

Cheshire East Council

## Adoption Service – Six Monthly Report

**01.04.2020 – 30.9.2020**

## **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 2020. Plans for children are dynamic and develop every day and the picture will have changed at the point this report is read.

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

Since going live, Adoption Counts has had responsibility to discharge Cheshire East’s responsibilities as an Adoption Agency. The working relationship between the Local Authority (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 which 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. 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, the Head of Service for CIN/CIP 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 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.

The RAA tracking meeting enables any cases of concern to be discussed with the Head of Service. 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 update the Head of service about children for whom family finding has been problematical.

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, regularly works in Cheshire East office bases alongside the social work teams, and attends 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	
	7	2	0	1	3	0	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	<b>Total</b>
							13

### 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	
	0	2	1	4	1	2	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	<b>Total</b>
							10

There were 10 Placement Orders granted from the beginning of April 2020 to the end of September 2020:

One child has been matched within the A2 threshold of 4 months.

For the remaining nine children:

Two of the children's foster carers have requested to be considered as adopters. These requests are currently being explored.

Two of the children – a sibling pair, have complex needs and further assessments including an updated sibling assessment are ongoing prior to a move to an adoptive family.

The placement orders for the remaining five children were granted from July 2020 onwards so they remain within the A2 threshold. **(A2 is the average time between a local authority receiving Court authority to place a child for adoption and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family)**. Links have been identified for three of the children and it is expected they will be placed within the A2 measure. A link has been identified for one of the children, however, an extended family member has come forward at a late stage in the proceedings and a viability assessment is being completed. Family finding is ongoing for the remaining child who has complex identified needs.

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

There has been one child who has had a SHOBPA rescind in the period. The plan for this child changed from one of adoption as a family member came forward and requested to be assessed. The child was placed with their family member on an SGO plan.

### 3.4 Number of Children Placed for Adoption in the period.

Number of children placed for adoption per month							
Cheshire East	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	
	1	0	3	6	3	1	
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	<b>Total</b>
							14

There were fourteen children placed for adoption between April – September 2020. The A1 measure for this cohort of children is 573 days and the A2 measure is 181 days. **(A1 is the average time between a child entering care and moving in with it's adoptive family, for children who have been adopted).**

Three of the children were placed below the A2 threshold of 121 days. One of the children was a relinquished baby so did not have a A2 measure.

Ten of these children were outside of A2 threshold with five of these children placed within six months of Placement Order.

I M-G is a two year old who was placed 11 days outside of the A2 threshold. COVID meant that I could not be placed until July 2020.

CW is a three year old who was placed 22 days outside of the A2 measure.

JS is a four year old who due to his age and needs required preparation prior to moving to his adoptive family, COVID impacted upon preparation plans. His measure was 155 days.

KM and CM are a sibling pair aged 2 and 1. COVID meant that they need to be placed at different times with their adoptive family with one child moving in June and one in August. Their measure was 156 days.

Outside of 6 months:

S T-C is a two year old who was adopted by her foster carers. A fast track assessment was completed and once the foster carers were approved as prospective adopters, the linking / matching was progressed.

M and J D are a 4 and 3 year old with complex needs who are part of a larger sibling group. It took longer to find a family as adopters were needed who could meet the children's identified needs and promote direct contact with their siblings who were also adopted.

IM is a three year old who was adopted by her foster carers. A fast track assessment was completed and once the foster carers were approved as prospective adopters, the linking / matching was progressed.

MH is a three year old with global developmental delay. Two prospective adoptive families were identified, however, these links were not able to proceed due to the adoptive families own personal circumstances. This impacted upon the overall family finding timescales.

93% of the children placed for adoption were placed with prospective adopters approved by Adoption counts.

### 3.5 Number of children adopted in the period

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

For this cohort, the average number of days for A1 is 403 days, which is within the threshold of 426 days. One child was placed within the A1 measure. The child outside of the threshold is a 2 year old with complex medical and health needs who was adopted by his foster carers. His measure was 507 days.

For A2, the average number of days for this cohort is 214. One of the children had a decision made about their match with their adoptive families within the threshold. The child outside of the threshold is the child mentioned above, he was adopted by his foster carers who were assessed as prospective adopters. This impacted on the timescales as he could not be matched with the foster carers until they were approved prospective adopters. His measure was 338 days.

Analysis:

The number of children placed for adoption and adoption orders has decreased in this period. COVID-19 has had an impact upon general court timetabling, a number of hearings have been deferred and there was a period of time when the courts were not processing adoption applications so directions hearings for adoption orders have experienced general delay. There was a period of time from March – end May where children were not placed for adoption due to COVID restrictions. As court timetabling has resumed we would expect to see an increase in adoption orders over the next quarter.

### 3.6 Early Permanency

No children have been placed in early permanence placements during this period within fostering for adoption families, temporarily approved by Cheshire East's Agency Decision Maker as foster carers under regulation 25A of the Care Planning Regulations.

#### **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.

9 audits have been completed. Of those:

2 were graded as good and 5 in need of improvement at the point of SHOBPA.

CPR's are re-audited prior to matching panel and in order for the match to be heard by panel, it is required they have reached a standard of 'good' by this point. All CPR's that were graded in need of improvement at SHOBPA stage will therefore have been graded 'good' at point of match.

With this in mind, the auditing process has changed to directly involve the allocated family finder working alongside the child's social worker from the point of SHOBPA decision. The audit done then, carried out by the Adoption Counts team manager linked to Stockport, is shared with the social worker, family finder and the social worker's manager. The family finder will then support the social worker and advise where needed in order to complete the CPR to the required standard prior to matching panel. Adoption Counts has developed a template of good practice which clearly outlines what information is required in each section.

#### **5. Adoption Support**

Adoption Support remains integral to our delivery for adopted children, new adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults, recognising 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 recognise 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.

In this 6 months we have delivered out Adoption Support differently due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

#### **Centre of Excellence for Adoption Support**

##### **SERVICE OVERVIEW**

The long-term funding for this service has been agreed by the board until March 2021, with negotiations with Clinical Commissioners to secure longer term funding on a joint basis moving forward

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

During the National lockdown the Adoption Psychology team have maintained their connections with the team and families. They have adapted their delivery model to meet the changing demand and circumstances. They have delivered the following:

- Daily consultation sessions - these have been set up to support staff and adopters with issues relating to mental health, attachment and trauma, school anxiety and transitions. This has proved an invaluable support to workers and been a new route for families to access direct input from the psychology team.
- Newsletter – Adoption counts has provided a weekly newsletter for parents during lockdown, with the Adoption Psychology team providing useful articles, activities and advice on issues relating to the impact of change on children's wellbeing. This has included information sheets on theraplay activities, adult mental health, coping with anxiety and change, providing a secure base etc.
- Webinars from EPs – following the announcement of children returning to school, the Educational Psychologists developed a webinar for professionals

about supporting positive transitions back to school. This has then been followed up by problem solving seminars to assist with case specific issues.

- Targeted Foundations for Attachment – The team are trialling a 1-1 delivery model of this course during lockdown, to offer new adopters the opportunity to have a bespoke package of support if they are unable to attend the FFA group. This has been funded by the ASF Covid-19 fund.
- Virtual Theraplay informed parenting support group – due to the close nature of the Theraplay Group, the team have had to reimagine the delivery of this group to new families. As such, the team are creating a virtual support group that offers psychoeducation and video activities to replicate the Theraplay Group that was previously delivered. This has been funded by the ASF Covid-19 fund.
- Continued 1-1 virtual support for families and completion of specialist assessments.

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.

In this period the panel have considered 5 requests for match funding. The panel have scrutinised the requests and challenged some of the length and frequency of the therapeutic plans. Further details are in the table below regarding ASF applications.

#### **5.4 Adoption Support Fund Applications**

We have continued to access the ASF to provide additional therapy for adoptive families 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 has been 183 applications to the ASF, in this period totalling **£693,156.98**. The applications are broken down overleaf.

LA	Number of applications	Amount	Applications approved with match funding
Cheshire East	50	£206,460.91	2
Manchester	37	£166,656.78	2
Stockport	46	£162,463.65	1
Trafford	30	£97,878.11	0
Salford	20	£59,697.53	0
Totals	183	£693,156.98	5

We are awaiting the outcome of the Government spending review to ascertain if the ASF will remain as a funding stream for Adopters after April 2021.

### 5.5 Referrals / Enquiries for Adoption Support

We are currently working with **621** allocated cases (excluding Letterbox) - a continued increase from the previous 6 months.

We have a further **374** cases awaiting allocation, **141** children for Adoption Support, **192** adults for Access to records. The remaining 41 are general enquiries, for advice and 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 allocated 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 initial meeting to progress with access to records is considerably longer. They do however all receive a response to their referral, advising them of the system and next steps.

The table below indicates the data for each Local Authority in terms of those allocated cases (excluding general cases – 24) and those awaiting an allocated SW (excluding general cases – 41).

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.

<b>Local Authority ALLOCATED</b>	<b>Adopted Adult April–Sept 2020</b>	<b>Oct- March 2021</b>	<b>Adoptive Family April- Sept 2020</b>	<b>Oct- march 2021</b>	<b>Total April- Sept 2020</b>	<b>Oct- March 2021</b>
<b>STOCKPORT</b>	17		93		110	
<b>MANCHESTER</b>	29		103		132	
<b>SALFORD</b>	12		52		64	
<b>CHESHIRE EAST</b>	12		126		138	
<b>TRAFFORD</b>	9		102		111	
<b>Other LAs</b>	0		42		42	
	<b>79</b>		<b>518</b>		<b>597</b>	

<b>Local Authority WAITING</b>	<b>Adopted Adult April–Sept 2020</b>	<b>Oct- March 2021</b>	<b>Adoptive Family April- Sept 2020</b>	<b>Oct- March 2021</b>	<b>Total April- Sept 2020</b>	<b>Oct- March 2021</b>
<b>STOCKPORT</b>	36		33		69	
<b>MANCHESTER</b>	82		34		116	
<b>SALFORD</b>	15		12		27	
<b>CHESHIRE EAST</b>	43		41		84	
<b>TRAFFORD</b>	16		15		31	
<b>Other LAs</b>	0		6		6	
	<b>192</b>		<b>141</b>		<b>333</b>	

During the period April 2020 – September 2020 we received **142** new referrals into the Adoption Support Service. This is a reduction on the previous 6 months, 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.)*

<b>April-2020 Local Authority</b>	<b>Sept</b>	<b>Adopted Adult</b>	<b>Adoptive Family</b>	<b>Birth Family</b>	<b>Advice &amp; Signposting</b>	
<b>STOCKPORT</b>		2	15	0	1	
<b>MANCHESTER</b>		14	32	0	2	
<b>SALFORD</b>		1	15	0	0	
<b>CHESHIRE EAST</b>		2	24	0	3	
<b>TRAFFORD</b>		6	11	0	2	
<b>UNDEFINED</b>		0	1	0	1	
<b>OTHER LA</b>		0	7	0	3	
		<b>25</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>142</b>

<b>Oct-2021 Local Authority</b>	<b>March</b>	<b>Adopted Adult</b>	<b>Adoptive Family</b>	<b>Birth Family</b>	<b>Advice &amp; Signposting</b>	
<b>STOCKPORT</b>						
<b>MANCHESTER</b>						
<b>SALFORD</b>						
<b>CHESHIRE EAST</b>						
<b>TRAFFORD</b>						
<b>UNDEFINED</b>						
<b>OTHER LA</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 continue to develop 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 have recently recruited to all vacant posts and are awaiting start dates.

## **5.6 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 1,300 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.

### **Current number of Letterbox agreements per LA**

Manchester	Salford	Stockport	Cheshire East	Trafford
305	277	250	186	120

## **5.7 Birth families**

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

The clear and easy referral process is increasing the number of families who access the service. PAC-UK will provide annual figures as part of the contract.

## **5.8 Support Groups – Covid-19 update**

For the past 6 months all staff have primarily been working from home continuing to deliver Adoption Support in different ways, through email, telephone and virtual home visits, with face to face visits now being agreed where safely risk assessed. The impact of Covid-19 on the personal and professional lives of both staff and on the lives of the families supported has been apparent.

Initially there was an increase in calls to First response and on open cases, as families were worried about priority school access and changes to routine for their children. Following this period the referrals into the service remained steady, with a small proportion of assessments relating directly to the impact of social distancing and isolation on families. There have been a number of families who have experienced significantly increased pressure due to children being out of school, with child–parent violence being raised by some. The demand for the Managing challenging behaviours support group highlighted this as being a priority need for families on the database. The course was always full within hours and waiting lists for each one held. These were also parents not all with an allocated SW, as we allowed direct access, it is evident that this is was an increasing need during the period.

As we have not been able to provide our usual support groups, evening workshops and family fun days face to face we have had to adapt our delivery model.

Using additional ASF Covid-19 funding, which was made available by the government for delivery of additional support to adopters and SGOs initially for a 4 month period then extended to 8 months, we were able to quickly provide additional support to families on our case load and those within our region.

This included the following:

- 5 Virtual therapeutic parenting courses delivered by Independent providers
- Additional 1-1 therapeutic parenting support for targeted families from an Independent provider
- 4 virtual support groups (over 6 weeks) delivered by Adoption UK on the following topics:
  - Managing angry feelings and defiant behaviour during Covid-19 (CPV/NVR)

- Home schooling during Covid-19
- Living with change and anxiety during Covid-19
- Access to the Adopter Hub for all adopters living in the RAA, delivered by PACT
- Targeted access to 1-1 Peer Support delivered by Adoption UK for 50 families.
- Targeted access to Relationship Support from a private provider
- VAA SW secondment to assist with First response Service
- The Adoptables –time limited access to a peer support programme for adopted young people providing virtual activity groups open to all young people in RAAs.

## **6. Recruitment of Adopters**

### **6.1 Approvals**

There have been 51 families approved as adopters during the first six months of this year 2020-2021. Whilst this is slightly less than half of the total for last year (110 approvals in 2019-2020), given the situation with the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown, this should be seen as very encouraging; the level of business has been maintained despite the challenges at a relatively consistent level.

At the end of the period (30<sup>th</sup> September 2020), there were 29 families in Stage One, 17 in between Stage One and Stage Two, and 36 in Stage Two; a total of 82 families in the assessment process. This is a slight increase on number at the end of the previous six months which was 77. This is particularly positive, given the difficult circumstances we all have faced in the first half of this year as discussed above and is a strong position from which to enter the second half of this year.

Enquiry numbers have increased with 510 received over these six months, in comparison with 437 in the preceding period, even accepting the significant decreases in the last two weeks of that period due to the national lockdown. The source of our enquiries remains predominantly web based and so we have increased our investment in our promotion through Google Adwords.

Source	Enquiries
Online	353
Local Council referral / website	71
Social Media	9
Recommendation from friend / relative	16
Other	32
Outdoor Advertising	5
Event /info Stand	3
Radio	1

Second Time Adopters	8
Previous Adoption Enquiry	12

It is always important to note that whilst enquiries from social media, outdoor advertising, event and radio seem low, many of those who say 'online' will have originally heard about Adoption Counts through these other channels. It is that 'drip drip' effect of seeing our brand around that drives applicants to find us through the websites.

Numbers of initial visits have also increased to 104 in the period, an increase of 27 on the previous six months as well as the number of Registrations Of Interest (which is the formal application to be assessed as prospective adopters) up to 70, from 62.

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 meetings 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 14 partner/step-parent adoption enquiries during this period compared with 34 in the preceding 6 months which is significantly lower than usual. This is likely to have been due to the pandemic and national lockdown and there is evidence in the early part of quarter 3 that the numbers are increasing once again. This number is the total from across all five of our local authorities.

LA	Number	Percentage
Cheshire East	4	29%
Manchester	1	7%
Salford	1	7%
Stockport	3	21%
Trafford	1	7%
Not known/out of area	4	29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100%</b>

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

LA	Number	Percentage
Cheshire East	2	40%
Manchester	1	20%
Salford	1	20%
Stockport	1	20%
Trafford	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100%</b>

Nine applications were accepted during this period, an increase in comparison with six during the previous six months. These were predominantly from families who had been seen during 2019-2020.

LA	Number	Percentage
Cheshire East	2	22%
Manchester	1	11%
Salford	4	45%
Stockport	2	22%
Trafford	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### 6.4 Information events

Before the pandemic, these were held on a fortnightly basis at locations around the region. After lockdown was announced, the last two information events in March were cancelled, whilst it was determined when they could be resumed. When it was evident this could not happen, plans were quickly put in to place for virtual information events, to be held on a weekly basis.

These started in early April and have been very successful indeed. It is thought that these may continue even after lockdown, with the potential for one a month in a venue for those families who would prefer that face to face connection.

## **6.5 Training groups**

Before the pandemic, there were monthly 3-day preparation training groups for those families early in the application stage. The March group was due to take place the week after lockdown was announced and was therefore cancelled. When it became apparent they could not resume in April, a working group was set up to split the training topics into modules and prepare these for virtual training, in the form of presentations, reading, exercises, etc. Six modules were prepared, with a learning log to be completed for each one.

It was recognised that this is not the ideal way in which to present training, as it lacks clarification for any subjects not completely understood, doesn't give the opportunity for observations of the families, does not help to build up support networks, etc. For these reasons, it was decided that a check-in video meeting would take place after each module between the applicants and their social worker. Some applicants have successfully moved forward with these in good timescales, whereas others have been a little slower, or needed more clarification on certain subjects before they could move forward to the next stage. However, overall, this was the best way of ensuring adoption applications were not placed on hold during the pandemic. Other top-up training sessions have been carried out in similar ways. Towards the end of the period, we have trialled a live virtual training evening which was successful and so have now established a working group to look at how the three day preparation might be delivered in a more similar way to face to face groups as we are aware that applicants are missing out on a number of elements of that experience. These include the interaction with trainers, with guest speakers and with each other.

Previously, most training groups resulted in the applicants exchanging contact details, setting up 'WhatsApp' groups, etc. so they could maintain relationships and provide ongoing support to each other. This has been replaced with two, so far, WhatsApp groups which have been set up remotely for the families who wish to be involved and it has been reported that these are a great source of support for the families to each other. These groups are managed by adopters for adopters and staff are not involved.

## **6.6 Marketing and Recruitment Campaigns**

This period commenced just two weeks into the Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, so marketing was somewhat lower key than previous years. However, we took the opportunity to use additional spend on digital and social media advertising, rather than outdoor advertising. Enquiry numbers understandably dropped significantly for the first few weeks, whilst the country adjusted to the new way of living, however they soon picked back up and there was no detrimental effect noted with application numbers.

The National Recruitment Campaign, which had originally been scheduled to start in March 2020, was launched in September of this year. The campaign theme is 'You

can Adopt' and the website and social media hashtag #youcanadopt will be used widely. This will mainly be an online, digital and media launch rather than the original planned activities of outdoor and street advertising, due to Covid-19. The aim is 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.

The Campaign will run through to 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020 and additional marketing will be evident during National Adoption Week too, which is scheduled for 12<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> October 2020. 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.

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

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description - compliments</b>
04.06.20	Adopters thanking an adoption support worker about her practice and the support she had given.
18.06.20	Feedback given by an adopter who had previously made a complaint who said how helpful and proactive two adoption support workers had been.
18.09.20	SSW saying how warm and professional a Family Finder and social worker have been during the linking and matching process.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description - complaints</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
01.07.20	An adoptive parent complained about the lack of support provided to her son from Adoption Counts. Adoption Counts agreed therapeutic support is needed and provided an explanation as to how this is being discussed / progressed with the appropriate agencies to ensure the most effective support is provided.	Not upheld.

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

### **Family Finding**

From March – current date, Adoption Counts have developed and reviewed family finding processes to look creatively at all cases where children's plans for adoption have been delayed and to ensure that as far as possible we were able to progress permanence plans in a timely manner.

We have continued to hold monthly tracking meetings and monthly strategic matching meetings. We have developed new guidance re planning and managing introductions with a risk assessment being completed for each child. Due to this we have been able to place children on fostering for adoption plans and since the beginning of June have planned successful transitions, moving a number of children from foster care into their adoptive families.

We have continued to hold adoption picnics and have profiled children using a range of video clips. Adopters are able to access these video clips of children for a limited period of time via a secure Adoption Counts website on our SharePoint site. We have held two adoption picnics: 30 children have been profiled with 51 families accessing SharePoint resulting in 21 expressions of interest. We are aware the level of interest expressed has been much higher when delivered face to face, this is a risk area moving forward in matching our children with more complex needs. In addition, Adoption Counts recently profiled 14 children at a national exchange event. We received only 6 enquires from the event, where 72 children were profiled and only 10 adoptive families attended. This highlights the national shortage for children with more complex needs and emphasises the internal success we have had in the past using the picnics.

### **Recruitment and Assessment**

Information events have been held on a weekly basis, the numbers of families attending these have increased to 159 (01.04.20 to date) from 128 in the same period last year. It is thought that these may continue even after lockdown, with the potential for one a month in a venue for those families who would prefer that.

Before the pandemic, there were monthly 3 day preparation training groups, virtual training is now delivered in the form of presentations, reading, exercises, etc. Six modules were prepared, with a learning log to be completed for each one.

A national recruitment campaign '#YouCanAdopt' was being prepared prior to the pandemic, but the launch had to be delayed. It will therefore now commence on 16th September and will focus on myth busting. The campaign will run to 8th December and will also cover National Adoption Week, 12th to 18th October, the theme of which will have a specialist Black, Asian and minority ethnic strand. This will also coincide with Black History Month.

We are now starting to evaluate our experience of remote working - trying to learn from the successes, whilst also clarifying what might be the risks. We will be undertaking evaluation surveys with staff and Panel members as a starting point, and then with adopters who have had experience of virtual training, assessment, approval and matching. Virtual information evenings and initial visits may, for example, be some of the changes we wish to retain as they have speeded up entry of adoptive applicants into the process.

## **Adoption Support**

From 17th March 2020, we have been continuing to deliver Adoption Support in different ways via email, telephone and virtual home visits, with face to face visits now being reinstated where safely risk assessed.

There have been a number of families who have experienced significantly increased pressure due to children being out of school, with child - parent violence. Two adoption breakdowns have occurred during this period, neither of these were placements made by Adoption Counts and nor had they had access to the early intervention/prevention service we are now able to offer.

Other families have found that having children at home has relieved the stress in relation to often daily issues with education for their children and have used the time to strengthen family relationships. This very much confirms the national picture.

Adoption Psychology have delivered some online training and support for families. Using additional ASF Covid-19 funding, which was made available by the government for delivery of additional support to adopters and SGOs initially for a 4 month period then extended to 8 months, we were able to quickly provide additional support to families on our case load and those within our region.

## **Adoption Psychology**

During this period the Adoption Psychology team have maintained their connections with the team and families. They have adapted their delivery model to meet the changing demand and circumstances.

## **Adoption Panels**

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

Name Nicola Booth

Role Operations Manager

Date 12.12.2020