

Adoption Annual Report

2023/24



Executive Report

adoption
now

Together we make a difference

Bolton
Council

ROCHDALE
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Oldham
Council

BLACKBURN
DARWEN

Bury

Tameside
Metropolitan Borough

1. Introduction

Achieving adoption for children contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people in line with priorities outlined in other Council plans.

Adoption Now is a Regional Adoption Agency providing adoption services on behalf of six Local Authorities – Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside. It is hosted by Bolton Council. Bury children's cases are held by Adoption Now social workers from Placement Order onwards.

This report covers the financial year 2023/2024, ie. 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024. Data in this report relating to children with a plan of adoption is local data relating to Bury children however, adoption support and recruitment data covers the whole Region unless otherwise stated.

2. Adoption Agency Business - Children

2.1 Headline Data

21 Children being tracked with possible plan of adoption at 31st March 2024.

16 Children with new Should be Placed for Adoption decisions.

16 Children made subject to a Placement Order.

6 Children matched with a prospective adoptive family.

6 Children joined a prospective adoptive family.

12 Children adopted.

2 Children were placed with carers under Fostering for Adoption Regulations.

0 Children had their Should be Placed for Adoption decision reversed.

16 Children waiting for a family on Placement Order at 31st March 2024.

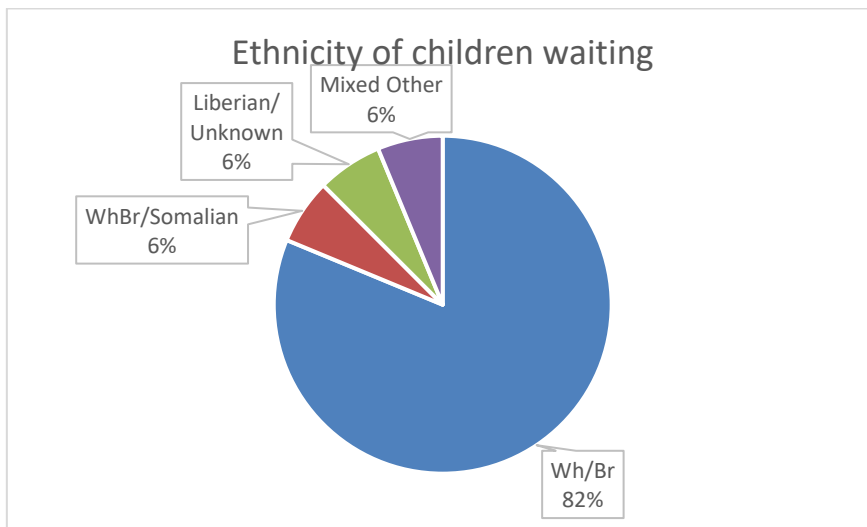
2.2 Analysis

After a busy first half the year in terms of decision making the second half of this last financial year saw a further **4** children made subject to a decision that they should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA) meaning that for the whole year a total of **16** children had new plans of adoption. This is a slight increase on last year's figure of 14 but not as high as the 4 year peak in 2021/22 of 24 decisions made. The number of Placement Orders made this year has mirrored SHOBPA decision unlike in previous years, evidencing that the court are on the whole agreeing with Local Authority plans and that court decisions are being made in regards to children with plans of adoption.

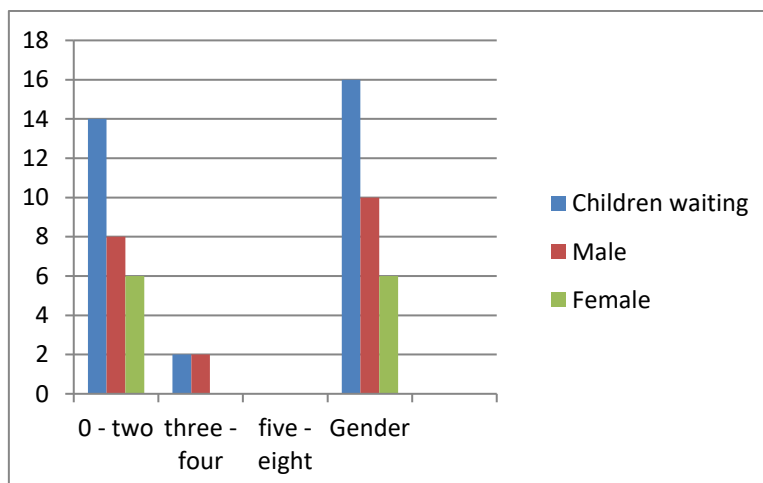
What is notable in the data however is that the number of matches and placements (children joining adoptive families) has not followed the same trajectory with families having only been found for **6** children within the year. This is reflected in a rise in the number of children waiting at the end of year point, up from 6 last year to **16** this year. This is concerning as it can indicate difficulties in finding appropriate families for children with plans of adoption.

Some indication as to the reasons behind this can perhaps be seen by exploring the demographic of children with new plans of adoption in the previous year. This shows that out of 14 children who received new plans of adoption in 2022/23, only 65% percent were White British with the remaining 5 children representing 5 different ethnicities between them. In addition, whilst none of the children were in the older five years plus age bracket, only 4 were aged two years of under. If these are indeed factors, then one would expect to see evidence of this also in the demographic of the children waiting with a Placement Order for a family.

In fact, only 3 of the 16 children were of non-White British ethnicity with two of these having some Black African heritage. Statistically Black children are known to wait disproportionately longer for a family than other children. Notably both of these children also have maternal mental health histories which pose additional risks in terms of their own prognoses.



In terms of the ages of those children waiting there is arguably less reflection of the figures seen above in relation to last year’s decisions, with all but two of the children waiting aged 2 or under. It is perhaps notable that there are more males than females as whilst this does not always equate to longer wait times, out of those adopters who specify a preference more tend to have a preference for girls.



Therefore, neither ethnicity nor age appear to account for the low number of matches and placements made and the higher number of children waiting. Another factor that can lead to longer waiting times for children is being part of sibling groups with a plan to live together. 4 of the 16 children are part of sibling groups of 2. Additional needs relating to health, development and behaviour are also major factors in it being more challenging to find families to meet these needs. 1 child is noted to have significant health difficulties. This

same child along with one other has developmental delay. Maternal health and mental health histories which may have genetic implications for the child is a factor in relation to this second child plus 5 others, and some of these have also experience neo-natal abstinence symptoms following maternal drug use in pregnancy. Therefore overall, **8** children have notable additional needs or implications for future well-being.

It seems likely therefore that a combination of these factors is at least in part impacting upon the ability to find families able to parent these children in a more timely fashion. Some staffing issues in relation to capacity have also been noted in the last year and are being addressed but this may also have impacted to some extent. Over the past twelve months there has also been an increasing shortage of adopters which is affecting all family finding activity at present.

What is encouraging is that at the point of year end **7** children were progressing towards a match with identified families including **4** out of **8** children who had waited over 200 days. A further child in this cohort, and the child who has waited longest, has experienced significant delay due to a family being identified but the foster carer then applying to court independently to adopt him. That court case was ongoing at 31st March 2024. Another two foster carers were considering, with the Local Authority's support their ability to adopt the children in their care one who has significant health needs and the other a sibling group of two.

Of the remaining **5** children waiting, 1 had only be subject to a Placement Order for less than a month. A family had previously been identified for 1 child but the family withdrew when it became clear that the plan was for this child's sibling to be placed alongside if adoption becomes their plan. The longest wait time for any child without a link or exploring foster carers is 201 at 31st March and relates to a sibling group of 2 who both have some level of additional need and future health uncertainty.

5 of the children with links had plans to be placed with Adoption Now adopters (excluding the two foster carers with whom discussions were being had). **50%** of the children who joined families were placed with Adoption Now adopters. For Bury children this is below the target of 60% in house placements over this past year although overall the target was exceed in relation to all children. The 5 children with inhouse links will go some way to redressing this balance and every effort is made to ensure equity across the six local authorities that Adoption Now serves whilst equally ensuring the right matches are progressed.

2.3 Family Finding Activity

Professional links and relationships have continued to result in some positive matches. Link Maker continues to be used as a key tool in-house as well as externally to allow adopters to see the children who are in need of a family for themselves. Filters are used on Link Maker to ensure that the best use is made of in-house families before decisions are made to look externally, whilst also ensuring that this is done in a timely fashion to avoid unnecessary delay for any child. Link Maker continues to be a useful tool with some adopters expressing interest in children who we might not have immediately considered for them based on their preferences. The regional placement group continues to operate, meeting on a 6 weekly basis to encourage matches with local voluntary adoption agencies as the advantage both in terms of children's identity and in terms of support in children being placed within the North West is recognised.

Profiles for children who are waiting longer or who it is anticipated are likely to wait longer are shared monthly with Regional Adoption Agencies across the North West, and this consortium of RAA's continue to plan and run joint Activity/Fun days for children and adopters waiting across the North West region alongside the Voluntary Adoption Agencies in the area. Currently these are being funded by the DfE who recognised the innovative work being done by Adoption Now and North West RAA's in terms of this collaborative working.

All Adoption Now approved adopters, regardless of their location are immediately available to Bury children, and most place profiles on Link Maker whilst progressing through Stage 2 of their assessment to enable early links to be made.

It is the Agency’s practice to search for a family within Adoption Now in the first instance and then to look further afield to other RAA’s or Voluntary Adoption Agencies. For all children, but particularly those who it is anticipated will wait longer, initial in-house searches are completed anonymously pre-Placement Order to avoid delay once an order is made.

2.4 Quality Assurance

Quality of practice in relation to children with plans of adoption is measured in a number of ways including, but not exclusively, timeliness, quality of recording and report writing and outcomes.

Timescales: The Scorecard data for children adopted between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024 is as follows:

Measure		Average time taken
Placement Order to Matching (A2)	Scorecard Indicator - 121 days	198
Child entering care starting adoption placement (A10)	Scorecard indicator – 426 days	581

Both average timescales exceed the targets. The A10 timescale takes into account court proceedings and therefore the Agency has less control over this target, however the A2 timescales indicates the length of time that a child has waited for a family to be found and progressed to formal match, and therefore higher timescales can indicate issues with the quality of practice and performance. It is important when considering this however to factor in a number of things including the cohort of children adopted and the local and national picture in terms of adopter sufficiency at the time.

In relation to the cohort of children, only **2** children had previously been placed under Early Permanence arrangements. These children experienced no wait in joining their family after placement order was made and would usually contribute to bringing the overall average down a little, however they represent only 14% of the overall number of children adopted. Sadly only **1** other child was matched within the target timescales.

The cohort of children includes **3** sibling groups of **2** representing 50% of the children and this, along with the fact that both children in one of the sibling groups had additional needs (1 having been born at 25 weeks and experiencing health implications and the other with more significant attachment difficulties), and the children in another sibling group were aged 4 and 6 years old has undoubtedly contributed to the higher overall average. The sibling groups alone waited between 164 and 261 days before they were matched with families, although with the lowest of those figures being for the older sibling group of two, this is a positive achievement.

5 other single children also have some level of additional need. Of these **1** had development, speech and language delay, **2** were at higher risk of being affected due to maternal drug and alcohol use and **2** have severe eczema which prevented them from living in a house with a furred animal, significantly reducing the number of adopters available. Significantly 3 of the 12 children had an element of Black heritage with two of these also having additional needs and 1 being aged 4 and therefore slightly older. As mentioned above

Black children statistically wait longer and this was certainly true for these three children with their waiting times ranging from 204 to 300 days.

Add to the above, the growing shortage over adopters over the latter period that these children were placed and the lack of timeliness does not appear to be a strong indicator of poor performance or quality but of efforts to achieve the best outcomes for these children.

Recording: Regarding reports presented to panel, **86%** of the Adoption Permanence Reports/Support Plans and **57%** of the Child Permanence Reports presented for a match were deemed to be Excellent or Good with the remainder being satisfactory for the making of a decision. One Child Permanence Report (representing **14%**) was deemed to be poor but did not prevent a decision being made due to the quality of the Adoption Permanence Report. Training is being delivered 3 times a year by Adoption Now to help improve the quality of Child Permanence Reports.

Case records held on the Local Authority system as well as those held on the Adoption Now system receive regular management oversight. The Agency is aware that some improvements are required in relation to the quality and quantity of record keeping on the Adoption Now system which is in part due to difficulties experienced by case holding social workers in managing two systems. Development work is underway to provide better feedback regarding the quality of case recording and also to improve the quality of recording.

Outcomes: **0** children had previously made plans of adoption reversed by the Agency Decision Maker during this last year, indicating that the court is generally in agreement with the Local Authority decisions being made and that it has not been necessary to changes any plans as a result of being unsuccessful in family finding for any child. In addition, there have been **0** disruptions over the past year involving a Bury child. When a child moves in with adopters but is unable to remain there and moves out prior to an adoption order being made, this is classed as a disruption. The lack of disruptions not only this year but over the past three years is a very strong indicator that that appropriate matches and placements are being made and families are being well supported in their early days together.

As indicated above 2 of the children adopted within the last year were originally placed through Early Permanence arrangements which means that at the point of adoption they have had minimal moves with one of these children having gone straight from hospital to the family that has become their permanent home. A further 2 children were placed with Early Permanence carers during the year. This is very positive although the aspiration would be to place more children with prospective adopters under this arrangement where it is appropriate however, whilst there has been a year on year increase in the number of adopters offering Early Permanence, the increasing shortage of adopters now is resulting in many of these being matched with children waiting. It is not currently possible to reserve adopters solely for the purposes of Early Permanence unless the adopters themselves expressly wish to wait.

3. Adopter recruitment

3.1 Headline Data

175 formal enquiries taken in the period from 136 couples and 39 single applicants.

132 Initial visits undertaken to 108 couples and 24 single people.

12 Viabilities undertaken with foster carers and sibling adopters.

87 new applications (Registration of Interest's) taken.

26 Stage 1's ongoing at 31.03.24

17 Stage 2's ongoing at 31.03.24

58 new families approved as adopters (43% offering FfA).

37 further assessments closed pre-approval (27 stage 1 assessments, 10 stage 2 assessments).

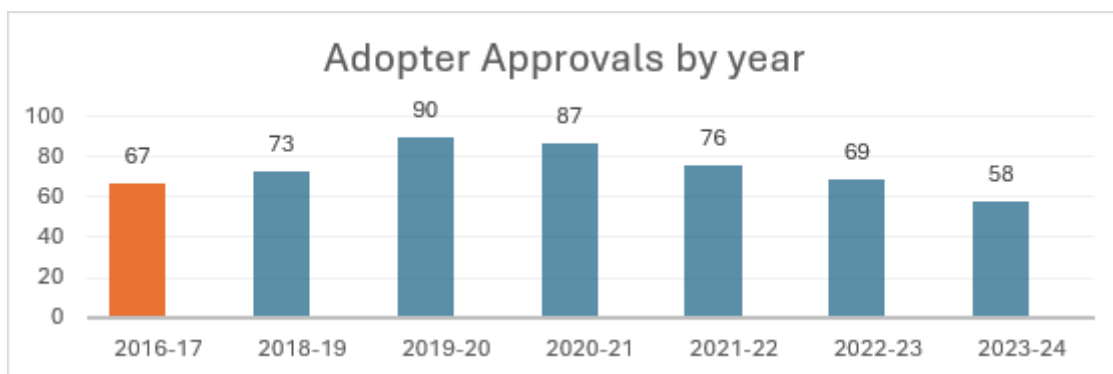
57 active pre order support cases – families with children placed.

45 approved and waiting families being supported at 31.3.24 – 19 actively progressing with matches, 3 on hold and 23 available (includes 10 South East Asian families, 10 WB families, 1 White British and European couple, 1 White Irish and British Pakistani couple and 1 White British and White British/Black Caribbean couple).

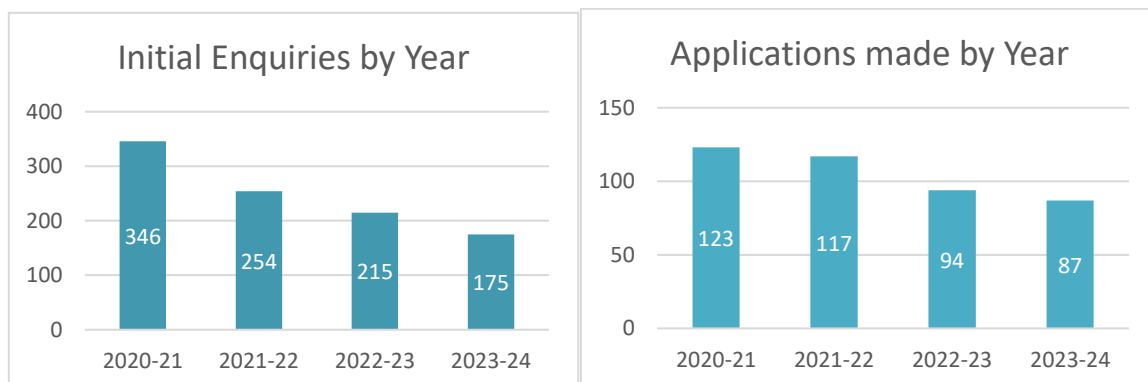
13 singleton children placed with new FfA Adoption Now families.

3.2 Analysis

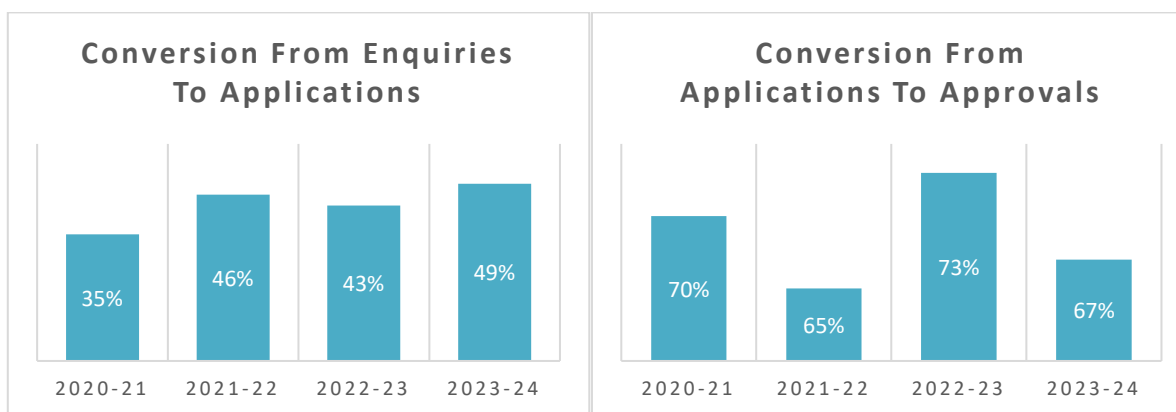
An annual target of approving 100 adopters each year was set by the Board in 2019, however this has never been achieved, with adopter approvals falling year on year locally and nationally since that year. Approval outcomes this year are the lowest since Adoption Now formed in 2017, with an impactful **16%** decrease in approvals this year from 22/23. This is the first year that the number of approvals has dropped below the level achieved by the six individual Local Authorities in the year prior to Adoption Now going live.



The number of formal enquiries received has shown a similar trajectory with falling numbers over the past four years, as has the number of applications made to the Agency.



However, the percentage conversion rate from enquiry to application is at its highest over those four years at 49% up from 35% in 2020/21.



The conversion rate from applications to approved adopters is hard to calculate accurately as many prospective adopters will apply in one year but not reach approval until the following financial year; however, a rough calculation based on the number of applications and approvals in each year shows that the conversion rate has fluctuated, but evidences that on average just under 70% of applications progress to approval. Whilst a very small percentage of assessments are presented to the Panel and Agency Decision Maker but are not approved (none in this last reporting period), it is clear that there is a high level of fall out between the point of application and the end of Stage 2 assessment. The loss of families during the process does not however appear to be increasing year on year. Notably, withdrawal during the adoption process means that significant work has already been completed, and in some cases full assessments written. In this financial year, **27** applications closed at stage 1 after considerable work being expended and **10** in stage 2.

As recorded in previous reports, the cost-of-living crisis is felt to be a contributor to the reduction in enquiries and overall reduction in adopters, as supported by research from Adoption UK: [Adoption Cost of Living Crisis AUK](#). Whilst it is difficult to provide an evidence base regarding impact on numbers of people making their first contact with the agency, data collated in respect of withdrawals from the agency post application but pre-approval highlights that in **14** of the **37** case closures, financial stability was a factor. This year finances are a contributor in **38%** of applications to the agency not progressing to approval within the year. However, it is important to note that in all those cases there were also other contributing factors. In situations where finances alone constitute a barrier, the agency works with families to establish a way forward wherever possible (whether this is being clear in assessment where a means tested allowance would be needed or in helping families navigate the benefits system or encouraging an increase in savings during assessment or during a break between stage 1 and 2).

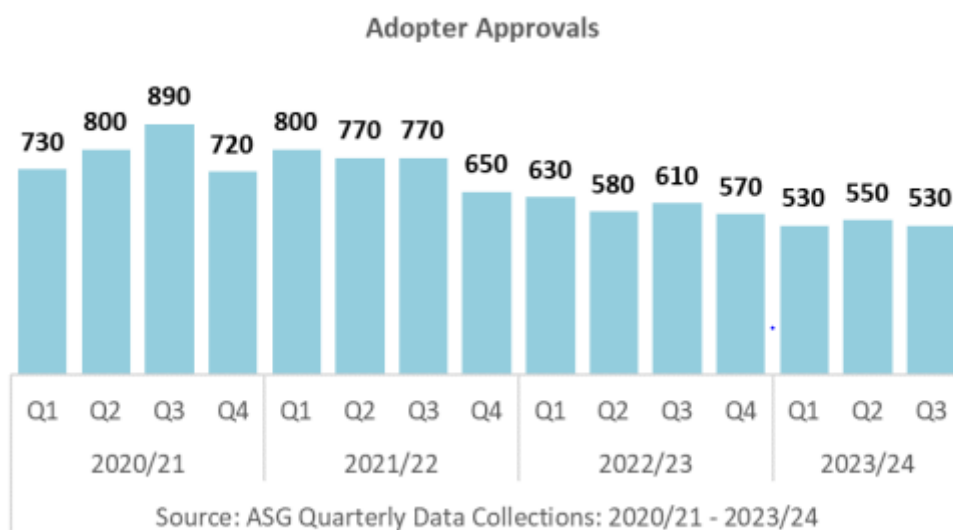
In summarising the additional reasons for withdrawals outside of finances, out of the 37 closures, factors for lack of progression included: **3** families had limited support networks, **8** families were impacted by mental health / medical health concerns, **5** families had challenges with home circumstances and providing stability, **2** experienced significant bereavement or family illness, **9** families withheld significant information compromising trust and honesty with the agency, **3** decided to pursue fertility treatment and **1** became unexpectedly pregnant, **1** had a change in job role and wanted to pursue study, **1** was made redundant, **1** family did not engage after application and **3** had a change of heart around adoption (one of these being returning adopters who could not work within modern adoption).

In most cases withdrawals have been for multifaceted reasons and a combination of the above. **22** of the **37** closures were led by the applicants themselves. **15** cases closed due to applicants withdrawing on advice from the agency. In all such cases applicants are advised of any next steps they can take to enable them to be in the best position should they choose to reapply in the future.

An additional factor impacting adopter approval outcomes is that the agency did not actively recruit Asian families for quite a proportion of the year due to the large numbers already approved and waiting. Since

taking enquiries again this has been restricted to Asian families living in the geography of the RAA and particularly those who appear to have a very open offer in terms of age, needs and ethnicity of children.

The majority of local RAA's (including our neighbouring RAA which has a much more affluent demographic) are reporting their lowest figures too. Nonetheless, Adoption Now with **58** adopter approvals continues to hold its second place regional amongst the RAA's, with the highest approving **71** adopters this year and the lowest **18**. The drop in adopter approvals is also in line with the national picture both in the previous and the current year, which saw an overall drop (**12%**) in adopter approvals (Coram-i Quarterly Data Collections) based on the first 3 Quarters in 2023-24 compared to the same period in the previous year, as evidenced below. (Confirmed Quarter 4 data is not yet available.)



Within this national scene also the Agency has shown consistency with Adoption Now approving **2.65%** of all adopters approved nationally in 2023/24, down slightly from last year (2.89%) but remaining up from the previous two years (2.54% and 2.21% respectively).

Predicted adopter approvals 2024/2025:

6 adopter approvals are anticipated in Q1.

28 families are anticipated Q2, although given the complexities it remains a little early to predict with accuracy. If achieved this would be a significant increase on last year (**11** adopter approvals).

12 families are currently have potential to be presented to panel in Q3. Last year **19** adopter approvals were achieved in this quarter, but it is too soon to be able to provide meaningful comparison.

In recent years we have seen an upturn in adopter approvals in Q3 and Q4 due to assessments that have been 'stuck' coming through later than anticipated. It is positive that this upturn looks likely in Q2. However, in previous years the agency has had a healthier number of enquiries that usually move through the system within the year.

In the main, for adopters to be approved in the coming financial year applications must be received by the end of Quarter 2 (30th September 2024) and it is clear that a minimum of **37** applications will be needed during this period to match this year's approval rate given the average fall out rate post application and pre-approval.

The Agency however would aspire to exceed the number of approvals achieved this year in line with the clear need both locally and nationally.

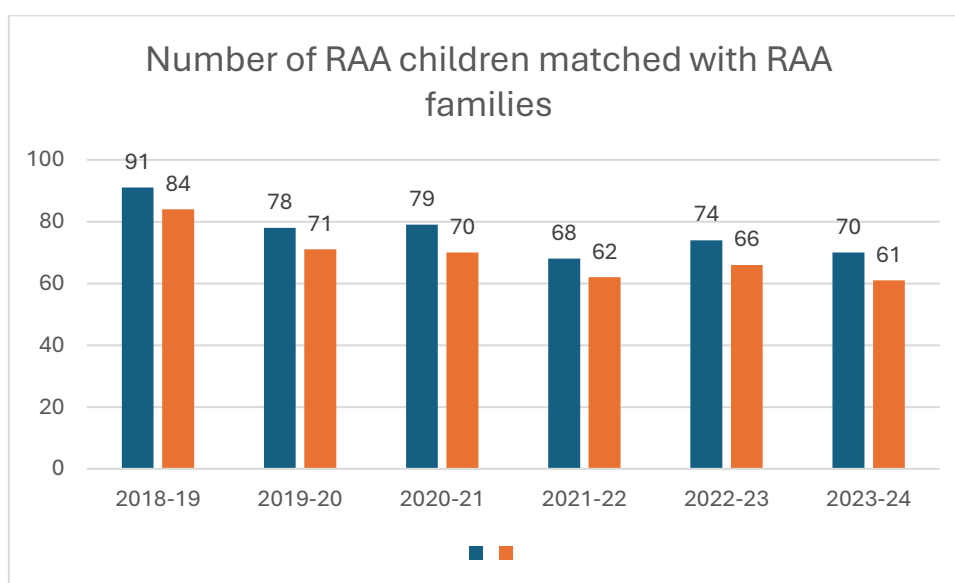
Adoption Now's Recruitment Strategy aims to 'claim' as many available families as possible.

Plans are in place to target those have previously adopted, sections of the public who may be more likely to respond altruistically to children waiting and the current decline in adopter numbers, and single males who are currently under-represented.

3.3 Matches

In this full year **95** children from across the 6 Local Authorities were matched with **82** families. (1x 3, 11 x 2 and 70 x1)

70 of those 95 children were matched with **61** RAA families (52 singleton placements, 9 placements of 2 children). This equates to **74%** of all the children matched (up 24% on last year).

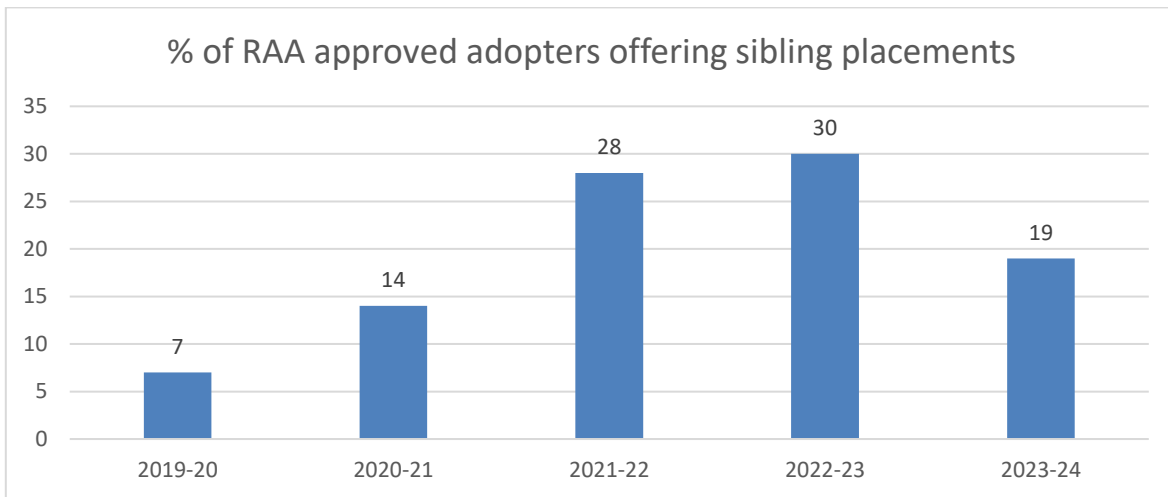


3.4 Matching factors

The challenge to recruit sufficient adopters willing to consider siblings placed together, children 3 years plus, those with additional needs or those placed under early permanence remains a priority locally and nationally. Whilst not a legal requirement, the ability to match children on the basis of their ethnicity remains an important consideration as is the need therefore to recruit from a broad demographic that reflects the backgrounds of Adoption Now's children.

Age of children: Of the 58 families approved **19 (33%)** were willing to consider children 3 years or older.

Siblings: In this year **11** families were approved to adopt siblings. This is **19%** of all approved families. (Down from 21 (**30%**) last year). This is a disappointing downturn from what has been a significant uphill trend since 20/21. The service continues to promote stretch to families where appropriate; the sibling training having been developed with the purpose of encouraging this. Whilst this may be as a result of the cost-of-living crisis or the increased numbers of singleton children available on Link Maker, this cannot be assumed and any barriers to applicants considering siblings will need to be a focus of the recruitment strategy for the forthcoming year.

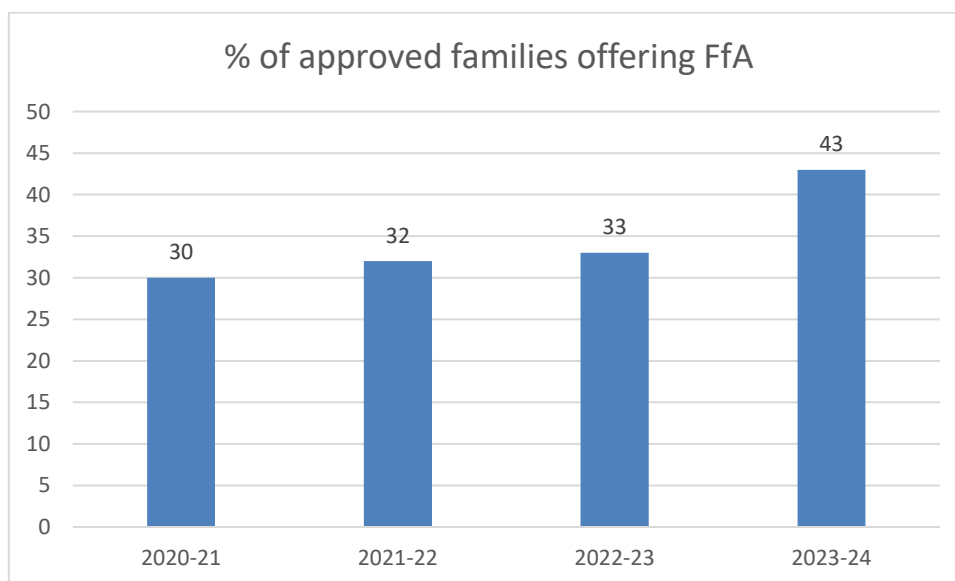


Single/LGBTQ+: Of the **58** families approved in the agency, there were **9** single applicants (**15%**), an increase on last year (**11%**) and **11** LGBTQ+ couples (**19%**), a decrease on last year (**24%**). The focus this year needs to be on increasing the number of LGBTQ+ applicants and understanding the barriers to single males seeking to adopt as out of the **9** approvals of single applicants, **8** were female.

Early permanence: Prospective adopters are advised about early permanence options with a focus on recruitment for Fostering for Adoption (FfA) from first enquiry onwards.

All adopters now attend a mandatory full day of Early Permanence training in addition to the 3-day adopter preparation groups that are delivered in person. This is particularly relevant in the drive to encourage consideration of Early Permanence for older children.

In this period, **25 (43%)** of the **58** approved families offered FfA placements (compared with **33% 22/23** and **32% 21/22**). The number of families considering early permanence has continued to rise year on year and is testament to the quality of training offered. A challenge for the agency is managing resource, whilst there has been an increase in the Early Permanence offer, some families are being used in traditional adoptions due to sufficiency challenges.



Ethnicity of adopters: In this year the service has seen less diversity with **8%** of approved adopters being other than White British (down from **25%** last year); **3** families of Southeast Asian heritage, **1** family of Polish heritage and **1** family WB / Black Caribbean. There continues to be a focus on recruiting Black families as

there is a recognised local and national need. This will continue to form part of the forthcoming recruitment strategy. South East Asian children continue to be under-represented in the care system and very few Asian children are awaiting adoption. Notwithstanding this, some of the Agency's longstanding families have been matched both internally and externally in **23/24**. As of 31st March 2024 there are **10** families of South East Asian heritage approved and waiting for a match. One of these families is also open and can realistically consider children of South Asian/White British or South Asian/Black African/Black Caribbean heritage.

Those waiting are offering placements for early permanence, siblings and older children; many are willing to consider children of a different ethnicity or religion to their own. Despite the success of achieving matches for some of this cohort of families, there are still some who have waited two to three years and over.

At this time therefore it is only possible to progress applications from families of South East Asian ethnicity who are able to meet the needs of children waiting, namely those with significant complexity or larger sibling groups (3+) or where there is an openness and capacity to consider children waiting of a different ethnicity or religion.

3.5 Quality assurance

Timeliness: Of the 58 approvals in the period **17** were fast track (no Stage 1 required). Of the remaining **41** assessments that necessitated a Stage one process **4 (10%)** were completed in the 61-day target timescale; down from **17%** last year. The majority are delayed by GP medicals however other applications are being delayed due to other non-medical issues. An increased scrutiny in assessments following learning from Serious Case Reviews, whilst absolutely necessary is also having an impact on timescales.

32 of the **58** Stage 2 assessments were completed in timescale (**55%**), which equates to the same percentage as last year. Efforts continue to try and increase the number of assessments that meet timescale despite the challenges of increased complexity.

Quality of reports to Panel: Of the **58** approvals in the period, **46 (79%)** of reports were judged good or excellent by adoption panel members. (Down from **90%** for the same period last year). The remaining **12 (21%)** were deemed to be satisfactory and fit for the purposes of decision making. There was however an increase in quality during the second half of the year as compared to the first half. Low numbers overall do contribute to the percentage values being more sensitive but the complexity of the assessments being completed increases along with the increased level of scrutiny has also had an effect. The established management team continues to quality assure all reports prior to submission for panel and support is provided to social workers throughout assessments to grapple with the increased complexities.

3.6 Adopter Recruitment /Marketing activity

Varying from past years, the marketing strategy now works on a quarterly rotation for **recruitment campaigns** with two recurring 'sets' of marketing activities and platforms. This provides the opportunity to be creative and plan effectively whilst also giving the flexibility to consider the Agency's needs that are identified by monthly internal tracking. Over the past 12 months two focussed campaign themes have been run;

- April – June – the #EveryStep campaign, focussed on 'Support' throughout the adoption process. Starting from the first call potential adopters make to the point of a child being placed and beyond.

This campaign utilised Adoption Now's social media platforms and podcasts to share the messages of support whilst also utilising advertisements in local magazines, banners in local authority areas and a door-to-door leaflet drop across all six local authorities. Local authority communications teams were

also engaged with campaigns, sharing them across their social media and internal platforms to gain a larger reach.

- July – September – the ‘I’m not too old’ campaign, focussed on ‘Our Children’. The campaign highlighted the need for adopters for older children (3 years+) challenging the idea that these children are ‘too old’ by focusing on their needs. The campaign highlighted how many “firsts” the children still had to go through and the importance of these moments, sharing them with families.

This campaign used creative and ‘thought-provoking’ messaging as well as outdoor advertisements on buses, billboards, and train station adverts. It also included a roadshow in shopping centres across the 6 Local Authorities utilising Adoption Now’s website, social media, and press to gain more coverage.

- October – December - ‘We need people like YOU’ Diversity Campaign - showed the diversity within our adopters and our children. Addressing topics such as age, adopters with additional needs, BAME (global majority) adopters, Cultural issues, Faith, Language, LGBTQIA+, Mental Health, Our Families and Single Adopters. It targeted the qualities needed in Adoption Now adopters. During this period, Christmas materials were also run in December to celebrate the festive season.

This campaign made use of Adoption Now’s social media platforms and targeted specific areas, groups, and magazines to encourage people of different ethnicities and faiths to come forward and talk to us.

- January to March - The ‘I became a parent when...’ campaign highlighted the positives that come with becoming or growing a family through adoption. Giving a chance for adoptive parents to share their personal stories about when they felt like ‘Mummy’, ‘Daddy’, ‘Papa’, ‘Mama’, ‘Mum’ or ‘Dad’ for the first time! The warm, fuzzy, funny, and interesting moments that made their family,

This campaign utilised an emotive digital radio campaign to get people thinking about what it is like to start their own family. Outdoor advertisements on buses, billboards and train station adverts encouraged people to talk to Adoption Now and start their journey. Social media and Adoption Now’s Podcast where also utilised to support the key messages of the campaign.

4. Adoption Support

4.1 Headline Data

488 active adoption support cases – **15.3%** increase in 2023/24.

209 referrals for adoption support in 2023/24 – **95.5%** increase in 2023/24.

391 applications to the ASGSF – **21%** increase in 2023/24.

£1,170,232.59 claimed from the ASGSF – **26%** increase in 2023/24.

94 assessments of adoption support needs completed – **26.5%** drop in 2023/24.

110 new requests to access adoption records – **20%** drop in 2023/24.

4.2 Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) has now become the Adoption Support and Special Guardianship Fund (ASGSF) with a view to encouraging more Special Guardianship families to seek support and access the fund. This is a change in name only and has not changed the nature of the fund or Adoption Now's role or responsibilities relating to its use.

Preparation for auditing Adoption Now's 2023/24 use of the ASGSF commenced in January 2024 and will be finalised by 31st July 2024 with the submission of the Annual Assurance Statement. There continues to be much confusion experienced by providers in relation to year end, particularly where funds have not been used by 31st March and therapy provision needs to continue into the next financial year. Additionally, there are a significant number of final invoices outstanding for therapy provision provided up to 31st March 2024 – therefore, the monitoring and auditing process continues to be very time consuming.

In December 2023 the ASGSF introduced Outcome Measures – the requirement being that the therapist must select one of 5 outcome measurement tools (STQ's, Thinking About Your Child etc) and complete a baseline assessment and repeat this at the end of an intervention. The scores from these assessments must then be inputted onto the ASGSF portal and are required 2 weeks after the start of an intervention and 2 weeks after the end of an intervention. This is still a very new system which is not yet embedded with providers and currently requires a lot of chasing to receive the scores, with several issues and errors being raised with the ASGSF User Group. The purpose however is to receive better feedback from adopters and adopted children regarding the value of the interventions provided.

The ASGSF continues to be an ever-growing area of work as a result of the increasing requirements when making applications, monitoring and auditing as well as the general increase in the volume of applications and children requiring ASGSF funded support.

Total monies claimed 01/04/2023 – 31/03/2024	£ 1,170,232.59
Number of children currently receiving therapy funded via ASGSF	334
Post order applications (by Child)	294
Pre order applications (by Child)	28
Number of applications made to the ASGSF	391
Post order applications (by ASGSF application)	367
Pre order applications (by ASGSF application)	22
Number of Group applications made to the ASGFF	2 – for 12 children
Post order – by child	9
Pre order – by child	3

The above data is based on applications and claims and does not yet include the funds that have been surrendered or returned. The final figures detailing the actual spend from the funds claimed will be finalised in July.

£968,227.23 was claimed by the mid-year point and was significantly higher than at any previous mid-year or year end point - this was £644,931.43 at mid-year 2022/23 and exceeded the overall total amount claimed in 2022/23, which was £930,750.63. Whilst this significant increase was observed at mid-year, applications appear to have slowed down towards the latter end of the year. What was evident at mid-year was that much of the surrendered funds from 2022/23 were re-claimed immediately from 2023/24 funds which, together with applications for continuing provision, is likely to account for some of the significant increase in funds already claimed earlier in the year. It will be interesting to see whether a pattern develops in the next financial year due to needing to reclaim unspent funds from one financial year in the next financial year.

Whilst the total amount claimed in 2023/24 (£1170,232.59) exceeds the total amount claimed in 2022/23 (£930,750.23), the overall annual increase is slightly less at **£239,481.96** in comparison to the annual increase in 2022/23 at just over £246,000.

As seen in 2022/23, the number of applications and numbers of children receiving support via ASGSF have also continued to increase significantly, with **391** applications for **334** children at this financial year compared to 323 applications for 291 children last year.

In this period Adoption Now has made 2 group applications and 9 child/ren applications to the Adoption Support Fund for packages of support provided by Adoption Now. These applications have been for the in-house Therapeutic Parenting Course, RAMP (Reducing Anxiety Management Programme) and Early Support Packages. After expenses (venue hire etc) these have generated the following income for the agency:

Adoption Now Intervention

Therapeutic Parenting Course

RAMP

Early Support Package

2	
2	
7	
	£29,629.40

Match Funding is required when a package of support required within the year goes beyond the fair access limit of £5000 per child. The Agency then funds half the additional work whilst the ASGSF funds the other half. The Agency refers to Adoption Now in post adoption order cases and refers to the placing LA in pre-adoption order cases. The figures below represent an increase in just under £1,000 in comparison to match funding paid in the last financial year.

Total monies paid for Match Funded Applications – 01/04/2023 – 31/03/2024

Local Authority Breakdown:

BwD

Tameside

Bolton

Oldham

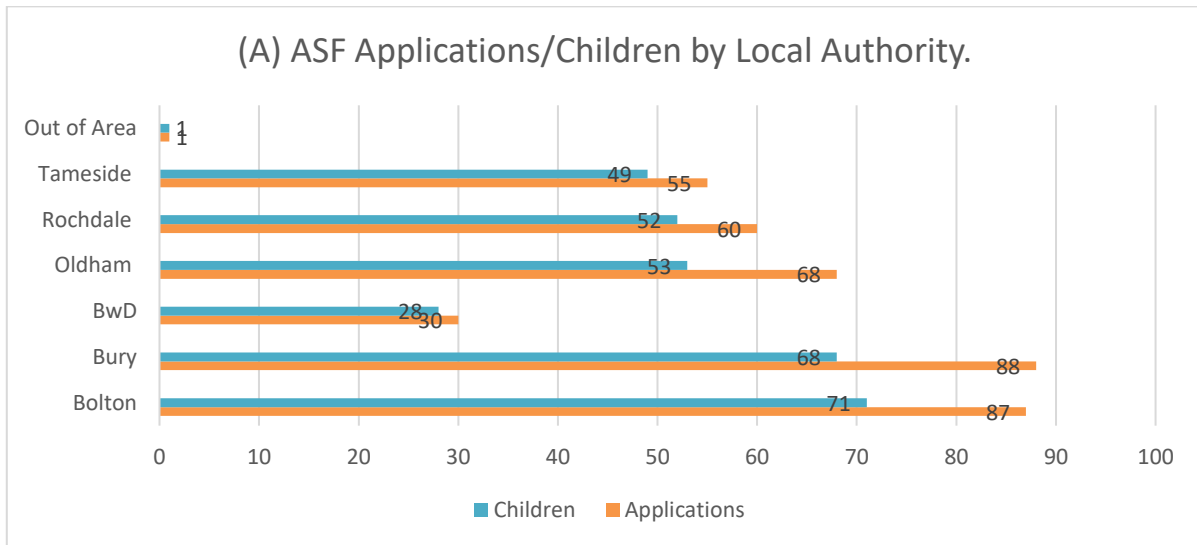
Rochdale

Bury

Number of applications/children

£8351.19
£0
£3,436.00
£2,844.24 <i>(£759 paid by Bolton/Pre order)</i>
£466.25
£1,604.00
£0
11 for 14 children.

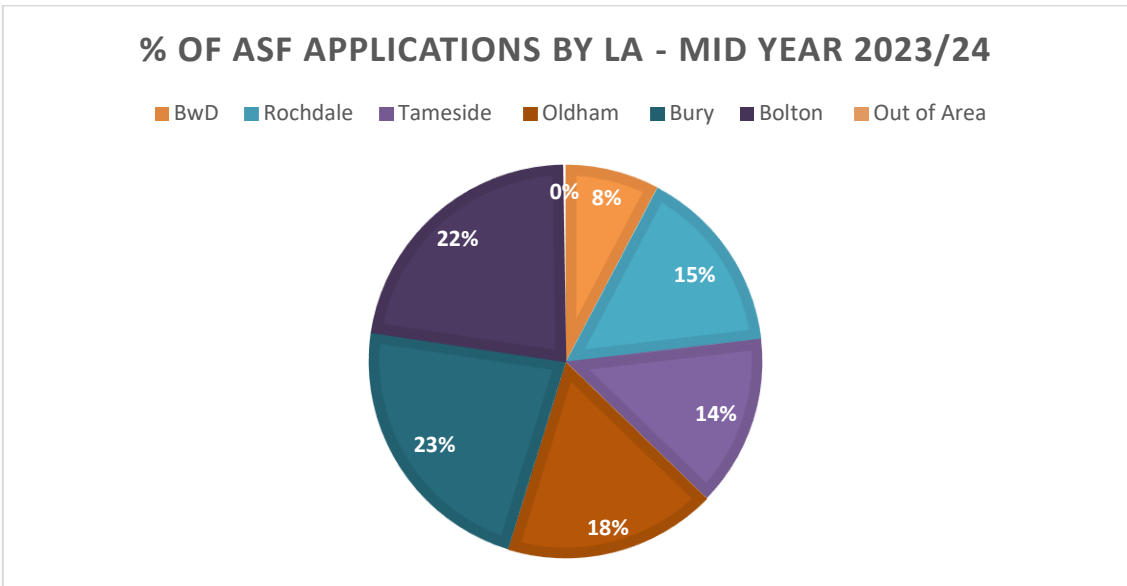
Local Authority Breakdown of LA ASF Applications/Children



The illustrations above and below show a consistent pattern seen in previous years in terms of ASF applications by Local Authority. Whilst the numbers are increasing across all 6 Local Authorities, the following have seen more significant rises - Blackburn with Darwen has seen a **55%** increase, Rochdale a **57.5%** increase and Oldham a **23%** increase. Bury continues to be the highest user of ASF with Blackburn with Darwen the lowest, although Bolton has just one less application than Bury but with a slightly greater number of children.

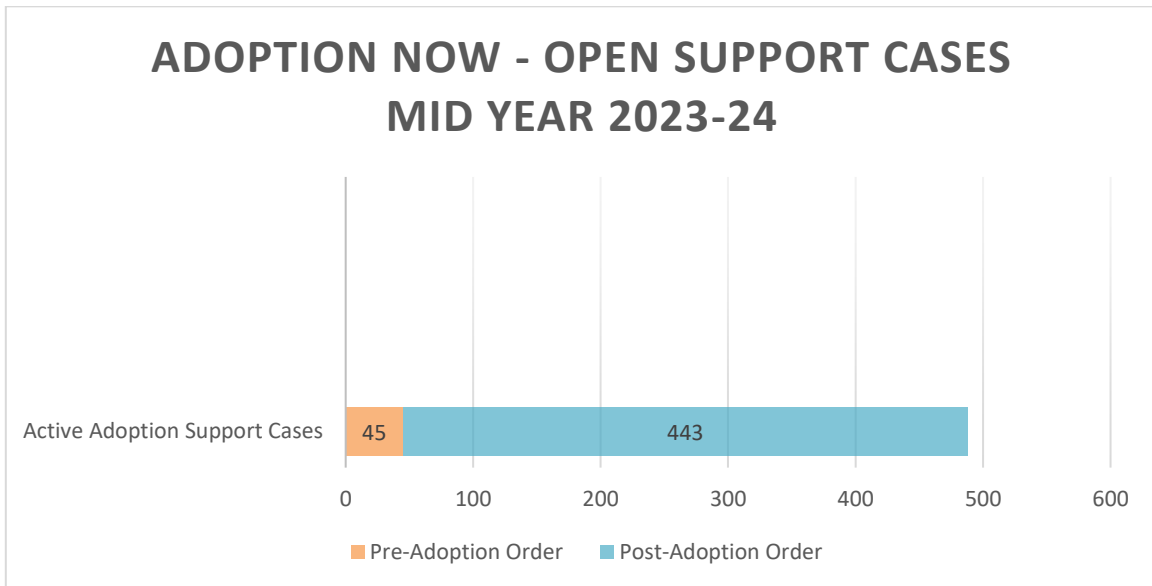
Perhaps this could see the start of a shift for Bury as the greatest user within Adoption Now. Bury have historically been adopter rich and had children placed from across the nation – many of which have been complex sibling groups and have required considerable and intense adoption support packages via ASGSF. It will be interesting to see whether the gap between Bury and the other Local Authorities continues to close: that said, requests from families living in Bury who have been approved by a voluntary agency, had children placed from outside of our RAA and not accessed support previously remain a frequent occurrence.

The one out of area application/child relates to a family who live in the Adoption Counts region where a parent works for that agency and an arrangement is in pace for Adoption Now to provide support. This arrangement is reciprocal.



4.3 Adoption Support Cases/Workload:

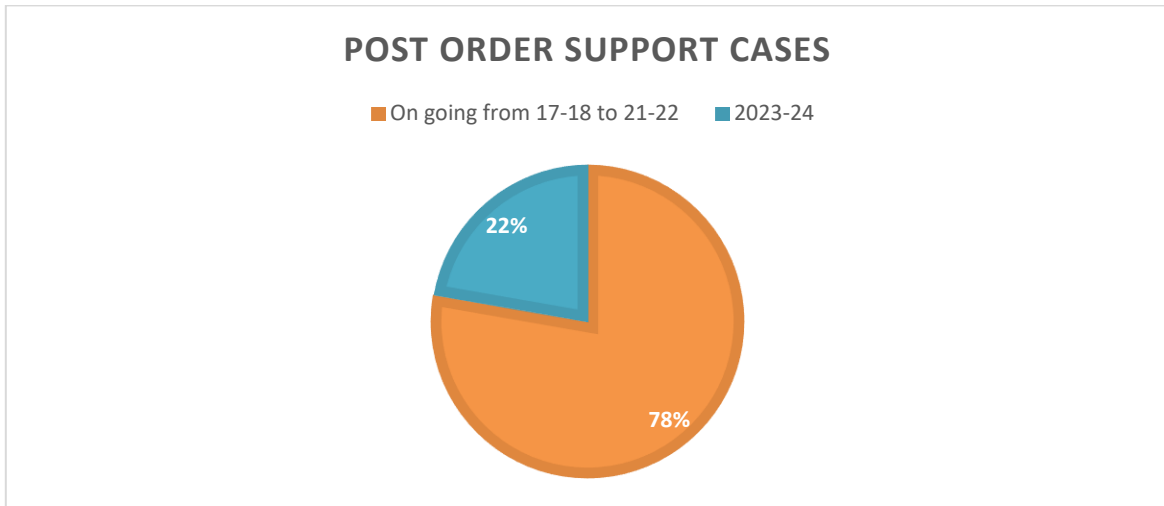
The service continues to record and report on the pre and post order support data separately.



The current open case total is **488** – this total reflects the number of children receiving adoption support, both pre and post adoption order. There is an overall increase in workload/active cases, from 423 at year end 2022-23 to 488 in this period. Whilst this may seem to be a steady increase year on year (2021/22 – 370, 2022/23 – 423 and 2023/24 – 488), there continues to be a consistent high volume of referrals being received each week.

As was seen at mid-year, there has been a further decrease in pre-order cases, from 72 in 2022/23 to **45** at this year-end period. Post order cases have seen a more significant increase from 351 to 443, rising from **392** since this mid-year.

Post-order support: The number of open post-order cases is **443**, which is made up of **167** referrals open in this mid-year review period and **276** ongoing cases as illustrated below:



The above chart illustrates the make-up of the post order active cases with a slight rise in the number of new referrals received in this period from 160 last year. Whilst those ongoing from previous years had decreased at year end 2022/23 to 191, this has now increased to 276 and is reflective of the high volume of referrals being received as well as the complexity of the cases being supported.

The areas of work that have seen growth this last year are Section 62 requests (requests from therapists and social workers to view files of children that have been placed outside of Adoption Now and are receiving adoption support services) and requests for adoption support from young people aged 18 and above. It is probable that other RAA's and Adoption Agencies will also be seeing increasing numbers of adoption support requests as well as increased usage of the ASGSF, which will account for the increased need to access such information. Technically, these are access to records/information requests, however, Adoption Now's LCS database system currently only allows an Access to Records pathway to be created for an adult and as S62 requests only apply to children under 18 years, these are recorded on the system within an Adoption Support pathway and are included in the adoption support data.

There has been a cluster of requests for adoption support from young people aged 18 plus. Whilst the Agency has always supported young people beyond 18, these cases have been quite sporadic previously. In some of these cases support is being provided for both adoption support and access to records. Whilst it is very positive that this area of work is evolving, that young adults are actively seeking and wanting support; this is raising new challenges and changes for the agency in terms of processes and systems. Again, there are limitations evident in the database and work is being completed to try to resolve these.

Processes are also constantly being updated and amended as a result of new types of requests in relation to post commencement adoption records. Further challenges involve navigating working relationships with the young adults and their adoptive parents, with the focus more on working directly with the young adult whilst building/maintaining relationships with all involved. It is difficult to know why referrals from over 18's are increasing at this stage – the Adoption Barometer and Adoption UK have been advocating for adoption support services to be available post 18 years for the last 3 years at least, together with the ASGSF publishing more widely the criteria, which includes young people up to and including 21 years of age. It is therefore likely that the combination of these will be having some impact on the increasing number of young adults seeking adoption support as they become aware of the offer, however this will be monitored further through 2024/25.

Assessments: The number of completed assessments of adoption support need are lower than at the same point in 2022-23, from 119 to **94**.

Active assessments have seen a slight increase, with **43** compared with 32 at this same period last year. **8** families have withdrawn from the assessment before completion.

Assessments:

01/04/2023 – 31/03/2024

Completed Assessments

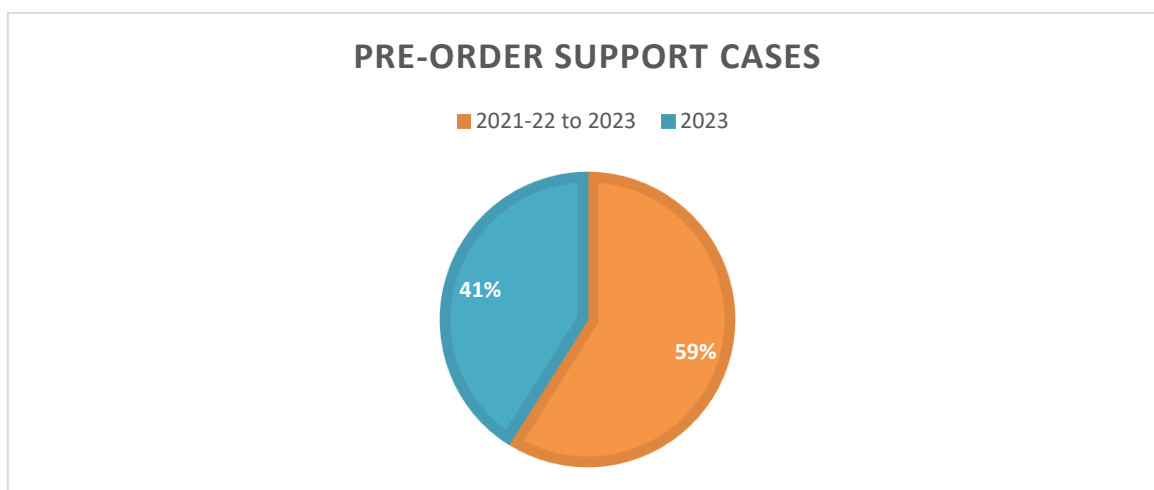
Active Assessments

Withdrew at Assessment

Completed Assessments	94
Active Assessments	43
Withdrew at Assessment	8

Pre-order Support: The number of open pre-order cases is **45**, which is a decrease compared with year end 2022/23 where the agency had 72 open pre-order cases.

This total reflects the number of children receiving adoption support pre-adoption order. This could be allocated with direct support from within the team, ASGSF commissioned support packages or tracking through early placement with regular consultation reviews. This pre-order support continues to show that needs are being identified sooner and appropriate support is being given at an earlier stage.



Adoption Support Consultations:

01/04/2023 – 30/09/2023

Adoption Support Consultations:

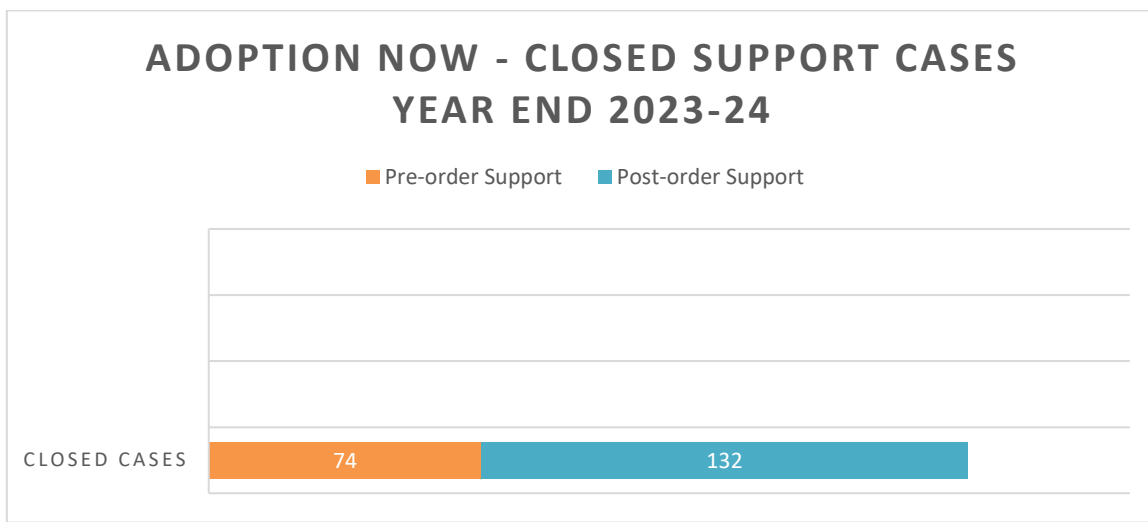
NFA following consultation:

Receiving on-going Adoption Support

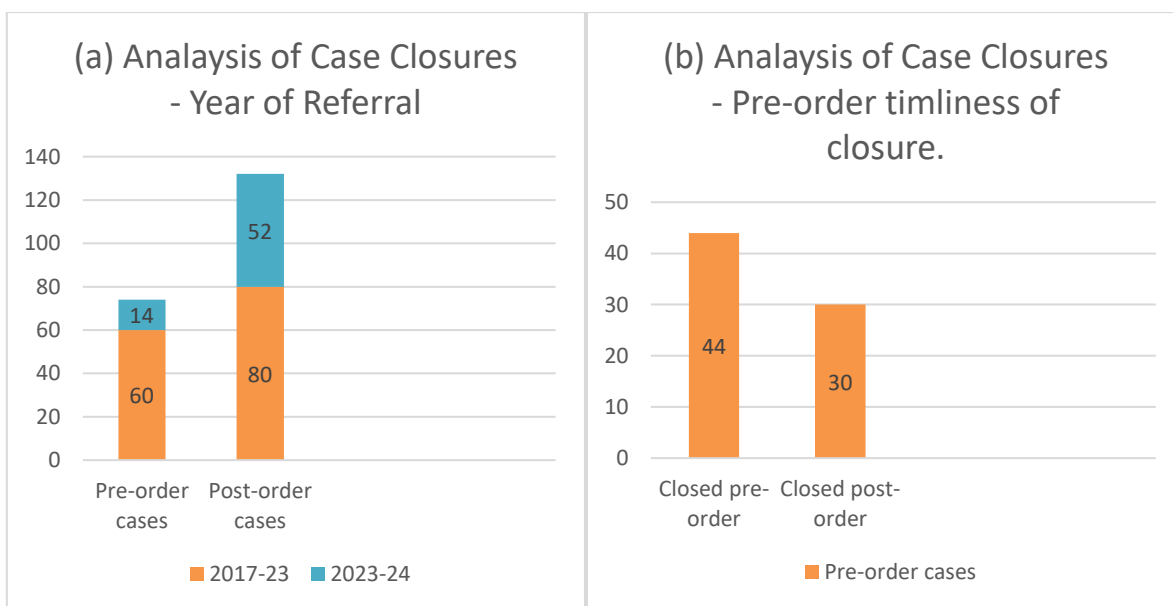
Closed at Adoption Order

Adoption Support Consultations:	103 (for 126 children)
NFA following consultation:	46
Receiving on-going Adoption Support	45
Closed at Adoption Order	74 (21 remain open post order)

There has been a drop in the number of initial adoption support consultations held this year, with 103 compared with 156 held during last year. However, the number of children is very similar with 128 last year and 126 this year. Early support packages are being provided more frequently and commencing at the start of placement either by the support team or commissioned with local adoption support providers.



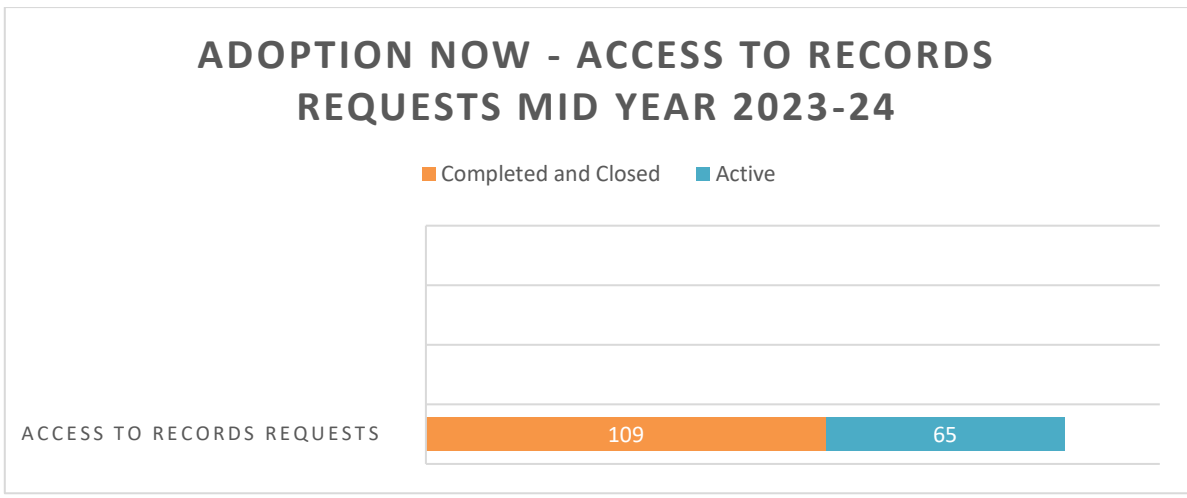
Case closures during 2023/24 are slightly lower at **206**, compared with 216 in 2022-23. As was evident at mid-year, pre-order case closures have continued to increase more than in any previous years and may account for the decrease in pre-order cases currently active.



Further analysis of the case closures in chart (a) shows that **52** post order referrals received in 2023/24 were closed within the same year. Consider this with the **167** post order cases that remain open from 2023/24 then Adoption Now have received **219** referrals resulting in adoption support services being provided throughout 2023/24 – which is a 95.5% increase from 2022/23 with 112 referrals. Chart (b) illustrates that **44** cases receiving adoption support no longer required active support prior to the Adoption Order and **30** closed following the order being granted. **21** of these 30 have remained open post order. It is imperative with so many new referrals that cases are closed when possible and it also indicates that interventions are succeeding in supporting families to the point that they no longer need active interventions. Some families will need help at different stages in their adoption journey and cases can be opened again as and when required.

4.4 Access to Records

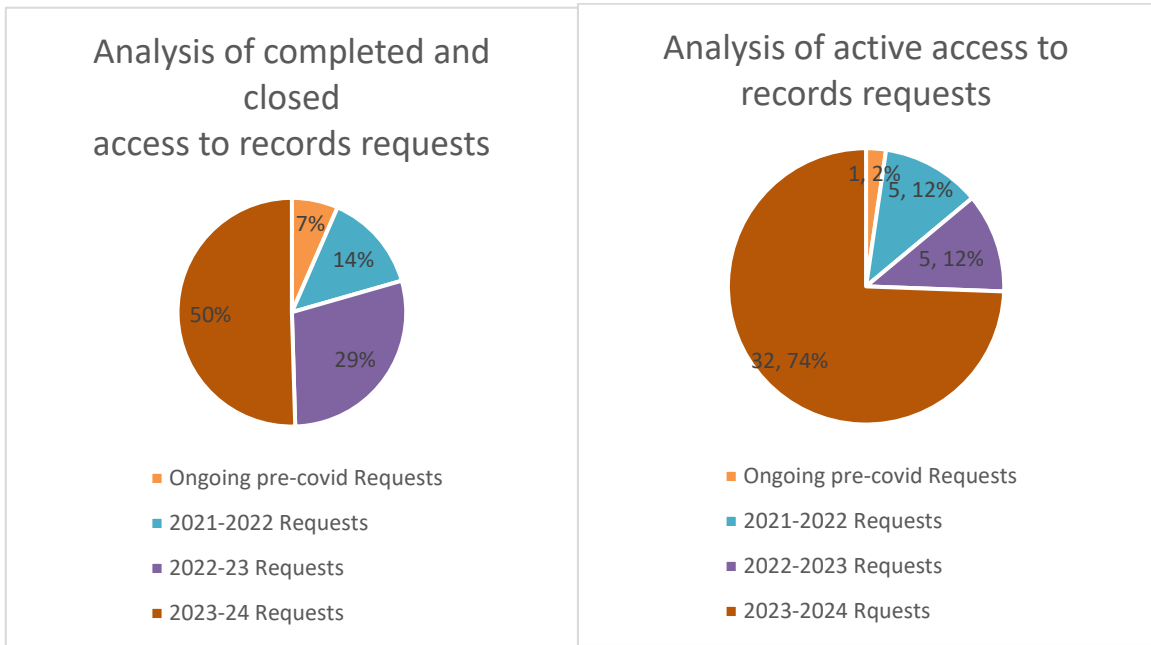
As reported in the previous annual reviews, this area of work was significantly impacted upon due to the pandemic and a recovery plan to clear the work waiting had commenced towards the end of 2020/21. The backlog from the pandemic period has now been cleared except for one case from 2018/19 where a request for the court records cannot be completed due to asbestosis in the Manchester Court building and is outside of the agency's control.



As can be seen above, **109** access to records have been completed and closed within 2023/24, with **65** remaining active.

109 access to records requests have been completed in 2023/24 – 56 of these are referrals received in 2023/24 and 53 from previous years. Taking into consideration the 56 completed within the same referral year, together with the 54 referrals from 2023/24 that remain active, **110** new access to records requests were received in this annual period.

The charts below illustrate in more detail the referrals received by year and show very few cases waiting where referrals were received prior to 2023/24.



Of the five cases remaining from 2021/22 one remains open due to Asbestosis in the Court building as above. Three are expected to be ready for closure early in the new financial year. One has been waiting for records from another RAA, which have now since arrived.

Of the five cases remaining from 2022/23 in four cases summaries are awaited from other agencies. In the fifth case the responsible RAA has yet to respond as to whether they hold the records.

In some instances, the wait for summaries from other agencies can be 12 to 24 months and has been a similar pattern for several years.

4.5 Contact and Letterbox Service:

The transfer of the letterbox service from the six local authorities is now complete with almost 1500 active letterbox exchanges/files transferring to Adoption Now. Definitive data continues to remain unavailable due to delays and errors in relation to the database system and the Letterbox Pathway. A temporary solution for this is being worked on by LCS and is anticipated in the coming year.

The workload is now increasing. As well as managing the day-to-day letterbox exchanges, queries and supporting birth relatives to write letterbox exchanges the contact co-ordinators each hold a caseload. These include supporting/supervising direct contact, supporting to establish direct contact, support to re-establish letterbox exchanges and supporting families where a birth relative has died (verifying cause of death/information to share with adopters, inheritance issues etc). More definitive data will provide further understanding and analysis as to the impact of the Modernising Contact agenda on contact arrangements coming through and on resource, therefore prioritising the database issues in the coming months will be crucial.

The co-ordinators have started to review the information leaflets and templates and are currently developing a process for Veto's (now known as Expression of Interest/ Expressed Wishes).

4.6 Quality Assurance:

Assessments of Adoption Support Needs: The audit of assessments completed in 2023/24 found that assessment reports are on the whole of good quality and are completed within a timely manner (Adoption Now follow the timescales for Single Assessments). Some have fallen outside of these timescales due to various reasons such as staff sickness/need to reallocate, parent led delay, delays in gathering information and delays in accessing historical information. Whilst all assessments completed are always purposeful, they are often very varied in terms of depth and detail which is dependent on the purpose/recommendation of the assessment. For example, where a specialist assessment is requested or a therapeutic service is needed more urgently an adoption support assessment maybe less detailed. Further work is needed within the management team and with the wider team to monitor timescales and record clear rationales for any delays.

Basic Information: An audit of basic information recorded on casefiles has commenced, focusing on essential information, ensuring consent, adoption order dates, ethnicity and disability are all recorded. There are significant gaps remaining across the system and work will continue into 2024/25.

Support Plans: The current integrated support plan on the LCS database is very brief and not fit for purpose. Work has started with the LCS team to create a more detailed and appropriate adoption support plan but is delayed as with other aspects of the adoption support LSC system developments.

Closures and Transfers: An audit of all active adoption support cases has recently been completed in March 2024. This has identified a number of cases needing to be prepared for transfer to another RAA due to the 3 year rule, needing closures finalising or are in need of a review due to inactivity. The purpose of this

audit is to prepare for new staff joining the team as well as informing the development of a case weighting model to be used across the adoption support service. This will continue into 2024/25.

5 Core Offer Support – Training, Workshops, Groups and Events

Pre-Approval training

This is delivered regularly throughout the year. In this review period the following have been delivered:

24 Information Events delivered online.

11 Adopter Preparation Groups delivered (each 3 days in person),

2 Returning Adopters/Foster Carer Preparation Groups presented (1day),

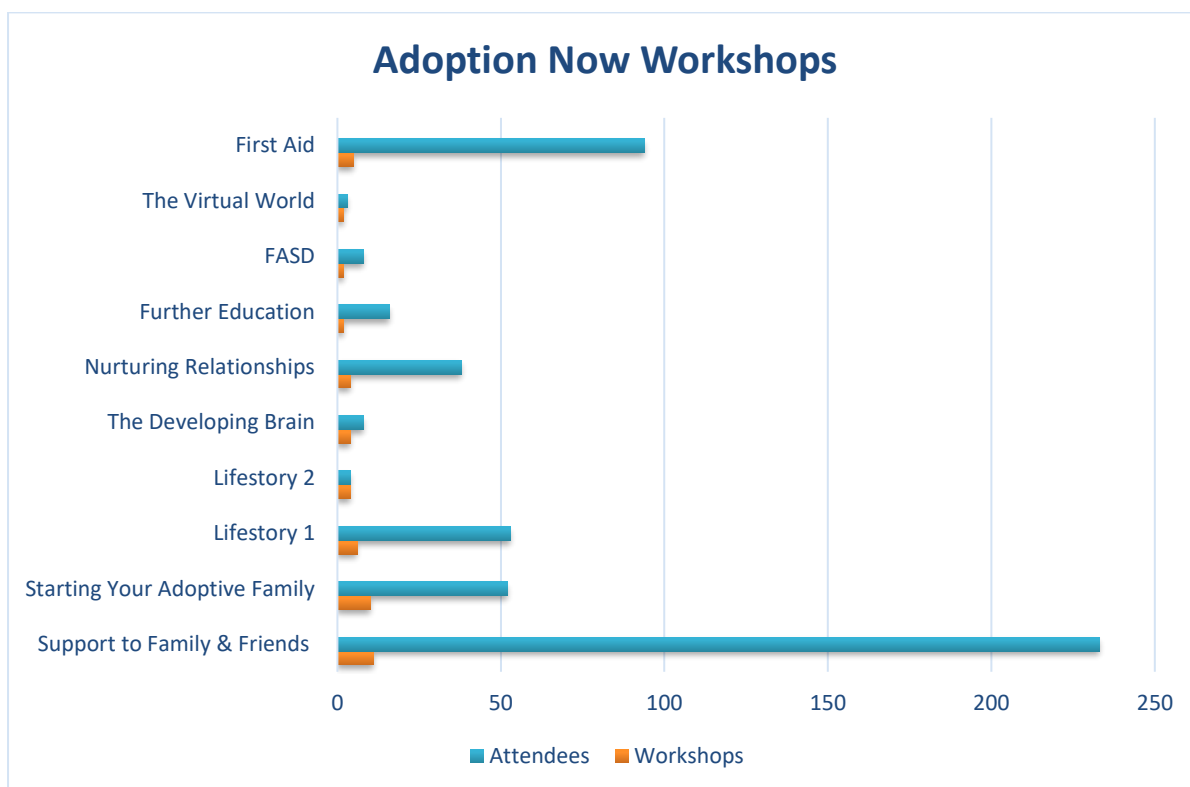
7 Considering FfA training courses (1 day),

6 Considering Siblings training courses (half day),

During 2023/24 Adoption Now has taken an active role in a North West project funded by Adoption England to encourage people to consider Early Permanence for older children. One of the successes of this project already has been the offer of a two-day **Therapeutic Parenting Course** specifically aimed at prospective adopters considering adopting children aged 4 years or older. The course has run six times during the year with **58** families being referred. As a result, 30 families have felt able to offer Early Permanence as an option for older children and 7 families have gone on to care for children through Early Permanence/Fostering for Adoption.

Workshops

These are mixed to offer both virtual and face-to-face options in some instances with The Virtual World running virtually as delivered PAN regionally and Support to Family Friends also running virtually to capture wider and distant family networks.



The table above shows the number of each workshop held over the annual period, together with the total number of attendees overall for each workshop. Support to Family and Friends continues to receive very high numbers of attendees and is one that continues to work particularly well online. A number of workshops were cancelled during the year including one on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, 3 on The Developing Brain and 2 on Starting Your Adoptive Family.

Having piloted **Network Meetings** in the first half of this year, they are now used as a matter of course in relevant cases. These meetings involve gathering adopters and their support networks to consider the type and extent of support that can be offered from within this group. They can be used at a variety of points from within adopter assessments, through the matching process with children and after a child or children have joined a family. At times it is pertinent to hold more than one, particularly where a Network Meeting has been held during matching and there are then difficulties, either anticipated or otherwise, after the child or children join the family. It remains early days but it is hoped that these meetings will help to keep disruptions at a minimum even with the increased complexity of both children and families that is seen.

Support groups and Events

Single adopter group – Monthly virtual meeting.

FFA Support Groups- run regionally across North West RAAs.

Adopters of Children with Additional Needs – a new support group run regionally across the North West RAA's.

Nurture Group – runs twice monthly at 2 venues across the region.

Teen Group – runs monthly.

Summer Picnic 2023 – 38 families/49 children.

Winter Wonderland Party 2023 – 116 parents/ 107 children.

Easter Egg Hunt 2024 – 98 parents/90 children.

Mentor Support Groups – 1 in person and 1 virtual held every 3 months

Therapeutic parenting course - 2 x 5-Day Courses in this period = 13 families. As part of this intervention, Adoption Now has formed a regular call back/support group, which has run 6 times through

2023/24. This has been positively received and well attended with each group having new participants from the ongoing therapeutic parenting courses

Reaching Out

Adoption Now's bulletin/newsletter that is published to the mailing list quarterly with some additional special editions.

Feedback

Feedback is sought after every one-off event and regularly from groups that run throughout the year. It is largely very positive with the main request being for more support events and activities. Adopters within the Nurture Group have requested additional information and support around meeting the needs of relinquished children and this will be planned in the coming year. Young people and their parents in the Teens Group have requested more activities and meet ups and thought is being given as to how to meet this request. A selection of other feedback received is below:

It has helped others and myself. (14 year old adoptee – Teens Group)

It's helped me with socialising and making new friends (14 year old adoptee – Teens Group)

[The trainers] references to her own experiences made the information more relatable – you were learning content from a professional but also from a mum of an adoptive child – I could see her in her two roles. I liked her honesty; e.g. it will be tough and stressful, but it will also be the best decision you ever make.

6. Adoption Panels

Adoption panels continue to operate four times per month with an option to run a fifth panel if required. A bi-annual panel chairs report exists which summarises the work of the panels.

The panels quality assure paperwork being presented. For approvals the Prospective Adopter Report is scrutinised. When matches are considered, panel members scrutinise Adoption Permanence Reports which consider the needs of the child and how the adopters can meet these needs, Adoption Support Plans which look at any additional support needed to meet the needs of the child, and Child Permanence Reports which look at the needs of the child including the background of their family and parents and the reasons why adoption is the appropriate plan. Overall, 90% of the Adoption Permanence Reports and Adoption Support plans and 74% of the Child Permanence Reports presented to panel were rated good or excellent. There was just one report during this period that was rated as poor due to inconsistency in the verbal and written presentation. Panel deferred the item to await further information.

Feedback is sought from professionals and adopters who attend panel. In the main this has remained very positive with adopters making comments such as 'Amazing' and 'Not so daunting after all' and one social worker attending from another agency commented 'I found panel members were really welcoming and questions were clear and fair'. In terms of suggestions for improvements there were some differing views regarding the advantages of face to face over virtual but in the main all still found the experience to be positive. There was also a professional's request to be informed of delays on the day. Panel Chairs are mindful of the need to keep to time, but on occasions when this is not possible the Panel Advisor makes every effort to update those waiting.

7. Inter-country adoption

Inter-country adoption services are occasionally requested in Bury and the Local Authority has a statutory obligation to provide or commission a service. Bury commission this service from The Inter Country Adoption Centre.

8. Voice and Influence

Services being designed are in line with the expressed wishes of some of our young people who continue to be consulted to support service development. Creative ways continue to be used to encourage participation from children who access post adoption support as well as those children who are awaiting adoption, especially, but not exclusively, those who are verbal. The Teens Group has led to some more meaningful engagement/consultation but this remains an area for further development to ensure involvement from children, adopted adults, adopters and birth parents.

9. Complaints

Adoption Now has received two formal complaints within 2023/24.

The first was from Adoption Now adopters regarding concerns raised around unassessed risks posed by a relative within the adoptive family. The complaint was investigated by an Independent Investigator who did not uphold any part of the initial complaint.

The second was from adoptive parents in relation to a letterbox exchange facilitated by Adoption Now. This was investigated and responded to by the Adoption Support Team Manager. She upheld one point within the complaint and provided both an apology and resolution. On another point, whilst it was not upheld in terms of a complaint against the Agency, a resolution was proposed. There has been no further response from the complainants and therefore the matter is considered resolved.

There were no complaints received by the Local Authority in this period relating to adoption matters.

10. Allegations

There have been three allegations made against Adoption Now adopters. This is an unusually high number within one year. All three were entirely unrelated and had very different elements to them. There is no indication currently that this sudden increase indicates a new pattern which should cause concerns about overall practice, however this is being kept under review, and in one case, as detailed below, a Serious Case Review is looking at the learning that can be taken.

The first involved a Blackburn with Darwen child in the care of Adoption Now adopters and the outcome of the Section 47 enquiries following abnormal blood results was that the injury to the child was most likely of an accidental nature. The further health implications of the blood tests were followed up in relation to the child.

The second allegation relates to an Oldham child who sadly dies upon admission to hospital whilst in the care of Adoption Now adopters. This remains under investigation with no immediate outcome expected. A Serious Case Review has been started following an initial Rapid Review.

The third allegation relates to a Tameside child in the care of Adoption Now adopters. The allegation was substantiated, and a Risk and Support Plan was put in place. Overtime it was possible to gradually reduce this and the issues which led to the allegation were addressed.

11. Staffing

Adoption Now is made up of 80 seconded employees from across the six local authorities and 16 employees employed through Bolton directly to Adoption Now. These include a combination of part-time and full-time employees. The staff is organised into three main teams, those being Care Planning and Family Finding, Recruitment and Assessment (including Marketing and Welcome teams) and Adoption Support (including Contact Co-ordinators) with the addition of the Administrative team.

Working across the service, the following staff have been seconded from Bury throughout the financial year: 1 Team Manager (Recruitment and Assessment), 1.5 Advanced Practitioners (one part time in Care Planning and Family Finding and one full time in Recruitment and Assessment), 4.5 FTE Social Workers, 1 FTE Family Support Worker, an Administration Team Manager and a FTE Contact Co-ordinator. The Bury workers are split between Care Planning and Family Finding (1.5 FTE), Recruitment and Assessment (1 FTE) and Adoption Support (2 FTE) with the Family Support worker working across Recruitment and Assessment and Adoption Support. Agreement was also reached during this year for an additional 0.5 Social Worker within the Care Planning and Family Finding Team which currently remains vacant along with a full-time post.

12. Budget

All Adoption Support fund applications for adoptive families are dealt with by Adoption Now.

The operational budgets supporting adoption are transferred to Adoption Now at the beginning of each financial year and combined with the budgets from the other five local authorities. This budget has not been increased since the formation of Adoption Now (except for the addition of the Letter Box function) which has put ongoing pressure on some budget lines and in particular the staffing budget lines.

£1,108,610 Total Expenditure (excluding ring-fenced expenditure)

£903,615 Total Income (excluding ring-fenced income)

£204,994 Total Shortfall taken from Reserves

£361,979 Remaining Reserves at 31st March 2024

The shortfall was made up of £155,410 overspend and £49,584 shortfall in income in comparison to the budget. However, there are a number of costs each year which have not had a budget line from the outset. The largest of these is the operational costs paid to the host Local Authority totalling £116,218 for the year. The costs that do not currently have a budget line total £194,634 for the year evidencing that savings continue to be made in many areas within the budget to cover some of this shortfall. The reserves were built up due to savings made in the first few years of the Regional Adoption Agency and there was agreement to retain this in order to cover the known shortfall that would start to occur.

The Board of Directors is well apprised of the financial situation and plans to fully review the costs, spending and income of Adoption Now during the coming financial year in order to plan for 2025/26 when there will be insufficient funds within reserves to cover the ongoing shortfall.

A total of £87,890 was spent on placing Bury children with outside agencies during the year.

13. Service Development

The Agency recognises the importance of ongoing development and ensuring a staff resource that is skilled and experienced in all aspects of adoption and child protection. A variety of peer support, inhouse training and development initiatives alongside the use of external training courses is used to achieve this. A development plan exists within Adoption Now to ensure continuous improvements are made to the service. In addition, this is informed by adopter surveys carried out at least annually.

Key focusses for development over the past year have been in the areas of Maintaining Relationships within adoption and meeting the needs of Global Majority children and adopters. Leading on from a number of staff members attending a national conference looking at Maintaining Relationships in the first half of the year and the Panel Development Day which also had this focus, around a third of the staff attended a one day Safe and Meaningful Contact training course in March to help develop thinking around how to promote more meaningful relationships between adopted children and their birth families in a planned and assessed way. Work is being completed to look at how to use and implement the toolkit promoted during this training at all stages from pre-Placement Order through to post adoption, in order to develop more informed and structured plans for children.

In the second half of the year the Adoption Now management team took part by invitation in Inclusive Leadership training (the Just Heart, Just Home project) which was centrally funded. The workshops and presentations were a reminder that Black children are over-represented in the care system, wait longer for adoption and are the least likely to achieve stability. The course provided the space, time and confidence for participants to consider what this means for global majority children and adopters across the Adoption Now footprint. Adoption Now has also taken part in a pilot project (AFDiT) developing a toolkit to assist in considering the needs of children who are or may be placed transracially. This is due to be published and launched in the coming months and will then be further disseminated within the service.

For the past two years Adoption Now has commissioned a variety of online training from CVAA. Workers who attend these events are then tasked with feeding the learning into the wider teams so that the benefit is spread across the service.

Adoption Now runs regular training for foster carers from the six Local Authorities and any external foster carers who are caring for the Local Authority's children on Moving Children On, with a particular focus on the relationship-based model used by Adoption Now. In addition, training is provided to foster carers before each Adoption Fun Day to prepare them and help them to prepare and support the children attending.

Training on the writing of Child Permanence Reports is offered regularly by Adoption Now throughout the year to Local Authority Social Workers responsible for writing these as well as new workers within Adoption Now. New Early Permanence Champions were appointed earlier in the year. Due to a number of staff changes it has taken longer than anticipated to review the in-house process around Early Permanence but the Champions will shortly be ready to roll out workshops to Local Authorities on a regular basis.

This year Adoption Now has run a workshop on the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund for Local Authority Special Guardianship services to support with growing numbers of SGO applications, monitoring and auditing, preparation of the annual assurance statement and sharing provider information. Additional support has been provided to the LA's as and when required.

Where there is opportunity for joint learning with counterparts regionally and nationally, these are regularly taken up particularly by the management team but also, as appropriate, by other workers within the service.

The revised forms used during the matching of children with adopted families are now embedded into the service and used with confidence and success. New National Matching Standards are anticipated early in the coming financial year and will be cross referenced with existing practice to ensure that all aspects are compliant.

The future of the Adoption Support Fund remains uncertain from one year to the next, therefore to ensure that therapeutic services can be provided in-house (which assists also with generating some income whilst the Adoption Support Fund exists), further investment has been made in skilling up staff within the Adoption Support Team in particular in the areas of Theraplay and DDP which are two of the most common therapies drawn upon with adoptive families.

14. Mentoring Service

16 Mentors

26 new referral in the second half of the year

36 Adopters open to recruitment and Assessment working with mentors at 31st March 2024

10 Adopters open to Adoption Support working with mentors at 31st March 2024

5 Families awaiting allocation to a mentor at 31st March 2024

The mentors are volunteers who support those coming through the process and in the early stages of match and having a child join their family, as well as a few families in need of adoption support. Wherever possible allocations are made to ensure greater understanding of the specific circumstances of the family, so of those waiting for allocation 3 are waiting for an Asian Muslim mentor to mirror their ethnicity, culture and religion (however they are currently approved and waiting with not identified match), one is awaiting a mentor who adopted on their own and one a mentor whose family is of mixed race. Mentors are recruited with the specific needs in mind to ensure that there is always diversity. There are currently 1.5 vacancies and during the period 3 mentors have had to resign due to changes in their circumstances/lack of time and 3 new mentors have started. Recruitment is ongoing as the right people come forward.

The feedback from those who have had the support of a mentor remains very positive with all who responded rated the service as very good or good. Adoption Now remains relatively unique across the North West in terms of this offer. Below is a small selection of the feedback received:

It has been extremely helpful not just for myself but my partner too as we are able to discuss issues and consider new ways of dealing with things.

It was an excellent way to learn about someone's experiences and the challenges they faced.

I think it helped us not be so hard on ourselves and be reassured that everyone is learning in this adoption process.

Katrina Williams
Head of Service
28th June 2024