



Bi-Annual Report

1st April 2020 -30th September 2020



Transform a child's life...

1. Introduction

This is the Bi-annual report for Adoption Tees Valley, covering the period of 1.4.20-30.9.20

The report is provided under Standard 25 (6) of the National Minimum Standards, Adoption (2014), to the executive of the Local Authority.

Adoption Tees Valley is the Regional Adoption Agency, as defined under the Education and Adoption Act (2016) for the 5 Local Authorities of Darlington; Hartlepool; Middlesbrough; Redcar and Cleveland; and Stockton.

The service is located within Stockton, on Oxbridge Avenue, and is a co-located team of adoption social workers, and support staff, delivering adoption services, as set out in the Statement of Purpose, across the Tees Valley region.

This 6 month period has been highly impacted by responding to and working under the constraints of the coronavirus. The report will show that despite this huge and complex challenge, the Adoption Service has placed more children with loving adoptive families, than in the same period last year, and there have been more children adopted than in the comparable period last year.

Additionally, the service has refocussed on early permanence for children with an adoption plan, bringing a renewed focus on the Early Permanence Strategy through the 5 Local Authorities, and the Local Family Justice Board. An overview will be reported in the full Annual Report, once the strategic actions are embedded.

Thanks and recognition are due to the Adoption Tees Valley team and wider Children's Services partners across Tees Valley for their dedication and commitment to maintaining high quality work, and the pursuing permanence plans for children, during the pandemic. There has been creative and thoughtful work across services to ensure that children are safely moved to their new families, and that all adoption work continues to sustain the adoption service that is needed in this region.

2. Governance

The RAA is governed by a Board, which comprises the 5 Directors for Children's Services of the 5 Local Authorities within the partnership. There are 2 non-Executive Directors, who were recruited to the Board in 2020, and who are adoptive parents who have adopted through ATV.

The Service Manager for ATV attends all Board meetings and presents information to enable oversight of the performance of the RAA, strategic direction and operational practice. The Board has a role in being assured of the quality of adoption work in Adoption Tees Valley, and receives information on quality, outcomes, and proposed improvements.

Board meetings are held quarterly.

The Chair of the Board is Sue Butcher, DCS at Middlesbrough Children's Services, and it is now agreed Chair tenure will be for 2 years.

In each of the 5 LA's there is an Adoption Lead Officer who is responsible for ensuring that the RAA is delivering effective and high quality adoption services for the children in its area. The Adoption Lead Officer is registered with Ofsted,

Adoption Leads meet with the Service Manager and Team Managers of ATV monthly.

The Lead Elected Members of the Council with responsibility for Children's Services, for each Local Authority area meet bi-annually with the Board and Service Manager, to oversee the work of ATV, and be kept informed of key developments.

3. Covid

Undoubtedly, the most challenging theme of this 6 month period has been the impact of Coronavirus on the adoption service, and on planning for children to be placed with their permanent new families.

Like all other services, and the wider society as a whole, ATV has been significantly affected by Covid and the imperative of seeking to limit the spread of the virus, while also needing to ensure that the service continues to plan for children to be adopted. It has, and continues to be, a high priority to maintain good practice standards in relation to the delivery of adoption services, while seeking to ensure that all children referred with an adoption plan are progressed, and we seek families who are a good match to meet their needs.

The government has issued amended regulations, see below, which have been considered by the Services, with due consultation with the Adoption Lead Officers, and wider stakeholders where necessary. The amended regulations and ATV's use of these will be reported on within this Bi-Annual Report.

Placing Children

ATV suspended the placement of children for a short period in March- May 2020, along with most other RAA's and LA's. The first lockdown was a period of great uncertainty and a national drive to reduce the spread of the virus was a priority: This resulted in careful planning and review of how children may be moved safely, from foster carers, to adoptive families, and how final contacts with birth parents would take place.

ATV continued bringing planned matches to Panel and children waited until a safe plan for introductions could be made. ATV has worked closely with the national RAA Heads of Service Group, and The Department for Education, to collaborate on best and safe practice during and following the early period of lockdown.

ATV consulted closely with all 5 partner LA's during this period, and agreement about the way in which children would be moved on, in the context of wider regional children's services work, was achieved.

Children began to move into their adoptive families in May 2020. Each placement was underpinned by a risk assessment, taking account of all parties, and in line with Stockton Borough Council policy for covid, and policies for the placing LA.

It was very important that birth parents and children were enabled to have their final contacts and LA's ensured these took place, with appropriate health and safety planning around these.

45 children were placed for adoption between 1.4.20 and 30.9.20

Amended Regulations

The Government introduced emergency legislation to allow Childrens Services to continue to operate, with greater flexibilities, under the constraints of Covid 19.

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (2020) was passed through parliament on the 23.4.20 and came into force on the 27.4.20

The emergency legislation gave some designated permitted flexibilities, to the Adoption Agencies Regulations (2005), as amended (2013).

- Adoption agencies are no longer required to constitute and adoption panel but have the power to do so. If they choose to constitute an adoption panel, only 3, instead of 5, panel members, of which one must be an independent person, are required for it to be quorate.
- Adoption agencies are permitted to make a decision that a prospective adopter may enter the assessment (Stage 2) even if information in relation to the health of the adopter, and the DBS has

not yet been obtained. Where the agency decides the adopter is not suitable to adopt because of information received in relation to these checks in stage 2, the prospective adopter may not make an application to have their case reviewed by the IRM.

- The adoption agency may decide that a child relinquished for adoption does not require being referred to the adoption panel.
- The adoption agency may decide not to hold a review of the child's case under adoption agency regulations, where it decides that it is not practicable to carry out a review of the child's case, and it is satisfied that a review is not necessary to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

The following use of these flexibilities has been undertaken in Adoption Tees Valley:

- i. A panel has always been convened for usual panel business. No adopter has been approved, and no match has proceeded to a decision, without being considered at the adoption panel.
- ii. The Agency produced amended procedures to allow for the possibility that the panel may not achieve quoracy of 5, in unforeseen circumstances. On 4 occasions the agency has operated with 4 panel members, and on all other occasions, there have been at least 5 panel members. The panel is independently chaired, and there is always at least 2 further independent panel members.
- iii. No relinquished child has been referred or considered within this period.
- iv. The agency has progressed adopters to stage 2 of the assessment process, without having yet obtained health information, and/or DBS information. This has been necessary, as GP's have not been able to prioritise adoption medicals of prospective adopters. This has taken place in 9 cases.
- v. No adopter who is required to have a medical assessment has been approved without a medical assessment having taken place and considered by one of the Agency medical Advisors.

Health and Medical Assessments

All children who have been approved for adoption, and who have progressed to matching panel have had the required health assessment, known as the Adoption Medical, which is carried out by the Medical Advisor, and who is a paediatrician.

Due to the temporary rules for GP practices, whereby non urgent cases are not seen face to face, ATV has adopted the Coram BAAF recommended approach of video conferencing for medical appointments. This means that

prospective adopters have been asked to seek a video conferencing appointment, while also providing essential health check information to the GP. This has been the means of conducting adopter medicals, and while it has enabled the agency to continue to approve adopters with the required checks, there have been delays in approvals due to this reason.

Medical Advisors have not attended panel meetings during this period, due to the pressures within the health service, arising from Covid. Medical Advisors have continued health assessments of children as noted above, and have considered all adult health assessments, and provided advice to the agency. Panel have had opportunity to ask for medical advisor advice, in advance of panel meetings, and where necessary medical advisors have agreed to attend panel, remotely, for a short period to provide that advice.

The panel and agency have identified that the full contribution of Medical Advisors, as full panel members is a gap, and Medical Advisors are now being scheduled back in to attend panel meetings.

Social Work Practice

Much of the social work practice has taken place via video conferencing, especially in the early days of lockdown. Social workers and families reported that where a relationship existed, continuing via video conferencing did not significantly affect assessment work, or support work. In the later stages of the period, social workers felt that where they had not met the adopters previously, there have been concerns about the degree to which they were satisfied that they were able to get to know families without meeting them on more than one occasion, and for this reason, the service has agreed that more face to face visits were needed. At all times, children's safety and welfare has been the priority and all adopter assessment work is about finding good safe homes for children.

Preparation training of adopters has continued, via video conferencing. All applicants have been required to attend the full 4 days, as previously, and to contribute to, and feedback on learning and preparation.

Starting adoption placements clearly require face to face work. Risk assessments, and practice have minimised the numbers of people involved, and ATV has worked closely with the LA social work teams, and with external providers, where needed, to develop a clear plan, with limited contacts.

The service has operated with a position that where possible, work will be conducted via video conferencing, however, where there are concerns about the impact of none face to face work, on children's welfare and safety in the longer term, face to face work will be carried out.

Panel has operated totally on a video conferencing platform. While initially, Panel Chairs and panel members took some time to get used to this method, it is being used well to manage all panel Business, and there is no evidence of less rigour in considering cases.

Approving Adoptive Parents

There has been some impact on approvals, due to the medical issues, as identified above. However, the service has maintained a high priority on recruiting, assessing and approving adoptive parents. It is clear that in order to continue the delivery of an adoption service, ATV must maintain its focus on the recruitment of adoptive parents.

Courts

There have been delays in the Courts, which have had some impact in 2 areas for children:

- Care proceedings and final hearings, where placement orders are granted.
- Adoption orders being granted

Courts have managed the initial delays, by building recovery position, and children in proceedings are now being progressed, to Final Hearing.

There was initial delay in Adoption Orders being granted in the Teesside Combined Court, and Senior Judge requested that adopters did not lodge within the early months of the pandemic. However, Courts have for around 6 months been working to hear adoption applications, and a total of 39 Adoption orders have been granted in the period. This compares well with many other regions, and more Adoption orders have been granted than in the same period last year.

Adoption Support- Additional Covid Funding – Adoption and Special Guardianship

In May, the DFE made additional provision for additional funding which could be applied for, by Local Government Adoption Agencies, and those delivering Special Guardian support - RAA's and LA's. This funding was in recognition of the significant pressures that were anticipated to be experienced by adoptive families, special guardians, and children given the lockdown, lack of access to school for children, and changes to therapeutic provision.

All funding had to be applied for via RAA's, with a requirement that services would be made available to adopters within the RAA, adopters registered with VAA's, special guardians.

Timescales were tight for applications and ensuring that commissioning arrangements were undertaken. However, in working collaboratively, with the Special Guardianship leads across Tees valley, ATV and the 5 LA's undertook some feedback with adopters, and Special Guardians, and made decisions about which services to commission.

In respect of Adoption, the following services were commissioned, and have been implemented:

- Access and membership for 1 year to the Adopter Hub, provided by the charity PACT, which provides on line support, peer support, and webinars and tools for adopter support, aimed at upskilling adopters in knowledge and awareness of children needs.
- Specialist Courses in Non-Violent Resistance (NVR), to support adopters and special guardians who may be dealing with increased levels of violence associated with anxiety and attachment issues. These have been provided by a local accredited trainer in NVR.
- Specialist help from the Child Psychology service, which provides specialist help and support to adoptive parents and special guardians, associated with issues for children, including violence towards carers.
- Dedicated commissioned psychological support to adopters, where additional high level provision is required to support parents to help their children and manage the complexities of covid.
- Out of scope of this annual report, however, accessed via the Covid funding was Grandparents Plus, to provide on line help and support to special guardians within Tees Valley.

Staffing Resilience

It was initially anticipated that there could be a high number of staff absent from work, due to covid, this has not turned out to be the case. There has been less than 10 days lost due to coronavirus.

There has been impact on staff of managing work, where they have had children to care for, and/or vulnerable relatives. It has also been recognised that staff have varying responses to the pandemic, which have changed over time, requiring recognition of the welfare needs of staff, and managers.

The service has managed these issues through appropriate support measures, through use of wellness Action Plans, and regular staff to manager support discussions.

4. Benchmarking Information

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Q2 2020/21 (30 September 2020)
Population of children aged 0-17 Tees Valley	144,996	144,996	145,691	146,120	146,833
Looked After Children (end of period) Numbers Tees Valley	1,585	1,717	1,862	2,129	2,274
Adoptions Tees Valley	60	70	83	64	39

At 30.9.19		At 30.9.20	
Number of children placed for adoption in period	33	Number of children placed for adoption in period	45
Average time in days for child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family during year, Tees Valley ASGLB scorecard A1	509	Average time in days for child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family during year, Tees Valley Govt threshold is 426 days Current national average: 486 days	431
Average time between Placement Order and a match, across Tees Valley ASGLB scorecard A2	288	Average time between Placement Order and a match, across Tees Valley Govt. threshold : 121 days Current national average: 178 days	239

Number of approved adopter families waiting to be matched ASGLB scorecard A11	16	Number of adopter families waiting to be matched	15
Percentage of adopted families matched to a child who waited at least 3 months from approval to match ASGLB scorecard A12	20%	Percentage of adopted families matched to a child who waited at least 3 months from approval to match	36%
Number of adopters in assessment ASGLB scorecard A13	31	Number of adopters in assessment	41
Number of children looked after with a plan for adoption, not yet placed ASGLB scorecard A9	97	Number of children with a plan for adoption, not yet placed	66
Number of children with a plan for adoption and Placement Order, not yet placed ASGLB scorecard A14	64	Number of children with a plan for adoption and Placement Order, not yet placed	37
Number of children in a Foster For Adoption placement (on the 31 st March) ASGLB scorecard A17	7	Number of children in a Foster For Adoption placement, on the 30.9.20	3
Number of children from ethnic minority backgrounds adopted from care in the year ASGLB scorecard A6	4	Number of children from ethnic minority backgrounds adopted from care in the year	3
Number of children aged 5+ adopted from care in the year ASGLB scorecard A7	1	Number of children aged 5+ adopted from care in the year	11
Number of sibling groups waiting to be adopted	33	Number of sibling groups waiting to be adopted	23
Number of children in sibling groups waiting to be adopted, or placed, together	72	Number of children in sibling groups waiting to be adopted, or placed, together	56
New Agency decisions that a child should be adopted within the year ASGLB Scorecard A15	44	New Agency decisions that a child should be adopted within the year to date	43*

Number new Placement Order granted within year ASGLB scorecard A16	29	Number new Placement Order granted within year to date	28*
Number of children for whom permanence decision has changed away from adoption ASGLB scorecard A5	10	Number of children for whom permanence decision has changed away from adoption	18

*Figures taken from ATV data

Analysis of performance information within ATV:

The number of children placed within this period, for adoption is 45, compared with 33 in the same period last year.

There have been a high number of children aged 5+ who have been adopted in this period, rising from 1 to 11, against last year's comparison, and this is a significant positive for older children in Tees Valley, who have now achieved permanence through adoption.

The number of adoption orders granted is 39, compared with 28 at the same period last year.

The timeliness of children moving in with their adoptive families has improved compared with this period 2019-20. Placement Order to match timeliness has also improved.

The higher numbers of children being placed and adopted is reflective of the trend which has been evident over the last 18 months of rising numbers of children in this region with an adoption plan, coming through for placement and then being adopted.

It is a huge positive, reflective of multi-agency working across Tees valley, that the numbers of children who have been placed for adoption, and the numbers adopted have increased, notwithstanding the challenges of Covid.

The service has increased the numbers of families it is aiming to approve this year, in line with placement orders forecast by the 5 Local Authorities, and in line with increasing demand for adoptive families in this region. The new target for the year is an ambitious 80 families. The numbers approved within the period is 26, however, there have been delays in achieving nationally expected timescales, largely due to delays in the GP medicals, for reasons highlighted in the section on covid above. The number of families who are in the assessment process has increased from the same period last year, and the numbers of stage 1 starts and stage 2 starts has also increased.

There are fewer children waiting with a PO, but not yet placed, at the end of the period, this figure having come down significantly, from 64 to 37. It should be noted that children may fall into this category, when they are linked but not yet matched or placed for adoption, so this number does not reflect children for whom the service has no family. For this reason, in operational practice, the service tracks children on a monthly basis, and identifies those children for whom no family has yet been identified. Numbers here are typically lower and may be around the 10-12 mark each month.

The numbers of children in sibling groups waiting has fallen.

Agency Decisions that adoption is the LA plan have slightly fallen in this period, against the previous year, as have PO's. as the reduction is only by 1 in each case, the year end picture will give a better indication of how adoption numbers are progressing in Tees Valley.

There have also been a higher number of children with a plan which has changed from adoption. A number of these children have had a change of plan to remain on a long term fostering basis with existing foster carers, or due to difficulty in finding adoptive families.

Early Permanence figures are lower this year than at the same time in the previous year.

5. Marketing

ATV has operated 2 key lines of marketing approach over this period.

The service has worked with the RAA National Recruitment Campaign, which has been funded through the DfE, to generate more national interest in adoption, and particularly targeting adopters for the children who wait longest. Nationally, these children are Black and Asian Minority Ethnic children, (BAME) and significant focus has been placed on a campaign aimed at generating more adopters across the UK, and specifically for these children.

The campaign has been branded up #YouCanAdopt and has its own website. ATV has linked to this campaign and shared the logo on all promotional and communications e mails.

Additionally, the service has analysed this regions sufficiency needs, looking at the profile of children in this region, and those who wait longest. Within this region, the highest additional need is for families for sibling groups, and particularly where one or both siblings have additional needs or are in the older age category (5+). Being a child in a sibling group is the single most likely factor that leads to children waiting. Once multiple hard to place factors are also present, including BAME, and having a disability, or being over age 5, these children may wait longer.

ATV had 9 visits to our website as a direct result of referral via the national campaign. This number is low in comparison to the overall enquiries figure, but it represents those enquirers who have directly visited the #YouCanAdopt website, not all enquirers who may have come via the national campaign.

Based on regional analysis, ATV set out a regional social media campaign in August, seeking to generate more adoptive families who can consider the complex needs of the children we know we need to find families for, including awareness of the pipeline of children.

The campaign generated a huge level interest, not just in the region, but across the UK.

	Numbers Q1-Q2 2020.	Numbers Q1-Q2 2019	% increase on 2019 same time period
Enquiries	196		94%
Social media	7,000		677%
Website	11,000 users		26%
Stage 1 Starts	27	21	28%
Stage 2 starts	24	14	71%
Approvals	26	27	- 3%

We do know that many of these enquirers were not in a position to adopt, however, there is also an increase in those progressing to assessment, which is beneficial to the regional needs.

In National Adoption Week, which was October 10-17th, the service promoted the national campaign to seek to generate more interest in adopters from minority ethnic groups. There was a slight increase in enquiries from BAME applicants, and there are now 2 families of ethnic minority heritage in assessment as a result of the campaign.

6. Recruiting Adopters

Following lockdown, it was clear that there was a potential for a downturn in the recruitment of adopters, both in terms of new adoptive families registering their interest, and also in those who were already in assessment, progressing through stage 1 and stage 2.

On a practical level, the service left the office, and staff began working from home, in line with Stockton Borough Council advice and guidance to staff.

The challenge was to consider how work could continue, operating using video conferencing, for the key activities.

The key challenges were:

- Ensuring that all staff had devices which would operate remotely, and the learning and IT support to transition from face to face work, to video conferencing. Stockton IT have been very supportive to business continuity, and this has enabled the service to work well.
- Managing communications and information to prospective adopters, and all members of the team, to ensure that business continued, in a consistent way.

The Information evenings for prospective adopters continued, via video conferencing. There has been a significant upturn in those wishing to adopt, and to provide greater opportunity for enquirers to access information about adopting through ATV, the service increased the number of information events. To respond to the numbers of enquirers, the service offered a total of 8 Information Events, to prospective adopters in this period.

It is very positive that enquiries, stage 1, and stage 2 starts increased, however there were delays which impacted on the approval of adoptive parents during this period. Delays were largely due to Covid related issues, and receipt of all checks and references, at a time when employers, LA's and others who were required to provide checks in stage 1, were themselves impacted by Covid related issues.

It is expected that there will be a recovery of this position, as more businesses and services found ways to manage their processes. The latter months of 2020 will show increased numbers of adopters progressing through the system.

7. Preparation Groups for Prospective Adopters

These were conducted via video conferencing. The Preparation Group Leader, and the Recruitment Manager looked at ways to change the delivery and engagement mechanisms, to ensure that prospective adopters received the preparation material and the learning environment they needed to help them to understand about adoption, and to provide the foundation knowledge for meeting the long term needs of a child who is adopted.

Adopters reported a high degree of satisfaction with preparation training, although it is recognised that they have not had any other experience. What was noticeable was that many adopters reported feeling comfortable in their own homes, learning and participating via video conferencing.

The service maintained standards and expectations of full participation by all prospective adopters, unless they were permitted not to attend, due to being second time adopters.

3 Preparation for Adoption groups have been held in this period.

30 families attended the Preparation for Adoption Groups.

This included 5 same sex couples, 23 heterosexual couples, and 2 single applicants- both female.

8. Adopter Approvals

26 adopters have been approved.

Of these:

16 were heterosexual couples

4 were single – all female

6 were same sex couples

Assessment Timescales

Timescales for first time adopters, start of stage 1- approval- 217 days

Government set timescale: 180 days

Timescales fast track adopters (second time adopters/former foster carers) – 160 days

Government set timescales: 121 days

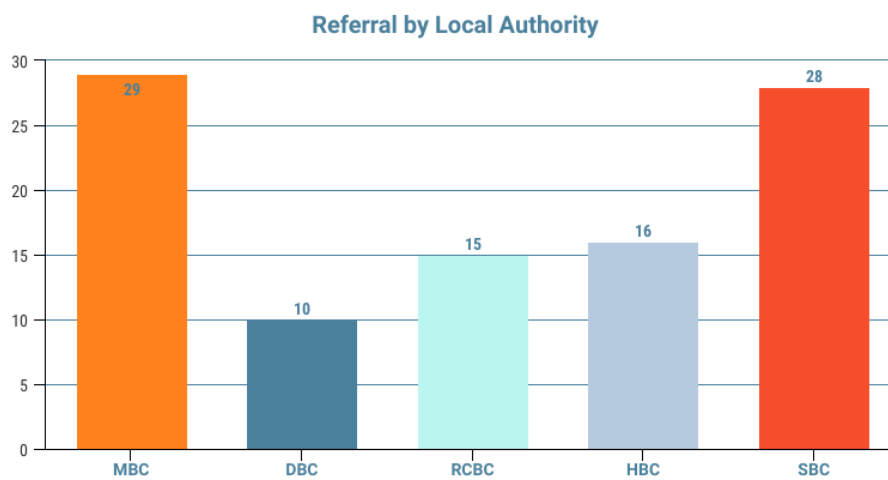
Delays in mainstream adopter assessments are as detailed above.

Timescales for fast track are skewed by one case, with specific factors.

9. Referrals of Children

	April-September	October-March	Totals
Early Notifications 2020-21	98		
Early Notifications 2019-20	88	76	164
Early Notifications 2018-19	58	111	169

Referrals by LA:



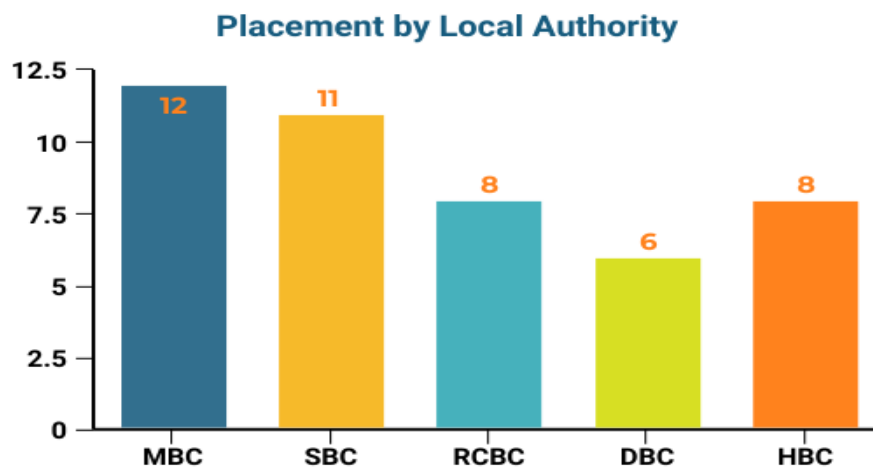
Referrals/early notifications are of children who may have an adoption plan. Not all will go on to have an adoption plan, or placement.

ATV encourages early notification, even where the LA is twin tracking, which means pursuing more than one option concurrently. This means that ATV can monitor children who may have an adoption plan and can track those for whom the LA proceeds to make an adoption plan, and planned dates of final hearings in Court.

10. Placements of children

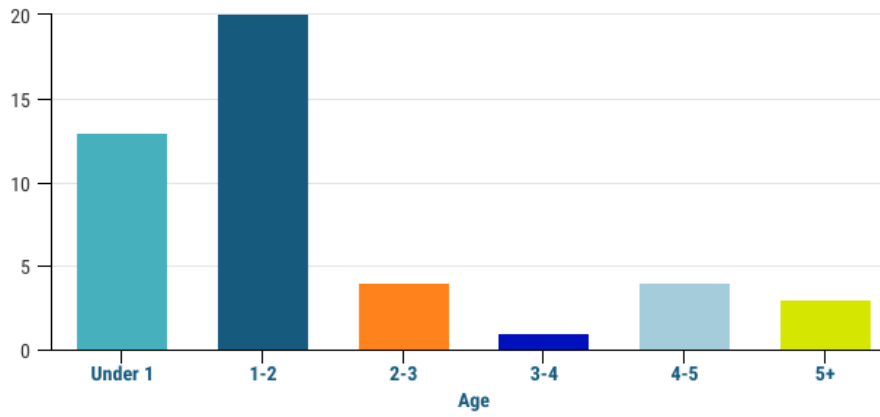
	2019-20: April-September	2019-20: Oct-March	Totals 2019-20	2020-21 April-September
ATV children placed with ATV adopters	24	36	60	27

ATV Children placed with external adopters	9	22	31	18
External children placed with ATV adopters	1	1	2	1
Total ATV children placed	33	58	91	45
Total placements	34	59	93	46

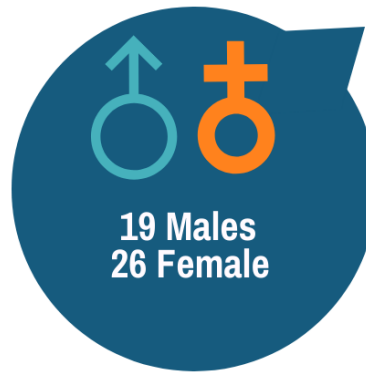


Characteristics of Children Placed

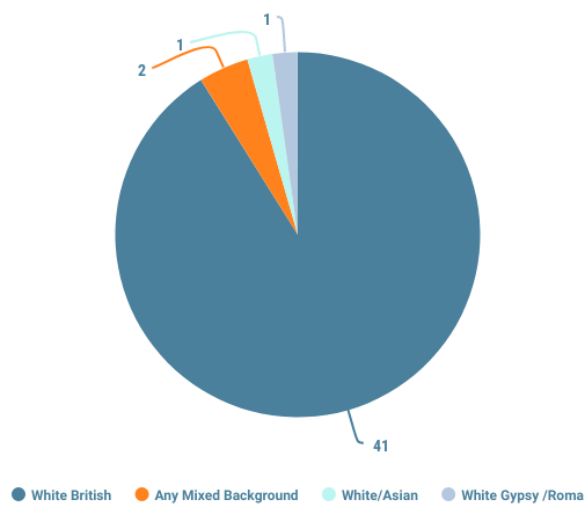
Children placed by age



Total Children Placed = 45



Children Placed by ethnicity



Early permanence/Fostering for Adoption

Placed EP/Fostering for Adoption within the period	7
Matched with former Foster Carers	5

The numbers of Tees Valley children matched and placed in this period has increased compared with the same period last year, by 36%.

A challenge has been that the service has needed to family find externally for a higher number of these children, placing with external adopters. In considering the needs of children placed externally, there have been a number of children for whom needs have been complex, through either having a health uncertainty, or developmental delay. There have been some older children and sibling groups placed externally. There have been a small number of children who have no additional needs, who have been placed externally, and these issues have been around availability of internal families, who would be a suitable match.

Key Milestones and Timescales for Placement by Local Authority

	ADM-plan for adoption	PO	A1 Days	A2 Days	A10 Days	Adoption Orders
DBC	7 (5)	1 (1)	332	138	304	4
HBC	4 (5)	1 (3)	301	179	376	1
MBC	25 (25)	13 (15)	636	412	346	13
R&CBC	1 (5)	2 (5)	425	263	425	8
SBC	2 (3)	4 (4)	459	205	451	13
Totals	39 (43)	21 (28)				39

*figures in brackets are ATV data for these milestones, which are different in some cases from the LA data returns and will be verified through Q3 & Q4.

This data shows:

Middlesbrough Council have significantly increased the numbers of children with an adoption plan, and Placement Order within this period.

This is consistent with the Improvement Plan, with a focus on permanence planning and ensuring children are referred and plans made for permanence in a timely way.

In other LA's the impact of delays in Court proceedings is evident in the lower numbers of PO's although a national trend for a downturn in numbers of adoption has been evident.

Middlesbrough performance in relation to children now adopted, and considering their key milestone timescales, has been poor. However, the positives are that children who have waited some time have now been adopted and have achieved permanent families, through adoption. The A10 figures shows timescales, adjusted to when children moved in with their foster carers where foster carers go on to adopt the child. These figures are much lower for MBC. This shows that some children who are now adopted have in fact been living within that family for some time, but the key delay has been in securing permanence in that family.

ATV Service Manager is working closely with MBC on the Corporate Parenting, Permanence and Sufficiency Strategy.

11. Life Story Work

Completion of life story books for children has continued to be a challenge for the service. An additional worker was agreed by the ATV Board to provide additional capacity to undertake this work, however, has not generated a significant impact for 2 main reasons:

- The number of children has continued to rise above the capacity to complete a good quality life story book, which provides well documented and a child focussed way of telling the story with key information from all parties to and for the child, in the future.
- A key challenge has been and continues to be getting information from those who need to provide it, in a timely way. A great deal of time is invested in seeking information, often after cases have changed hands, or social workers have left.

ATV and Adoption Leads are currently exploring better options for managing life story work for children, including exploration of digital products, which can “grow” with the child, and can be added to, by those invited to contribute, from an earlier stage.

12. Disruptions

Due to very low numbers the actual disruption rate will not be reported in this annual report.

There have been no disruptions in this period of children pre-adoption order, or of children placed since ATV went live.

13. Adoption Panel

A Panel Chair's Report has been co-produced by the two independent panel chairs, as required under Adoption NMS (2014) Standard 17.2.

The report has been made available in full to Adoption Tees Valley managers and the team; to the ATV Board; to the panel members, and wider stakeholders. For the purposes of this Half Year Report, a summary of the information is included here.

Panel runs each week, and is one half day, considering a maximum of three cases. As detailed above, the panel has continued through Covid, but the Service has needed to adapt to an on line video conferencing format, which most other Adoption Agencies have also implemented nationally. In this period, due to increased business, the service has put on additional panels, to meet demand in a timely way.

The panel is constituted under Adoption Agency Regulations (2005), and National Minimum Standard 17.

The ATV panel considers all adopter applications for approval within the Tees Valley region, and the agency decision is made within ATV by the Service Manager.

The ATV panel considers all matches of children in Tees Valley Local Authority care with adopters, including adopters from outside of the Tees Valley region. The panel makes a recommendation on matches, and the agency decision is made by the Local Authority Agency Decision Maker.

PANEL STATISTICS SUMMARY

Number of Panels held during period All of these were held virtually initially via Zoom and latterly via Teams All were quorate- though 6 panels had 4 members rather than 5 (Emergency Regulations)	25 (23)
Number of Panel dates cancelled and reason	4 (2) No agenda items
Number of Panels re-arranged and reason	0
Impact of cancellation/re/arranged dates	n/a
Number of Panels chaired by SH	10 (10)
Number of Panels chaired by JP	13 (11)
Number of Panels chaired by vice-chair JF	1

Number of Panel chaired by vice-chair LT	1
Number of cases heard at the panels held:	
One case:	3 (2)
Two cases:	7 (3)
Three cases:	9(13)
Four cases – went into a full day Panel:	4 (4)
Five cases – went into a full day Panel:	2 (1)
Total cases heard:	70 (68)

Figure in brackets is the number for the previous six-month period in each category

Number of Cases Presented to Panel by Type

Type of Business presented		Outcome
Number of suitability to adopt considered	31 (24)	2 were deferred by panel and approved at a later panel. 1 suitability was a majority recommendation, otherwise, the recommendations were unanimous
Single applicant	7(6)	
Male/female Couple	18(13)	
Same sex couple	6 (5)	
Number of Brief reports recommending unsuitable presented	0 (1)	
Number of Adoption Matching cases considered	39 (43) 0	Recommended Deferred All recommendations unanimous
Number of Children's	0	N/A

Adoption Plans Considered (Relinquished)		
Number of Adopter Reviews of Suitability	0	N/A

Figure in () is the number for the previous six-month period in each category

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).

Panel comment on any delays that occur and the reasons why, if known. These comments are included in the minutes to ensure feedback is available to the appropriate ADM.

Of the 31 applications presented in this period, 14 were concluded to ADM (following panel) within timescale and 17 were concluded to ADM outside of timescale.

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].)

Timescales reported in ATV are those for the Adoption Scorecard. i.e threshold is whether PO to match is within 4 months.

Panel regularly express their concern regarding the delay in permanence planning for children, particularly those known pre-birth who present for adoption match up to 2 years old.

Of the items presented, 19 were within timescale of 4 months, and 20 were outside of timescale.

Overview from Panel Chairs

Change to virtual panels

This was an exceptional six months with panel business transformed by the sudden impact of the pandemic- Covid 19. Panels, immediately this period began, had to become virtual due to the national lockdown.

New Technology: The virtual conferencing was achieved initially via Zoom and latterly, (once the technology had improved,) via Teams -Stockton's preferred software. This massive change was challenging for all attending especially for the first three months and different approaches to managing the business were required. It has felt that the chair has to be more in control and more formal in approach leaving less opportunity for debate and informality.

Impact on Members: Although most members took all of these changes in their stride, some panel members were unable to continue on panel due to this massive change, factors including -their internet provision and their technical ability. It would be fair to say that almost all struggled at least in the early months but for some this led to them withdrawing. Hopefully, when there is a return to face to face panels, most will return to be active members of the Central List

Regulation Change: The regulatory framework was changed by the coming into force of the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 on 24/4/20. This statutory instrument eased a number of regulations including some of the regulations which are the main provisions affecting the Adoption Panel. The regulation enabled Adoption Agencies to stop holding panels if they wished. It also allowed a lower quoracy, if panels were held. This easing was used in ATV to a minimal extent. But panels continued to be held and just 4 were held with a lower quoracy and that was 4 panel members instead of 5.

Some of the other easement of regulations also affected panel's scrutiny of timescales for example medicals which were changed due to the unavailability of face to face GP appointments.

General Comments and Themes

- The panels that were held with over three agenda items, were exceptionally hard for panel members and officers to sustain concentration and the quality of consideration because of the virtual format and on-going connectivity issues. During the period the agency decided to limit the number of items to three and put on extra panels where necessary. This was a very welcome decision.
- A business meeting was held with Panel Advisors and Service Managers in July to review panel and operational/practice and business matters.
- A revised version of the Matching Report was provided by the Agency which will be trialled in the next period. This was warmly welcomed.
- 17 Appraisals have been held within this period. 6 remain outstanding.

- There were separate meetings with the Medical Advisers held within this period and it was acknowledged that the pandemic has had a massive impact on their workload, and they are currently not attending panels.
- The Panel training day that was planned for 20th May 2020, was cancelled. (This has now taken place, and further training is planned)
- Panel would benefit from feedback and learning from disruptions, and on early permanence. (EP was the subject of the November training session with panel).
- Panel diversity remains a challenge, although with recruitment of team members, there has been a male, and 2 BAME panel members recruited.
- Challenges continue with IT systems, although SBC IT department are quick to respond when asked.
- Quality feedback forms have not been provided by the agency from applicants, social workers attending and panel members this period. (It is noted that applicants and social workers have not responded to e mail requests, and panel quality feedback has been within minutes of Panel but not separately collated in this period).
- There continue to be a number of fostering for adoption cases which ensure a good outcome for those children in terms of maintaining their attachments. However, there continues to be evidence of missed opportunities for such placements when matches come to panel.
- Some delays in progressing children's plans continue. Availability of case work time, staff sickness and Court timescales are some of the reasons mentioned.
- There continue to be some CPR's which are not up to date at panel. Challenges in collating quality information this period mean the scale of this is hard to quantify overall.
- There are questions around some cases where life appreciation days would be required, and a highlight that practice is not consistent across Tees Valley in this respect.
- It is highlighted that panel members need updated information on outcomes from panel recommendations.
- Despite such a difficult six-month period, there are many positives for the agency to record.
- A high number of suitability considerations and matches have been to panel.
- Despite all the difficulties of changing panel working practices so abruptly, this has been managed successfully and panels have continued to be held. It is very positive that the agency chose to continue holding panels, although the emergency regulations allowed them to stop doing so, as the panels provide independent scrutiny of

adoption practice for children in the five councils' care, who are particularly vulnerable.

- The exceptional commitment of central list members during this period is recognised.
- Overall, despite the obvious difficulties and turbulent and emotionally challenging times, the panels have continued to function and maintained their scrutiny of an important service for children. This is a huge testament to all involved.

14. Adoption Support

Adoption Support has been impacted by covid. The service has considered some different ways to deliver adoption support to children and families, given the pandemic, and significant change from face to face support to video conferencing, unless the circumstances demanded face to face service.

	Q1-Q2-2019-20	Q1-Q2 2020-21
Number of Adoption Support Referrals	92	43
Number of Access to Files Request	Not collated	12
Number of Adoption Support assessments	31	28
Number of Applications to the Adoption Support Fund, successful	98	60
Number of Unsuccessful or partially successful Applications to ASF	0	0
Value of Applications to ASF	£278,460	£228,931
Number of Post Box Transactions in period	900	1200

Continued Therapeutic Provision

ATV would like to recognise the significant contribution and creative approach that Independent therapy providers on the Preferred provider list have undertaken. They quickly made arrangements to hold therapeutic sessions with children and families via video conferencing mechanisms.

Therapeutic Parenting Courses

Through 2019-20 the Service began to commission therapeutic parenting courses, with group applications being made to fund these.

These have become core to the ATV post placement support offer.

During the period of review this year, these courses have not been delivered as frequently, and with lower take up. Just 2 courses have been run, with one being delivered in the period.

Education Support

The ATV Education Support Worker has continued to provide support advice and guidance to children and families during this period.

During the period 1/4/20 to 30/9/20 I supported **30** children and their families.

The main reasons for the support were as follows:

- During home-schooling parents had noticed that their child was struggling academically and wanted me to arrange more support for them when they returned to school.
- A large percentage of the children had actually enjoyed lockdown due to the fact that there were no pressures on them to conform and mask their emotions. Due to this, parents felt they struggled going back to school. This resulted in the children expressing their anxieties in undesirable behaviour. Therefore, the school and the parents needed support and advice.
- Due to Covid - no transition periods to new schools or new class teachers had a big impact on the children. Some children found it difficult moving to secondary school, where pre Covid there would have been enhanced transition periods arranged. In most cases the children had not met their new class teachers, so they had great anxieties especially those children where attachment is difficult.

In some instances, the new class teachers also did not seem to have had the normal 'handover' from the previous class teacher, so they did not have that background and understanding of the child.

- Due to the pandemic some of the children's levels of not feeling safe were heightened and therefore they were functioning in their instinctual brain

rather than the cognitive brain for learning, thus they had experienced fight or flight responses. This contributed to one of the children being excluded.

- Children also required support as when they returned back to school in September in some instances in did not look or operate the same due to 'Covid bubbles. This required working with the schools to allow for/ timetable increased regulation opportunities and in some instances visual timetables.
- Arranging E.H.C.P needs assessments and increased S.E.N support for some of our children to help when they transition to secondary and ensure the support is in place from the start.
- Of the 30 children, 3 could not cope at home with the lockdown and losing the structure of school. This in turn placed great pressure on home life and the families. Therefore, I arranged with the schools for them to return, for some on a part time basis.
- 3 children needed to return to school as their parents were key workers however the school was disputing this therefore, I was required to be involved.

During this period, I also created two guides for our parents on choosing schools - Primary and Secondary. This was with a view to empowering them with knowing their rights in terms of admission criteria and also providing them with questions to ask the schools so ultimately, they choose the right school for their child.

No adoption support services have been provided within the premises of ATV during this period, and all supports have been as commissioned, or delivered remotely to parents and children.

Commissioning

ATV have re tendered the Independent Birth Parent Support Service, and the Access to Files Service in this period, through working together with the Stockton BC Procurement Team.

The contract, of a value of £30,000 per annum, has been awarded to Adoption Matters, a national Voluntary Adoption Agency, with a regional base, and with expertise in provision of both services.

15. Complaints

There has been one complaint held within this period, which was investigated by an independent person. The complaint was not upheld, although learning by the agency around one aspect of process was implemented following the complaint.

16. Finance

Adoption tees Valley is joint funded as a shared service under the Education and Adoption Act (2016) and is a joint funded on a shared basis, with the allocations of funding per LA as detailed below.

	Baseline Running Costs (based on former costs of the Adoption Services in the year preceding the RAA)	Percentage Interagency fee contributions (based on average annual adoption numbers 2014/15 to 2016/17)
Darlington	16.2%	20.2%
Hartlepool	13.5 %	14.0%
Middlesbrough	31.8%	27.2%
Redcar and Cleveland	16.7.%	14.0%
Stockton	21 %	24.7%
	100%	100.0%

ATV Budget Projection 2020-21

	Budget	Projection	Variance
<u>Expenditure</u>			
Staff Costs	1,366,000	1,450,000	84,000
Premises	29,000	23,000	(6,000)
Other Services (including Adopter costs, Charms Licence, Link Maker, Panel Costs, Other subscriptions)	223,000	196,000	(27,000)

SBC Recharges (Rent/Lease, Finance/HR/Legal, ICT, Building Cleaning)	113,000	115,000	2,000
TOTAL Expenditure	1,731,000	1,784,000	53,000
<u>Income</u>			
LA Contributions	(1,731,000)	(1,731,000)	0
Virtual School Funding (to fund temp post)	0	(34,000)	(34,000)
Reserves	0	(2,000)	(2,000)
TOTAL Income	(1,731,000)	(1,767,000)	(36,000)
Projected overspend in 20/21	0	17,000	17,000
	Budget	Projection	Variance
Interagency Expenditure	500,000	1,000,000	500,000

The interagency fees budget overspend is reflective of the higher numbers of children who have been referred and placed for adoption than was forecast at the outset of the RAA implementation.

The Service is seeking to increase recruitment of adopters, as detailed in section 6. At the half year position, approvals were slightly reduced on the previous year Q2 position. The numbers in assessment were higher, and it is forecast that adopter approvals will be increased this financial year, which will assist towards creating more opportunity for internal placements.

Assessor capacity has been an issue later into this financial year, and there has been a period of time where enquirers were in a waiting list position, which is unsatisfactory.

The Board have overseen the financial position, and have agreed an “invest to save” model, creating an opportunity for a pool of Casual Sessional Assessors, to provide additional flexibility to respond to peaks of demand, and enable those wishing to adopt to be progressed without delay.

This is planned to be a cost effective way of creating more internal capacity for placing children, which will have an impact on the overall interagency fee budget.

17. Quality Assurance

National Minimum Standard 25.

The following mechanisms have been implemented for managing and monitoring the work of the agency, and the quality of work.

- Tracking systems to enable regular monitoring of children and adopter journey's; timeliness, and outcomes. Tracking systems have been further improved in this period.
- A performance, assurance and challenge meeting (PAC) has been held with the senior adoption lead for each LA, quarterly following ASGLB and ATV Scorecard data returns. All children for each LA have been tracked and monitored, and agreement about direction, or decisions signposted where applicable.
- A balanced scorecard has been generated quarterly detailing key performance data, user feedback/satisfaction measures; complaints/compliments; finance. This has been presented to the Board, which has a role in questioning, challenge and being satisfied of the effectiveness of the service.
- The Adoption Panel has a quality monitoring role in the Service around business presented to it, for consideration and advice. As detailed in the Panel section, this period has seen some gaps in provision of quality monitoring data which is now being addressed.
- The Adoption Panel Chairs provide a report bi-annually to the Service Manager, which will be presented to the Board; Panel; and to the team, for learning and improvement where required. The first six-month 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 case practice audit tool has been developed. Case practice audits were undertaken, across a sample of case records, with managers independent of that case, and the worker. Individual case audits have not been undertaken during the period of lockdown. These will be implemented in the second half of the year, as an audit, assurance, and learning mechanism.
- Most staff, and all managers have had an annual appraisal.
- All Central List members and Panel Chairs have had, or have planned, an annual appraisal.
- Team meetings take place monthly, 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 at the start of lockdown via a Consultation Survey. User feedback was used to inform adoption support needs during lockdown.

- 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.
- Stockton BC have undertaken an audit of the service to provide an "independent" QA mechanism.
- The Service has proposed to change the decision to contract with Tri X for the on line procedures, and they were not felt to meet the needs of the RAA or of the constituent LA's, in relation to care planning for adoption work. An independent person has been contracted to write a new procedure suite for ATV, which will map out links to each of the 5 LA Children's services care planning procedures. These will be in place by February 2021.

Ofsted

There have been no Ofsted inspections in the period under review, as all inspections have been suspended. Improvement work has continued with Middlesbrough BC, as part of the Commissioners oversight, following the Ofsted ILACS inspection 2019. ATV Service Manager has been involved in delivering the Improvement Plan, specifically in relation to the Corporate Parenting, Strategy, an overarching strategy encompassing the Sufficiency and Permanence Strategies.

18. Forward Planning

The service has begun to establish priorities for the forthcoming year, arising from review, and practice development across regional and national forums.

The following are the key strategic improvement and practice development priorities for 2021:

- Extend adoption support to a more integrated corporate parenting approach across Tees Valley.
- Reduce waiting times for adoption support assessments.
- Continue to address capacity to provide sufficient adopters who can meet the needs of the children referred in Tees Valley, to reduce pressure on the external placement budget.
- Address timescales for adopter approvals, specifically working with health to ensure that medicals do not hold up assessments.
- Create a mechanism for the child's voice to be heard and to influence the development of practice in Adoption Tees Valley.

- Work with the 5 Local Authorities to seek better solutions to life story work for children, addressing delays, due to capacity to undertake the work, and new options for digital life story books.
- Continue to work with all 5 Local Authorities to seek to ensure that children have the best possible permanent family, in timescales which meet their needs, and which are appropriately supported to provide best outcomes. Also, to ensure that children are well prepared for placements where they may have had moves, and emotional issues arising from separation, loss and trauma.
- Work with the regional RAA's and VAA's to support development of the UEA Moving to Adoption Model.
- Address quality monitoring mechanisms, to make it easier to collate quality feedback, for improvement, especially with regard to panel feedback.

