



Report title:

Adoption Service Report

- 30 September 2019 to 31 March 2020 &
- 01 April 2020 to 30 September 2020

Date of report: 02 November 2020

To: Sandwell Council

Produced by: Mark Tobin
Head of Service

Service: Adoption@Heart

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.

The report jointly covers the full year 2019/20 and the interim period of six months 1 April to 30 September 2020.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 30 September 2020.

Adoption@Heart is a Regional Adoption Agency, providing adoption services on behalf of Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton Councils. The service is hosted by Wolverhampton City Council and became operational 1 April 2019.

2. Number, type and age of children waiting for adoption and length of time waiting

As at 31 March 2020:

There were 48 children subject to placement orders, but not yet placed for adoption. The breakdown of timescales for these children is below:

Nine children require their placement order to be rescinded. A further eight children were no longer subject to family finding, as foster carers were under consideration to become their adoptive parents.

Of the 31 children in active family finding, 20 were in the process of being matched with adoptive parents and five children were already placed with adoptive parents, but not yet legally adopted.

There were six children in active family finding, where adopters had not yet been identified.

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Less than 3 months: | 7 |
| Between 3 and 6 months: | 11 |
| Between 6 and 12 months: | 5 |
| Between 12 and 24 months: | 8 |
| Children waiting over 2 years: | 0 |

As at 30 September there were 29 children on placement orders and not yet placed with an adoptive family. Six children have been subject to a change of plan, so not in active family finding.

23 children were on placement orders with an active plan of adoption. Six were in the process of being adopted by their foster carers and a further three were in the process of having their

plan reviewed. These children were therefore no longer subject to active family finding. Three children were matched but not yet placed with their adopters. Eleven children were subject to active family finding.

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Less than 3 months: | 4 |
| Between 3 and 6 months: | 5 |
| Between 6 and 12 months: | 8 |
| Between 12 and 24 months: | 2 |
| Children waiting over 2 years: | 4 |

2.1 Children Made Subject to Placement Orders

As at 31 March 2020:

| Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | March | Total |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|-------|
| 5 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 23 |

As at 30 September 2020:

| Apr | May | June | July | Aug | Sep | Total |
|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|-------|
| 0 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 11 |

2.2 Children Subject to Should be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decisions

As at 30 September 2020 there were 44 children with the decision to be placed for adoption (SHOBPA), but not yet subject to a placement order. Nineteen were waiting to have decisions rescinded.

Data was not available for the number waiting at 31 March.

2.3 Number of Children who had a SHOPBA during the period

As at 31 March 2020:

| Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | March | Total |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|-------|
| 7 | 2 | 4 | 8 | 2 | 8 | 31 |

As at 30 September 2020:

| Apr | May | June | July | Aug | Sep | Total |
|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|-------|
| 2 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 13 |

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

Five children were subject to a change of plan away from adoption during the 6-month period to 31 March 2020.

2.5 Number of Children Placed for Adoption during the period

For 12 months to 31 March 2020:

| Apr | May | June | July | Aug | Sep |
|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|
| 2 | 3 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 4 |

| Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | March | Total in year |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|---------------|
| 7 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 41 |

For the six months to 30 September 2020:

| Apr | May | June | July | Aug | Sep | Total |
|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|-------|
| 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 20 |

Children Placed in Previous Years:

| Financial Year: | 16/17 | 17/18 | 18/19 |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Children Placed: | 29 | 35 | 36 |

Analysis:

The number of children placed in the 18-month period to 30 September 2020 have exceeded performance in previous years.

3. Number of Children Adopted

The number of children legally adopted by their adoptive parents in the full year 2019/20 was 31.

The number adopted in the first six months of 2020/21 was 13.

Number of children adopted in the three previous years is below:

| Financial Year: | 16/17 | 17/18 | 18/19 |
|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Children Adopted: | 36 | 39 | 28 |

The number of children adopted in the 12-month period 2019/20 has increased on the previous year performance. Due to the time delay in a child being placed and adopted, this does not at this stage relate to Adoption@Heart practice. The numbers adopted in the 6-month period to 30 September 2020 is slightly lower and it is expected that the full year number of children adopted will be lower, due to court delays created by Covid-19. The numbers of children leaving care nationally via adoption has reduced continuously since 2017.

Adoption Scorecard Performance

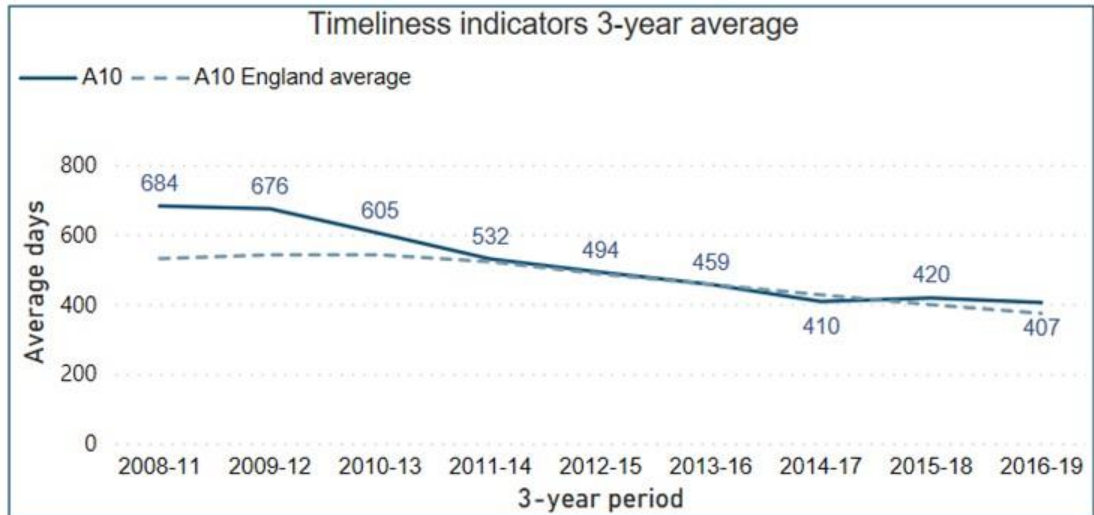
In 2014, as part of its' Adoption Reform Agenda, the government introduced Adoption Scorecards to track local authority performance and to tackle delay in the adoption system. Scorecards are produced for a 3-year rolling average, with the latest data being published for April 2018 - March 2019 (Published April 2020).

The current indicators are:

A10 – number of days between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. The current threshold is 426 days.

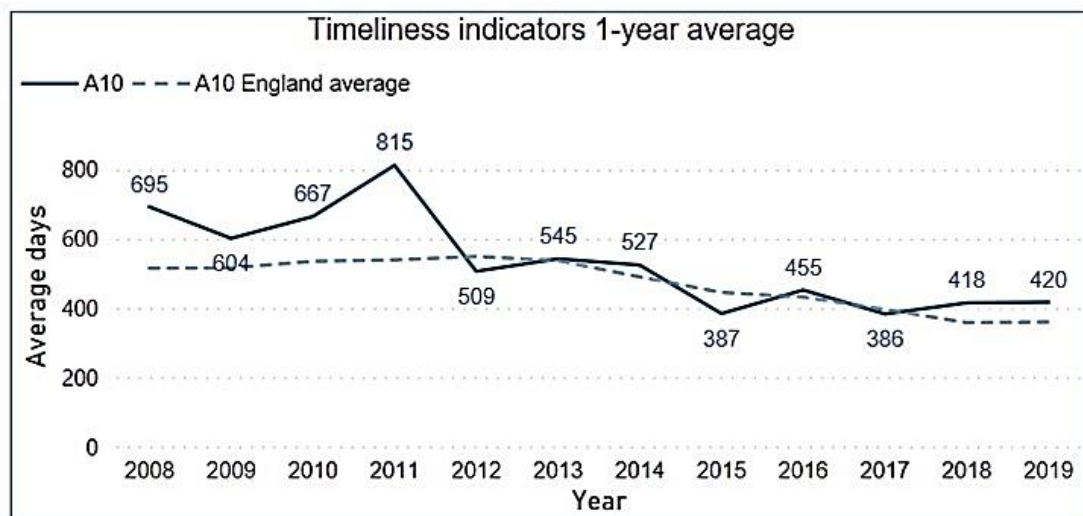
A2 – the number of days between receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and the Agency decision about a match to an adoptive family. The current threshold is 121 days.

| A10: Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster care adoptions: | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 2019 average days: | 2019 England average: | Average time in 2019 was longer than in 2018 | 2016-19 average days: | 2016-19 England average: |
| 420 | 363 | | 407 | 376 |



A10 Single year and 3 year average performance is under the threshold but higher than national average. Timeliness for children has improved significantly over an 11 year period.

| A2: Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family: | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 2019 average days: | 2019 England average: | Average time in 2019 was shorter than in 2018 | 2016-19 average days: | 2016-19 England average: |
| 233 | 170 | | 227 | 178 |



A2 performance for both single year and 3 year average is significantly above threshold and national average evidencing delay from the point of obtaining a legal order to matching children with adopters.

3.1 Early Permanency

There were 5 children placed in early permanence placements via Foster for Adopt.

4. Recruitment of Adopters

4.1 New Enquiries

For the period from 1st April 2020 to 30th September 2020, 283 new enquiries were received by the Adoption@Heart Recruitment Team.

This is in comparison to 139 enquiries received last year in the same period. 349 enquiries for the entire year.

During the year 2020/21 adoption enquiries have increased during the Covid-19 crisis and this reflects a national increase also experienced by other agencies.

4.2 Information Events

115 Adopter households attended virtual information events in the year 2019/20.

57 adopter households attended virtual information events took that place in the six months to September 2020, compared with 61 (mix of single and couples) households in the previous six months.

Due to Covid-19 Information Events were run virtually and the service offered a combination of phone consultations and virtual information events from June 2020. 106 adopters (units not individuals have received information in 6 months via this combined approach.

4.3 Initial visits

The number of initial assessment visits carried out to potential adoptive parents is as below:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Full year 2019/20: | 128 |
| Six months April to September 2020: | 68 |

4.4 Registrations of Interest

The number of Registrations of Interest to adopt received were as below:

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Full year 2019/20 | 64 |
|-------------------|----|

| | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Six months April to September 2020 | 42 |
|------------------------------------|----|

Analysis:

The service has improved on year one performance in the first six months of year two, with a 31 percent increase in the number of Registrations of Interest.

Of the figures above six ROI's (three in each period) were received from foster carers adopting children in their care.

4.5 Current position

At the end of the period (30 September 2020), there were 19 families in Stage One, three in between Stage One and Stage Two, and 18 in Stage Two.

4.6 Timescales in Stage One

Stage One has a timescale threshold of 8 weeks or 56 days. 26 stage one's have ended in this period and the average duration (including fast track applications but excluding families who withdrew during stage one) is 48 days. 15 out of the 26 were completed outside of timescales.

4.7 Timescales in Stage Two

Stage Two has a timescale of 16 weeks or 112 days from commencement of the process to the Agency Decision regarding the match. 31 have ended in this period with an average duration of 113 days. 11 out of the 31 stage were completed outside of timescales.

4.8 Adopters Approved

There have been 34 adopters approved in this period compared with 34 in the previous six months (51 for full year 2019/20).

Analysis:

There is evidence of improved adopter recruitment performance in the first six months of the year 2020/21. The total number of approvals in the first year of operation was 51, therefore 34 approvals in the six-month period evidences an increase of 33 percent. This together with the numbers in stage one and two at 30 September, suggest that the projected overall number of approvals for the full year should increase to between 60 and 70. There has been some delay in receiving checks and medicals due to Covid-19, which could impact on performance.

4.9 Adopters Required

The service expects to place between 120 and 130 children in the current year and the targeted performance is to place 60 percent in house with this reducing incrementally to 30 percent over the next 3 years. In order to achieve this target performance will need to improve to 80 to 100 approvals over the next 3 years.

4.10 Partner adoptions

The service undertakes four Step Parent Adoption cases for each local authority each year. This will be considerably below the demand for each local authority. Work has been undertaken to embed consistent practice in screening enquiries in the local authorities and Adoption@Heart staff offer consultation on all enquiries received. To date the numbers referred to the service are in the table below:

| LA / Trust | 2019/20 Full Year | 2020/21 6 Months |
|---------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Walsall | 3 | 1 |
| Sandwell | 4 | 1 |
| Dudley | 4 | 0 |
| Wolverhampton | 1 | 1 |

5. Marketing Report

Marketing figures for this period are:

- 283 enquiries
- 49 phone consultations and 57 virtual information events attended
- Between 1 April 2020 and 30 September 2020, we had a total of 10,752 website visits – made up of 8,415 unique visits.

Marketing Activity

Despite the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, marketing activity has remained a priority in line with the national message that recruiting adopters and placing children with adopters remains a priority.

A summer campaign took place across July and August, which featured a digital advert impression campaign with a range of print and radio coverage across four weeks and a series of blog posts from Adoption@Heart Social Workers, detailing their working week from home. A myth busting social media campaign also took place across Facebook.

The national 'You Can Adopt' campaign launched on the 16 September 2020, which seeks to bust myths around who is eligible to adopt and explore what the adoption process involves.

The adoption process can seem confusing and complicated for those who are interested, so the campaign encourages agencies to work together to make sure prospective adopters receive the same message regardless. Adopters need to have the same message, process and experience, when it comes to their adoption journey.

Additionally, the campaign aims to target potential parents from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, as these children traditionally wait longer to be matched. We have to work effectively together to address the reasons why this is the case and we need to be better at reaching into the community to find those people who might be interested but aren't coming forward.

It also highlights that especially during the coronavirus pandemic, there are still children out there who are looking for their new family. A pilot campaign also launched in October across Birmingham and London, which urges potential black adopters to come forward. Two enquiries have been received so far from Home for Good, as part of this drive.

Communication Leads across Wolverhampton, Dudley, Sandwell and Walsall are working together in marketing the service across the region, utilising their knowledge, resources and opportunities to promote the service across the region.

The remainder of the year will see increased marketing activity with the National Campaign combined with localised activities over the Autumn.

6. Requirements on the Preparation of Adoption Report Regulations

6.1 Complaints

There have been three formal complaints about the service since 1 April 2019. Information about complaints specific to this council, as well as generally about A@H include nature of complaints and outcome if concluded.

One of these was from adopters in stage one of the recruitment process, where a decision was made not to proceed. Their complaint related to this decision and delays in communicating this in a timely way. The complaint was partly upheld due to the delay, but the decision not to invite to stage two was not changed. Learning has been identified and discussed with the relevant staff.

The second stage one complaint was from an adoptive parent who had received unauthorised contact from a birth parent, who had obtained their contact details. This did not relate to a child placed by Sandwell. Following an investigation by the Head of Service, it was concluded that this was not the case. The complaint also highlighted issues in communication during the service transition process with the adopter regarding post adoption contact. This part of the complaint was upheld and learning discussed with the relevant Team Manager.

A third formal complaint has been received from an individual who made an enquiry to adopt but was not invited to proceed to registration of interest due to significant vulnerabilities identified at initial visit. A meeting took place between this individual and the Head of Service in Autumn 2019, however the complaint has escalated to stage two and is currently with the Ombudsman.

6.2 Staffing

Total number of staff, numbers in each team, vacancies, capacity issues, use of agency staff:

The service employs 32 qualified Social Workers on a permanent basis along with seven agency Social Workers, who are providing additional capacity due to vacant posts, sickness, maternity leave and additional demand created by Covid-19. Two agency Social Workers are funded for twelve months to provide additional family finding capacity.

There are three Team Managers, with one each covering the thematic service areas. One of these posts (Family Finding) was vacant until September 2020, but a seconded Manager in that role has now been permanently appointed. The panel team have two Panel Advisors (one of these is vacant and currently covered by an agency Social Worker), along with a Panel Co-ordinator and three Panel Administrators, one of which is currently vacant.

The Business Support Team have a Manager, a recently created Senior Business Support Officer post along five Business Support Officers. There are currently two BSO vacancies in the team.

Vacancy rates have remained low since the service went live and despite Covid-19, sickness and absence rates have been minimal during the first six months of 2020/21.

Ongoing consideration is being given to staffing capacity in relation to demand on the service, in particular for Family Finding and Adoption Support.

6.3 Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

There have been no referrals to the IRM in either period.

7. Development of Adoption@Heart

7.1 Practice

Since February 2020, a programme of Practice Development Work has addressed the developmental needs of the service. From this work additional practice guidance has been implemented with a view to raising standards of practice and increasing performance and innovation, as the service becomes more established. Key areas of focus to date have been:

Adoption Support

To develop a measurable, outcomes-based vision for Adoption Support Services, ensuring that services are focused on achieving outcomes.

Ensure that we have the right systems and processes to deliver the right level of the service to the right families, based on levels of need.

Provide adopters with easier access to and better support from other agencies.

To deliver a more responsive birth parent support service and promote birth family relationships.

Improve services for adopted adults.

Early Permanence in placing children

Raising awareness and knowledge about early permanence and embedding the early permanence policy, practice and delivery in house and across partner organisations, through opportunities for training and development to ensure that knowledge is up to date and is widely shared.

Adopter Recruitment

Streamline processes and shorten timescales for all parts of the adopter assessment journey from Enquiry to ADM approval. With the aim that 90% of all assessments are completed in the required 6-month timescale. Development of Stage One and Stage Two processes to address delay and facilitate Adopter Self Learning in Stage One and Stage Two.

Increasing adopter engagement and consultation

To influence service delivery through the development of an Adoption Advisory Board. Adopter Voice is commissioned to support A@H with this work. Increased communication with adopters through their journey by the development adopter database and a plan of regular communication.

7.2 Family Finding Activity

The tables below contain the total numbers of children placed by the service during the year 2019/20, as well as the six months to 30 September 2020/21.

Full Year 2019/20 – Children Placed:

| LA / Trust | In House | Inter-agency | Total Placed |
|----------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| Sandwell | 20 | 21 | 41 |
| Wolverhampton | 10 | 13 | 23 |
| Walsall | 11 | 8 | 19 |
| Dudley | 9 | 8 | 17 |
| (Total) | 50 | 50 | 100 |

1 April to 30 September 2020 – Children Placed:

| LA/ Trust | In House | Interagency | Total placed |
|---------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|
| Sandwell | 4 | 17 | 21 |
| Wolverhampton | 6 | 9 | 15 |
| Walsall | 7 | 11 | 18 |
| Dudley | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| Total | 22 | 40 | 62 |

For comparative purposes, the performance of each LA / Trust in placing children is in the table.

2018/19 – Children Placed by LA / Trust (year prior to Adoption@Heart going live):

| LA/ Trust | In House | Interagency | Total placed |
|---------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|
| Sandwell | 8 | 28 | 36 |
| Wolverhampton | 29 | 13 | 42 |
| Walsall | 16 | 12 | 28 |
| Dudley | 16 | 16 | 32 |
| Total | 69 | 69 | 138 |

Early Permanence

In the full year 2019/20, five children were placed via Foster for Adoption.

20 children have been placed via Foster for Adoption in the first six months of 2020/21, five of these children were Sandwell children.

Analysis

The overall number of children placed in the year 2020/21 has increased pro rata by over twenty percent, compared with the previous year performance, despite the impact of Covid-19 on children's transitions. The service is likely to place around the same number of children in total as the combined total of the four partners in the year prior before the RAA was formed.

In the first year of operation, forty one percent of children placed were from Sandwell and consequently numbers placed for the other three partners were considerably lower. This was due to the fact that more Sandwell children were waiting on Placement Orders at the point the service became operational. In the first six months of the current year, this has levelled out with thirty three percent of children placed being from Sandwell.

The numbers of children placed for both Walsall and Wolverhampton have significantly increased in the current year to date. The number of children placed by Dudley remains lower than in the previous year and this should be seen in the context of the numbers of children waiting to be placed for adoption, which are also lower for Dudley. These are provided in the table below.

Inter-agency usage has remained high during both periods, with sixty four percent of children placed externally in the current year to date. The increased numbers of adopters entering the process in the same period would indicate that the number placed in house should increase, as these adopters become approved during quarters three and four of the current year.

Foster for Adopt usage has significantly increased during the first six months of 2020/21. This increase is the result of development work done within the service and across the partnership.

7.3 Adoption Panels

Adoption panels have operated since early April 2019 across the four Local Authority / Trust locations on a weekly basis. Panels have approved 51 Adopters and matched 107 children in the year 2019/20 (100 children placed in year). In the first six months of 2020/21 panels have matched 67 children with adoptive parents (62 placed with adopters) and approved 34 adopters.

Panels have been robust in raising issues about practice where appropriate.

The service now has four panel Chairs, having recruited a further Chair in addition to the three who transferred in April 2019. The two Panel Advisors and the Panel Coordinator have driven the development of robust quality assurance processes and the Head of Service has held quarterly meetings with the Chairs. A joint staff / panel member development day took place in January 2020 and another is scheduled for December 2020.

In April 2020 Covid-19 restrictions led to the need for panels to be run virtually, rather than face to face. Despite initial challenges in moving to this new way of working, the panel team and Chairs worked effectively together in ensuring panels were able to run smoothly via Microsoft Teams. Consideration is currently being given to the benefits of the virtual panel system and to what extent the system might remain virtual once restrictions are lifted. There have been clear benefits regarding adopter attendance and reducing regional travel for professionals.

ADM processes are now embedded and there have been less delays in progressing decisions due to resource challenges.

Following challenges in ensuring panels are quorate during the first-year, additional panel members have been recruited from within the local authorities. This has reduced dependence on independent panel members, improve quoracy and enable effective involvement by partner agencies in panel delivery. There are some ongoing challenges regarding the quality of documentation and adherence to timescales, which are being addressed.

7.4 Partnership Working

Considerable progress has been made during the 18 months since the service went live in strengthening engagement and communication across the partnership. This has improved the interface between the service and partners and improved the understanding of it being a shared service, rather than a separate entity.

Practice workshops were held in all partner services during the quarter four of 2019/20. Further workshops are planned for Autumn 2020.

Adoption@Heart managers are attending key meetings relating to children's care planning and tracking.

Virtual working has improved engagement, due to reduction in travel and impact on time.

Establishment of an Operations Group has improved operational communication at Head of Service and Service Manager level.

A partnership event for all staff is planned for November 2020 (delayed from May due to Covid-19).

8. Adoption Support

During April 2019 to March 2020, the service made 226 ASF applications. In the six months to September 2020, 145 applications have been made to the fund. The split of these according to which area the adopter lived, in is outlined in the table below:

| Local Authority | ASF Applications 2019/20 | ASF Applications 2020/21 – year to date April to September |
|-----------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dudley | 82 | 38 |
| Sandwell | 40 | 26 |
| Walsall | 58 | 40 |
| Wolverhampton | 46 | 41 |

Adoption@Heart is responsible for the following post adoption contact arrangements. The table shows the number of children and the work generated, as some children will have multiple post adoption recipients.

Post Adoption Contact 2019/20 – Full Year

| Council | Number of Adoptee | Number of Contacts for Adoptee |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Dudley | 343 | 966 |
| Sandwell | 544 | 1083 |
| Walsall | 683 | 1786 |
| Wolverhampton | 351 | 1022 |

Post Adoption Contact 2020/21 Year to Date:

| Council | Number of Adoptee | Number of Contacts for Adoptee |
|----------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Dudley | 357 | 941 |
| Sandwell | 535 | 1068 |
| Walsall | 772 | 1860 |
| Wolverhampton | 400 | 860 |

Referrals / Enquiries for Adoption Support

There have been 94 referrals for assessment of need between April 2019 - March 2020 and a further 43 during the period April to September 2020. All of them have resulted in delivering specialist intervention, commissioning therapeutic services either inhouse or with external providers. Additionally, there have been a significant number of reviews of therapeutic intervention and we have made 288 applications to the ASF for new and continued therapeutic services.

In House Therapeutic Provision

The service has an in-house Adoption Support Therapist who delivers therapeutic intervention which includes; Therapeutic Life Story work, DDP informed practice, delivery of parenting programmes including Nurturing Attachment Parenting Programme, plus training sessions. The total ASF claims from work undertaken amounts to £38,314.33.

9. Accountability**Management board**

The service has continued to have in place two key layers of governance with a Management Board attended by Assistant Directors and a Strategic Commissioning Board attended by Directors of Children's Service.

The Strategic Commissioning Board has continued to meet quarterly, supported by the commissioning lead from Dudley. The Chair of this board transferred to Sandwell in October 2020, due to a change of DCS in Dudley who previously chaired.

In May 2020 an Operations Group was established on a trial basis, with a view to increasing engagement, oversight and operational involvement of Heads of Service and other managers from each partners service. This group has met monthly chaired by the Head of Service for Adoption@Heart. Consequently, the Management Board has met bi-monthly given part of its function is now delegated to this group.

Further discussion will take place with the Strategic Commissioning Board in January 2021 about the governance arrangements moving forward.

Report completed by:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mark Tobin', written in a cursive style.

Mark Tobin
Head of Service