

# Adoption Tees Valley Annual Report 2020-2021



Transform a child's life...

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## Glossary

ADM- agency decision maker

PO- Placement order

RAA- Regional Adoption Agency

VAA- Voluntary Adoption Agency

## **1. Introduction**

This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> full annual report of Adoption Tees Valley, which is the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), for the 5 Local Authority Councils of Darlington; Hartlepool; Middlesbrough; Redcar and Cleveland; and Stockton.

This Annual Report covers the period of 1.4.20 - 31.3.2021.

This period has been impacted by the national Covid 19 pandemic, and the year reported on has been characterised by adoption activity which has been conducted within the amended regulations and restrictions that have been imposed because of the public health emergency.

The pandemic has brought both challenge and opportunity to work differently across Children's Services, and within the arena of adoption. To continue adoption activity and finding permanent new families for children requiring adoption, it has been essential to work creatively, and collaboratively, to deliver the best possible services to children and adoptive parents throughout. The service has trialled new ways of working and has implemented practices which have been underpinned by nationally developing adoption practice, and research.

This report will show that 82 children have been placed for adoption within this year, and a further 17 have been placed for early permanence, not yet "placed for adoption" which is overall placement activity broadly consistent with the previous year. This level of adoption activity demonstrates that across the 5 Children's Services Teams, and within Adoption Tees Valley, work has been continued, challenges discussed, and solutions found, and children with an adoption plan have continued to achieve permanence, through safe, and well supported social work practice. A point of celebration is that 20 % of children placed have been over 5 years of age, and 56% have been in the harder to place categories, which includes children aged 5 +, siblings and children of ethnic minority backgrounds.

Referral numbers of children to ATV have continued to rise, with a 19% increase on the previous year. This is indicative of continuing high numbers of children in our care across the Tees Valley, which is in contrast to national trends across England.

Adoption Orders granted have been at their highest numbers for 6 years in the region, at 89, again going against national trends in adoption activity.

The data for this period shows that there is a continued demand for permanence via adoption for children who are, sadly, unable to be cared for safely by birth parents, or within their birth family, or kinship network.

The timeliness data shows that ATV has brought a year on year steady improvement to overall average timescales, for children from starting their care journey to moving in with adopters. This is a positive indicator as we know that there are a number of children, now adopted, who have had significant periods of time before becoming adopted, and who are now reflected in overall timeliness data.

The specific data on Placement Order to Match timescales has shown an increase, which is reflective of this same group of children. The service is working with Local Authorities to understand the story for children with lengthy care episodes prior to adoption. It is notable that across England this timeliness figure (A2) has also increased this year.

ATV is also reviewing and analysing critically the practice which supports timely matching of children once PO is granted. It's crucial that Local Authorities and ATV work closely and collectively together where a child may have a plan for adoption, and that information is shared in a timely way, to enable early family finding to take place. There are good processes in place for early notification of children, who may have a plan for adoption, but we know timely sharing of all information has been a barrier in some cases. The service has asked its Legal Advisor to develop an Information Sharing Protocol for early permanence planning for children, and this has been a piece of work which has been ratified through the Local Family Justice Board, and through consultation with multi agency partners. It is intended that this protocol will support early information sharing for the benefit of finding families for children at the earliest opportunity where adoption is their plan.

The work, and outcomes are reflective of good, well planned and collaborative work through multiple stakeholders, including the Courts. Professionals have communicated well, and have planned together, using new ways of working to achieve best outcomes for children and their families, taking account of the challenges of the pandemic, on health and movement within and between communities.

Although the pandemic has brought some significant challenges, the service has developed and piloted some new ways of working, which are outlined in the report.

- Early permanence has been embedded in a more systemic way, with a clear pathway for adopters wishing to offer this placement type.
- The service has worked with the University of East Anglia research "Moving on to Adoption" to trial a model of Introductions and Placement planning, which supports moving children in with adopters at a pace they need.
- The service has developed the "Assessment to Support Pathway", enhancing the continuity of preparation for adoption, and adoption

support, using the underpinning model of Secure Base, and PACE parenting.

- A new Friends and Family training module is now offered to all adopters and their support networks.

## **2. Covid Regulation Flexibilities**

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. These permitted adoption services a range of flexibilities which would enable adoption activity to progress, through the pandemic. The amended regulations were again amended in September 2020, and March 2021, changing what flexibilities were permitted.

ATV has used flexibilities as follows:

- 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. The flexibility to stand down panel has not been used.
- 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. This flexibility has not been permitted since September 2020 and has not been used since that time.
- 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. Since September adopters have only been progressed to stage 2 without Medical Reports having yet been received.
- v. No adopter who is required to have a medical assessment has been approved without one having taken place and considered by one of the Agency Medical Advisors.

A significant challenge for the Agency has been the situation with respect of provision of Medical Reports by GP's, due to challenges of covid, and pressure on GP practices.

The service has worked at a local GP practice, and strategic partnership level to attempt to address the timeliness of adopter medicals. The service valued the input of Safeguarding GP's particularly for Hartlepool/Stockton and for Darlington, who have liaised with local GP practices to promote the importance of adopter medicals in the safeguarding of children. However, some GP practices continue to present lengthy delays in providing adopter medicals, which has impacted on overall assessment timescales, and in some cases led to some dissatisfaction for prospective adopters.

### **3. 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.

### **4. National Context of Adoption**

The government has rolled out the programme of regionalisation of adoption over the past 4 years, and almost all Local Authorities in England are now in a RAA.

Regionalisation has enabled a viable working group of RAA leaders to meet and work together, to develop practice, and address challenges and opportunities affecting the adoption of children across England.

The core objectives are to enable children to be placed with adoptive families more quickly, reducing waiting time to be adopted; and to improve the quality of adoption support for children and families.

The DfE have supported the regionalisation programme, and there is now central government funding to progress strategic leadership, and programme workstreams for adoption across the national RAA Leaders Group.

The ATV Service Manager participates in the national RAA leaders' forum, and through this, ATV is developing adoption practice within a national context, influenced by key stakeholders.

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) seeks to address matters impacting on permanence for children. Locally, the regional ASGLB is a strategic and practice forum for North East and Cumbrian Local Authorities, and Voluntary Adoption Agencies, and is chaired by Sally Robinson, DCS at Hartlepool BC who is also a member of ATV Board.

Within this year, the Regional ASGLB convened a conference, delivered virtually, with researchers from The University of East Anglia presenting the findings of the Moving on To Adoption Model. ATV has begun to adopt this best practice model in some targeted cases, planning for an introductions programme for the child which is centred around good relationship building between foster carers and adopters, and taken at the child's pace.

ATV works as part of the regional and national strategic and operational forums, to be influenced by, and to influence best practice for adopted children, and those who have a plan for permanence via adoption.

Through regional collaborative work, there has been a drive to achieve better opportunities for placing children within the region, where possible through the development of a regional protocol, where VAA's and RAA's have agreed to maximise and protect the opportunities for children to be placed with locally approved adoptive parents, where possible.

Work is underway through the RASGLB partnerships to develop a regional market position statement, to underpin sufficiency analysis and planning for the children requiring adoption. The aim is to use regional adopters for regional children, and to plan for future needs, and skills to take the children who require adoption.

## **5. Key Strategic Development**

### **Early Permanence**

ATV has set out to offer more opportunity for children to be cared for by their likely permanent family, at an earlier stage in their lives. This is achieved through fostering for adoption, where the child's plan is well developed before the Placement Order is granted, enabling a transparent, well planned placement, which reduces moves for children, and enables vital bonding and attachment with those likely to become parents to the child, at an earlier stage.

This has been mobilised through the Early Permanence Strategy, which has been collaborative, and has involved key stakeholders with a role in care planning and the placement of children for adoption.

This report will show the work and progress in developing early permanence, and key challenges learned through the process.

In total 17 children have been placed on a fostering for adoption basis, prior to the Court authorisation to place for adoption.

### **6. Three Year Review of Adoption Tees Valley**

The Board have directed a review of ATV, in line with original plans in the Business case presented to Councils prior to implementation.

The review will measure performance against the 4 key objectives set out in the original full business case, presented to the 5 Local Authority Councils for agreement, prior to the establishment of the RAA.

These were:

- To deliver better outcomes for children and families
- To deliver improved value for money
- To establish strong and sustainable services
- To successfully implement the RAA

The review is being supported by a member of the Stockton BC Transformation Team and is using a mixed methodology of data and financial review; surveys; focus groups; and peer to peer learning project between ATV and a similar sized RAA. An independent facilitator, experienced in RAA development, has been appointed for a Focus Group with the Board of ATV.

The review is underway and will conclude with findings in September 2021.

### **7. Performance Benchmarking Information**

This section will compare ATV overall performance to England average, where comparable data is published and exists.



Individual LA data for the 5 Local Authority partners will be provided in later sections

## Children

	ATV 2019-20	ATV 2020-21	Direction	All England	Direction
<b>Adoption Orders</b>	64	89	↑ Inc 39%	2,863	↓ Dec 16%
<b>Placements</b>	91	82	↓ Dec 10%	3,064	↓ Dec 7.5%
<b>PO's</b>	82	76	↓ Dec 7%	2,907	↓ Dec 12.5%
<b>ADM BID's</b>	96	99	↑ Inc 3%	3,731	↓ Dec 9.5%
<b>Early Permanence</b>	10	17	↑ Inc 70%	449	↓ Dec 7%
<b>A10</b> (entering care to moving in with adopters) - days	414	405	↓ Dec 2%	418	↑ Inc 11% from 375 2019/20 Adoption Scorecard
<b>A2</b>	214	238	↑ Inc 11%	206	↑ Inc 11% from 185 2019/20 Adoption Scorecard
<b>Rate of leaving care by AO</b>	10%	12%	↑ Inc 2%	11% (2019/20)	↓ Dec 1% from 12% 2018/19

From ATV Q4 Scorecard, taken from ASGLB returns, England Data from ASGLB Q4 2020-21

X indicates data not available, or not meaningful in this report

## Adopters

	ATV 2019-20	ATV 2020-21	Direction	All England	Direction
<b>Approvals</b>	51	62	↑ Inc 22%	3,164	↑ Inc 6%
<b>Numbers in assessment-end of period</b>	34	40	↑ Inc 18%	X	
<b>Stage 1 starts</b>	60	63	↑ Inc 3%	X	

	ATV 2019-20	ATV 2020-21	Direction	All England	Direction
<b>Stage 2 starts</b>	57	62	↑ Inc 9%	X	
<b>Fastrack</b>	20	12	Dec 40%	X	
<b>Waiting to be matched at end of period</b>	22	36	↑ Inc 64%	X	
<b>Waited more than 3 months to be matched</b>	71%	54%	↓ Dec 17%	X	
<b>Approval to match timescale</b> Days		129		269	
<b>Approval timescale</b> days	202	217		295	
<b>Stage 1</b> days		93		112	
<b>Stage 2</b> Days		127		141	

From ATV Q4 Scorecard, taken from ASGLB returns, England Data from ASGLB Q4 2020-21

X indicates data not available, or not meaningful in this report

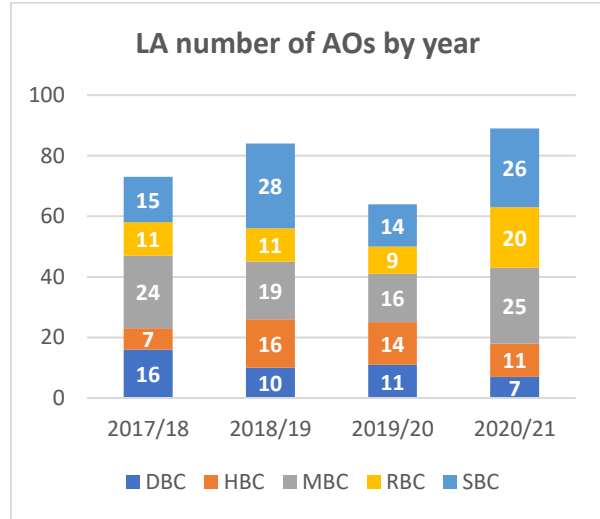
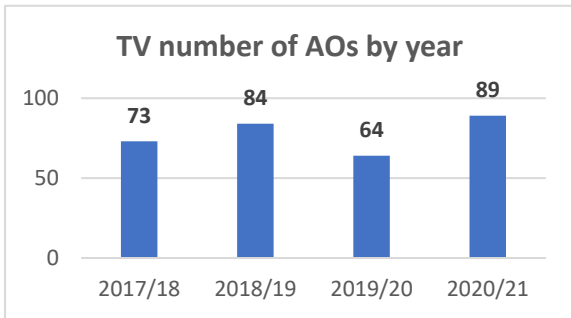
### Characteristics of children Adopted 2020-21, and Children Waiting with PO as of 31.3.21

	Age under 5	Age over 5	Female	Male	Ethnic Minority Heritage	Disabled	Part of Sib group	Harder to place
<b>Adopted</b>	71	18	49	40	8	2	37	46
<b>Waiting with PO, 31.3.21</b>	39	9	25	23	7	0	19	20
<b>Waiting over 18 months since</b>	9	6	7	8	4	0	10	10

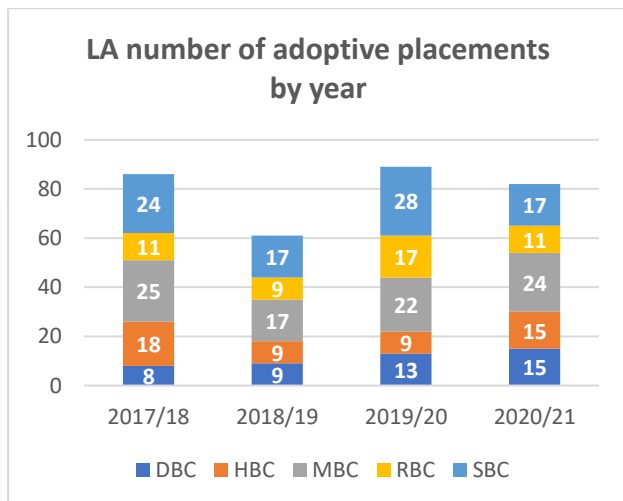
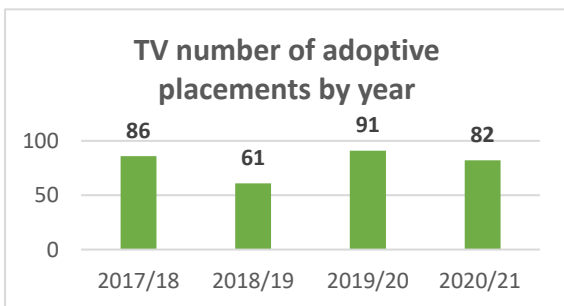
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Individual Local Authority Performance

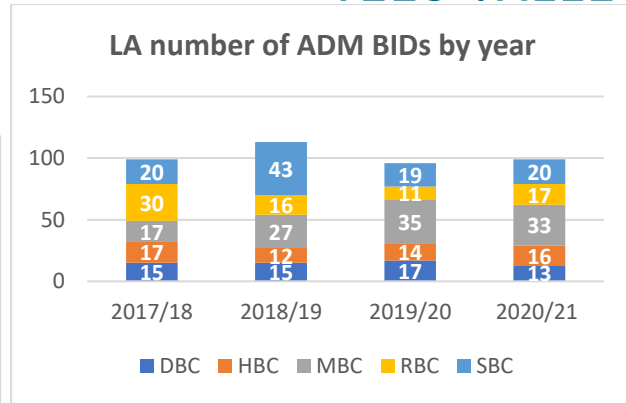
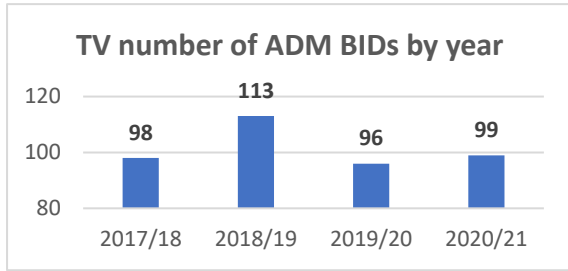
**Adoption Orders**



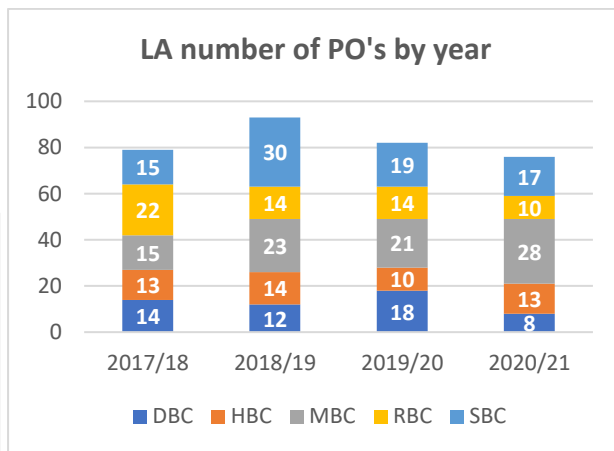
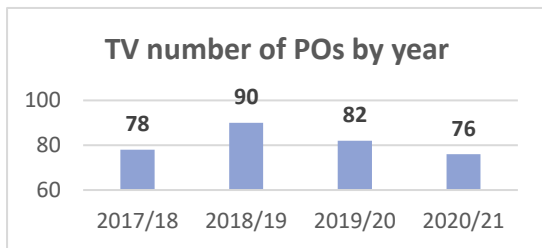
**Children Placed for Adoption**



**Agency Decisions that Adoption is in the Child's Best Interest (ADM BID)**



**Placement Orders**



Analysis of Performance

The numbers of children adopted from care in this year has risen by 39%, with 89 children having been adopted this year. This is the highest level of adoption orders in the last 6 years, and indicates that in Tees Valley, adoption activity does not appear to be following the national trend, of a decline in numbers.

Stockton, Redcar and Cleveland, and Middlesbrough have seen Adoptions from care rise in the last year, with Redcar and Cleveland seeing a 122% increase; Stockton seeing an 85% increase and Middlesbrough seeing a 56% increase.

Darlington and Hartlepool have seen fewer children adopted in this year, than the previous one.

Adoptions from care in this year reflect the high numbers of children placed overall for adoption in the previous year.

This year, the numbers of children placed with adoptive families has dropped by 9% from 91 to 82 children placed for adoption in the year.

Stockton have seen a 39% drop in placements; and Redcar and Cleveland a 35% drop. Middlesbrough have had 9% more children placed; Hartlepool have had 66% increase and Darlington 15% increase.

The service has promoted early permanence (EP), as detailed above. This has impacted on EP cases, with more children having started their adoption placements at an earlier stage, via fostering for adoption. The number of children in EP has risen by 70%, although numbers are small. The numbers have risen from 10 in the previous year to 17 in this year.

To date no children have been returned to parental care following placement in a fostering to adopt placement, however, the Service is now beginning to encounter cases where this is being considered. It should always be remembered that where parents are able to care for their child safely, this is the best plan for that child.

ATV has had significant impact in terms of adoptions of older children from care, with 18 of the 89 children adopted from care this year being over age 5. This is 20% of all children adopted were over the age of 5. This particular outcome is a positive one, indicating that in Tees Valley, we are collectively ambitious that older children can be adopted, and have achieved permanence via adoption for many older children.

The number of children for whom the permanence decision has changed from adoption remains steady at 21. The reasons include: a change of plan due to the child's needs changing; no adopters able to be found in the timescale required; Court not granting PO.

Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds have increased slightly in this year, from 5 to 8. This represents 9% of all children adopted.

Agency Decisions that adoption is in the child's best interest have risen slightly (3%), with Redcar and Cleveland being the LA which has seen more plans decided.

Placement Orders have declined in this year by 7%, from 82 to 76. This may reflect the national trend is beginning to follow in Tees Valley, with national adoptions reducing, or due to delays in Final hearings. Better analysis will be available of the trend in PO's, as the year 2021-22 progresses.

ATV has increased its approval of adopters by 24%, rising from 51 in the previous year to 62 adopter approvals in this year. This is a significant achievement, especially during the pandemic. This figure could have been greater; however, many assessments have been delayed due to delays in GP practices in undertaking adult health assessments.

ATV has seen a greater number of Stage 1 assessments starts (a rise of 3% to 63) however, noted is a number of stage 1 drop outs due to the adopters not being at the right time in their lives to adopt, or checks identifying it is not suitable to proceed. It is felt that more people considered adoption during covid, but more applicants were not yet ready to adopt, when stage 1 commenced. Stage 2 starts have increased in the year, from 57 to 62, a 9% rise.

The above reflects that in Tees Valley, adoption is continuing to be busy and to thrive, with children being matched and placed at a relatively similar level, and with a continuing interest in adopting from people within the community.

The performance also will help address whether ATV is recruiting the right adopters for the children who require placement.

This year 30 children have been placed with external agency adopters, which is the same number as the previous year, but is a greater percentage of the total (36%). Of these 30 children, 15 were placed within the NE and Cumbria region, with local VAA's, which is a positive in terms of seeking to offer children families where contact plans can more easily be maintained, and where their regional identity, and longer term adoption support needs are planned for closer to the home region.

At the end of the period 36 families were approved, not yet matched. However, of these families many were in the process of matching, and the data shows that the percentage of families who wait more than 3 months following approval, to match has reduced from 71% to 54%. This means that nearly half of all families were matched with children within 3 months of their approval and is a positive indicator that ATV is utilising its own adopter resources. The rise in numbers not yet matched is also indicative of a greater number approved. There are few adopters who are waiting over 12 months to take a child, and ATV adopters are almost always taking Tees Valley children.

ATV is matching adopters more quickly following approval than the England average, by 140 days, with ATV average timescale being 129 days following approval, and the England average being 269 days following approval. This indicates that ATV is recruiting the right adopters for children, and is effective in matching quickly, with much linking activity taking place as adopters are in the later stages of assessment.

More adopters are needed to meet the demand for placements, which is continuing to show an increase, with no reduction in placements.

ATV has been working on an improved Assessment to Support Pathway, as detailed, seeking to offer greater information, support and provide more confidence to those adopters who can consider children in the harder to

place category, which includes older children, siblings, children of ethnic minority heritage, and disabled children, or those with developmental delays.

Within this year, ATV has placed a sibling group of 3 children together, with adopters recruited and approved internally, which is a significant achievement.

## **8. Marketing and Recruitment**

ATV has planned a number of key marketing activities, aimed at promoting the RAA and achieving more people choosing to come to ATV to adopt.

There have been key lines of marketing approach this year, supported by 3 campaigns, focussing on attracting more prospective adopters to ATV.

1. The service has worked with the RAA National Recruitment Campaign, funded through DfE, targeting adopters for children who wait the longest. Nationally these are children from black ethnic minority backgrounds. The campaign has been branded #YouCanAdopt and has its own website. National film and materials were used, and ATV produced its own film, echoing this campaign, with our social worker, Chioma, being the face of ATV during this campaign.
2. ATV analysed our sufficiency needs, assessing the needs of children in this region who wait the longest to be adopted. In this RAA it is siblings, where one or both siblings have additional needs, and one or both children are aged 5 +. In August 2020 ATV did a dedicated (anonymised) profile campaign, generating huge social media interest, making ATV one of the biggest RAA facebook accounts in England.

To promote needs, ATV set out 3 clear campaign periods in 2020-21:

- August 2020– profiling our needs for adopters for hard to place children.
- October 2020- National Adoption Week- supported the National Adopter Recruitment campaign, with use of national materials, and our own film. Focus was on promoting the need for adopters for black and ethnic minority children, who wait the longest to be adopted in UK.
- March- April 2021- Sibling campaign, with media interviews, and a dedicated focus on the need for adopters for siblings in Tees Valley.

The ATV website ([www.adoptionteesvalley.org.uk](http://www.adoptionteesvalley.org.uk)) is the largest source of enquiries, and enquirers can now request a call back, seeking an initial conversation with one of our team to discuss their interest. Systems in ATV mean that enquirers receive a friendly call, within the same day, and can

easily access an initial conversation followed by an initial visit, to progress their interest.

Outcomes:

87 visitors to the ATV website as a result of national campaigns, and who have directly visited the #YouCanAdopt website.

Significant increase in social media following as a result of profiling. It is not yet clear what impact on overall approval rate, however, since 3.1.21 there have been 5 approvals of adoptive parents who can seek to adopt siblings.

2 families of ethnic minority heritage have come to ATV as a result of the National Adoption week/ATV promotional campaign.

	Full year 2019-20	Q1&Q2 2020-21	Full Year 2020-21
Enquiries	270	196	357 (32% increase)
Social media followers	1,000		10, 989
Website Visits	18,175	11,000	17,738
Attendees at Information Events	Not counted	Not counted	205
Registration of Interest	61	30	63

Conversion Enquiry to Registration of Interest- 22%

In the forthcoming year, ATV will be focussing more effort on developing the website, and reaching out to our target audience, supported by digital marketing expertise.

### **9. Adopter Journey – Enquiry to Approval**

	Total 2019-20	Q1 & Q2 2020-21	Q3 & Q4 2020-21	Total 2020-21
Initial Visits to prospective Adopters	65	50	42	92
Stage 1 Starts	61	30	33	63
Stage 2 Starts	54	32	30	62
Adopter Approvals	50	26	36	62

Conversion Initial Visit to Approval – 67%



Assessments have been undertaken virtually by assessing social workers, qualified and experienced under the Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations. During the early part of the year, assessments were being fully continued via virtual video technology, for those assessments started face to face before the initial lockdown. ATV operated within practice guidelines agreed through the RAA Leaders group, enabling sharing and learning around opportunities for best practice, and high quality assessments, conducted virtually. During the year, assessing social workers identified that where they had not yet met the applicants, building a relationship with prospective adopters was more difficult via virtual means. The service agreed planned face to face visits, to enable good quality assessments to be undertaken, while maintaining careful risk assessment around covid protection, for all parties. It has been high priority to ensure that children's welfare and future safety are paramount, and this has been at the forefront of continued assessment work. No adopters have been approved without at least one home visit, which enabled a full home safety inspection, and face to face meeting between assessor and the applicants.

### **New Initiative**

#### **10. Assessment to Support Pathway for Adopters**

During this year, service planning has sought to strengthen the preparation, assessment, and support pathway for prospective adopters. The objectives are:

- To help ATV adopters to feel even more equipped and prepared to consider children with greater needs, with the aim of increasing more internal placements, and reducing inter agency placements
- To follow recommendations of the 2020 Adoption Barometer report (Adoption UK) which recommends that all adopters should have an identified support plan.

A small group of social workers, and the Recruitment Manager have developed the ATV model of assessment, using the Adopter Hub (PACT UK) materials, and webinars, and building on the Secure Base Model (Schofield and Beek). Additional elements of the assessment include:

- More use of Adopter Hub materials to explore how prospective adopters understand and will meet the needs of children with wider needs
- A Self-Care plan, developed and worked out by applicants with their social worker
- Case Studies available to develop thinking and self-awareness

- A new Family and Friends Training Course, enabling the support network of adoptive parents to learn more about the needs of adopted children.

Kirsty - one of ATV's experienced social workers, who developed the course explains:

"The motivation to start this training session was to share our knowledge at ATV with the people that will be ultimately supporting the adopter(s) as parents and who will be the ones that are playing an important role in a child's life. The aim was to provide an understanding of the differences parenting an adopted child and the reasons why a child's behaviour and development might be slightly different to other children in the family and network. Ultimately it was to equip the family and friends with how best to support the child and the adopters.

We started the training in March 2021, and we have facilitated 4 sessions. There are another 3 sessions scheduled for the rest of the year and are running bimonthly. So far, we have had 39 individuals who have attended the half-day session, supporting 20 couples / single prospective adopters in their adoption journey.

The topics we cover include: The adoption process, attachment, contact in adoption, why children require an adoptive family, the different categories of abuse, identity, fostering for adoption, therapeutic parenting and how you can support and help".

Feedback from a prospective grandparent highlights "Each child has gone through trauma and they will remember and grieve for that. They have no idea what is ahead of them so they will need time to readjust, so we as new grandparents need to be mindful of that and adjust ourselves to think first and foremost of their life story and realise this child will have different needs from us too regarding what we knew as parenting".

## **11. Preparation for Adoption Groups**

ATV saw an increase in the numbers of applicants starting the process during covid and progressing through assessment and preparation.

The Preparation sessions were held via Video conferencing however, applicants completed all 4 days and the same content, and opportunity to meet various key people who could talk about adoption was maintained.

ATV has a lead social worker for the development and implementation of Preparation Training. She has maintained a dedicated focus on the preparation of adopters, supported by a number of social workers in the

team, ensuring that all speakers continued to join, giving prospective adopters a good preparation experience.

Angi Simmons - ATV's Lead Trainer

We have completed all training since May 2020 in the virtual format. This has been a learning curve but so far, the feedback has been positive. We have now the ability to have "breakouts rooms" and this has helped in the socialising of the group members too. Extra groups were held in October 2020 and January 2021

Within ATV we have continued to move forward with our assessment tools and the training has also been a tool that has been updated.

Using the Secure Base Model (Schofield and Beek) and incorporating this throughout the 4 days will ensure our adopters have awareness of this important theory in child development to carry on through their stage 2 assessment period, offering a range of ongoing learning.

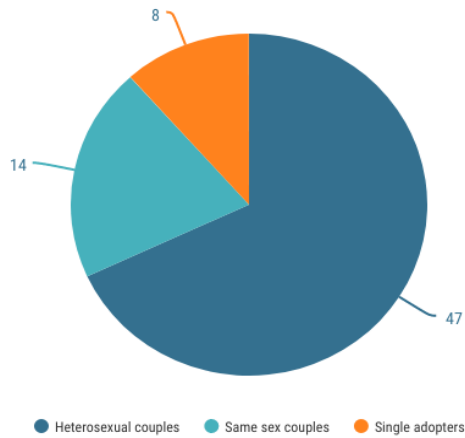
Prospective Adopter feedback -

- *I thought today was amazing taught us more than expected considering it was the first day.*
- *There is a lot to take in but it definitely was worth it*
- *Learning about separation and loss was really important. We always believed that we would be as open as possible with our child to help with their identity. This input reaffirmed that for us, and we believe strongly about children knowing where and who they have come from and having open and honest conversations.*
- *We look forward to being part of the ATV family and meeting you in person. Thank you!*
- *The courses have allowed us to question our own preconceptions and has totally changed our opinions on some aspects such as contact and meeting the birth family. We feel like we are more informed in general and now feel this is definitely the journey we want to follow.*
- *We feel the preparation training was extremely useful. It has opened our eyes to the issues we may face as well as providing us with tools and resources to help us along the way.*

Number of groups held: 6

Number of households attending in total: 69

Characteristics of attendees at preparation training



## 12. Early Permanence

ATV has acted on a strategic plan to deliver early permanence for children in the Tees Valley for whom the Local Authority has an adoption plan, or is in the process of assessment, with adoption as one possible outcome.

**Early Permanence (EP)** is the placement of a child who may have/is likely to have an adoption plan, with prospective adopters, who are dually approved as foster carers and adopters. The usual route is often called **Fostering for Adoption (FFA)** and the approved adopters are identified as prospective carers for the child, before the Court has authorised the placement for adoption of that child, through a Placement Order. The child is placed with the family on a fostering basis, until such time as the Court grant a Placement Order, or that the Court determines that the child will return to birth parents, or to a family member, based on evidence provide in the Final Hearing.

***The benefits of EP are that the child has fewer moves in care, prior to formal placement for adoption, and the child has the opportunity for beginning bonding and attachment to their permanent carers, at the earliest time. Both these actions are well researched as being beneficial to children in the short and long term.***

Early permanence does not pre-empt the decision of the Court and Judges will always decide a child will return to the care of parents, or family members where the welfare of the child dictates this is the best outcome.

ATV rolled out the early permanence Strategy is 2020-21, a delivery plan which was delayed due to covid.

- Meetings were held with senior managers and senior solicitors in each LA, to agree the key approach to early permanence across Tees Valley.
- An Information Sharing Protocol has been drawn up by ATV Legal Advisor (Cygnet Family Law) which was consulted on, through the Local Family Justice Board, including with members of the Judiciary.
- ATV Managers delivered a training programme to each Local Authority in Tees Valley, and to Cafcass and the Adoption Panel. Additional sessions have been offered to some IRO's.
- ATV has implemented a preparation workshop which is mandatory for any prospective adopter wishing to consider early permanence.

ATV and the Local Authorities have delivered 17 early permanence placements for children in Tees Valley, an increase of 7 on the previous year.

Of these 17 placements, no child has returned to parents within the year. One child continues without PO and may return to birth family care.

More opportunity for Early Permanence is a strategic goal of the national RAA system, and ATV has worked in collaboration with other RAA's practice to develop the service in Tees Valley. Its success as a pathway for children is based on good quality assessment work by the Local Authority children's social work team, and in good preparation and support to prospective adopters.

ATV will build on support to adopters offering early permanence in this year (2021-22). ATV will further develop the preparation module for prospective adopters, in line with Coram BAAF training in September 2021. Work is underway to strengthen the partnership between the 5 LA Fostering Services and ATV, to deliver a clearer and more cohesive offer to adopters and the child.

### **13. Referrals of Children, Matching and Placing**

#### **Early Notifications to ATV**

	Q1&Q2	Q3 &Q4	Full Year	
Early Notifications 2019-20	88	76	164	
Early Notifications 2020-21	98	97	195	19% increase

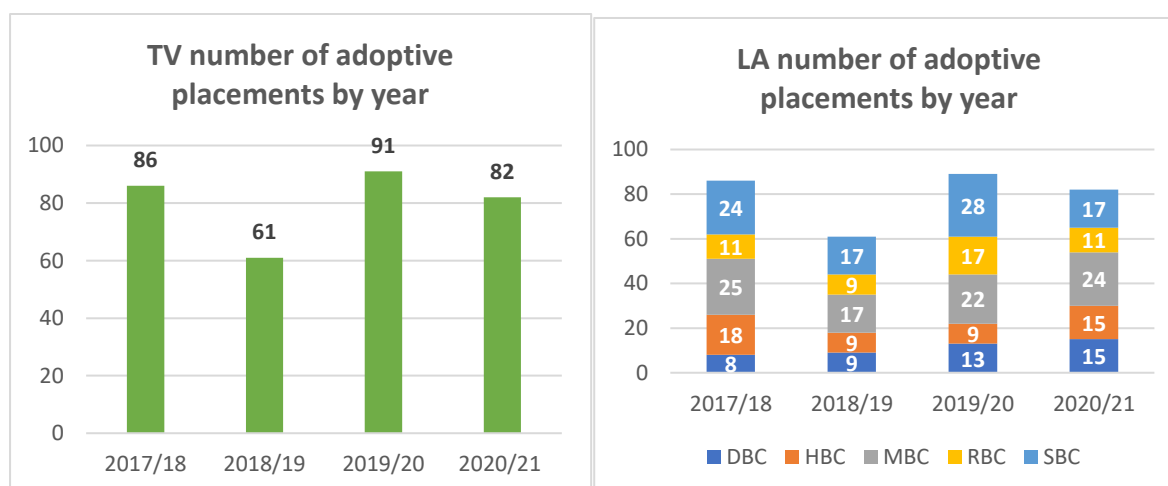
### Referrals by Local Authority

Year	DBC	HBC	MBC	R&CBC	SBC	TV
2020/21	26	28	58	31	52	<b>195</b>

### Placements

	2019-20	2020-21: April-September	2020-21: Oct-March	Totals 2020-21
ATV children placed with ATV adopters	60	27	25	52
ATV Children placed with external adopters	31	18	12	30
External children placed with ATV adopters	2	1	1	2
Total ATV children placed	91	45	37	<b>82</b>
Total placements	93	46	38	<b>84</b>

### Placements by Local Authority



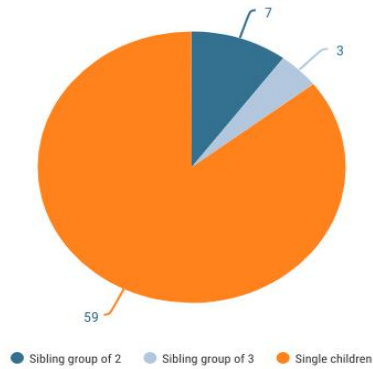
## 14. Characteristics of children placed

Age at the time of moving in:

0-12 months	1-2 yrs.	2-3 yrs.	3-4 yrs.	4-5 yrs.	5+ yrs.
26	31	11	4	4	6
32%	38%	13%	5%	5%	7%

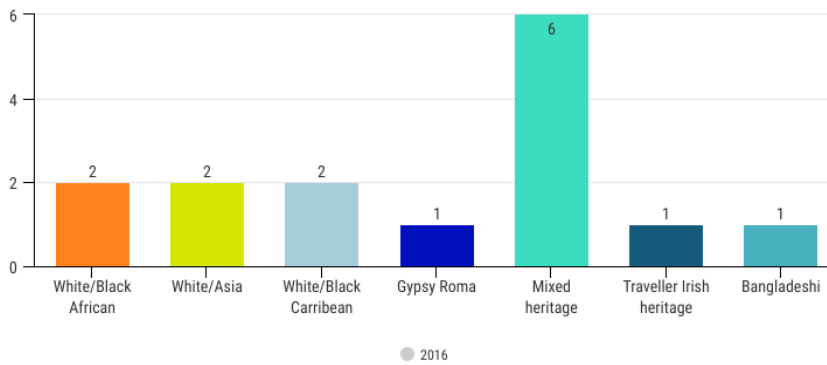
### Siblings

Number of children in sibling groups, 2020-2021

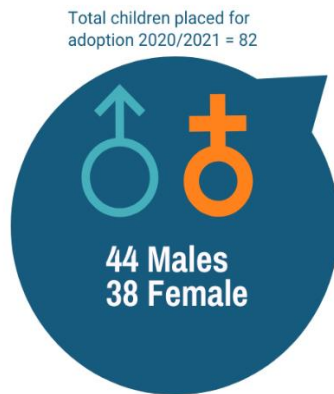


### Ethnicity

Ethnicity breakdown (15 children from ethnic minority backgrounds), 2020-2021



### Gender



### **Children who wait the longest to be adopted in Tees Valley**

Analysis of children waiting with a Placement Order data, at the end of Q4, identifies that the characteristics of children waiting more than 4 months in almost all cases include children in sibling groups. There were 27 children waiting with PO, not matched, at the end of Q4. Of these children:

- 5 have waited more than 12 months to be matched
- 7 have waited between 8-12 months to be matched
- 4 have waited 4-8 months to be matched
- 11 have waited less than 4 months

4 of the 5 children who have waited longest (over 12 months) are in sibling groups, and each of the sibling groups includes at least one child over age 5.

One who has waited over 12 months is a young child, with uncertain developmental needs, but not a disability.

Of the children waiting 8-12 months, 2 are part of a sibling group of 3 children, waiting to be placed, aged over 5 and ethnic minority heritage.

There is a further white sibling group of 3, with a child aged over 5 in that group. Also, a white sibling group of 2, also with a child aged over 5.

### **15. Disruptions**

There have been no disruptions to a child's placement, following placement with adopters, and before the adoption order is granted.



This is a positive, indicating that children have been matched appropriately, and adopters have been supported to meet the child's needs.

One child was matched, and began introductions, but then did not go on to be placed.

### **16. Adoption Panel**

An Adoption panel Chairs report has been co-produced by 2 Independent Chairs, as required by Adoption National Minimum Standard 17.2 (NMS 2014)

The full report is made available to the Board of ATV; to the Adoption Panel; to the management and team at ATV.

This report is for the second period of 6 months in this year- 1.10.20-31.3.21

### **Thematic strengths and areas for improvement for ATV Panel Business and Management of panel**

Panel chairs fed back that overall adoption activity was positive, and panel was operating well.

There were a total of 28 panels held within this six month period and 23 within the previous six months. The total number of cases considered was 69 as opposed to 70 in the previous period reflecting the limit on work presented to any one panel, which is welcomed.

Panel chairs summarised:

- It is to the adoption team and panel members credit that adoption business has been maintained throughout this period, including a third 'lockdown' and that no panels have had to be cancelled due to Covid related issues.
- Due to the 'virtual' nature of Panels, the Chair continues to have a much more formal role in directing the business and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to speak and to ask questions. This format does reduce the free flowing discussion previously held during face-to-face meetings, which does not sit comfortably with Panel Chairs.
- The Chair continues to take on the additional role of agreeing and collating panel member questions, which are submitted in advance of panel.
- There continue to be the challenges associated with technology and virtual panels. IT issues during virtual panel meetings have delayed business on occasions and have meant that the experience for adopters will have been less well managed and supported.
- None of the panels in this timeframe were held with the reduced quoracy allowed under the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020. However panel continued to see the

impact of the 'easing' allowed by these regulations, particularly in timescales for medicals, meaning these were not always completed until nearer the end of the assessment process, giving little or no time for medical issues to be fully addressed within the reports in some cases.

- Adopter preparation training, meetings and assessment sessions continued to be held virtually rather than face-to-face. Although applicants and adopters are generally positive about their experiences the longer-term impact of this remains to be seen.

Strengths identified over the past 6 months include

- Continued consideration of adoption business and commitment of everyone involved throughout a time of unprecedented upheaval and anxiety due to the Covid 19 pandemic.
- Consideration of questions for applicants/adopters prior to panel has been a benefit and saved time on the day.
- In contrast to the national trend, adoption business is increasing in the region with 6 additional panels having to be arranged to supplement the weekly panels already planned. Additional panels are already being planned for the next 6 months ensuring there are sufficient central list members available and documentation can be read in a timely manner.
- There have been 17 fostering for adoption cases presented for match, ensuring good outcomes for those children in terms of establishing and maintaining their early attachments.
- Panel minutes are now circulated to all panel members for consideration to ensure a full and accurate record is agreed.
- All Central List Members have now had an Annual Review.

Areas for improvement include:

- 1 Panel was cancelled at short notice due to lack of business during this timeframe, with 6 additional Panels arranged at relatively short notice, although with the required 10 day period for panel papers to be circulated, and read, indicating that the planning of work to be presented at panel perhaps needs more careful oversight.
- The number of individual documents presented for adoption matches continues to prove challenging when dealing with information electronically.
- Although a very helpful update on outcomes was provided in February 21, panel members do not receive regular, timely feedback on outcomes following Panel e.g. whether ADM agreed with panel recommendations and made their decision within the 7 day timescale;

whether planned placements went ahead successfully, information about reasons for interruptions/disruptions or feedback received from presenting social workers or prospective adopters.

- It would be helpful for a summary of pertinent issues raised in Central List member appraisals to be made available to Panel Chairs to contribute to the 6 monthly report.
- Although there has now been training relating to trends in disruption in specific cases that have disrupted since ATV went live, this did not allow the panels that dealt with the particular cases to look forensically at their practise in the approval and/or match.
- There continues to be some evidence of missed opportunities for early permanence placements when matches come to panel, though early permanence does seem to be embedding in some of the Local Authorities.
- There continue to be some delays in progressing children's plans, resulting in delays in identifying children who require adoption and subsequent matching. Availability of case work time, changes of social worker, staff sickness and Court timescales are some of the reasons cited.
- There is not always consistent practice across the Tees Valley Local Authorities in respect of Life Appreciation events, which are not always in evidence where, ideally, they should be required. Sometimes there has been planning and thinking about Life Appreciation Events, but not shared in the panel documentation. Such events should draw on information from all carers and significant agencies involved in a child's life.
- Although there are some excellent examples of CPR's the inconsistent quality continues to cause concern at panel where lack of knowledge about regulatory requirements on the part of some authors in preparing children's plans for adoption is evident. Some CPR's don't have updated information in and this compromises what is available for adopter and children. The importance of full, factual and qualitative information being available to children for their future cannot be overstated.

The agency meets with panel Chairs following provision of the annual report and has continued to make changes and amendments to process, to reflect feedback, and improve quality. A challenge for Adoption Tees Valley is that although panel is a busy, weekly (sometimes twice weekly ) formal meeting requiring a significant amount of administration, planning, and quality preparation, there is no additional Panel Advisor or Panel Administrator to support this process, as is the case in most other Regional Adoption Agencies.

## **17. Life Story Work**

The Biannual report 2020-21 highlighted challenges with managing the volume of life story books for children who are placed for adoption. The forum of LA Adoption Lead Officers and ATV have continued to address backlog of life story work, looking at short term and longer term measures to address this issue. Additional staffing (temporary) has been introduced to address backlog however, barriers are identified whereby the child's social worker may not always provide information in a timely way or gather this at the time events are progressing with the child's journey through care. The ATV Board have considered this matter and agreed that children's social workers should be responsible for life story work for children. It has been agreed that children's social workers will be more actively monitored within each LA for progress with life story work, and the ATV role will be to support the child's social worker in producing the book.

The backlog of life story work is being addressed between each Local Authority and ATV, via agency agreements in each case.

Longer term options for a digital app, to support gathering life story information are being explored. Consultation has taken place with a group of adopters, who have given valuable feedback, but in general welcome the idea.

## **18. Adoption Support**

The adoption support service to adopters has by necessity been delivered largely through virtual means, due to the pandemic, with some face to face contacts where this has been required for case work, and the need to visit children and families.

	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>	
Number of adoption support referrals	147	83	
Access to Files requests/completed	35	36	
Adoption Support Assessments completed	132	55	
Successful application to ASF	175	166	
Unsuccessful application to ASF	0	0	
Value of applications to ASF	£692,833	£637,551 + £70,965 Covid	

Education Support Cases during year	28	59	
Number of Post Box Contract Agreements		279	

The 3 Tier model continues to be in place. Tier one face to face supports located within the ATV building have not been delivered within this year.

### **Referrals**

Referrals for adoption support are now managed through the duty system, with social workers being booked for a one hour call back, to undertake a telephone duty referral, which is then forwarded to the Adoption Support manager for consideration.

Referrals for adoption support have decreased this year, which may be reflective of less demand due to covid. Another possibility is that the service faced a high demand arising from adopters waiting for a service, prior to commencement of ATV, with more adopters in high need now receiving a service, and underway with a support plan. It may be early days to evaluate the impact of strengthened tier 1 and tier 2 offers, and whether the universal offer via ATV is beginning to meet needs at an earlier stage.

A challenge for the service is the waiting list for adoption support allocation, which can run into months. The service has designated 3 FTE adoption social workers to the Adoption Support Service.

The service development plan for 2021 is to increase partnership working, and a more integrated approach with LA's, to enable children and their adoptive parents to access more readily wider supports from Local Authorities and strategic partners, where services can and should be made available to families from wider partner provision.

### **Adoption Support Assessments**

The number of adoption support assessments has reduced this year. However, this is reflective of covid funding enabling the service to "group book" therapeutic training, without having to use the multiple application process. Also, the impact of the Education Support Worker may be now helping families to receive the support they need, in the area of education, which is reducing demand for adoption support assessments. The waiting list continues to be a challenge to adopters waiting, and for the service.

### **Applications to Adoption Support Fund**

The service has progressed slightly fewer applications to the ASF in this year, although as with adoption support assessments, covid funding has allowed

for group applications to be progressed as one application, rather than many individual applications.

Many of the individual applications are repeat applications for families who referred in for support, and assessment in 2018, 2019, and 2020, but have entered into repeated annual applications for continuing therapeutic input.

The application process for ASF funding has become more administrative this financial year, due to changes in the ASF. Nevertheless, it is welcome additional funding, to enable access to therapeutic supports for families and children.

The application value in this year is c£638,000 down from c£693,000 in the previous year. Although down by £55,000 there has been additional covid funding which the service applied for, amounting to £71,000 spent in total.

### **Therapeutic provision**

The Service was supported by Stockton procurement team to re-open the Preferred providers list for therapeutic services, to be funded via ASF.

A further 4 services were admitted to the list.

Children and families continue to value the therapeutic input which is vital to help children who have experienced harm, through early adverse childhood experiences, abuse and neglect.

### **Access to files**

The service has commissioned Adoption Matters to deliver the service for Access to Files for adult adoptees, and birth relatives. Significant partnership working has taken place to establish a procedure for access to records, including work with all 5 Local Authorities, via Adoption Lead officers. After considerable working together, with this experienced Voluntary Adoption Agency the service is working effectively to provide timely access to records, for eligible people.

There have been 36 Access to Records requests progressed this year. This is a similar level to the previous year.

### **Education Support**

The service has continued to employ an Education Support worker, co-funded through the 5 Local Authority Virtual Schools, via DFE grant funding for children previously in the care of the LA.

This post has become well embedded over the last year, and the worker is delivering effective education support to children, and families, within the context of schools. This means that she also works frequently with Designated Teachers, and others involved in helping and supporting children. The worker

meets regularly with Virtual School Heads, to plan for her own development, to work within a collective approach to educating children, and facilitating emotional and attachment related needs to be understood and planned for within the school setting.

59 families and children have been supported during this year.

The Education Support Worker says:

The main areas of support are helping schools to understand a child's behaviour and needs, training schools about developmental trauma and the impact, mediating between parents and schools when relationships have broken down and providing schools with strategies to help the child be ready and able to learn. Also, to help families to have a better understanding of the education system.

As the post has developed and become more well known, schools and parents contact me directly for support and advice daily.

**Thrive Approach:** I'm now a Thrive trained practitioner, and I have added this element to my support within schools. It has been used as a social and emotional intervention to help support the children with neurodevelopmental gaps due to adverse childhood experiences. I work closely with the teachers to profile the children and this indicates where the 'gaps' in their neurodevelopment have occurred. I then provide planning for the schools to deliver the interventions and then reprofile the child to assess. It is a holistic approach therefore I provide parents also with lists of planned activities that they can complete at home, which will consolidate what has taken place in school. This support has been positively received by the schools, children and the families involved.

**Training:** I was a speaker at Middlesbrough practice week and delivered a presentation on Previously Looked After Children.

Delivered developmental trauma and attachment training at schools.

I am also due to deliver adoption awareness training during the next academic year to schools.

I attended the FASD conference network which furthered my knowledge and understanding in this area and how it can be used to support schools, children and families.

Hartlepool Virtual School Heads says:

The Education officer provides invaluable advice, guidance and support to children, their parents and schools in relation to any aspect of education. This input has been important in ensuring that schools are aware of the difficulties that children adopted may face in school, providing training and recommendations to support. She also provides parents with a significant assistance with any aspect of education,

attending meetings alongside parents, guiding them through complex education processes and being a point of contact for them.

### **Post Box**

The service has reviewed how post box contact, also known as letterbox is delivered in ATV.

The system is one which takes time to make sure all letters exchanged are properly recorded and checked, also that where letters aren't received according to agreed arrangements a follow up is made with parties to remind of the need for the contacts to be sent.

The service has made changes to the way in which these arrangements are recorded in the system, aimed at providing greater confidence in the flow and exchange of the information, with records kept in the system of all correspondence exchanged.

The way in which the arrangements are counted has also changed. Therefore, data provision is not a like for like comparison with previously reported data.

There have been 279 post box contact arrangements in the last year.

### **Birth Parent Support**

Adoption Tees Valley has commissioned Adoption Matters to provide birth parent support to all birth parents whose child is to be placed for adoption, from the point at which adoption is the plan for the child. There has been work across all 5 LA's, though Adoption Lead officers to promote this service.

Adoption Matters have called their Birth Parent Support project "Birth Ties" and have produced a leaflet for awareness raising with families and professionals working with them. Leaflets have been made available to IRO's and Adoption lead officers, and it is now agreed that referral for independent birth parent support will take place at the time the LA makes its sole plan for adoption.

In this year, 37 families were provided with independent birth parent support. The families came from all 5 Local Authorities across the Tees Valley and Darlington.

### **Therapeutic Parenting Courses**



ATV seeks to offer a regular option for therapeutic parenting training, which is funded through applications to the ASF. This is part of the Tier 2 offer, and all adopters are encouraged to attend once the child is placed with them.

In the year, one course was held in this period. The Nurturing Attachments training was held in November 2020 and was attended by 3 families. Although the service sought to generate applicants from the adopter community, for therapeutic parenting training, the numbers seeking to attend during covid have been lower than during pre-pandemic times.

Efforts were made to convene a Future Stars (a sensory parenting) programme, however, take up was again low, and this has been run in June 2021, outside of this time period.

One provider of non-violent resistance training specifically delivered the course to adoptive parents and special guardians, during the lockdown, and this was funded through covid funding for adoption and SG support.

### **Adopter Hub**

The service commissioned the Adopter Hub as a new on-line tool for adopters providing information, detailed in depth guidance, webinars and on line support. This was initially commissioned as part of covid funding and has provided a range of valuable information to adopters. It is now being used for support to adopters and prospective adopters, throughout assessment, preparation and post placement support. Around 170 users have registered.

### **Covid Funding**

Covid funding was made available and applied for via DfE, to provide additional supports to families in need.

The following services were provided through this additional, one off, funding source.

- Adopter Hub
- NVR (non-violent resistance training and support)
- Child Psychology Service
- Access to specialist support via Child Psychologist

### **Adoption Support – Development areas**

Post adoption support is one of the areas that has received most attention for development since regionalisation of adoption. One of the key government objectives was to improve adoption support to children and families, to improve long term outcomes for adopted children.

Measures of success in ATV include:

- Implementation of an adoption support service, with dedicated adoption support workers
- Collaborative work with virtual schools, and the partnership funding model for an Education Support Worker post.
- Regular opportunity for all adoptive parents to access therapeutic parenting training
- Significantly higher draw down on ASF funding and therapeutic service input.

ATV continues to work with the national forum of RAA's to learn and develop around improving support to adoptive families.

In ATV all families now have an adoption support plan, in line with recommendations from the National Adoption Barometer Report (Adoption UK, 2020). The support plan will detail the available support to families within ATV, at Tier 1,2, and 3.

All families have access to register for a 2 day therapeutic parenting course, and all families will receive one year adoption support from their assessing social worker, beyond the adoption order.

The service now requires that any requests for financial allowances or supports are made prior to matching panel, in order that families are clear about the financial support plans, prior to confirming they wish to progress the match. This does not mean families cannot request further assessments, post placement, but the service is much clearer that adoption allowances must have been applied for, and agreed by the relevant LA, prior to matching panel.

The biggest challenges for adoption support in ATV are:

- Waiting timescales for allocation for adoption support assessments
- Having a shared wider strategic partnership approach that means adoption support needs are understood and recognised by local authority, health and other statutory and third sector partners.

To address these issues, ATV is working to review allocation timescales for adoption support assessments.

ATV is also currently undertaking wider systems awareness of adoption support, across early help, and other LA Children's services teams.

### **19. Children's Voice in Adoption**

ATV has been working with a Doctorate Researcher, Helen Woolley, who is undertaking research into life stories for children. Through the research project, a group of teenage young people has been formed- the Junior Researchers, who are now working closely with the researcher, to share ideas

and thinking about what it means to be adopted, and where they feel organisations and individuals could be influenced to better understand adoption.

The Junior Researchers have already identified they believe that ATV would benefit from a Teenagers Worker, to support adopted young people with the variety of issues that they encounter as they grow up.

The service will be working with this group, to help progress the voice of the child, through influencing and targeted campaigns, but also on how the service can better develop to listen to the voice of adopted young people.

Prior to the national pandemic, ATV had started a children's group, to incorporate the child's voice into ATV, and to enable groups of children to receive some dedicated support to help them with understanding their identity as adopted children, alongside other adopted children.

The group has not progressed due to the pandemic. It is planned to resume this group as an when the service is able to commence working safely again in the building.

## **20. Non Agency Adoptions**

ATV is responsible for non- agency, step parent adoptions. This is the adoption by one birth parent and a partner to that person, who is not the natural birth parent, of a child. It is a full assessment, which will inform the Court on the granting of an adoption order, and the permanent dispensation of parental responsibility to the absent birth parent.

This service continues to present a resource and demand issue, whereby the service has the challenge of allocation of resources to step parent adoptions, from the overall team which must focus effort on the high number of children in our care, requiring permanence planning and adoption.

One worker has been allocated to manage step parent adoptions.

The following data applies to 2020-21

Enquiries	46
Initial Visits	9
Awaiting assessment	39
In assessment as of 31.3.21	10
Adoption Orders granted	8

## **21. 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.

- The Review of ATV is a wide reaching review, to assess progress of the RAA against the agreed objectives that were set out at the implementation of the RAA.
- Tracking systems to enable regular monitoring of children and adopter journeys; timeliness, and outcomes. Tracking systems have been further improved in this period. Tracking highlights barriers to be addressed, for example, delays in GP reports have been addressed with Commissioners in health; Designated Child in Our care Nurses, and via safeguarding GP's.
- Tracking of children enables focussed discussions with Adoption Lead officers quarterly, or as required, to ensure that individual children's plans are progressed in a timely way, and that thematic practice issues within Local Authorities are addressed.
- 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.
- Permanence Champions for each Local Authority ensure that children's referrals are progressed and tracked in a timely way. This means that ATV is able to family find for children at the right time, and with the right information about that child's plan.
- ATV attends one Local Authority (Middlesbrough) Permanence Monitoring Group, monthly, and the Gateway panel monthly, to assist with the improvement journey for that LA, and with quality and timeliness of practice for children.
- The balanced scorecard (BSC) has been reviewed and developed to better reflect nationally submitted data, via ASGLB returns from Local Authorities and Adoption Tees Valley. The BSC is 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. Quality of PARS is felt to be high, with some recommendations about consistency of practice across PAR's. Quality of CPR's is generally improved, although some remain poor. Minutes now detail feedback on quality of CPR in order that ADM's in Local Authorities are able to read the panel comments

around quality of the CPR. Panel has commented on improvements to the Adoption Support Plan, and APR.

- 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.
- 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. These will be collated into a thematic audit report for board to consider.
- Most staff, and all managers have had an annual appraisal.
- All Central List members and Panel Chairs have had an annual appraisal. Panel chairs now request that the agency collates themes from appraisal for the annual report. Panel training has been delivered to panel members arising from feedback from panel appraisals, which includes Disruptions; Roles and Operational processes for ATV; early Permanence.
- 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. There is an adopter survey currently live, seeking adopter views on the services ATV provides, which will be analysed as part of the ATV review.
- 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 commissioned a person with senior experience and understanding to update and write the policies and procedures for ATV. These are now well underway and will be completed by September 2021. Policies have been shared via Adoption Leads, to enable LA development of policy framework which is integrated with ATV, for adoption practice.

## **22. 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.

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

### **2020/21 Financial Year End Position**

At the end of the 2020/21 financial year, Adoption Tees Valley underspent by £24,000, which has been carried forward in the ATV reserve.

<b>Expenditure Heading</b>	<b>Budget 2020/21</b>	<b>Actual Outturn</b>	<b>Variance year end</b>
Employees	1,322,700	1,432,000	109,300
Running Costs	295,000	190,000	(105,000)
Support Service Costs	113,000	118,000	5,000
Interagency Fees	500,000	909,000	409,000
Income	(2,230,700)	(2,673,000)	(442,300)
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>(24,000)</b>	<b>(24,000)</b>

### **Interagency Fees**

Interagency fees are payable for those children matched with adopters who are not recruited by ATV. The budget for interagency fees is £500,000 and was overspent by £409,000. This led to additional contributions from each Local Authority, as follows:

	<b>Budgeted Contribution to Interagency Fees</b>	<b>Actual for 2020/21</b>	<b>Additional Contribution for 20/21</b>
<b>ATV Interagency 2020/21</b>	<b>500,000</b>	<b>909,000</b>	<b>409,000</b>
Darlington - 20.2%	101,000	184,000	83,000
Hartlepool - 14%	70,000	127,000	57,000
Middlesbrough - 27.2%	136,000	247,000	111,000
Redcar & Cleveland - 14%	70,000	127,000	57,000

Stockton -24.6%	123,000	224,000	101,000
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Overspend on employee costs is largely offset by underspend on running costs, leading to a net budget saving. This is being reinvested into services for post adoption support, and marketing.

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, and by the close of the year had increased adopter recruitment by 39% on the previous year.

Nevertheless, a similar number of children have been placed for adoption externally as the previous year. Data shows that adopters in Tees valley are being used for placements, with few being available for external placements. ATV adopters are on average being matched 100 days more quickly than the national average.

The service has progressed the Invest to Save model noted in the Biannual report. there is a small pool of casual assessors who are able to supplement assessment activity where demand is high, and pressures exist.

Furthermore, a greater focus on digital marketing is being progressed with a local Digital Marketing Company, with the aim of securing more market share of those wishing to adopt in this region.

The review of ATV will evaluate the “Value for Money” objective in ATV, and all LA Finance Teams are involved in the evaluation.

The ATV board has considered the Budget and Financial Report. the ATV Board continues to monitor actions to reduce external expenditure, however, children who are waiting to be adopted should not be further delayed due to an unwillingness to use external agencies, and in this region, this is agreed as paramount by the Board.

### **23. Development Areas for Adoption Tees Valley**

The service continues to review and develop, in the light of data analysis against national and regional benchmarking; through feedback; national and regional practice development in adoption; Panel Chairs feedback; Quality feedback. The Service will also be taking account of the Review of ATV, and any lessons or themes for improvement.

Key Developments within the 2021 Service Plan are:

- Strengthening the involvement and voice of adopted children in ATV.

- Strengthening the Preparation and Assessment of Adopters, to help them feel more informed and equipped to meet the needs of children, including those with additional needs. The Assessment to Support Pathway has already commenced, and is practitioner led.
- Continuing to address sufficiency of adopters, through improved marketing and recruitment. Also through the strategic work with VAA partners to provide regional sufficiency, where ATV does not have adopters available. This will help ATV to continue to work at reducing the waiting time for all children who require permanence via adoption
- Taking the Early permanence strategy to “Phase 2”, building on the learning and experience during “Phase 1”, especially with respect to supporting adopters, and professionals; working more closely with Fostering Services; working across more multi agency partners including health; workforce development.
- Strengthening the partnership working with children's services partners, Early Help, and other strategic partners, to extend and improve access to support when and where it is needed, at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Continuing to address the model for life story work, to ensure this is done in a more timely way. This will be informed by the PhD research currently underway, which in turn is informed by Junior Researchers.
- Continuing to address timescales for adoption support assessments. Also, extending the options for Tier 1 and Tier 2 support, include peer to peer support, to help adopters and children.
- Taking forward actions from Panel Chairs report, to continue to work at smooth and streamlined operation of panel.
- Working together with the 5 LA partners, to continuously improve permanence planning, and quality of CPR's, to deliver timely and well matched placements for children.