noted with respective A2 figures of 897 and 1011 days.

3.6 Number of children adopted.

Number of children made subject to Adoption Orders per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Total
	2	1	2	1	3	3	12



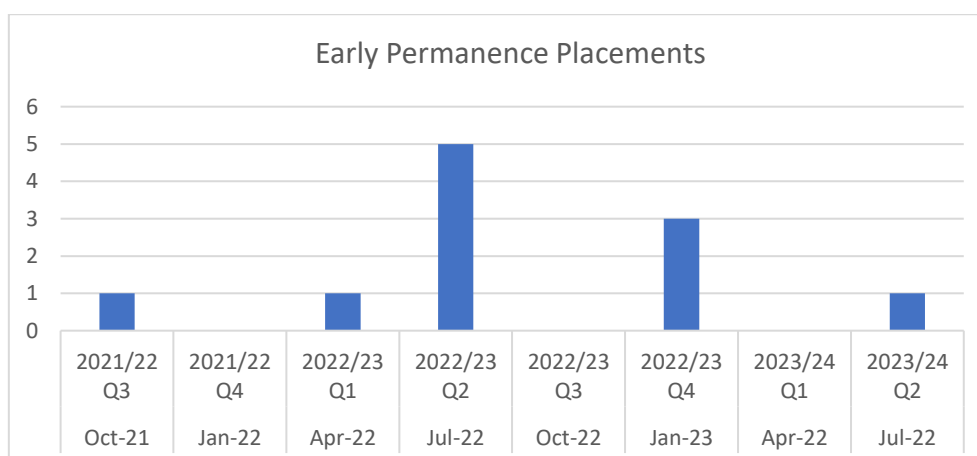
Twelve children have been adopted in Q1 & Q2 which is six more (100%) compared to the same period last year. The A10 average for these children is 559 days which is an increase of 59 days in comparison to the same period last year. The children outside of the measure experienced delays due to carrying out connected person assessments, establishing paternity,

completing viability assessments and a period of reassessment following birth parents separating.

The A2 average is 118 Days, three days below the threshold and an improvement of 94 days on last year. Seven children were adopted within the threshold of 121 days. The children who experienced delay include a sibling pair who had been living with their grandparents and needed the period between match and placement to be extended to allow the adopters to meet with the grandparents and ease the transition. Prospective adopters were identified within timescales for another child, however, there was a high level of uncertainty with regards to his future health needs and it took longer to find a family with the skills and capacity to meet his lifelong needs.

3.7 Early Permanency

Number of children placed in a Foster to Adopter placement							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Total
	0	0	0	0	2	0	2



Two children were placed in early permanence placements during this period. This child was placed with carers temporarily approved by Manchester’s Agency Decision Maker as foster carers under regulation 25A of the Care Planning Regulations. One child was placed in the same period last year. Both children have now been placed for adoption.

3. Quality of Reports

CPRs (child permanence reports) are audited by the Adoption Counts Team Manager linked to Cheshire East, 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.

Twelve 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	None recorded	Grand Total
SHOBPA			5	7		12
Panel			10	2		12

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.

4. Recruitment of Adopters

4.1 Approvals

There have been 35 families approved as adopters during this period, this is 2 less than the previous 6 months (1.10.22– 31.3.23) and 7 less for the same period last year (1.4.22 – 30.9.22). This is a decrease of -17% compared to the same period last year and has remained at this level into Q3. Nationally approvals are down -12% so we are performing below this average.

At the end of the period (30th September 2023), there were 42 families in Stage One, 9 in between Stage One and Stage Two, and 36 in Stage Two; a total of 87 families in the assessment process. This is a slight increase on the number at the end of the previous six months which was 85. It is an increase of 9 families compared to end of the same time last year.

Enquiry numbers have decreased with 772 received over these six months. This is 241 less than the previous 6 months (1.10.22– 31.3.23), and 31 less than the same period last year (1.4.22 – 30.9.22).

The spike in increase for that previous six months was not typical and was thought to be enquiries received from families who had delayed their enquiry during the main Covid period. The 772 received in this period is higher than comparable period pre Covid.

Although many of these enquiries are merely requests for information packs, with no further contact, the agency feel these are still of high importance as those enquirers may enquire again in the future, when they are ready to speak further, and will hopefully come back to the original agency they enquired with. The source of our enquiries remains predominantly web based, and social media ads, so we continue with our investment in our promotion through Google Adwords and Facebook.

Source	Enquiries
Online	629
Local Council referral / website	24
Social Media	34
Recommendation from friend / relative	7
Other	2
Outdoor Advertising	2
Event /info Stand	24
Radio	1
Magazine/Newspaper	1
Second Time Adopters	2
Previous Adoption Enquiry	46

Numbers of initial meetings have decreased in line with the numbers of enquiries. There have been 65 in this period, which is 32 less than the previous 6 months (1.10.22– 31.3.23), and 9 less than the same period last year (1.4.22 – 30.9.22).

Registration of interest's (which is the formal application to be assessed as prospective adopters) have not decreased. 65 were received, of which 8 were fast-track applications (second time adopters or foster carers). This was 1 more than the previous 6 months (1.10.22– 31.3.23), and 22 more than the same period last year (1.4.22 – 30.9.22).

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.

4.2 Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

No referrals were made to the IRM during this period.

4.3 Partner/step-parent adoption enquiries

Our Recruitment Team received 10 partner / step-parent adoption enquiries from Cheshire East in the period, which is 5 less than the same period last year (1.4.22 – 30.9.22). We are finding in general that the numbers received are comparable with the numbers received pre Covid.

All 10 enquiries resulted in a meeting taking place with a social worker, which is 5 more than the same period last year. Meetings with Cheshire East residents made up 53% of the total meetings in the period.

3 applications were accepted during this period, which is the same number as last year.

4.4 Information events

These events continued to be held 'virtually' on a fortnightly basis, where potential adopters watch a live presentation from the Recruitment Manager and a Social Worker, followed by a film with some of our adopters talking about their experiences.

100 families watched an event during this period. This was relatively low compared to other periods. For a short period of time, we had been steering enquiries from out of our five local authority areas to their local RAA/VAA's, due to receiving a lot of 'out of area' families approaching us. This was reversed when we identified the drop in the numbers attending information events.

The number of families attending these events compared to the number moving to the next stage, will always seem higher due to us still inviting people to watch the event when they may not be in a position to move forward. This is with the hope that when they are wishing to apply, they will return to us in the future.

4.5 Training groups

During this period, 3 day face to face adopter preparation training groups continued to be held monthly.

51 families attended these groups over the 6 month period.

4.6 Marketing and Recruitment Campaigns

Our marketing activity remained consistent during this period. 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.

We attended the main Pride events across the region too.

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 has been booked for National Adoption Week, which is scheduled for 16th – 22nd October 2023. We are running 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.

5. Compliments, comments, and complaints

Description - compliments
Feedback from adopters who were complimentary about the support and service they received throughout the adoption process. They referenced the hard work, skill and efficiency shown in their sensitive and complex case. They stated that all who have come into contact with the child and the adopters reference the great social work practice shown throughout the process.
Praise for a social worker who was described by an adopter as ‘amazing during our journey to officially adopting our son’. The couple referenced the social workers’ support, efficiency, guidance, and outstanding knowledge and how much faith they had in their work.
Compliments for a junior adoption support worker regarding their understanding, interest, care and support in their case. They were praised for their manner which was described as friendly, easy to talk, to whilst remaining professional. The adoptive family were very satisfied with the clear support identified and possible courses of action offered to them.
Description - complaints
No complaints were received in the period

6. Practice Developments in Adoption Counts

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 are also working in partnership with CoramBaaf with 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.

Enquiry numbers to assessment data relating to numbers and approved adopters is detailed in section 4.1. 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 35 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 - 0% were within timescales.
- Stage 2 - 36% 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 C SPR, overseas checks causing delay and previous partner references. In relation to systems and processes we are changing our structure to create a stage 1 team, so we can have better oversight and closer working with business support colleagues to reduce delays.

Adopter tracking meetings focus on monitoring 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. This should improve timeliness and assist us with identifying issues that cause repeated delays, both inside and outside of our control.

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. More applicants withdrew due to financial pressures, which has not been seen before.

Sufficiency meetings are held monthly and 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 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 there is a 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.

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 (Rights, Acceptance , Culture and Ethnicity) 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.

Nicola Booth

Operations Manager

June 2024

7. Adoption Support update

Adoption Support Six Month Performance Report 1 April to 30 September 2023

Adoption Support remains integral to our delivery for adopted children, new adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults, recognizing the life long journey. We remain committed to supporting families in the early transition stages of a placement and when an adoption order is made. Thereafter we recognize that new challenges may emerge 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

Centre of Excellence for Adoption Support

SERVICE OVERVIEW

The long term funding for this service has been agreed by the board until March 2025, with negotiations with Clinical Commissioners to secure longer term funding on a joint basis moving forward.

7.1 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 information in this report relates to the CAMHS component of the service. The service is partly co-located with Children’s Social Care which enables a co-ordinated 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 with some choice of venue. The service sits alongside other services that support the child’s home, care planning, relationships, health, education and hobbies. The iThrive model shows how the Adoption Psychology and Adoption Counts Adoption Support Service fit together.

[i-Thrive Diagram-JUNE 2023.pdf](#)

7.2 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

7.3 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.
- 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 **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, Social Care and Voluntary Adoption Agencies

(VAA,s)which enables professional challenge and support to make the best use of resources in our agency.

7.4 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. For comparison, last year’s total figures are included.

Managers continue to oversee and sign off all Adoption Support Fund applications, ensuring quality of application and consistency of requests. We have held a forum for our providers to inform them about the requirement for Outcome Measurement tools to be used in all applications; this is designed to offer a method for measuring outcomes for therapeutic intervention.

Nearly all regular providers and now registered on the Flexible Purchase System (FPS or The Chest). All have been evaluated by managers to ensure quality of providers for therapeutic provision.

	Year total 2022-2023
Number of applications made	541
Amount in £	1,912,477 Includes 48,562.76 matched funding for the highest need families

April-Sept 2023

LA name	Applicat ions	Total ASF Funding	Total Match Funding	Total Application	Total Application s with Matched Funding
Cheshire East	84	£280,544.38	£1,197.50	£281,741.88	1
Total for Adoption Counts	281	£908,228.12	£10,853.8	£919,082.00	5

7.5 Referrals / Enquiries for Adoption Support

The team has 980 open cases. These cases are:

	Previous year 2022-23	Q1 2023	Q2 2023	Comments
Open cases (these are broken down into categories below)	930	980	980	First Response, Long term and adopted adults cases
First Response	199	176	176	
Long term	529	597	597	
Adopted adults open cases	202	207	207	
Letterbox (not in figure above)	1360	1367	1367	See breakdown below

Further information about the case numbers, including specialist workers:

	Previous year 2022-23	Q1 2023	Q2 2023	Comments
Therapeutic social worker (cases counted in long term team above)	82	84	96	2.5 FTE
Education advisor	39	37	42	0.5 FTE
Adoption "Surgeries" completed	100	17	25	

Demand continues to be steady. The First Response team continue to offer advice and signposting, and for all families are encouraged to complete therapeutic parenting courses or sensory intervention, and / or are offered education support when they seek support initially. This is aimed at early intervention and a lighter touch for parents who need support. 19 surgeries were completed in April-June and 25 in Jul- Sept. First Response assessments have offered 40 families the chance to go straight to therapeutic parenting.

Families who have completed this therapeutic training or who have more complex needs on first presenting to the service, are booked for an Adoption Support Assessment. Waiting times for these are now rising, currently (December 23) at 21 weeks.

Ongoing support is offered to 597 children and their families. Social workers offer support around parenting, education, therapeutic interventions, and contribute to CIN, TAC, Safeguarding meetings and Children with disabilities colleagues. We have undertaken an evaluation of all the families currently receiving support and 58 of these are considered to be on the edge of care by their social worker or parents. These families will receive a high level of support and input.

Demand from adults accessing their records has remained steady and the team (1 FTE) continue to respond to the requests as soon as possible. There still remains a waiting period for many requests but most a dealt with within six months (this doesn't include any period of waiting to recover records from other LA's, VAA's or RAA's). Those who need a priority service receive this.

7.6 Keeping in Touch Team (formerly Letterbox Service)

The FSW letterbox workers continue to be supervised by a specialist manager, as a discreet team of workers within Adoption Support. This allows Adoption Counts to support birth families and adopters to provide the best they can for the child to promote their identity.

The **Keeping in Touch Team** (Letterbox) team are holding all contact referrals; this has 1394 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+. The team is working under pressure as rising numbers of families are requesting support with new in-person (direct contact) arrangements. We have developed guidance for social workers, families, and are contributing to national developments around maintaining relationships. This includes emphasising the value of relationships for adopted children from the preparation groups through to matching and placement.

Letterbox:

	Previous year 2022-23	Q1 2023	Q2 2023	Comments
Cheshire East	285	285	290	Data due to migrate by Feb 2024
Total	1367	1367	1394	

We anticipate a change in number for all cases recorded, starting from February 2024 onwards. We will be migrating data on to Charms which will enable us to record the number of exchanges as well as the number of children who send and receive letters; this will offer a more accurate insight into the way KITT is used.

7.7 Birth families

PAC-UK offer our independent birth parent counselling for all 5 LA's. We continue to have a positive working relationship with PAC-UK who continue to offer 1:1 support and an in-

person parent group. PAC-UK referral numbers are below. These are on target for using the full commissioned amount by the end of the period.

	Q1: Apr-Jun 2023	Q2: Jul-Sep 2023	Q3: Oct-Dec 2023	Q4: Jan-Mar 2024	Total 2023-24
Apr-Jun 2023	Jul-Sep 2023	Oct-Dec 2023	Jan-Mar 2024	2023-24	
Cheshire East	1	6			7
AC Total	11	12			23

7.8 Support Groups

Events for adopters continue and in this period we delivered a family event at Tatton Park Farm, which over 160 adopters and children attended. The feedback was very positive and families valued the opportunity to develop peer support, as evidenced in the quotes from parents below:

“[these events] are an invaluable source of support”

“...our children being able to socialise with other adopted children”

Evening workshops continue for parents, which offer training on specialist areas which affect adopted children. In this period we have delivered the following:

April – Helping your child with change in school

May – CATCH online

June – Supporting your child’s development through play

June 23 – Navigating the virtual world

July 23 – Supporting teens (the teenage brain)

July 23 – Life story work

September – Support in education (SEND)

October – Navigating the education system

November – Therapeutic parenting for primary age

Jan 24 – Sensory development for children

Jan 24 – Looking After Yourself for parents

Teen groups continue to offer a safe space for 14-16 year olds who have often found it harder to be part of a group, or not have the high level of support needed to participate in other

areas, and a new group created due to demand for 12-14 year olds. This has been well received and the parents have peer support sessions, so we enable parents to develop their networks with others.

Adopter Voice are commissioned by Adoption UK to offer our adoptive parents a way to feed back to our service. We have a new Communities & Engagement officer who joined them in November and we hope this will improve communication with volunteers. We have 4 forums arranged between now and October 2024 as well as our AAB meetings, and look forward to continuing to engage with our adopter voice community. The family rambles are well received with good attendance.

Adoption UK are commissioned to provide peer mentoring for families, where families can be linked up with another adopter who can offer a structured programme of 6 sessions of support. We continue to encourage families to use this resource, in early placement, for more established families, and in early permanence.

We have memberships to CATCH with online resources, webinars, training and support as well as a moderated parent forum.

Adoption Counts continues to work alongside our **Adoption Psychology** colleagues and offer consultations, training to workers, direct work with families, therapeutic groups for parents and children, and specialist assessments.

The project continues with the Institute of Public Care (Oxford Brookes). This will be a two-year research project into the impact of our multi-disciplinary Adoption Psychology service (APS). This will involve research with adoptive parents who have previously used the service, and those who are coming into the APS service to follow through as they undertake specialist assessments or interventions. It will aim to evaluate outcomes including the financial benefit of a multi-disciplinary team. Due to some information sharing challenges the project was delayed in starting, but has now begun (December 23).

Our **virtual school colleagues** continue to participate in a regular meeting, chaired by our Educational Psychologist, which is topic based and looks at the areas which matter most to adopters and professionals. This is intended to bring virtual schools P-LAC leads together to best meet the needs of adopted children.

We hold an adoption support **sub-board** which has invited representatives from each LA to attend, along with education and health colleagues. In October the sub-board have focussed on education so have proposed a conference with virtual head teachers, SENCOs, designated teachers, LA SW's, alongside our Adoption Matters colleagues, to look at transitions in education and we met again in December to work towards realising this goal. One of the main challenges will be in addressing the differing needs of adopted children

during their transition into their adoptive family, and the period of time children are out of education.

7.9 Practice Developments

A request has been made to the Board to consider extending the 2.5 additional staff seconded to this service, as a response to historic underfunding and demand increasing post-pandemic.

KITT has been re-branded to reflect the work taking place, and continues to develop the service for families wanting in-person keeping in touch (direct contact) arrangements. Some of these take place in a crisis situation where the young person has contacted birth family members already. As there has been a national focus on this area of support, we are seeing demand rise as families increasingly see the importance of maintaining links with birth family members for adopted children.

We have been developing guidance for workers, and a policy framework, to offer families a consistent and containing response when requesting this support.

Therapeutic social workers have been trained in Theraplay delivery and have successfully completed their first course for parents, without APS support. This means that we have a greater flexibility for the course delivery as well as being able to generate more income for the service. This has covered the costs of their training so further events will generate income.

Kristen Roberts

**Adoption Counts Adoption Panel
Adoption Panel Chair's 6 monthly report
April to September 2023**

**Adoption Counts Adoption Panel Chair's 6 monthly report:
April 2023 to September 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 as well as their committed and diligent support in the functioning of Panels

2. Overview of Panels

The arrangements for Panels brought about by the Covid pandemic situation have continued and the majority of Panels are still being held virtually using Microsoft Teams. This has been seen as the "normal way" to now conduct panels with many members and adopters having a preference for this arrangement. It is recognised however the benefit for applicants, social workers and panel members of meeting in person, in terms of building working relationships and ease of communication. On this basis in person panels have been re-introduced and any Panels which take place on a Wednesday are now in person.

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.

Panels usually begin at 9.15 or 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.

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 individuals and we need to proactively encourage new members that reflect the racial and cultural diversity of the area that Adoption Counts serves, as well as ensuring that members

reflect wider diversity, for example in terms of gender, age, disability, socio economic background and life experience.

During this period, we have had regular attendance by 3 of the Local Authority's Paediatricians and this has been very much welcomed, however for 1 Paediatrician this is limited to the start of the meeting (due to clinic arrangements) 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 those paediatricians that currently support our work, and this might allow them to commit to the full panel meeting. Discussion is under way with the two other Medical Advisors who do not regularly attend Panel to try to resolve this issue.

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. This issue has been raised with the ADM for each of the RAA local authorities and a response is awaited.

Panel Member Appraisal

Most Panel Members have had their appraisal with approximately 70% of appraisals having been completed in person.

Panel Member Training

Adoption Counts continues to run two Panel Development Days per calendar year; the last one took place in July 2023. This included:

- Adoption support and post adoption contact
- Learning tables that provided an overview of some of the top up training the agency delivers including BLM & Diversity, Early Permanence and contact
- Attachment Style Interviews in adoption assessments.

Feedback from the Panel Members who attended the training was positive, in particular in relation to the Black Lives Matter and Diversity training.

The next Panel Member training is booked in for January 2024.

Panel Chairs have continued to meet 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 second half of the meeting, this supports collaborative discussion about issues relating to all 5 authorities and promotes consistency of both practice and paperwork. Comments from ADMs are particularly useful and much valued, however not all ADM's attend and therefore 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 April 2023 - 30 September 2023)

Panel Business							
	No. of panels	No. of items considered	Matches	Approvals	SHOBPA	De-reg	Adopter review
Panels	26	78	42**	35*	1	0	0

*1 approval was a recommendation by the Social Worker that the applicants were unsuitable to adopt. This was agreed with by Panel, and ADM

**49 children matched – 36 single children and 5 sibling groups of 2 & 1 sibling group of 3
Out of the 42 matches for 49 children, 10 were fostering for adoption – which is 24% of the total matches and 20% of the children.

Data

CPR/PAR

For the above period, 49 CPRs were presented to Panel (this included seven sibling groups of two) and 35 PARs.

RAA data of quality of reports. All agencies					
Matches, 49 CPRs *			Approvals, 35 PARs		
Outstanding	5	10%	Outstanding	6	17.1%
Good	36	73.0%	Good	27	77.2%
In need of improvement	8	17%	In need of improvement	2	5.7%
Inadequate	0	0%	Inadequate	0	0%

***1 report was ungraded as panel deferred and has not been included in any of the figures**

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 a significant improvement at 83% than last quarter's figure of 77.35%.

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 90% in the previous quarter to 94.3%.

SHOBPA

CPR Agency specific data within the RAA – as a % out of total of 49 reports**				
Agency	Outstanding	Good	In need of improvement	Inadequate
Cheshire East (12)	0 and 0%	10 and 20%	2 and 4%	0 and 0%

CPR Agency specific data per Local Authority – as a % within each LA				
Agency	Outstanding	Good	In need of improvement to be good	Inadequate
Cheshire East out of 12	0 and 0%	10 and 83%	2 and 17%	0 and 0%

5. Panel Scrutiny – timescales

Agency specific data matches					
Agency	Total children matched	A1 met	A1 not met	A2 met	A2 not met
Cheshire East	12	2 and 17%	10 and 83%	7 and 58%	5 and 42%

**SHOBPA not included.

Comments

There is wide variation in the above figures across local authorities, however a number of factors impact timelines of placement such as age on entry into care, sibling group, complexity of need, etc.

Each local authority will be analysing their own cohort of children via the national scorecards and comparisons with both regional and statistical neighbours.

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 15 evaluations were completed for this half year. (last quarter in brackets)

Adopters	Adoption social workers	Children's social workers	Family Finders
4	6	3	2

Question	Score
Before attending panel were you clear about panel's function?	4.53 (4.67)
Were you given sufficient notice about the date and time of panel?	Yes 5.0 (No data)
Were panels members introduced to you?	5.0 (5.0)
Did panel members treat you with courtesy and respect?	5.0 (4.67)
Did panel members seem familiar with your case?	4.93 (4.8)
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?	5.0 (4.6)
Were the recommendations made by the Panel Chair clear?	5.0 (4.8)
Overall gradings	4.93 (4.6)

Additional comments from Social Workers and Family Finders:

"Panel Chair and members were all professional and friendly – Panel can be overwhelming at times for workers and applicants but more recently they have been more personable and I think allows applicants to speak more freely. The panel questions were provided 2 days prior to Panel which was the earliest I have had these – this was brilliant as allowed more time to read over them. The questions were well thought out and feedback helpful for developing my assessments. Lastly the feedback was provided immediately afterward which I really appreciate."

"This was a lovely panel to attend and also for my adopters who were incredibly nervous. Everyone engaged with warmth and undivided attention and welcomed my adopters on to panel. Chair made it very clear what was going to happen for them and the panel came over as very cohesive and well run. Thank you so much. Also had a sense that all the papers had been very carefully scrutinized"

*"The panel were friendly, humorous and good natured, which fostered a relaxed atmosphere."
"Everyone was relaxed and welcoming"*

"I didn't feel the need to clarify any points as I had a sense that the documents had been well read. I also felt that [Social worker's] very detailed work on the Panel documentation was

recognized and it was because of such detail that the questions asked were actually quite easy for the adopters to respond to."

"The warmth and enthusiasm of everyone. Also a real sense of the 'risks' in the placement but this was presented with sensitivity and yet the factors recommending the match were verbalised in the summary."

"Panel members made their wishes clear, well communicated, questions asked in simple form, process during panel explained and managed well, friendly approach by all"

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

"This was a very serious meeting that it 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 there comments which were appropriate. There was also positive feed back for the professionals which is very welcome and in my experiences unusual."

"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."

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"I felt the panel members understood the case and their questions were pertinent. This was a very serious meeting that it 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".

Feedback from one social worker related to a case where there was a negative recommendation, comments made regarding this case were as follows:

"Panel's function is to make a recommendation based on the written and verbal information in front of them related to the applicants. It was therefore disappointing that a panel member abstained from making a recommendation as someone in her personal life made positive changes in similar circumstances to the applicants and she wanted to point out that people do change. It was noted by the chair however that there was no evidence of the applicants having the ability to change..... The panel member referred to above appeared to have limited insight in to the information and analysis around the applicant's ability to be adaptable, reflective and to grow. She felt that her personal experience with a family member's own growth and reflection meant that the applicant's had the same ability..... I understand that panel members are able to abstain from making a recommendation where they feel unable to, but I remain concerned about the panel member's reasoning and I hope that she was challenged and debriefed by the chair following the panel, for her own learning."

In reflecting on the feedback of this social worker it is identified that the role of the Panel Chair is vital here in terms of providing appropriate challenge both within Panel discussions and also individually following Panel, and within members' appraisal. In addition there is a potential training need for Panel members to ensure that they objectively consider Panel cases.

Adopter Feedback

"Going to panel was very daunting but we were made to feel very welcome and we actually enjoyed the process and meeting the panel members. Once we were there we felt relaxed and it didn't take long at all, so it was a very good experience. Thank you!"

"All the panel members where lovely really made me feel at ease and ask I started to answer my question it made me feel less nervous and like a conversation"

"They were straight forward and really empathetic with my answers and body language , clear they were listening to my answer"

“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.”

Conclusion

In summary within this last six month period Adoption Counts has seen on-going progress, in particular within the grading of CPRS and PARs. Social workers working across all of the 5 local authorities that comprise the RAA have delivered a higher proportion of child focussed, well written reports that have enabled Panel in its decision making process. Quality paperwork supports the effective functioning of Panel, reducing the length of Panel discussion and questioning for both social workers and applicants.

Feedback from both social workers and adopters attending Panel is consistently good, providing evidence of the quality of preparation and scrutiny undertaken by Panel members, as well as the creation of a welcoming and positive Panel culture.

The writer would like to express her thanks in particular to the high quality administrative support delivered by the Adoption Counts Panel Admin team. Papers are consistently provided on time with the minutes produced providing a fair and accurate account of Panel discussions.

Recommendations:

The agency should consider:

- 1 Continuing their work to seek to increase the number of Paediatricians available to support Panel, specifically the two Medical Advisors who do not regularly attend Panel.
- 2 Ensuring consistency across all 5 local authorities of the availability of Medical Advisors for consultations with prospective adopters prior to Matching Panel
- 3 Delivering social worker training across all of the 5 local authorities to support workers in writing CPRs that accurately and sensitively consider how a child will receive and respond to words and terminology used in this document when they read it in later life. Whilst it is accepted that some progress has been made in this area there remains a lack of consistency across all 5 local authorities
- 4 The rationalisation of paperwork for Panel items. Can paperwork be rationalised and consolidated to reduce the volume of Panel paperwork and to ensure that Panel members can focus on the central issues? For example are multiple copies of a child's medical assessment required in every case?
- 5 Ongoing work to widen the diversity of Panel membership, from the perspective of issues such as race and culture, age, gender, socio economic background and life experience.
- 6 In response to feedback from the July 2023 Panel member training explore running a more extended training event around BLM and Diversity to develop member's cultural awareness and competencies.
- 7 Training for Panel members regarding the giving of reasons for decisions, to ensure a welfare checklist focussed and an evidenced based approach to decision making.

Naomi Kelso, Independent Panel Chair

19.4.24