



Supporting  
families  
through  
adoption

Cheshire East Council

## Adoption Service – Annual Report

01.04.19 – 31.3.20

## **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<sup>st</sup> March 2020. Plans for children are dynamic and develop every day and the picture will have changed at the point this is read.

## **2. Working with Cheshire East Council**

Since going live, Adoption Counts has had responsibility to discharge Cheshire East's responsibilities as an Adoption Agency. The working relationship between the LA and the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) has been fundamental to the success so far of the partnership working and has been embedded at all levels. 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 invited to attend the quarterly operations group meetings. These provide 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. There is a shared ownership of the agenda and a range of issues are discussed with very positive communication and outcomes as a result. The group has identified the need for input from the RAA to ensure that staff in the LAs maintain their knowledge and benefit from updates to practice and research. For example:

- The fostering team manager has been an active member of the moving to adoption transitions steering group. This is concentrating on standardising practice using recent research from the University of East Anglia about the transition from a foster placement to an adoptive home.
- Colleagues from Cheshire East have attended a conference exploring practice developments adoption transitions.

The Operations Manager linked to Cheshire East is in regular 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.

The Head of Service for cared for children and care leavers and the Service Manager for cared for children and care leavers attend the monthly Adoption Counts tracking meetings and are active participants. 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 including:

- 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 throughout 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 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.
- Children requiring legal revocation of placement orders and “Should be placed for adoption” rescinds.

There is no doubt that the efficacy of these meetings is improved when care planning representatives from the local authority (LA) attends as this ensures a robust joint approach.

The team manager in the RAA linked to Cheshire East also attends the monthly tracking meetings and she, alongside the three dedicated Family Finders, regular work in Cheshire East office bases alongside the social work teams, attend legal gateway meetings and final care planning meetings to provide advice and a view where required. Links between Cheshire East and the RAA seem to be embedded well.

### **3. 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	August	Sept	
	1	1	1	5	1	3	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	<b>Total</b>
	2	3	0	1	2	3	23

#### **3.2 Children subject to Placement Orders**

Number of children made subject to Placement Orders per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	
	3	2	1	0	1	5	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	<b>Total</b>
	2	5	1	1	1	3	25

Out of the 25 Placement Orders granted within the period:

Ten children have subsequently been placed for adoption with two of the children adopted by their foster carers.

Six children have been linked with prospective adopters, five of these children are within the A2 threshold.

There are nine children for whom a Placement Order has been granted within the last six months but are yet to be placed. Within this cohort there are:

two sets of siblings – a sibling group of three and a sibling group of four who are placed in foster care together – the care plan is to place separately with adopters in two sibling pairs.

Family finding is currently on hold for the sibling group of three who all have complex needs and are currently accessing therapeutic support in preparation for permanence. A link has been identified for one of the sibling pairs.

Family finding is also on hold for a two year old little boy – a link had been identified but birth parents have applied to the court to contest the Placement Order application.

Family finding continues for the remaining three children. In relation to identifying 'patterns' two of the children are older and a sibling group and the remaining child has a diagnosis of foetal alcohol syndrome.

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

There have been three children who have had a change of plan:

Two children were returned to the care of their parents following further assessments in proceedings.

The remaining child was an older child who had experienced significant neglect alongside a number of moves. Extensive family finding took place for a 14-month period, unfortunately, an adoptive family was not identified. The plan for this child therefore changed to one of long term fostering.

### **3.4 Number of Children Placed for Adoption during year.**

Number of children placed for adoption per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	
	1	1	2	1	2	1	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	<b>Total</b>
	2	2	3	1	2	1	19

74% of the children placed for adoption were placed with prospective adopters approved by Adoption counts.

For sixteen of the children placed for adoption during this period, it has taken longer than the A2 measure of 121 days to achieve permanence.

Four of the children were older sibling pairs. Each sibling pair had complex emotional and health needs, their A2 measures were 377 and 181 respectively.

One child had complex health needs and a genetic deletion, his A2 measure was 265 days.

One child had significant development delay, his A2 measure was 197.

An interagency placement was required for two of the children due to identified geographical risks, their A2 measures were 227 and 133 respectively.

Three of the children were older with complex health needs and disabilities, family finding searches were completed, the children were then adopted by their foster carers. Their A2 measures were 338, 711 and 456 respectively.

Further medical information was required in respect of genetic issues for one child, her A2 measure was 349.

A 5 year old little girl who needed careful preparation and support in readiness for a move to an adoptive family. Her A2 measure was 164.

A child who was placed just 7 days outside the A2 threshold as further medical information was required before proceeding to match.

A 4 year old little girl with complex health needs. She needed to be placed separately to her sibling, the family finding search took longer as she had experienced significant neglect, had complex needs and her birth family applied for leave to contest her Placement Order. Her A2 measure was 587.

A 3 year old little boy with significant health needs and a serious skin condition. His A2 measure was 834.

In terms of identifying 'patterns' for these children, the majority had complex health and / or care needs, several children were also older or part of a sibling pair. Whilst it has taken longer to achieve permanence for the children identified above, it has been important to ensure families are identified who possess the right skill sets and experiences to meet the needs of the children. Adoption Counts and Cheshire East continue to work together from an early stage in care planning to ensure adoption plans for children who may wait longer i.e. sibling groups and older children, are achievable and the right plans for those individual children.

### 3.5 Number of children adopted

Number of children made subject to Adoption Orders per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	
	1	2	2	2	0	3	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
	2	0	1	0	0	3	16

For this cohort, the average number of days for A1 is 486 days, which is 60 days above the threshold of 426 days but within the overall average for England. From the 16 children adopted, 9 were within the A1 threshold. For the remaining 7 children outside of the threshold:

A six year old little girl with a measure of 627 days, had complex health needs and a disability. Family finding therefore took longer to ensure prospective adopters were identified who could meet her individual needs.

One child was placed on a fostering for adoption plan – the care proceedings were protracted due to the request for independent / additional assessments. His measure was 641 days.

A four year old little boy with a measure of 654 days, had complex health and developmental needs. Family finding therefore took longer and an inter-agency placement was required.

A two year old little boy with a measure of 446 days, had complex health and developmental needs. Family finding therefore took longer and an inter-agency placement was required.

Two of the children were older with complex health needs and disabilities, family finding searches were completed, the children were then adopted by their foster carers. Their A1 measures were, 744 and 846 respectively.

A three year old little girl had protracted care proceedings due to a connected persons and independent assessments. Her measure was 755 days.

For A2, the average number of days for this cohort is 231 days which is 110 days over the threshold of 121 days. From the 16 children adopted, three were adopted within the A2 measure and a further five within 4 – 6 months. For the remaining 8 children it has taken over six months to find a permanent family. Whilst it has taken longer to place the majority of children with an adoption plan during this period, many of the children have had extremely complex health or developmental needs, are aged 4 years or over and / or part of a sibling group and therefore are children who are likely to wait longer in achieving permanence through adoption. It is positive outcome for these children that whilst it has taken longer, permanence has been achieved within the right families.

The children outside of the threshold are as described above with A2 measures of 140, 144, 135, 176, 315, 207, 240, 383, 265, 456, 711, 227, 127.

### **3.6 Early Permanency**

Two children were placed in early permanence placements during this period. The children were placed with carers temporarily approved by Cheshire East's Agency Decision Maker as foster carers under regulation 25A of the care planning regulations on 12/11/2019 and 02/12/2019.

## **4. Quality of Reports**

Child permanence reports are audited as routine at point of should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA) decision and are re-audited prior to submission to the adoption matching panel.

Fifteen audits have been completed. Of those:

Eight were graded as good and seven as in need of improvement at point of SHOBPA.

All were graded as good at point of matching panel.

The available statistics evidence there have been improvements in the quality of paperwork between SHOBPA and matching panel during this period as seven CPR's have moved from requiring improvement to good. This highlights there is a robust and supportive auditing process in place. Adoption Counts will continue to support practitioners and managers in

implementing the advice they are given to ensure all CPRs reach a standard of 'good' by matching panel.

## 5. Adoption Support

Adoption Support remains integral to our delivery for adopted children, new 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 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.

### 5.1 Centre of Excellence for Adoption Support

**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 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.
- 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

Whilst this service provides an annual report on the overall outcomes of delivering its service aims they have continued to support families early in their adoption journey. New adopters have the option of attending a Foundations for Attachment Therapeutic parenting group and a Theraplay group.

Following the successful pilot of the Theraplay group in the summer of 2019 it has been rolled out as a programme available to new adopters , with family finders and recruitment and assessment workers identifying the families to attend within the first 6 -12 months of placement.

The programme was adapted from Theraplay®, which is a therapeutic approach which focuses on attachment strengthening activities designed to promote pro-social skills, self-regulation, trust and a positive sense of self.



The intervention focuses on enhancing attachment based parenting techniques through engaging in playful, fun games and activities. The group provides parents with an opportunity to play with their pre-school child in a structured and supportive environment, with other adoptive children and their families. Each week families are introduced to different games and activities that are based on the four dimensions of Theraplay: structure; nurture; engagement; and challenge. Each week ideas and information are shared about activities and parenting strategies that could be tried at home.

The group is led by Dr Sarah McIntosh, Senior Educational Psychologist (One Education) and facilitated by Joanne Lomas, Therapeutic Social Worker (Adoption Counts). The outcomes of attending the group were evaluated and highlighted the following;

- Increased parental confidence in relating to their child and in parenting them.
- Children displaying increased enjoyment and emotional progression
- Extended family members joined the course to establish a competent support network
- Early identification of additional support
- Additional early support implemented post group

The Foundations for Attachment programme is delivered jointly by Dr Kate Bonser Clinical Psychologist and Katy Peacock, therapeutic SW.

It is an introductory, interactive 6 session learning and support programme designed by Kim Golding. The course recognises the challenges in parenting children who have relationship difficulties, displaying resistant or challenging behaviours. It provides guidance on how to: nurture attachment relationships, build emotional connections, regulate stress and support behaviour through 'connection with correction'.

This then enables families to receive early therapeutic support to ground the family securely in recognising their child's emotional needs and how to meet them. Investing in adoption support at this early stage is intended to maximise the outcomes for the children.

#### **5.4 Multi Agency Resource Panel**

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

In this period the panel have considered 7 requests for match funding. The panel have scrutinised the requests and challenged some of the length and frequency of the therapeutic plans.

<b>Authority</b>	<b>Decision</b>
Manchester	3 recommended
Stockport	1 recommended
Trafford	1 recommended
Cheshire East	2 recommended
Salford	0

## 5.5 Adoption Support Fund Applications

We have continued to access the ASF to provide additional therapy for adoptive families using the Adoption Counts portal, 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.

There have been 187 applications to the ASF, in this period totalling £669,904.61, three group applications – the remaining applications are broken down below.

Local Authority	Number of applications	Amount of funding agreed
Stockport	28	£96,535.99
Manchester	42	£181,574.29
Trafford	26	£99,254.50
Salford	25	£53,800.05
Cheshire East	63	£212,326.75
group applications	3	£26,413.03

There is now confirmation from the Government that the ASF will continue for a further year until April 2021.

## 5.6 Referrals / Enquiries for Adoption Support

We are currently working with **571 open** cases (excluding Letterbox) an increase from the first 6 months of the year.

We have a further **412** cases awaiting allocation, **197 children for** Adoption Support, **180** adults for Access to records. The remaining 35 are general enquiries, for advice & signposting. All of the Adoptive families have received initial advice and guidance and a surgery appointment where required, but are awaiting a named SW for longer term support. Whilst waiting, families are linked to a First Response SW as a point of contact, so do still receive a service from Adoption Support.

Our service to Adopted Adults is not as responsive, and the waiting time for an office visit to progress with access to records is considerably longer.

The table below indicates gives the data for each Local Authority in terms of those open / allocated cases and those awaiting an allocated SW (excluding allocated birth families 30)

The numbers for other Local Authorities included in the data, relates to other local authorities who have placed children in our RAA and are transferring over, or for the adopted adults, the records are held with one of the LAs in our RAA, rather than the person residing in our RAA.

Local Authority <b>ALLOCATED</b>	Adopted Adult April–Sept 2019	Oct- March 2020	Adoptive Family April- Sept 2019	Oct- march 2020	Total April- Sept	Oct- March 2020
<b>STOCKPORT</b>	19	17	74	75	93	92
<b>MANCHESTER</b>	31	29	69	87	100	113
<b>SALFORD</b>	11	12	48	45	59	57
<b>CHESHIRE EAST</b>	8	12	115	110	123	122
<b>TRAFFORD</b>	12	9	83	86	95	95
<b>Other LAs</b>	23	33	20	26	43	59
	<b>104</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>429</b>	<b>513</b>	<b>541</b>

Local Authority <b>WAITING</b>	Adopted Adult April–Sept 2019	Oct- March 2020	Adoptive Family April- Sept 2019	Oct- march 2020	Total April- Sept	Oct- March 2020
<b>STOCKPORT</b>	13	36	29	34	42	70
<b>MANCHESTER</b>	30	75	23	45	53	120
<b>SALFORD</b>	7	15	17	14	24	29
<b>CHESHIRE EAST</b>	21	41	50	46	71	87
<b>TRAFFORD</b>	11	13	23	25	34	38
<b>Other LAs</b>	48	0	18	33	66	33
	<b>130</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>377</b>

During the period October 2019 – March 2020 we received **219** new referrals into the Adoption Support Service, This is a reduction on the first half of the year, as calls are being redirected appropriately by business support at the initial stage of the enquiry.

The number of requests are defined below;

(Please note; this does not include the Letterbox service, which is recorded separately.)

April- Sept 2019 Local Authority	Adopted Adult	Adoptive Family	Birth Family	Advice & Signposting	
<b>STOCKPORT</b>	7	30	2	5	44
<b>MANCHESTER</b>	15	29	1	5	50
<b>SALFORD</b>	5	26	0	1	32
<b>CHESHIRE EAST</b>	8	34	0	1	43
<b>TRAFFORD</b>	4	19	0	3	26
<b>UNDEFINED</b>	5	4	1	5	14
<b>OTHER LA</b>	30	15	0	4	49
	<b>74</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>259</b>

Oct- March 2020 Local Authority	Adopted Adult	Adoptive Family	Birth Family	Advice & Signposting	
STOCKPORT	10	21	0	3	34
MANCHESTER	18	32	1	3	54
SALFORD	9	16	0	1	26
CHESHIRE EAST	19	42	0	5	66
TRAFFORD	2	21	0	1	24
UNDEFINED	0	2	0	1	3
OTHER LA	0	8	2	6	16
	<b>58</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>219</b>

The first response model remains in place, to encourage better screening of calls and redirecting to universal services where appropriate. If a call is clearly adoption specific then advice, support and counselling can be offered via telephone and may be all that is required.

If it becomes clear from discussion that there is a need to gather more detailed information then the family will be invited into a surgery appointment to conduct an Adoption Support Assessment of need.

Of the referrals into the service for both Adoptive families 100% of adoptive families requiring an assessment / interview have been offered a surgery appointment within a 4-6-week timeframe.

We have not been able to meet the demand for ATR cases as readily and our service standards for this aspect of adoption support are below what we would want to deliver. We are developing a more systemic approach with a better use of business support to progress ATR cases more speedily.

The **Adoption Support team staffing establishment** is as follows -

- 2.2 FTE team managers ( 4 staff )
- 9.1 FTE Adoption Support Social Workers of which 7.3 FTE Social Work roles are filled ( 13 permanent staff ,1 agency worker - vacancies of 1.8 fte)
- 2.5 FTE First response SW role (3 staff). This includes an additional 0.5 post which has been seconded into Adoption support from the R & A team temporarily from February 2020.
- 2 FTE Therapeutic SW roles ( 2 staff )
- 0.8 FTE Senior Letterbox SW
- 2.8 FTE Letterbox Family Support Workers ( 4 staff , one vacancy for 0.8 post))

We are currently recruiting to fill vacant posts.

## **5.7 Letterbox Service**

The FSW letterbox workers continue to be supervised by the same senior practitioner 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. We are currently operating over 1,500 letterbox agreements which means over 3,000 exchanges in a year. We have additional administrative support to facilitate this more smoothly.

The Family Support Workers also undertake short pieces of work to assist families with adoption related issues, reducing the pressures of SW allocations.

As a Service, Adoption Counts is keen to develop best practice for our children and families. As such we are embedding new ways of supporting continued relationships with birth families and promoting children's identities.

### **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 will provide annual figures as part of the contract.

## **5.8 Group work**

Adoption Counts continues to recognise the importance of supporting adopters through the use of group work, to enable families to access professional guidance whilst building support networks with other adopters. We have continued to hold coffee drop-ins for informal support in the South & North spoke. These have been well attended and families enjoy being with other adopters in a group that accepts their child for who they are.

We have continued to deliver open access topic-based workshops, to enable adopters to access monthly support with clear advice and guidance to enable them in their therapeutic parenting role. These are delivered jointly with the Adoption Psychology team and alternate between the North and South spoke to maximise attendance across our Region. The workshops delivered have been -

- Life Story book and Later Life Letters
- Therapeutic Parenting
- Managing Transitions ( education)
- Adopter Voice
- Theraplay

The feedback is very positive and always attracts families from across the Region,

*'I learned great ideas about empathy and stepping back.....Not managing children, nurturing instead'*

*'Experts willing to share and impart knowledge.....Really personable and approachable'*

*'Enjoyed Table work/discussions "How to talk about abuse".....Understanding reasons why we need to tell the life story and the importance it holds'*

We have also continued to hold successful **Family Fun days-**

- Zed Arts activity day
- Heaton park Walk
- Buille Hill family fun day
- Tatton Park farm trip

These are always well attended and appreciated by families as an opportunity to meet families in the same situation, who offer understanding and acceptance. This is also a really valuable way of families meeting staff in a relaxed and engaging environment. We find that families are coming from across our region to attend and that location does not prevent a barrier for attending these events.

We have also continued to support 16 families to attend the Child on Parent Violence / Non-Violent Resistance programme commissioned through PAC-UK.

Towards the end of this period we were all impacted on by the Covid 19 lockdown. We have been responsive and reactive in setting up additional support for adopters that will be reported in further detail in the next report.

## **6. Recruitment of Adopters**

### **6.1 Approvals**

There have been 50 families approved as adopters during the last six months of the year 2019-2020. This is an increase of 11 from the same period in 2018/19 and makes the total for the year 110, compared with 85 the previous year. This is a great achievement for the service in terms of available families for the children in need of permanence through adoption.

At the end of the period (31<sup>st</sup> March 2020), there were 25 families in Stage One, 11 in between Stage One and Stage Two, and 41 in Stage Two; a total of 77 families in the assessment process. This is a similar number to the previous six months, which is positive as there was a good start to the year. Whilst there will inevitably be a percentage of these families who leave the process, this is an encouraging position to be in, at the start of 2020/21.

Enquiry numbers remained stable with 437 received over the six months, in comparison with 447 in the same time period last year. Very low numbers of enquiries were received in the last two weeks of this period, due to the Covid-19 lockdown, but this has picked up again in the start of 2020/21 and so is not thought likely to have a significant impact on numbers for the next period.

Numbers of initial visits were also very similar to the same period last year, but again some visits were delayed slightly whilst plans were put in place during the lockdown. We are expecting to therefore see an increase in initial visits during the first month of 2020/21.

It is difficult to compare the number of families attending the preparation groups as the March 2020 group was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there were still 48 families who attended over the five months, in comparison to 52 for the same six months of the previous year.

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 are effective though of course we are not complacent and continue to strive to increase our numbers further, to raise the profile of our agency and continue to aim 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 meeting continue with the Head of Service, the Operations Manager with thematic lead for recruitment and assessment, the Recruitment and Enquiries Manager and the Marketing Officer meeting to plan and review our progress. The conversion rate from enquiry to approval remains constant at 11% which would suggest that we continue to receive enquiries from the right kinds of people who are in a position to offer a family to our children as opposed to an increase in unsuitable enquirers.

## 6.2 Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

No referrals were made to the IRM during this period.

## 6.3 Partner/step-parent adoption enquiries

Our Recruitment Team received 34 partner/step-parent adoption enquiries during this period compared with 57 in the same period in 2018/19. This number is the total from across all five of our local authorities.

LA	Number	Percentage
Cheshire East	4	12%
Manchester	12	35%
Salford	8	24%
Stockport	7	21%
Trafford	2	5%
Not known/out of area	1	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>100%</b>

Twenty enquiries resulted in an office meeting taking place with a social worker, for information gathering and advice, in comparison with seventeen during the previous six months.

LA	Number	Percentage
Cheshire East	3	15%
Manchester	6	30%
Salford	5	25%
Stockport	4	20%
Trafford	2	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

Six applications were received during this period, in comparison with fifteen during the previous six months.

LA	Number	Percentage
Cheshire East	2	33.3%
Manchester	2	33.3%
Salford	0	0%
Stockport	2	33.3%
Trafford	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 7. Marketing Report

### *Adopters Required and Strategy 2019-2020*

Full information is available in the Recruitment and Marketing Strategy. In summary;

Our aims and objectives are to;

- increase the number of adopters approved by the agency against a national picture of falling recruitment figures and difficulties in attracting adopters to come forward.
- improve our conversion rate from enquiry to approval from the current 11% to 13% as evidence that our marketing messages are identifying the right people to come forward.

Although we do have babies available for adoption, we still need to target people who are willing to adopt children who are wait longer to be placed. We want to target **people who are willing to adopt children aged 2+, children of a BAME background, sibling groups, and children with complex needs**. Therefore, primary target audiences are as follows:

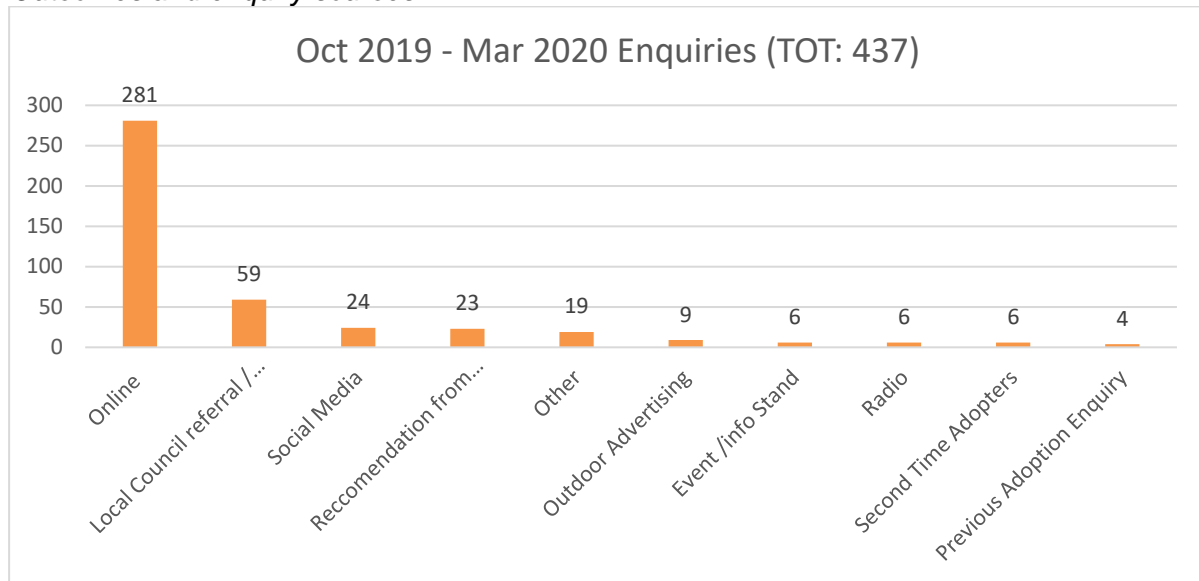
- People aged 25 – 55
- LGBT+ or heterosexual
- Married or in civil partnerships or co-habiting couples
- Single people
- People of a BAME background
- People who have experienced fertility difficulties
- Altruistic people who want to help children and society
- People that have experience in the social care sector and especially medical care sector (NHS employee pool), to improve the chances of placing children with complex needs

We will have four main campaigns throughout the year with consistent key messages;

- The value of adopting older children, sibling groups, BME children and children with complex needs
- Myth busting, i.e. *you CAN adopt if you rent, are single, gay, have birth children etc.*
- Adoption Counts provides timely and improved matching without unnecessary delay for children
- Full preparation, training and an excellent package of post adoption support and ongoing training is provided by Adoption Counts
- Introduce Adoption Counts always as “*your local adoption agency*” and focus on the regional aspect



### Outcomes and enquiry sources



Source	Enquiries
Online	281
Local Council referral / website	59
Social Media	24
Recommendation from friend / relative	23
Other	19
Outdoor Advertising	9
Event /info Stand	6
Radio	6
Second Time Adopters	6
Previous Adoption Enquiry	4

We continue to see that Google AdWords and online organic searches are the highest sources of enquiries.

Google AdWords and Website Improvements: Last year we undertook a review of our website and Google Adwords set up with external agency Creative Concern, which led to some layout changes – this was in order to optimise our expenditure and our presence online. As Google searches that link to [adoptioncounts.org.uk](https://adoptioncounts.org.uk) remain the top source of enquiries, we want to make sure we are doing everything that we can to capture website visitors by improvising usability (especially on mobile devices). We have also increased our Google Adwords expenditure from £50 to £60 a day, which has seen enquiries improve – a review of this is due in the summer to evaluate whether to maintain the cost.

Social media is also proving to be still a very powerful tool for brand awareness. We have increased followers numbers on both Twitter and Facebook, which are now well over the 1,000 mark on both platforms. Twitter shows a higher engagement from followers on conversations and stories, while the majority of actual adopter enquiries come through Facebook. We are

currently one of the most active RAA's online. Our followers' numbers keep increasing monthly, and we have seen a reflection of this in the number of enquiries generated via online medium.

Social media enables our agency to get exposure, traffic and gain market insights. Since the start of the Covid-19 lockdown period, we have increased our social media advertising budget, which has resulted in a steady number of enquiries.

In the year, we will continue to look at **online family finding via social media** presence with the creation of specific children-targeted adverts. This is a cost effective method in attracting adopters for children that have been waiting longer.

At this very moment in time, we are also using social media people from a BAME background who would be interested in adopting a child/children. We are currently exploring different avenues to spread the word and reach all different parts of the community, to ensure we are able to recruit more BAME adopters. So far in 2020 we have trialled leaflet drop in high BAME density areas and focused our social media advertising on spreading the appeal – targeting people who have expressed particular interest in BAME issues and related information.

A national recruitment campaign was set up during this period, to be delivered by regional adoption agencies, voluntary adoption agencies and other key stakeholders. The aim was to raise awareness of adoption and bust myths around who is eligible to adopt; ultimately to increase the number of possible parents registering their interest in adoption. Additionally, the campaign aims to target potential parents from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds as these children, as we know, traditionally wait longer to be matched with a new adoptive family, as well as older children, sibling groups, and those with complex health needs or disabilities.

Following extensive discussions with the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group, the launch date was set for 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Unfortunately, a few days before the launch date, a decision was made to postpone the campaign due to the quickly evolving situation around Covid-19 and an expected notice of lockdown. The campaign will still take place in the future, hopefully in the next six-month period.

## **7. Compliments, comments and complaints**

<b>Description</b>
Complimenting a letterbox worker on her positivity and empathy whilst working on a case where the birth parents had not been informed of an adoption due to their address not being known
Compliment from birth parent regarding FSW Support
Complimentary comments about Adoption Counts team manager for giving such clear information about the adoption process at a meeting.
Complimentary comments passed on from a child's social worker and her manager about a family finder and her contribution regarding a child being placed in America
Complimentary comments received from adopters about an adoption support social worker and how she has really understood the situation the parents are in, in relation to support their daughter and her challenging behaviours.

Description	S1 Outcome	S2 Request Date
Complaint from parent that a photo taken of their family has been seen of the Facebook page of the birth mother. The photo has been cropped showing only the child. Mother states that the photo was requested for court only and they have never given permission to share. Despite raising this previously, no one has been able to provide answers.	Not upheld	
Complaint about a lack of support from Adoption Counts. Mum lives in the Isle of Man with her twins, she and her husband split up and he hit one of the children whilst in his care. This has intensified the issues.	Partially Upheld	
Complaint from an adopter about a lack of support she has received from the service in relation to her daughter. Now resolved and the adopter has written to express her satisfaction with the current service.	Upheld	
Complaint from potential adopters about the way a SW handled their Stage 1 process. Reports she has been unfriendly, unhelpful and has lied and been unsupportive.	Partially Upheld	
Adopters have progressed a complaint via Cheshire East directly but they are not happy with response. It appears there are elements which relate to Adoption Counts which they wish to progress.	Partially Upheld	02/03/2020

## **8. Practice Developments in Adoption Counts**

### ***Family Finding***

Over the past twelve months development days have continued to take place on a quarterly basis for Family Finders. The days are well attended and prompt lots of discussion. A training workshop was provided at one development day by Coventry University to deliver research findings on Muslim children in the care system and a joint development day has also been held with recruitment and assessment workers. Areas explored include:

CPR audits – what does good look like

supporting colleagues in the local authorities regarding adoption planning

Completing matching paperwork and adoption support plans

performance data

From our discussions we have formed several working groups to consider practice issues. One of the working groups has developed a profiling template which has been well received and is now used across the service when profiling our children. This ensures profiles are of the highest quality alongside consistency of practice in terms of format, the information provided and incorporates contributions either from the child (depending on age and understanding) or from those who know the child best.

Another working group has met to consider race and ethnicity practice issues. This group will be discussing provision of training for Adoption Counts staff, adopters and panel members on issues of race, identity and culture alongside collecting figures and identifying national trends, research evidence and government guidelines re: BAME children, adopters and placements.

A transitions working group has been set up-linking with fostering leads in each LA to look at new research from The University of East Anglia. Transition planning is critical for placement success and yet often follows a very traditional script rather than a child centred needs led approach. In February we worked with the University of East Anglia to facilitate a very successful conference on moving to adoption. This looked at the challenges for all parties involved in the transition from foster carers to an adoptive family and considered:

- the key questions that arise for professionals supporting children through the process
- address the needs of each involved party before, during and after the move draw on theory, research, recent practice developments and existing good practice
- changes in social work practice to an individualised approach with a clear focus on the needs of the child

It was great to see so many colleagues join us, and the conference received very positive feedback. We have begun to share the research and learning back in our partner authorities and over the forthcoming months will continue to look at the next steps in changing transitions practice.

Two example templates and guidance have been produced and circulated - a CPR template and matching minutes meetings forms. The CPR template has been received very positively in terms of providing assistance in writing an accurate, comprehensive, informative and up-to-date picture of the child and their circumstances. The matching minutes form has assisted in standardising practice regarding the information provided to panel when considering matches.

The format of monthly matching / strategic matching meetings has changed, a monthly strategic matching is now held whereby all family finders, recruitment and assessment workers and team managers attend. This is chaired by an operations manager, all children are discussed who are subject to a Placement Order and are currently waiting for a link / match or children subject to a SHOBPA where Placement Order is anticipated within the month. The aim of this meeting is to prioritise our children waiting in terms of need and ensure all our children who are on placement orders or likely to wait longer have equal visibility / priority across our service. Families are identified and asked to consider children in terms of priority, this approach has been successful in reducing delay for children likely to wait longer whilst maximising our adopter resources.

Our Adoption Picnics continue to take place on a quarterly basis. During this period they have been attended by 76 children and 85 adopters. These have continued to be a highly successful matching method with 20 children successfully matched as a result in 16 placements.

At the end of March the COVID-19 pandemic began in the UK and as lockdown began came a busy period of adaptation as we had to think about the delivery of our family finding and transitions in a new virtual way. We were aware that Covid-19 measures could have significant consequences for our children who had been matched with prospective adopters and where introductions were being planned. We have therefore as a priority developed processes to look creatively at all cases where introductions have been delayed, and those where matches are being planned, to ensure that as far as possible we can progress permanence plans. Further details will follow in future reports.

## ***Recruitment and Assessment***

### **Development Days**

We have continued to meet on a quarterly basis and recently had a successful day during which we discussed a range of issues including the results from the staff survey, performance data, the use of social media in assessments and obesity in applicants and its impact on adoption. The day was well attended and there was lots of discussion and useful contributions. Our next day planned for April will be part shared with the Family Finders to enable us to cascade learning and discuss common issues.

### **Training for Adopters:**

Our new preparation programme has now been run several times and is becoming well embedded. Three of our workers put themselves forward to lead on the preparation group – Emily, Teresa and Bine – and so there is greater consistency in delivery. A very useful and comprehensive manual has been developed as part of this work which is shared with applicant's at the end of each day electronically and contains further reading on the topics covered as well as other useful resources that they can refer back to as they progress.

Sessions for *Family, Friends and Support Network* members have now moved to being delivered on a Saturday to enable more people to attend as numbers were very low in the sessions during the working week. We have been overwhelmed by the positive response to the new dates and are currently exploring how we can offer more sessions.

## **COVID-19**

At the very end of this period, the COVID-19 pandemic began in the UK leading us to cancel the March preparation groups for the safety of attendees and then with lockdown at the end of the month came a busy period of adaptation as we had to think about delivery of all of our provision and training for adopters in a new virtual way. The first provision to be tackled was information evenings to ensure we remained compliant with the requirement to offer detailed information to enquirers within 10 working days of their enquiry. The work of the team was quite simply outstanding and we were able to get the session up and running via SharePoint very quickly and were able to offer the sessions weekly rather than fortnightly. There has been a great deal of learning from these forced adjustments and transition in service provision and a number of benefits and improvements to the delivery of our service to families which we will continue as the lockdown eases. More information on this and other developments will be shared in the next six monthly report.

## ***Adoption Support***

### **Adopter Hub**

Adoption Counts has invested in peer support for adopters through the Adopter Hub. This is delivered by PACT and offers adopters access to -

- Peer support from other adopters via a live web chat, email and an adopter forum
- A programme of webinars on topics ranging from severe behaviour to emotional resilience.
- ELearning to top up adopters knowledge on attachment and how to support their children.
- Wide range of resources on topics such as education, online safety, mental health and development needs.
- Resources for schools

We have widened access to the hub to all adopters on our mailing list and are gradually increasing membership.

### **Adopter Champions**

Champions are a group of volunteer adoptive parents from across the Adoption Count region who were recruited as part of a joint initiative between Adoption UK and Adoption Counts. The recruitment of Champions came about as a result of Adoption Counts' commitment to Ensure the voices of adopters are heard. Adopter Voice, an initiative set up by Adoption UK, the national charity for adopters, was the perfect fit to fulfil this objective.

The Champions are members of the Adopter Advisory Board (AAB) and they meet four to six times a year.

Champions seek feedback from adoptive families on a range of issues including education and emotional wellbeing and report back to the Adoption Counts leadership team.

Feedback is sought via the private Facebook page called AdopterVoiceCounts and at social/networking events; Champions also sit on the national adopter advisory board.

The group have organised 4 Family Rambles which have proved highly successful as many of our family's value being able to walk and talk freely about issues important to them.

They have also compiled a report on School Transitions which has been taken forward by the Virtual School teams in some areas.

### ***Adoption Panels***

Information about panel will be covered in full in the Chairs reports.

Panels continue to run at least weekly across three venues (Salford, Manchester and Middleswich), with two panels in a week every 6 weeks. Panel business continues to be high; we have held 31 panels during this period hearing 103 items of business; that is 49 matches

of 54 children and 48 adopter approvals plus two adopter reviews. No families have been de-registered during this time.

Following the government's announcement of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, we had to very quickly make arrangements for panels to be held virtually to ensure that there was no delay for our children or families. The first virtual panel met on 26.03.2020 which was an incredible achievement for the Panel adviser and Panel leader who facilitated this transition with creativity, practicality and a will to make it work. We have continued to improve and tweak the panel processes as will be updated in the next report.

## **9. Partnership Working**

### ***With Our partner LAs***

Quarterly Operations Managers Meetings continue to provide an important opportunity for operational issues to be raised and shared. There is joint ownership of the agenda and attendees are proactive in raising relevant issues focusing on any ongoing issues but also at ongoing service development. Many issues are now resolved at a local level between team managers or operations managers enabling more strategic focus in the meetings themselves. Other meetings take place between the RAA and the LAs as and when needed in order to ensure a quick resolution.

Managers from local authorities are attending Adoption Counts tracking meetings where possible, with the exception of Manchester. There is no doubt that the efficacy of these meetings is improved when a care planning representative from the LA attends as this ensures a robust joint approach.

Adoption Counts staff audit process for Child Permanence Reports is now taking place in all of the LAs – both at SHOBPA and then again at match. In this way we are able to report to the LA on improvements and highlight where we need to target training and development. Details are incorporated into six monthly and end of year reports for each LA. .

Adoption Counts is working to implement the UEA model of transitions to adoption and our LA fostering and social work team representatives were invited to a conference we held in January launching the research.

### ***Partnerships with other RAA's***

A national leadership forum usually meets face to face six weekly, facilitated by Mark Owers, sharing useful learning and shaping development at a national and local level, as evidenced by work on the new national recruitment campaign. At the start of the Covid lock down these meetings commenced weekly on a virtual basis, offering a forum for shared discussion and problem solving, along with colleagues from DFE and Deloitte Management Consultants. There have been a number of working groups established as a result –to focus on assessment, matching, transitions and adoption support .These groups have developed some best practise standards for implementation during various stages of lockdown, ensuring consistency and quality assurance at a time of great challenge in terms of service delivery. We have been able to use input of leading researchers from the university of East Anglia and it has been helpful to have the direct input of the DFE. The regional manager was directly involved in this piece of work.

The Regional Adoption Manger meets regularly with 3 others local RAA leads who are currently exploring opportunities for further pan–regional development. We have for example worked together on the provision of independent support to birth parents and inter-country adoption.

### ***With the Voluntary sector***

We continue to work on the FLAG project with Adoption Matters and Caritas Care – a family finding tool to assist workers in identifying appropriate family finding strategies for children.

The provision of independent support to birth parents commenced in November 2019 – delivered by Pac UK-Family action. A launch took place and each La was invited to be represented. The contract delivery is regularly reviewed and the organisation have been evidencing an increased uptake in provision compare to that of our previous provider.

Intercountry adoption –Yorkshire Adoption Agency have been commissioned to undertake this piece of work on behalf of all 5 local authorities. This agreement will initially run until 31st March 2020. All subsequent years would then run from 1st April to 31st March.

The Concurrency project is commissioned from Caritas Care /Adoption Matters. Alternative funding arrangements for these placements were agreed at the last board meeting as Adoption Counts inter-agency budget cannot sustain funding. We have made no placements in this period, although 1 referral was made but could not be provided for in terms of an appropriate cultural and ethnic match. We believe that the increased use of Fostering for Adoption placements within Adoption Counts is the main reason for this dip in referrals although all LAs are encouraged to consider concurrency wherever relevant.

We routinely share profiles of those children where permission has been given for an inter-agency placement with voluntary sector partners.

### ***With our adopters***

Adoption Counts hold strategic matching meetings where all children and adopters are considered, in order to make best use of the skills and abilities our adopters have, and to ensure that all our children are considered. Following this meeting, recruitment workers will share profiles with their adopters, using their professional assessment skills and knowledge to identify the most appropriate potential links. Shortlisting identifies from these links which matches will be put forward.

The matching process within the Adoption Counts Family Finding policy requires full information about the child to be shared with adopters after short listing has taken place. Adopters will meet the key professionals for the child as well as their foster carers and have the option of meeting the placing agency's medical advisor. Life Appreciation Days are held wherever possible to promote best practice in sharing the full history of the child with adoptive parents. There is also an opportunity to meet the child through 'Mini meets' where this is appropriate.

Adoption Counts is working to implement the UEA model of transitions to adoption and our Adopter voice champions were invited to a conference we held in January launching the research.



Adoption picnics are held 4 times per year, giving adopters the opportunity to interact with some of our children, and to date these have been very successful.

Adopter led family finding is undertaken via Link Maker and activity days although the majority of our adopters are matched with children from AC partner local authorities very quickly post approval.

Once the match has been agreed, adopters are fully involved in the planning for introductions. All adopters are encouraged to meet with birth parents, with the exception of very rare instances where risk is too high, and in those cases alternative methods of communication can be considered.

#### **11. How do we involve staff and adopters in the development of our agency?**

Within Adoption Counts we endeavour to build a culture which encourages transparency and routine staff consultation.

Staff have regular team meetings, development days and whole service days where feedback is sought. Management decisions are explained and reviewed taking feedback into account. Staff are given the opportunity to be involved in, and to initiate service developments, such as the group looking at transitions from foster care and more recently the UEA research and new 3 stage model of transition planning. Staff are enabled to attend national conferences and to bring the learning back into the organisation.

Adoption Counts contracts with Adoption UK to lead the Adopter voice programme, bringing independence to our consultation with adopters. The Adopter Advisory Board is the conduit for engagement between Adoption Counts and adopters. The RAA manager meets regularly with the Adopter champions and attends their board meetings ensuring that the work of the agency and the advisory board have common aims.

Adopter champions have been recruited through Adoption UK, to engage with adopters, discuss topics, collate a report with recommendations and this would be shared with us via the board meetings. Adoption Counts senior staff attend the board meetings.

The Adopter Voice Champions are building on their engagement activities, growing the Facebook group, and developing a relationship with the communications officer in AC and seeking views on topics tasked by the RAA.

One of the greatest successes of the board is the growth of the engagement walks hosted by one of the Champions and supported by the others. These events are in different areas of the region as it is an easy way for peers to form connections and share feedback. The means of feedback is gathered by closed Facebook groups, email and more informal chats.

An important aspect of engagement with the AAB is that as it is independent of Adoption Counts, subsequently feedback is honest, anonymous and increases trust and confidence in adopters that leaders are listening. Social Media plays a significant part as an engagement tool and it has been agreed that a social media champion will be recruited to support the aspirations of the Adoption Counts AAB to be more interactive and encourage posting/comments/topical discussions.

The AAB have committed to their work and their established networks feed in, where appropriate to topics where we have asked for feedback. Champions brought feedback to the AAB for discussion and agreed recommendations which were included in the reports written and submitted by the Chair of the AAB.

These topics were

1. Mental Health
2. Peer to Peer Support
3. Adoption Counts website
4. Preparation Groups

Their input has resulted in a number of positive changes to the programme.

The chair of the AAB has taken up the role of representing Adopter Voice at the RAA management board. Adoption Counts has tangible outputs from the service commissioned to understand the lived experience of our adoptive families and where possible we endeavour to act on the recommendations proposed by the AAB.

In addition –the Chair for the Adoption Counts AAB sits on the Adopter Reference Group at the DFE, representing our adopters at national level.

## **12. Accountability**

The RAA has clear governance procedures in place. A quarterly Management board attended by our local authority DCS's receives reports on performance, service developments, budgetary issues and any decision making areas which requires authorisation at board level. The board has strategic responsibility for overseeing the work of the agency in relation to the following key areas.

- Sufficiency of adopters
- Timeliness for children
- Adoption support
- Management oversight of quality and performance
- Partnership working
- Use of resources
- Professional development

In addition, a monthly budget forecast, including the inter-agency position, is circulated to all partner LAs to ensure they remain fully up to date.

Name Nicola Booth

Role Operations Manager

Date 30.6.20