



Report title: **Adoption Service Report**

01 April 2020 to 31 March 2021

Date of report: 2 August 2021

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 2020/21.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2021.

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 2021:

There were 30 children subject to placement orders, but not yet placed for adoption. 3 had already had a change of plan away from adoption and for 7 their foster carer was in the process of being considered to adopt them therefore family finding was on hold. A further 3 children were linked to adoptive parents and awaiting matching panel with a view to being placed.

The remaining 17 were the subject of active family finding,

Of these 17 children 13 were part of the same sibling group and the timescales these children had been waiting since their placement order was granted are set out below.

Less than 3 months:	8
Between 3 and 6 months:	0
Between 6 and 12 months:	3
Between 12 and 24 months:	6
Children waiting over 2 years:	0

2.1 Children Made Subject to Placement Orders:

Full year 2020/21 As at 30 September 2020

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
0	2	2	6	0	1

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	Total
5	1	3	0	5	4	29

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

As at 31 March 2021 there were 30 children with the decision to be placed for adoption (SHOBPA), but not yet subject to a placement order.

2.3 Number of Children who had a SHOBPA during the period:

For the full year 2020/21

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
2	1	5	1	1	3

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	Total
2	3	0	3	2	4	27

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

There were 5 children subject to a change of plan away from adoption during the 12 month period to 31 March 2021.

2.5 Number of Children Placed for Adoption during the period:

For 12 months to 31 March 2021:

Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
1	5	6	3	5	2

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	Total in year
2	4	2	2	3	0	35

Children Placed in Previous Years:

Financial Year:	17/18	18/19	19/20
Children Placed:	35	36	41

3. Number of Children Adopted

The number of children legally adopted by their adoptive parents in the full year 2020/21 was 35

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

Financial Year:	17/18	18/19	19/20
Children Adopted:	35	36	31

Due to the time delay in a child being placed and adopted, court delays caused by Covid-19 and the impact on the courts, will be a contributory factor in delaying the adoption of children placed. The numbers of children leaving care nationally via adoption has reduced continuously since 2017. Despite this numbers of children placed by Sandwell for adoption along with the number adopted have remained consistent over a four year period. Numbers of S

Adoption Scorecard Performance:

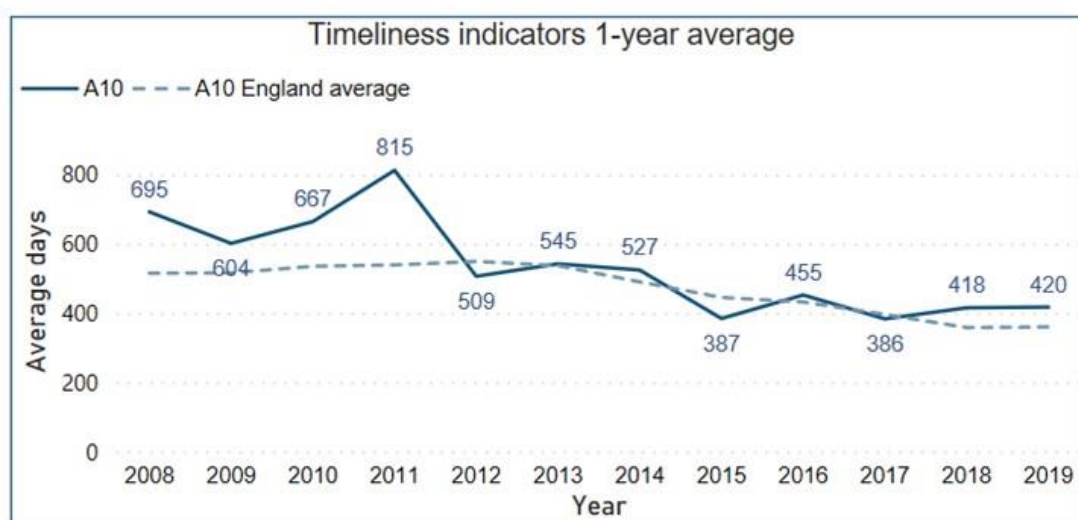
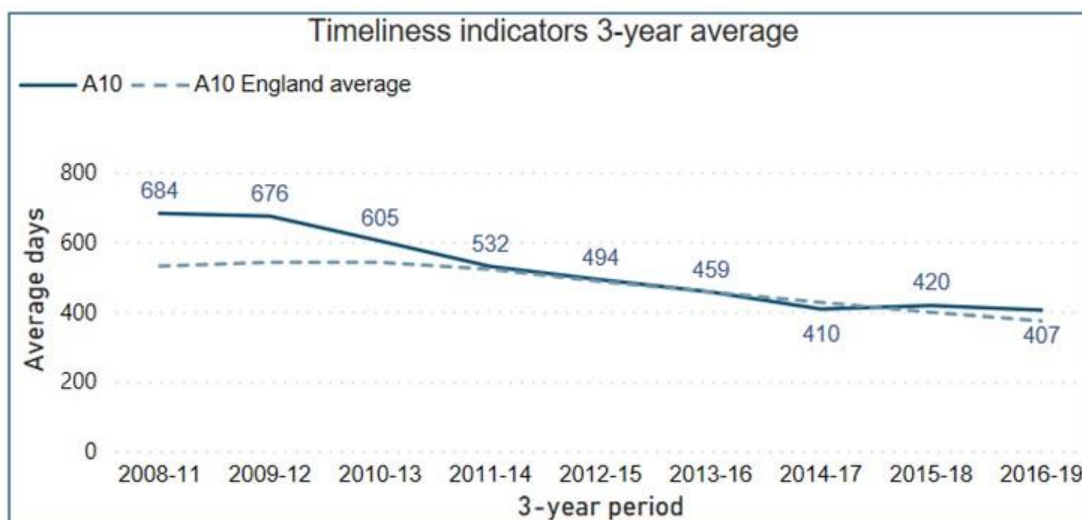
In 2014, as part of its' Adoption Reform Agenda, the government introduced Adoption Scorecards to track local authority performance and to tackle delay in the adoption system. Scorecards are produced for a 3-year rolling average, with the latest data being published for April 2018 - March 2019 (Published 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: 420	2019 England average: 363	Average time in 2019 was longer than in 2018	2016-19 average days: 407	2016-19 England average: 376



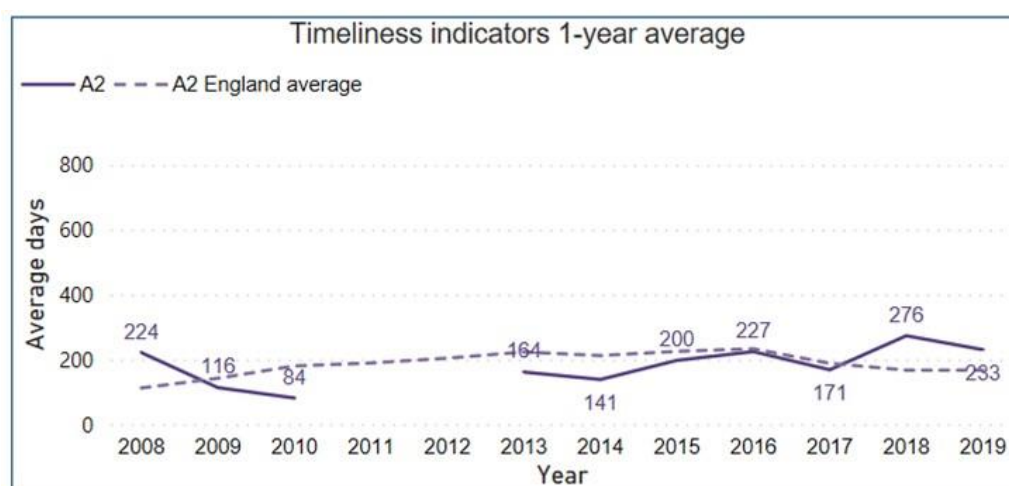
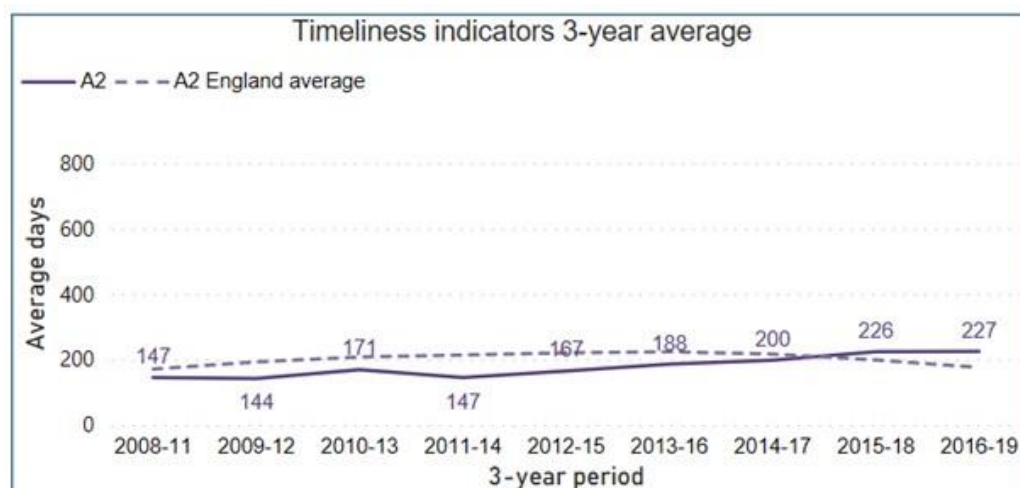
A10: Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster care adoptions:

2019:		2016-19:	
LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:	LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:
420	423	407	440

A10: Single year and three year average performance are within threshold but above England average

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: 233	2019 England average: 170	Average time in 2019 was shorter than in 2018	2016-19 average days: 227	2016-19 England average: 178
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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:		2016-19:	
LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:	LA average days:	Stats neighbours average:
233	222	227	236

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

3.1 Early Permanency

There were 6 Sandwell 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 31st March 2021, 638 new enquiries were received by the Adoption@Heart Recruitment Team.

This is in comparison to 349 enquiries received last year.

4.2 Information Events:

157 attendance at information events and 52 phone consultations (mix of single and joint applicants).

4.3 Registrations of Interest:

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

Full year 2019/20	64
Full year 2020/21	117

4.4 Adopter Approvals:

The service approved 69 adopters in the full year, an increase of 19 over the 50 approved in 2019/20.

5. Marketing Report

Between 1st April 2020 and 31 March 2021 there were:

- 638 enquiries
- 52 phone consultations and 157 virtual information events attended
- 23,169 website visits, made up of 17,938 unique visits
- 442 Twitter followers
- 2,133 Facebook likes

Marketing brief:

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of marketing activities, including the Adoption@Heart one year anniversary campaign, had to be put on hold. However, a summer campaign took place across July and August, which featured a digital campaign with The Metro, a Free Radio Black Country campaign across 4 weeks and a series of blog posts from Adoption@Heart social workers detailing their working week from home. A myth busting social media campaign took place across Facebook.

Face-to-face information events were put on hold and Adoption@Heart changed the format of these and delivered them virtually instead. Virtual information events were launched in June

and attendance has been higher than previously. During October, the first event took place where adopters appeared on camera, alongside Social Workers. This format has been much more engaging, enabling adopters to interact with the agency and have their questions answered.

Regular meetings have taken place with the Communications Leads for the four partner agencies. The meetings are used to discuss marketing activity, how the other communications leads have been supporting Adoption@Heart, utilising the knowledge of their areas and resources, what support is needed and how the partnership can work going forward.

LGBT+ adoption and fostering week took place in March 2021. Adoption@Heart had support from LGBT+ adopters to share their stories across multiple platforms, including video, social media, blog posts, news articles and radio interviews. A video shared online featuring Jen and Lisa has currently been viewed over 6,000 times and has reached 14,400 people.

Whilst the national You Can Adopt campaign took place between September and December 2020 (and aimed to bust myths around who is eligible to adopt, as well as exploring what the adoption process involves), the service continues to use its own material provided by the campaign for marketing activity. Content is regularly shared via social media, to ensure the campaigns key messages are highlighted within recruitment activity, as well as across the partner agencies.

A national siblings group campaign commenced in April 2021. The campaign will continue to empower potential adopters with the confidence that #YouCanAdopt instils. The campaign focused on sibling groups and was driven by the latest data and by concerns about the number of sibling groups still waiting to be adopted. As well as this, the campaign also continued community engagement work, to target prospective adopters from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority backgrounds.

Sadly, an Adoption@Heart approved adopter lost her life due to Covid-19 early 2021. Her husband wanted to honour his wife by offering a charitable contribution in her name to an adoption agency and Adoption@Heart worked closely with Adoption Focus (VAA) on a joint campaign. This attracted television and radio coverage in the West Midlands and aimed to promote greater awareness of adoption within Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

6. Requirements on the Preparation of Adoption Report Regulations

6.1 Complaints:

There have been two formal complaints about the service since 1 April 2019.

One of these was from adopters in stage one of the recruitment process, where a decision was made by the agency not to progress their application. 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.

A second formal complaint was received in the previous year 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 escalated to stage two and was referred to the Local Government Ombudsman. The LGO found that there had been fault on the part of service for undertaking initial assessment work with the individual prior to inviting her to formally register her interest to adopt. No fault was found with the decision not to progress the applicant into stage 1 of the assessment process or any aspect relating to the grounds for that decision.

Practice in the adopter sector widely is not in line with statutory guidance in this area. Most adoption agencies take the view that it would be poor use of resources and misleading to potential adopters not to undertake an initial consideration of their circumstances and suitability. In order to effectively meet the needs of children in need of adoptive families, the adoption agency must focus its resources strategically, in assessing those individuals most likely to become approved adopters. Adoption@Heart's practice reflects common and best practice in the sector. The Head of Service has been working closely with the DfE in relation to the difference between best practice and the Statutory Guidance.

Despite this, the Council accepts that it should have been made clear to the complainant that she was entitled within the statutory guidance to submit a Registration of Interest to agency, albeit, the outcome of this process would not have been any different in relation to the outcome for the applicant. A small change has been made to the agency's procedure in relation to terminology and information given to potential adopters at this stage of the process.

The LGO have indicated that they intend to issue a Public Interest Report on this matter in July 2021. The report will highlight the fault found against Adoption@Heart, whilst also highlighting the wider issue about practice in the sector and the statutory guidance. Full communication with Directors in each Local Authority has taken place.

6.2 Staffing:

The service employs 32 qualified Social Workers on a permanent basis, along with six 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 have been funded by the partner agencies 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 was permanently appointed in quarter three. The panel team have two Panel Advisors along with a Panel Co-ordinator and three Panel Administrators, one of which is currently vacant.

Management capacity has been increased with the addition of a Service Manager, funded within existing budget. This role was in the process of recruitment at year end and subsequently, recruited to on an interim basis, pending a permanent appointment.

The Business Support Team have an additional post of Senior Business Support Officer, which has been created and recruited to in the year.

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

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 Development:

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 developed and agreed across the partnership.

Adoption Support:

Increasing the range of services available to adopters with in the adoption support offer for the region, as well as improved 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.

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 2020/21.

1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 – Children placed in year:

LA/ Trust	In House	Interagency	Total placed
Sandwell	11	24	35
Wolverhampton	14	24	38
Walsall	20	17	37
Dudley	10	4	14
Total	55	69	124

For comparative purposes, the performance of each LA / Trust in placing children is in the table. 35 Sandwell children were placed with adoptive parents in the year.

Early Permanence:

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

As per the table below, 26 children have been placed via Foster for Adoption in the full year 2020/21, six of these were Sandwell children.

1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 – Children placed via Foster for Adoption in year:

LA/ Trust	In House	Interagency	Total
Sandwell	3	3	6
Wolverhampton	4	5	9
Walsall	5	1	6
Dudley	3	2	5
Total	15	11	26

Inter-agency usage for children placed via Foster for Adopt regulations is 42 percent.

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.

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 full year 2020/21 the distribution of placements across the partnership is more even with Walsall and Wolverhampton having more placements than Sandwell but very similar performance. This has levelled out with thirty three percent of children placed being from Sandwell.

The number of children placed by Dudley is lower than in the previous year and this should be seen in the context of the numbers of children with adoption plans and SHOBPA decision (sections 2.3 and 2.5 of this report).

Inter-agency usage has remained high during the year at fifty six percent of children placed externally across the partnership as a whole. It is positive that only twenty eight percent of Dudley children were placed with inter-agency adopters. 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 full year. This increase is the result of development work done within the service and across the partnership.

7.3 Adoption Panels:

Adoption Panels met were held on fifty occasions during 2020-2021. There are at least four panels a month for adoption matters to be heard. There is also flexibility within the panel system, allowing for extra and special panels to be arranged in order to enable additional cases and emergency matters to be heard, as and when directed by the courts. The service aims to avoid delay for children and ensures matters are dealt with in a timely manner.

The service has three adoption panel chairs, due to one chair leaving during the year. A fourth chair is in the process of being recruited. The three chairs in post are those who were transferred to the service in 2019.

The Agency Decision Makers from Wolverhampton make all the decisions regarding the suitability for approval of all prospective adopters. The SHOBPA decisions remain in the three Local Authorities and the Trust. Agency Decision Makers are very flexible with regard to early decisions with regard to matches, in order to enable transitions that work best for the child, for example using school holidays.

Panels have made positive recommendations on sixty-nine adopter approvals and one hundred and twenty-four matches in the period. All recommendations made by panel have been positive and all have been supported by the ADM.

Panel continues to be supported by a very committed group of staff. There are 1.5 Panel Advisors, 1 part time Panel Co-ordinator and 2 full time equivalent Panel Administrators.

Panel continues to offer individual feedback to Social Workers, regarding quality of the paperwork and to the Local Authorities and the Trust, regarding delay for children. Panel are also open to constructive observations regarding their performance.

Feedback is also sought from adopters attending panel, which this is largely positive and includes comments such as 'panel were warm & welcoming' 'panel members put us at ease'.

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.

7.4 Partnership Working:

Considerable progress was made during the year in strengthening engagement and communication across the partnership. This has improved the interface between the service and partners and improved understanding of roles and responsibilities between the service and Local Authority partners.

Practice workshops were held in all partner services during the year and specific training was delivered in relation to the quality of Child Permanence Reports.

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

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

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

A partnership event took place in November 2020 with a focus on key areas of practice and strengthening communication and engagement within the partnership. Over one hundred and twenty staff attended and a further partnership event is planned in June 2021.

8. Adoption Support

Adoption@Heart's Adoption Support Team model changed during 2020/21, subsequently, recruitment, assessment, linking and support to adopters pre order, remain in the Recruitment and Assessment Team, this offers ongoing support by a worker known to adopters and is common practice across the sector.

As a result of this model change the Adoption Support Team now specialises in all key provision of post adoption support, and now supports families pre and post order. The team also commissions therapeutic services via applications to the Adoption Support Fund, plus post adoption contact, access to records and birth parent support.

It is recognised that early life adversity impacts children developmentally, emotionally, cognitively and socially and requires therapeutic support in order for children to thrive. Adoption@Heart operates a graduated approach, offering universal access to an adoption training programme and support groups delivered by staff; enhanced support includes an assessment of need and parenting support, individually or in groups and targeted support includes commissioning of specialist therapeutic intervention. We utilise the service of an Adoption Support Therapist employed by Adoption@Heart, as well as commissioning private and independent therapeutic services.

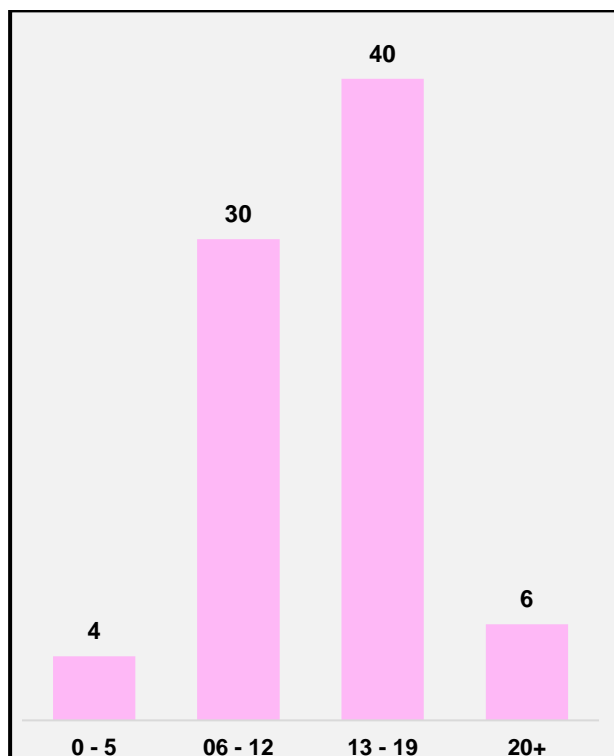
The number of adoptive families seeking adoption support continues to rise and this presents a challenge for the service. Additionally, families require support over a sustained period, and we continue to support a significant number of legacy cases transferred at the time of the launch of the RAA in 2019.

The type of support requested by adoptive families differ with support relating to emotional health and wellbeing, to help the child to develop more positive behaviours, improve family life and relationships and parents and carers to develop skills in therapeutic parenting; to help the family bond together; to help the child's engagement with learning and to address child to parent violence.

The Adoption Support Fund was established in 2015 by the Government to help adoptive families access support and settle into their new lives following adoption. The Government committed ongoing funding for 2020-21 financial year in advance of the spending review settlement.

300 ASF applications were made by the service during April 2020 - March 2021, this is an increase in applications.

The table below identifies that adolescence can be a particularly challenging time for adoptive families and we see the largest cohort of families accessing adoption support with children aged 13-19 years old. Young people are likely to face challenges relating to identity and self-concept, attachment and security and we are experiencing unsolicited contact by adoptees or birth parents which have the potential to destabilise adoptive families.



Covid 19 Adoption Support:

The DfE allocated £8 million from the Adoption Support Fund for adoptive families to meet needs arising from the coronavirus outbreak, we used our share of funding to pay for therapies to help adoptive families, including online counselling and couples therapy, virtual peer-to-peer support, plus specialist webinars through The Adopter Hub and National Association of Therapeutic Parents.

Post Adoption Contact:

Adoption@Heart is responsible for post adoption contact arrangements on behalf of Sandwell Council. There are three full-time Family Support Workers who are responsible for administering the service. They offer support to adoptive parents and birth relatives. The service has continued remotely during Covid 19, albeit there has been delay in the exchanges at this time as access to post is limited to once a week.

Access to Records:

The provision of birth records counselling and access to information is of vital importance in enabling adopted adults to understand the circumstances of their adoption and enhance their sense of identity.

Future Developments:

Practice development work, as below, is currently being undertaken with a view to improving the support offer to adoptive families in the region.

- Review and transformation of the planning and management of Adoption contact
- Development of a multi-agency, multi-professional service delivery model with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and Virtual Schools
- Regional Approach to offering support to birth parents at risk from repeat removals
- Regional commissioning framework for ASF providers
- Development of Psychological and therapeutic services
- Transracial Training
- Closer working with MASH to support understanding about the impact of trauma in adoptive families.
- Transitional support for older aged adoptees

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 Chairing of this board has remained with Sandwell during the year 2020/21.

In May 2020 an Operations Group was established, with a view to increasing engagement, oversight and operational involvement of Heads of Service and other managers from each partners service. This group has continued to meet 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. Management Board is chaired by the Deputy Director for Children's Social Care in Wolverhampton, as host Local Authority for Adoption@Heart.

Report completed by:



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