Bi Annual Report

31st October 2018 – 31st March 2019

Including annual summary of period 1.5.18-31.3.19

Mural to celebrate ATV 1st Birthday

Index

Glossary
ADM- agency decision maker
PO- Placement order
RAA- Regional Adoption Agency
VAA- Voluntary Adoption Agency
LA- Local Authority
EP- early permanence

Introduction

This is the second Bi Annual report on the work of Adoption Tees Valley, which is the new Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) operating as the Local Council adoption service for the 5 Local Authorities of Darlington; Hartlepool; Middlesbrough; Redcar and Cleveland; Stockton.

The RAA has been in operation since the 1.5.18. This report covers the period 1.10.18 – 31.3.19 and will include key performance information from the prior period of 1.5.18-30.9.18, for first operational year reporting.

Adoption Tees Valley has been the first RAA to set up in the North East region, and has embraced the change required to stimulate new ways of working, while maintaining and building on successful practice of the 5 Local Authority adoption services operating previously. There has been a lot of hard work, commitment to talk and explore change, and resilience through the change process within the adoption team.

As the first year of operation of ATV is marked, recognition is due to the Directors of Childrens' Services who have guided and supported implementation of this programme through Board governance and ongoing support to operational challenges and solutions. Also, to the Lead Elected Members who have provided support, commitment and knowledge.

As the service enters its second year of operation, a lot of the process of embedding change has taken place, and review/evaluation is directing the service plan for the year ahead.

What has gone well?

- The service is now fully operational and has embedded new practice and process following a period of significant change for the 5 LA's, and all staff.
- Children are referred at an early stage for consideration of adopters, and the service has established better mechanisms to track all children, and identify potential suitable families. 53 Tees Valley children have been placed for adoption within the first 11 months.
- Adopters waiting have been matched with children, and ATV has been effective in utilising available adopters, or enabling them to have children from other areas placed.
- Partnership work with regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies, and RAA's is energised and positive, and is starting to generate better mechanisms for early permanence for children.
- ATV is now beginning to achieve momentum in the recruitment of adopters: the numbers of people coming through the service to adopt has increased significantly. We are ambitious in our targets for recruitment, seeking to generate sufficient numbers of adopters for the children requiring placement, although we will always need to reach out to other agencies, and contribute adopters for other LA children.

- Many more adopters and children have accessed post adoption support. Awards from the Adoption Support Fund have increased by over 150%.
- The service has established a 3 tier offer of adoption support, and is holding events, and post placement training.
- Many harder to place children have been able to achieve an adoptive family, and in a number of cases the foster carers for those children have decided to go on to adopt them, providing for security and stability in their futures.

Challenges

- ATV is operating with a regional and national current context of many more children requiring an adoption placement than there are approved adopters waiting. Nationally, 38 % of all children with an adoption plan will wait longer than 18 months before moving in.
- In ATV, the analysis of this years' performance on timeliness identifies an increased timescale for the average A1 and A2 figures. Deeper scrutiny of this data highlights that there are a small number of children who have waited a significant period for an adoptive family, by virtue of needs, and circumstances. A number of these children have now been adopted, which is good news. However, their high timescales have led to increased figures in some LA's, as they are now "counted" from a statistical perspective. The service is working hard with the LA's and with regional VAA's to secure sufficient adopters, and adoption support, for children with more complex needs.
- At the time of writing we know there are a number of large sibling groups of 3+ who coming through with an adoption plan, and awaiting court authority to place for adoption. Finding families for larger sibling groups together, and developing better sibling assessments in care planning is a priority.
- The workload and volume of adoption activity has increased significantly, creating some pressures on staffing and capacity to respond and deliver in a timely way. The service has taken on additional temporary staffing, and has focussed on prioritising adoption placement for children waiting, over other areas of work, including allocation of step parent adoptions, and allocation of adoption support.
- Some technical and structural organisational development continues, including achieving a good data management system. At the time of writing a project is underway to ensure delivery of the CMS to meet recording and reporting needs.
- At a more strategic level, the service will seek to develop more integration with multi-disciplinary agencies, to secure and deliver better all-round support to meet children's needs within the family; education; and health arena.

Benchmarking

Included within this section is information about adoption across the Tees Valley in previous years, and the half year position of ATV against some key performance and ALB scorecard indicators.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Population of children aged 0-17 Tees Valley	144,531	144,996	144, 996	145,691
Looked After Children (end of period) Numbers Tees Valley	1,370	1,585	1,717	1,862
Adoptions Tees Valley	65	60	70	83

At 31.03.18		At 31.3.19	
Average time in days for child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family during year, Tees Valley **ALB scorecard A1**	435	Average time in days for child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family during year, Tees Valley Current national average: 486	446
Average time between Placement Order and a match, across Tees Valley **ALB scorecard A2**	157	Average time between Placement Order and a match, across Tees Valley	209
Number of approved adopter families waiting to be matched **ALB scorecard A11**	45*	Number of adopter families waiting to be matched	7
Percentage of adopted families matched to a child who waited at least 3 months from approval to match **ALB scorecard A12**	Range 17-71%	Percentage of adopted families matched to a child who waited at least 3 months from approval to match	75%
Number of adopters in assessment **ALB scorecard A13**	19*	Number of adopters in assessment	28
Number of children looked after with a plan for adoption, not yet placed **ALB scorecard A9**	99*	Number of children with a plan for adoption, not yet matched	92
Number of children with a plan for adoption and Placement Order, not yet placed	68*	Number of children with a plan for adoption and Placement Order, not yet placed	53

ALB scorecard A14			
Number of children in a Foster For Adoption placement (on the 31st March) **ALB scorecard A17**	5*	Number of children in a Foster For Adoption placement	5
Number of children from ethnic minority backgrounds adopted from care in the year **ALB scorecard A6**	3	Number of children from ethnic minority backgrounds adopted from care year to date	5
Number of children aged 5+ adopted from care in the year **ALB scorecard A7**	14	Number of children aged 5+ adopted from care in the year	12
Number of sibling groups waiting to be adopted	29*	Number of sibling groups waiting to be adopted	32
Number of children in sibling groups waiting to be adopted, or placed, together	73*	Number of children in sibling groups waiting to be adopted, or placed, together	68
New Agency decisions that a child should be adopted within the year **ALB Scorecard A15**	79*	New Agency decisions that a child should be adopted within the year to date	106
Number new Placement Order granted within year **ALB scorecard A16**	60	Number new Placement Order granted within year to date	73
Number of children for whom permanence decision has changed away from adoption **ALB scorecard A5**	9*	Number of children for whom permanence decision has changed away from adoption	35

*Data not available for one Local Authority in previous year, therefore figures are higher than given.

Analysis of performance:
- Looked after children numbers have again risen this year.
- The number of children adopted has increased to 83 in Tees Valley. This is a 18% increase on 2017-18 numbers and a 38% increase on 2016-17.
- Average A1 figure has increased by 11 days against year-end in 2017-18.
- 2 LA's have got worse and 3 have improved.
- Analysis of the children who are included in this figure highlights a number of children in 3 LA's who had a significant wait to be adopted, but are now adopted, and hence become part of the statistical

cohort. It is positive that these children, many of whom were in sibling groups; were twins, were of BAME heritage; or were older than 5, have now been adopted.

- Average A2 figure has also increased by 52 days.
- 2 LA's have improved figures and 3 have had increased timescales on average.
- Analysis of the children included shows again, a number of children who had significant delays between Placement Order to match, but are now adopted. It is worth noting that a small number of children with delays in achieving their adoptive family, will distort figures, but may also have very positive outcomes. See case study 3.
- The number of approved adopters waiting at the year-end has reduced significantly. One reason is that almost all of the 45 adopters waiting, some of whom had waited over 2 years, have now been matched with children. This is very positive, and has contributed to the story of how many children waiting have been moved in to adoptive families. Recruitment of new adopters was slower to get started as the new service became established, however, recruitment has now stepped up significantly, demonstrated by 28 in assessment at the year-end (and now higher) and adopters are being approved, and matched more quickly.
- The numbers of children with an ADM plan for adoption, not yet matched and PO not yet matched have slightly decreased. As the numbers of children referred through is increasing, it is suggestive that children are being matched more quickly, and also that there are a significant number of children, on that date (31.3.19) who were in the court system awaiting PO.
- The numbers of children with an ADM plan and with a Placement Order have increased. (21% increase in PO's this year)
- The number of children with revocations of the adoption plan has significantly risen this year.

For ATV, there are clear challenges to ensure that children referred are enabled to be matched with a suitable adoptive family in a timescale that meets their needs. This depends on a strong sufficiency strategy, which is targeted and based on analysis of the needs of children coming through the system for whom adoption will be there final care plan. Sufficiency is dependent on achieving recruitment and approval of adopters who can meet the needs of children in this region, and on securing a strategic approach to working with other providers of adopters, in the region, and nationally, where early consideration of children and adopters coming through will lead to early permanence for children.

Recruitment and Assessment

In ATV a recruitment and assessment team structure has been implemented, to provide dedicated focus and support to this essential part of the work, and this team is led and managed by a full time team manager. There is a part time marketing officer in post, and there is now a Sufficiency and Recruitment Strategy, supported by a strategic Marketing Plan.

While the recruitment of adopters was an area of work that took a dip, during and over the period of transfer from the individual LA's into ATV, the service has now gained ground, and is operating effectively and efficiently, with a clearer focus on the needs of children who are waiting for adoption, and forecasted future needs.

Regular marketing via social media is used, to highlight awareness of the agency, and also the needs for adopters for particular "types" of children. The service has developed a range of promotional methods, including targeted radio advertising, and production of a short film about adoption in Tees Valley, to promote the needs for adopters in this area.

Information Events are held monthly, which are attended by a steady stream of prospective adopters, and work has been done to focus on the customer service element of enquiry to approval.

Partnership working with regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies

As part of our sufficiency strategy, the service has sought to strengthen the partnership working between the regional VAA's, who recruit and approve adopters, with the aim of securing better communication and knowledge about children coming through with an adoption plan for our regional partners, while also gaining information about VAA approved adopters, and crucially adopters in stage 2 of assessment. Earlier exchange of information is aimed at enabling early permanence for children, by planning for matches at an early stage. This partnership working is also geared towards securing more regional adoptive placements for children from this region.

What have we done?

Following some strategic meetings to explore the approach, we have now established our ATV/VAA early tracking meeting, sharing details of children and prospective adopters at a much earlier stage. The initiative is in its infancy, however, we are positive about the outlook.

A VAA partner said:

> "This is has been a really positive meeting, with a genuine 2 way sharing of information, which worked well".

"Pipeline"- Prospective adopters in assessment

	May-September	October-March	Totals (11 month period)
Enquiries to Adopt	34	156	190
Initial Visits to prospective adopters	21	71	92
Stage 1 starts	12	25	37
Stage 2 starts	2	19	21
Agency Decisions on suitability to adopt – Adopter Approvals	3	16	19

Table 1

Timeliness Adopter Recruitment and Assessment

Timeliness of adopter assessment is a key adoption performance indicator. It is important that people wishing to adopt receive a timely service that helps them achieve their goals. It is also important for the sufficiency of adopters for children waiting that the management of this important family resource is efficient, enabling more adopters to be available. ATV has focussed on practice to monitor the progress of assessments, to ensure that where any delays are evident, the agency takes action swiftly to progress an outcome. While there are some delays, often due to checks and references delays in Stage 1, the service is improving in timeliness of application to approval. However, the ambition is that all adoption assessments are completed within 182 days where adopters wish this to be the case, and that all fast track assessments are completed within 121 days.

Timescales Application to approval	Average 192 days (Government standard 182 days)

Preparation Training Groups

There were 3 preparation and training groups for adopters held in the period (November 2018; January 2018; March 2018) with 20 prospective adopter families attending in that time.

The recruitment manager has now allocated a dedicated Preparation Group lead practitioner, to ensure consistency of delivery and quality across all groups.

Each preparation group is delivered over 4 days and covers a full range of information and knowledge to help prospective adopters understand the needs of children who will be placed for adoption, and consider how they will parent the children to meet those needs. Each preparation group includes a session with a birth Mum who has had a child placed for adoption. Adopters have found this particularly impactful, and helps them to understand the importance of birth family, and see the vulnerability story behind how people may come to be in a position where their child is adopted. As a service we are extremely grateful to our courageous birth Mums who have helped prospective adopters understand this important identity and heritage matter for adopted children, and value their contribution to adoption in this area.

Fast Track Assessments
In some cases Adoption Tees Valley carries out a fast track assessment. This is where the adopter is a second time adopter, or is a foster carer, wishing to adopt the child they are caring for.
Fast track allows for stage 1 checks to be done while the stage 2 home study assessment is being undertaken, and means that adopters can be approved and ready to adopt in a shorter timescale, to meet children's needs.

Adoption Panel

The latest panel Chair report, April 2019, is summarised for this Annual Report.

Feedback is largely positive on the quality of panel work presented, and the work of ATV and the Local Authorities in progressing adopter approvals, and matches.

The adoption panel runs weekly and considers a maximum of 3 cases- approvals and matches. Following review and evaluation of panel by the Independent Chairs and the Service, an aim has been to achieve 2 Vice Chairs for Panel, who meet the NMS for chairing. It was felt by the service that seeking to involve adopters more in the shaping of the service, vice chairs should be identified from the adopter cohort on the central list. Jenny Fagan, an adopter, has now been selected and inducted into role of Vice Chair, and has chaired 1 panel. Liz Talbot will also be undertaking this role, following induction, in the forthcoming months.

Following the first Panel Chair report, received in October 2018, the agency has set out to support the improvement in the quality of CPR's and has taken

a lead role in delivering CPR training to social workers, IRO's and managers across the Tees Valley region. 3 training events have been delivered to date by the Recruitment Manager, and Family Finding Assistant Team Managers, which have received excellent feedback, and have reached in excess of 60 participants. 2 further dates are scheduled.

Panel Business

Number of Cases Presented to Panel by Type:

Type of Business presented		Outcome
Number of suitability to adopt considered	17	16 recommended 1 deferred
Single applicant	3	All recommendations unanimous
Male/female Couple	13	
Same sex couple	1	
Number of Adoption Matching cases considered	32	31 recommended 1 deferred All recommendations unanimous
Number of Children's Adoption Plans Considered (Relinquished)	2	1 recommended 1 deferred All recommendations unanimous
Number of Adopter Reviews of Suitability	0	N/A

Table 2

Reasons for deferred business have been considered by the agency and appropriate steps have been taken to learn and develop from these. Some actions relate to the LA planning practice (relinquished) and some in relation to ATV practice (approval).

Panel members provide feedback to the agency on quality matters, in accordance with NMS 17.2. These are monitored by the agency for improvement, and in this second panel review period feedback in relation to adopter approvals was largely around proof reading and formatting. Quality

feedback around children's matches includes incorrect information and names used; siblings not listed in CPR; reports not updated meaning information out of date at matching panel; CPR for relinquished child having extremely limited information (which was later updated); information requested by child's ADM not updated in the CPR.

Timescales

Suitability to adopt: (Suitability: applications should be completed within six months; of which 2 months should be for stage 1 and 4 months for Stage 2. Fast track applications should be completed within 4 months).	17 applications have been presented to Panel within this timeframe and while many have been within timescale, a number of these have been out of timescale. The reasons for this have generally been staff or applicants sickness; applicants taking a break between stages; checks and references delays, and reports originally started prior to ATV going live. Panel minutes comment on reasons for delay if these are over the timescales prescribed as required in NMS 17.8.
Matching: (Timescales for matching are measured in two ways. The adoption scorecard A2 measure is 4 months average from PO to moving in with the adoptive family but the NMS standard is 6 months from ADM to matching panel [NMS 17.7].).	32 Children were presented for matching within this timeframe and a considerable number were out of the timescale aimed for nationally through the scorecard indicator. The general reasons given for these were waiting for a match to keep siblings together; changes in social worker; waiting for updated medical information; the challenge of finding mixed ethnicity adopters; the challenges of finding suitable adopters for the child; unknown reason for delays in progressing identified links for children – in 1 case the link with the adopter was identified in Sept 18 and the match presented to panel in March 19; some children could have potentially been placed on a Fostering for Adoption Placement, but adopters were not sought for this placement type. Panel minutes comment on reasons for delay if these are over the timescales prescribed as required in NMS 17.8.

The panel chair summary:

- No issues were detected of concern regarding the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations. (NMS Adoption 17.2) during this period.

- There has been an increase in fostering for adoption cases that have ensured a good outcome for those children in terms of maintaining their attachments.
- As previously reported, delays in bringing matches have been noted, this may be to do with the start of a new agency.
- The issue of updating the documents available for matching (especially CPRs) in respect of children continues to create some challenge and is an issue to be addressed with the childcare teams.
- Where decisions have been made about the prospective adopters' exercise of Parental responsibility which are different from the norm recorded in the APR (e.g. Agreed change of first name), they should be explained in the APR section about parental responsibility, so panel members can be sure that these are clear and adopters are aware of the parental responsibility devolved to them.

None Agency Adoptions

This relates to step parent adoptions. There has been a significant rise in these enquiries.

	May-September 2018	October- March
Enquiries for step parent adoption	12	33
Initial Visits	5	20
Step Parent assessments underway or to be allocated for initial visit.	10	45

Adoption Tees Valley has established a waiting list for step parent adoptions, due to increased demand, and the need to prioritise resource allocation to those children still looked after and requiring adoption placement. This will be kept under review. The significantly increased volume of step parent adoptions is a challenge for the service.

Referrals of Children

Children are referred to ATV via the Early Notification process, which is now becoming embedded practice within the Tees Valley. The referrals do not directly relate to numbers of children with a Placement Order, or indeed and adoption plan (ADM decision). ATV requests that referrals are made when the child's SW identifies that adoption *may* be a plan, and thus the opportunity to track the progress and outcome of planning for individual children is enabled. This process supports early permanence planning for

children, by allowing ATV to have consideration of children at the earliest possible point for potential links with adopters. Children referred are tracked regularly to ensure that ATV is focussed on all children who require an adoptive family, and once the Placement Order is granted in Court, the child is allocated to a Family Finder. Links may be achieved before this point, through ATV Permanence Champions working with the Recruitment Manager, to identify potential links, and where it is clear that no internal family is available, ATV will seek an external adoption agency adoptive family.

	May-September	Oct-March	Total
Early Notifications of Children in	58	111	169

Linking, Matching, and Placing

Linking is where social workers for the child, and for prospective adopters, and the adopters themselves have identified a potential child/family match. There are a number of visits and a great deal of work to explore whether the family will be suited to meet children's needs, now and into the future. This includes meetings with foster carers for the child; the health advisor; and others who have an important part to play, and information about the child and their personality and needs.

Life Appreciation days may be held where it is felt that prospective adopters will benefit from a full considered understanding of the child, from all those who know them, which may include nursery staff, or schools, and foster carers, family members, and social work professionals.

Matching is where the formal plan to match a child with a particular family is put before the ATV panel. They make a recommendation and the Agency Decision maker for the child will formally agree this plan.

Placements

	May-September	October –March	Total
ATV children placed with ATV adopters	15	23	38

ATV children placed with non ATV adopters	9	6	15
Total children placed with ATV adopters	24	29	53
Non TV children placed with ATV adopters	6	8	14
Total ATV children placed	24	29	53
Total children placed	30	37	67

Fostering For Adoption

Early permanence for children may be achieved in some cases through a fostering for adoption arrangement. This is where the plan for the child has not yet been secured in Court, via a Placement Order, which authorises the LA to place the child for adoption, and where the LA's plan is to apply for such an order. Circumstances may be for example, a new born baby where legally a PO cannot be granted until the child is 6 weeks old. Research identifies that it is in a child's best interests to have a secure attachment to the primary caregivers/attachment figures from the earliest opportunity, and that any move for a child may impact on their security and attachment capacity in future.

Where prospective adopters for the child have had an opportunity to consider all available information and agree that they wish to adopt that child, they may be approved temporarily as foster carers, by the Local Authority Agency Decision Maker for that child, under a Foster For Adoption arrangement. This allows a child to be placed, usually straight from hospital, and once the plan is authorised through the Courts, and then matched at Adoption Panel the placement becomes an adoption placement. The benefits to the child and adopters are the opportunity for that child to have one placement, and continue with stability of family life thereafter.

Risks are that the Court does not authorise such a plan and the child would move to another family member, or carer. Adopters must be prepared for such risks, and these are carefully evaluated on a case by case basis, in planning for a FFA placement.

ATV has made 5 new FFA (excluding children who are already placed with foster carers, and where the foster carers are applying to adopt) placements since May 2018, and there were 3 children placed, but not yet formally matched for adoption, as the agency set up.

Fostering for Adoption; concurrency and early permanence is the primary practice development for the service over the forthcoming year, including workforce development with social worker practitioners in the 5 Local Authorities.

Case Study 1

Baby B – Foster For Adoption

In February 2019 ATV received early notification for an unborn baby, due date in May 2019. Pre-birth assessment indicted no likelihood that the baby's plan would be to be in birth parents' care. The unborn baby had a sibling already adopted, and early planning led to the adopters of the sibling being approached to see if they would consider being assessed as prospective adopters for the new baby. They considered this and agreed that they would- recognising the value to both children of growing up with birth siblings. ATV began a fast track adoption assessment of the couple in February, including consideration of the fostering arrangements in respect of caring specifically for the baby. The couple were positive about caring for the baby under a FFA arrangement in order to build a strong parent/child attachment from the very early days and to promote a sibling relationship from as early as possible. The couple were presented to ATV adoption panel in April for approval as adopters and were subsequently approved as temporary foster carers for the Local Authority of the unborn child.

Prior to baby's birth, a robust plan in respect of baby's birth, contact plan and placement confidentiality was agreed by all parties. This provided the adopters and the birth mother with a clear plan around the baby's birth and agreement to visit the baby in hospital prior to discharge. It also put clear guidance in place regarding contact and how this would be managed for the baby, and birth parents.

The baby was born in May and adopters were able to visit just 20 hours after the birth, and the siblings were introduced to each other just 6 hours later.
The baby was discharged from hospital, and is living with adoptive parents, and full sibling under a FFA arrangement. This plan has allowed the baby to be placed from birth with the new parents; it has given the opportunity for contact between the birth parent and the adopters, and has enabled the children to live with their sibling without delay, and start to build their life relationships.

The plan is for application for a Placement Order at 6 weeks, and the match to be presented to ATV panel. Should the placement order not be granted, the child would follow the plan directed by Court.

Profile of Children Requiring an Adoptive Family

The profile of needs of children can be generated from the data on children placed during the year, and on children referred, and waiting at different stages of the process. Some children do not have a Placement Order granted in the Court, and it would be valuable to understand reasons for this. Discussion at case level with the Adoption Leads in Tees Valley indicates that contact planning, and assurances about contact between siblings, or a drive to place siblings together are reasons that the LA plan for adoption may not be ratified by the Courts.

It would be beneficial to undertake some collective analysis of the children who have an ADM plan for adoption, but where Placement orders are not subsequently granted.

It is important to understand what the reasons are that influence the Courts to make a different plan, from that of adoption, where permanence in a non-connected family placement is indicated. ATV are seeking to understand these issues and prepare the prospective adopters, during preparation groups for the importance to children of continuing contact with siblings, where it is part of the child's care plan.

It is also evident that further work is required to enable LA social workers making a plan for children, to have access to a quality, timely and cost effective resource to make sibling assessments in all cases, during the care planning process. Understanding children's long term needs, and preparing them for placement with adopters is crucial to long term outcomes for children. Feedback from LA Adoption Leads is that sibling assessments are an area for development in the region, and this issue is highlighted in court judgements.

A focus between ATV and the 5 Local Authorities will be to explore potential professional capacity building for sibling assessments, both to assist care planning, but also to help prepare adopters for meeting the needs of siblings in the future months and years.

ATV Children matched and placed in 2018-19:

Age

0-12 months	12-24 months	2-3 years	3-4 years	4 +
17	17	7	8	3

Ethnicity

White British (WB)	WB/Asian	WB/Kurdish	WB/Afro Car	WB/Black Car	Asian
41	2	1	5	2	1

5 of the children waited over 14 months from becoming looked after to being placed, and 2 children waited over 2 years.

In this cohort, there were 16 sibling groups. 32 children were placed together, in sibling groups of 2 children.

Children waiting as of May 2019:

The agency is actively family finding for 48 children, who have a Placement Order, at this point in time. Of these, 20 are linked.

Age

0-12 months	12-24 months	2-3 years	3-4 years	4 +
11	7	9	4	17

Ethnicity

White British (WB)	WB/Asian	WB/Black African	Asian
44	2	1	1

33 of the children are in sibling groups, including 3 groups of 3 children.

37 of the children are considered hard to find families for, due to complex health and/or emotional needs; health uncertainties; global developmental delay; background factors associated with parental lifestyle, or health; being part of a sibling group.

5 children have waited longer than 14 months for an adoptive family, and of these, 4 have waited longer than 2 years.

National comparisons highlight that 38 % of all children waiting for an adoption family, wait at least 18 months from becoming looked after to moving in with their adoptive family.

However, in ATV our needs analysis is driving our recruitment and planning strategy, with a high marketing and information giving emphasis on looking for adopters who can take siblings; emphasising the benefits of siblings remaining together; acknowledging that it is important to find and prepare the right families for children.

The section below on partnership working outlines the work being done to establish good strategic work with VAA's in the region.

Case Study 2

Sisters- siblings

The girls were referred to ATV in September as a sibling group of 2 children, aged 2 and 3 years, requiring and adoptive family together. The children had been in the care of the LA since April 2018 due to concerns regarding parental domestic abuse and neglect. Placement Orders were granted in October and family finding commenced. It was quickly established that there were no internal families approved, or in assessment and due to come to Panel, and so the children were profiled at the North East Consortium, Adoption Match and Linkmaker. The significant matching considerations for the children were to remain together in adoptive placement; adopters who could promote their European heritage; adopters who could support their Christian faith and be open to uncertainty linked to the children's early life experiences.

2 families were identified as potential links from Linkmaker. During the family finding process, the allocated family finder contacted other regional adoption agencies and was subsequently sent a profile from Adoption Matters, a regional Voluntary Adoption Agency, of a couple who were approved to adopt a sibling group of 2.

A matching and selection meeting was held where it was identified that one couple appeared to be the strongest link for the children. They met all of the essential matching criteria with both adopters being Christian and one of the adopters mirroring the children's ethnic heritage. A chemistry visit was arranged. The adopters said "the chemistry visit has really helped to establish relationships, provide a good grounding for introductions and was held at the right point". This match was presented to panel in April and subsequently ratified by the LA ADM. After a very positive introduction period the girls moved in to their adoptive placement in May.

The timescales between Placement Order and moving in was slightly over the DfE's recommended timescale, being 189 days. However this was well under the average for sibling groups, who can wait approximately 18 months to have an adoptive placement identified. Given that this was a cultural, religious and background factor match for the children and adopters, this is viewed as a very positive piece of work.

Case study 3

> **Older child Placement- D, now aged 7**
>
> D has recently been placed with A & M. Family finding began when D was five years old and the court judgement was that, if adopters were not found within 6 months, that the plan should be changed to one of long term fostering. This was based upon the fact that it is harder to find adopters who are willing to adopt children over five years old. A & M were approved as first time adopters by Adoption Tees Valley in November 2019. They have a birth son who was 14 years old at the time of their approval. During the initial stages of their adoption journey they had advised that they were looking to adopt one child up to the age of 4 years. They did not wish to adopt a very young baby and felt that an older child would be a better match for their family.
> During the preparation training and the assessment process, their upper age limit of 4 years was explored further with them. They were particularly affected by a DVD shown in the preparation training whereby two boys aged 5 and 6 were unable to find an adoptive family as they were considered by adopters to be "too old". As the assessment sessions progressed they asked if they could be considered for children up to 6 years of age as they were confident that they would be able to meet the needs of an older child.
> The couple attended an Exchange Event at Adoption Tees Valley and were able to see a profile of D and to speak to his Family Finder and they instantly felt a bond with him. D's Social Worker and Foster Carers worked with D to prepare him to move to his new family and, following a period of introductions, D moved to live with A & M on 1 April 2019.
>
> D's match with A & M was approved 247 days after his placement order date.
> He moved in with his adoptive family 539 days after he became looked after.
>
> D's case highlights that it can take time to find the right family for an older child requiring a permanent adoptive family, who are well matched to meet his needs. However, this little boy has now been placed within this region- ensuring his identity is promoted, including the love he has for his local football team- a shared passion with his new mum, dad and brother.

Disruptions

There has been 1 placement disruption during this period, of a child pre-order. A disruption meeting was held, chaired independently, and the case has been evaluated for any learning and reflections.

A disruption meeting has been held for a prior disruption, within this period.

Adoption Support

The service has established an adoption support team, with 6 social workers (working part time into this area), and 1 adoption support worker delivering adoption support to adopters, children and birth families.

ATV is now clearly setting out a 3 tier offer to adopters and children, and has delivered a range of services under this framework over the last 6 months.

There have been 2 events for children and families, with our Christmas party having welcomed over 80 people into the building.

The aim is to encourage all adoptive families and children in the region to access ATV events, and to build relationships with the team, and with each other for future support.

Adopter support groups have now become an established monthly event at ATV, with adopters and children being able to come along for friendship, play, and support. One "Theraplay" workshop has also been delivered by 2 of the ATV adoption support social workers.

The Tier 2 offer is a targeted support offer, available to many of the adoptive families through groups, training, and building on knowledge gained during preparation training. Our adoption support team is keen to offer high quality training to adopters in parenting children with disrupted attachments; experience of abuse, neglect and trauma; and children affected by parental substance misuse.

The service has successfully applied for funding from the Adoption Support Fund for adopter parenting training, and has now delivered 2 Therapeutic Parenting Training Courses. The first run was a 3 day Nurturing Attachment course, for adopters with a child or children now living with them, and was run by Aspire Psychological Services.

18 families attended this course, and feedback was very positive. For example, and adopter said

> "This training session was very insightful and very current to my/our personal situation. It was great to meet up with other people more or less in the same situation and to share experiences"

The Tier 3 offer is a specialist offer of support, and is where a statutory adoption support assessment is completed, for those children and families who are in crisis, or in need of specialist therapeutic intervention.

The service has seen a significant rise in demand for access to specialist services, compared with the adoption support provided in the 5 LA's previously.

Adoption Support Fund

One indicator of rise in requests for adoption support is that applications to the Adoption Support Fund have risen from £103,000 in the year 2017-18, to £261,000 in 2018-19.

There have been 133 applications for an adoption support assessment in the year, and 117 families who have received post adoption support, with one child accessing pre-adoption support.

There are some considerable challenges for adopters and adopted children, arising from early experiences, disordered and disrupted attachments, and the impact of placement moves within the care system. Adoption Support is a growing area of development for ATV, alongside other RAA's, and we are seeking to establish a more diverse, multi-disciplinary approach to adoption support.

Post Box

The Post Box service for the 4 Local Authorities of Hartlepool; Middlesbrough; Redcar and Cleveland, and Stockton is now established within ATV, and the charms data base is being used to manage and ensure records are kept of all transactions. There are in the region of 400 transactions per quarter- this is 400 letters/cards coming in and out of the service from adopters to birth family and vice versa. As the year closes, plans are underway to end the contract between Darlington Children's Services and DFW Adoption, now Adoption Matters, and to bring in the post box service into ATV. Funds have been redirected to establish a Post Box Co-ordinator role within Adoption Tees Valley.

Birth Parent Support

ATV has continued to contract with After Adoption for independent birth parent support, up until 31.3.19 and plans were underway to extend that contract, allowing ATV to consider future needs, and to commission for these. Sadly, After Adoption closed at the end of March, with little prior notice, and a significant effort was diverted into establishing a high quality alternative provision. Inevitably, there has been some "down time" in provision of this service, however, ATV has now contracted with Adoption Matters, to deliver a 1 year contract, for the provision of independent birth parent support.

S98 Counselling

Counselling, and/or support to adult adoptees has been provided to 33 people.

Partnership working with multi-disciplinary agencies

The service has sought to build fruitful relationships with other corporate and independent organisations and service providers. There has been good work together with Virtual Heads in the 5 Local Authorities, with regular meetings and sharing of key challenges for adopted children in the school environment. Virtual Heads have been seeking to build effectiveness in providing for their new duties to provide information, advice and guidance to formally looked after children – who are adopted. This collaborative approach has led to the joint funding of a new adoption education support worker post, who will be based in ATV.

The service has worked closely with independent providers of therapeutic services, including some local and national VAA's, to provide a range of therapeutic provision, which is largely funded from the ASF. There is a tender due for release in June 2019 to secure a preferred provider list of independent provision, which will support greater choice, value for money and assure quality standards and outcomes.

ATV has valued the commitment of the Medical Advisors who undertake health assessments of children for their adoption "medical", and consider health reports of prospective adopters. Work is underway to improve efficiency and ensure that children do not have repeat visits to Doctors, where this is not necessary to update health assessment.

There are some challenges in understanding and working together with mental health services, which will be a focus for development in the year ahead. A more joined up approach to working with adopted children and their families would potentially enable earlier assessment and delivery of the right supports to adopted children.

Participation and Feedback

The service has now set up an Adopter Partnership Forum, which is scheduled to meet bi monthly, and is aimed at encouraging the involvement of adopters in how the service develops and is delivered.

The group has met 3 times- with the first meeting being to develop the terms of reference. The group has proposed that ATV focus on a peer mentoring/Buddying Scheme, and as a result of this, the service is developing a service which will meet this need for adopters. The Partnership forum has not yet achieved full attendance, and the aim is to establish a group which is

representative of all members of the community, to ensure diversity is promoted in our future planning work.

Adopter feedback is sought after all events, and training, and has been very positive to date.

ATV has surveyed adopters for feedback on their experience about a range of aspects of the service. This first survey has a relatively low response rate, with 20 respondents. However, feedback was largely positive, with one dissatisfied respondent.

The service is planning for greater participation of children and young people in the direction and development of the service moving forward. Currently children attend the events, and access any adoption support assessed as being required, however, ATV plans to introduce a young adoptees group.

We know that children have benefited from coming in to the service for the events, and parties: they all have a great deal of fun, and enjoy spending time with each other, and with other supportive adults around them. Some children are voicing to their parents comments about being surprised at how many children are adopted. We see this is a huge positive step in the identity journey for adopted children, who will benefit from a greater openness and friendship group amongst adopted peers.

Governance

The Board has met 4 times within the period, and has been quorate on each occasion. The Board is provided with a report, in advance, by the Service Manager, and has a role in monitoring progress with the service development, performance information, setting direction, and budget scrutiny.

2 new posts have been agreed at Board: Post Box Co-ordinator, and Education Support Worker.

Complaints

There have been no complaints within this period, although there have been 2 concerns raised which have been responded to by managers, to the satisfaction of the person raising a concern.

Quality Assurance

There are a range of QA mechanisms which have been developed or continue to be implemented within this period:

- Tracking systems to enable regular monitoring of children and adopter journey's; timeliness, and outcomes.

- A performance, assurance and challenge meeting (PAC) with each LA. All children for each LA have been tracked and monitored, and agreement about direction, or decisions signposted where applicable.
- A balanced scorecard for adoption detailing key performance indicators, scrutinised by Adoption Leads and Board.
- The Adoption Panel operates a quality monitoring mechanism for assessments/matches presented, which is monitored by the Panel Advisors and Chairs, for improvement. The Service Manager is undertaking monthly review of this information, as a quality monitoring mechanism on presentation of cases to panel.
- The Adoption Panel Chairs provide a report bi-annually to the Service Manager. The second report has been produced and is commented on within this Bi- Annual Service report.
- Staff performance is monitored via supervision, which is monthly for all staff.
- A new case practice audit tool has been implemented. Managers have undertaken case audit alongside staff, for a collaborative approach to quality and case records, and to help share discussion about areas for improvement.
- Staff will have an annual appraisal, and Personal Development Planning will be aligned to appraisal and review.
- All Central List members and Panel Chairs will have an annual appraisal.
- Team meetings take place fortnightly, and are used to convey policy and practice information, involve staff in developments and any quality improvements that are required.
- Adopter feedback has been sought via a survey. Feedback from this survey and the partnership forum will be used to help with service development.
- The Service Manager, and Team Manager, post adoption support, have reviewed and monitored work undertaken by external agencies for post adoption support, to ensure that work supports outcomes and delivers best value.

Workforce Development

Staff have undertaken a range of training to support their development and capacity to deliver the adoption service. Training within this period has included:

- Adoption Support Conference
- Charms training (all staff)
- Adoption Match- workshop (all staff)
- What makes a good assessment? – workshop (assessment team)
- Placement needs of siblings (20 staff)
- Step Parent Assessments- internal workshop (assessment team)

- Data Security and Data Protection (all staff)
- Signs of Safety
- Performance Management Workshop- Managers
- Early Permanence Conference (April 2019)

A full team day was held in May 2019, during which all staff contributed to the review and evaluation of the whole service first year, and reviewed the work of the 3 key service areas of adoption support, family finding and recruitment/assessment. Some team priorities have emerged for the year ahead, and staff PDP's are being developed in line with the updated service plan, to focus the ATV team development on these key priorities and plans.

The key priority for the year ahead is to build on early permanence, including more systematic use of fostering for adoption, and concurrency planning.

Service Plans and Priorities 2019-20

Overall service priorities:

- Consolidating the practice developments of the first year in operation
- Early Permanence
- Strengthening the child's voice in the service
- Bringing more awareness of adopted children's needs and long term outcomes to regional strategic, multi-agency partners- strengthening access to support
- Strengthen the case practice audit process, and QA for all docs pre Panel
- Develop a workload weighting system

Recruitment and Assessment
- Aiming to achieve the recruitment targets for new adopters within the year   - Consistency -recruitment, and assessment of adopters   - Meeting timescales for application to approval   - Embedding customer service approach into the initial contact, onwards   - Strengthening the understanding of early permanence, including fostering for adoption and concurrency. This will include development of the workforce, and a new section for the preparation training for adopters.   - Building on the role of Preparation Group Lead, to ensure consistency in preparation and training for adopters.   - Focus on the core needs analysis of children referred and developing the recruitment to meet these needs.

Family Finding, Matching and Placement
Building on early permanence, fostering for adoption, and concurrency, and embedding EP practice in the service, and across the wider Tees Valley

- Seeking to strengthen matching practice with additional psychological support and guidance
- Building on Permanence Champion role, and strengthening tracking of children's plans
- Focus on timescales for PO to Match.
- Work with regional VAA's and RAA's to effect earlier matches, in the region
- Life Story work, allocated and completed for all children by second adoption review

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Adoption Support

- Build on the 3 tier offer to adoptive children and families
- Monitor outcomes and impact of adoption support
- Monthly support groups for adopters
- Bi Monthly therapeutic parenting training, plus other targeted training available for all adopters
- Employ the Education Support Worker, and establish the role
- Employ the Post Box Co-ordinator and establish the role
- Preferred providers list for therapeutic providers
- Seek to access dedicated clinical psychologist input to ATV for adoption support
- Children's group
- Strengthen the adopter partnership forum
- Peer mentoring/buddying for adopters
- Work with regional strategic partners, including Virtual Schools, and to deliver better long term supports to adopted children, available when they need them
- Work with national RAA's to develop better mechanisms for ensuring adopters can have support from their local RAA, from the outset, not from 3 years post adoption
- Review disruptions for learning

Vicky Davidson Boyd

Service Manager 17.6.19

Final version 22.8.19