

# Adoption Tees Valley

## Annual Report 2023-2024



ATV – a community of adoption

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## **1. Executive Summary**

Adoption Tees Valley has continued to thrive and develop as a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), with this year seeing a greater degree of pan regional partnership working with our neighbouring North East RAA's- Adopt Coast to Coast and Adopt North East. We have also progressed the partnership with the North East Integrated Care Board (ICB) through our innovative work together in developing the Multi Disciplinary Adoption Support Service- MDASS. Regional partnership working has enabled the RAA to draw funding from Adoption England for development and positive impact, aligned to the objectives in the National Adoption Strategy. Adoption England has recently published its own strategic plan for the forthcoming 3 years, and ATV, overseen by the Board, has continued to develop in line with national strategic priorities.

### 1.1 Adoption Nationally

Nationally, the numbers of children being placed for adoption and numbers adopted has been falling, although for the year of 2023-24 there has been a small upturn. The numbers of adopters recruited has reduced, and there is some concerns around the gap growing between the numbers of children requiring adoption, and numbers of available families to adopt. We know nationally that adoption provides a stable and secure childhood for many children, however, there is an increasing awareness that adopted children have many complex long-term emotional, social, learning and health needs arising from early trauma, neglect, and harm. Their needs must be understood in the context of early care experience, and their adoptive parents need support to meet these needs and provide nurturing family life. Adoptive parents, and young people themselves, tell us they need services provide continuing support, available as and when needed throughout childhood and into adulthood.

### 1.2 Culture Change in Adoption

So, what is the future of adoption, and what will adoption look like for children and their families in years to come? Adoption England (AE) – the national collaboration of Regional Adoption Agencies, has implemented a programme of culture change in adoption- a long-term objective to change thinking and practice, underpinned by social and adoptee drivers for change. Key to the culture change agenda is to increase the understanding of the importance of maintaining significant relationships in adoption, for adopted people and their birth families.

The President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, made a significant speech on this matter at the POTATO (Parents of Traumatized Adolescents and Teenagers Organisation) conference in May 2024 referencing the research work of the University of East Anglia (UEA), around the importance of maintaining lifelong links for adopted children. We recognise the continued importance of the need to remain open to birth family contact, and investing our professional care, effort and resource into maintaining those relationships, whether directly, or indirectly. Through the research undertaken by UEA, and the Adoption Barometer (Adoption UK) we know that for adopted adults and young people there is a huge importance in understanding their families of origin, reasons for being adopted, and maintaining those lifelong links. ATV has engaged with the national programme and through discussion with the Board and partners, will be developing ethos and culture which promotes a greater understanding and opportunity for maintaining significant relationships.

### 1.3 Early Permanence

Early permanence in adoption continues to be a key priority nationally, and for the region and ATV has continued to focus on early work with the 5 partner Local Authorities, to consider early permanence planning, pre-birth and pre-care in some instances. There remain challenges to creating the opportunity for more children to access an early permanence placement, however, there is good evidence over this year of significant strengthening of practice and understanding. ATV believes that early permanence is aligned to culture change in adoption, whereby early contact between carers who may go on to adopt, and the child's birth family takes place during the fostering period. We know this builds relationships between adoptive parents, and birth relatives, which has importance for potential future contact, and identity needs. Unfortunately, ATV has continued to have lower numbers than hoped for of carers who will undertake EP, however, we know that where EP is planned, there is a significant strength of practice, with a stronger preparation course, more information and high-quality support for carers undertaking this route. ATV is offering a dedicated Early Permanence Support Group, and it is well received and well attended by all EP carers. Through the pan regional funded Concurrency Project, now in its second year, we have worked more closely with the regional fostering services, to embed a shared understanding of the role of EP, and the roles of professionals supporting these placements.

#### 1.4 Voice and Influence

During this period, we are proud to have strengthened the mechanisms by which young people and adopters can influence the direction of the RAA, and have their voice heard. Young, adopted people have a strengthened opportunity to meet with other adopted children, through the monthly “Youthy” group, which is now held in a local youth club. There is also a dedicated Voice and Influence group, Adoptbats, which is focused on young people having a say about what its like to be adopted, and how they think the system should change to improve the lives and experience of adopted young people.

Adoptbats are currently making a film about what its like to be adopted, supported by Blue Cabin, a local creative therapy charity.

#### 1.5 Multi-Disciplinary Support to adopted children and families- MDASS

During this period Adoption Tees Valley has worked closely with Adopt North East, Adopt Coast to Coast and the NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) to develop a multi-disciplinary adoption support service, across the NE region. This is a funded project and is 1 year into the funding period of 2 years. This project sits under the national strategy to strengthen support to adopted children and their families. The new MDASS project is now staffed with a Service Manager, Psychologist, Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist, and 3 social work consultants. The Service Manager has begun to work with the team to develop the service specification, which will be offering a consultancy and therapeutic service to adopted families, and professionals across the region working with them. The model of support is Dyadic Developmental Psychology (DDP) which focusses on attachment, for children who have had early experience of trauma, neglect and harm. It is planned that service delivery will start from the summer of 2024, and the longer-term plan for sustainability is to draw funding from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF).

The aim of MDASS will be to significantly strengthen the support to families, from a multi-disciplinary therapeutic perspective, providing access to psychological consultation, assessment and intervention, for children with multiple and complex needs. This service will be aimed at getting more quickly to delivery of a therapeutic plan which will help children. It will aim to reduce the pressures of children's needs, improve quality of family life and outcomes, and prevent family breakdown.

## 1.6 The work of ATV

Recruitment of prospective adopters has been a challenge for the agency over this year, a challenge also for many other regional and national RAA's. It is thought that the cost-of-living crisis, alongside the effects of the pandemic seeing a rise in adult mental ill health and increasing awareness of the complex needs of adopted children has impacted on the numbers of people wanting to consider adoption. We want to continue to show the public that ATV, and partners are there to support children and families in the short and longer term.

The numbers of children placed has been largely stable over this past year and is comparable with the previous year. However, we have seen a significant rise in the number of children who have had disruptions and have left placement, most of whom have had a change in plan for permanency. These disruptions are uncharacteristic of the pattern for children placed through ATV and have been considered at every level, including during a Board development session, to learn from the disruption meetings and reports. This matter will be considered in the chapter relating to children's placements, needs and outcomes.

During this year, ATV has restructured to strengthen management of the core areas of the adoption service, and to strengthen leadership for the future of ATV. This means that each of the areas of recruitment, matching and placements, and adoption support are led by a team manager, and the operational activity is overseen by a Deputy Service Manager.

## **2. Governance**

Adoption Tees Valley is overseen by the Board of Directors, which is comprised of Directors, or Assistant Directors of the 5 Local Authorities; an adoptive parent; a Virtual School Head. The ATV Service Manager attends all Board meetings. The ATV Board provide strategic direction, oversee finance and overall governance of the RAA.

Each LA Council oversees the work of the RAA through presentation of the Annual and Bi Annual reports at Scrutiny, and/or Corporate Parenting Boards, and in some cases, representation of elected members on the ATV Panel.

### 3. Key Performance Indicators for the period 1.4.23-31.3.24

| Key Indicator                                     | ATV 2022-23 | ATV 2023-24 | Current c/w previous | National Govt Target where applicable |
|---|-------------|-------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Adopter Approvals                                 | 55          | 38          | Dec 31%              | N/A                                   |
| Children referred to ATV                          | 223         | 138         | Dec 38%              | N/A                                   |
| Children with ADM -BID (Best interests' decision) | 100         | 87          | Dec 13%              | N/A                                   |
| PO  | 87          | 79          | Dec 9%               | N/A                                   |
| Matches   | 81          | 75          | Dec 7%               |                                       |
| Placed  | 76          | 78          | Inc 2 %              | N/A                                   |
| Early Permanence                                  | 11          | 8           | Dec 27%              |                                       |
| Adoption Orders                                   | 84          | 76          | Dec 10%              | N/A                                   |
| Disruptions – pre order                           | 1           | 12          |                      | N/A                                   |
| Timescale – A2 (PO to match)                      | 146 days    | 130 days    | Improved             | 121 days                              |
| Timescale A10 – BLA-Moved in with Adopters        | 411         | 392 days    | Improved             | 421 days                              |

The above data will be referred to in each section, to provide a base line for discussion and review of the year's performance.

Where applicable, data for each Local Authority will be detailed within the report.

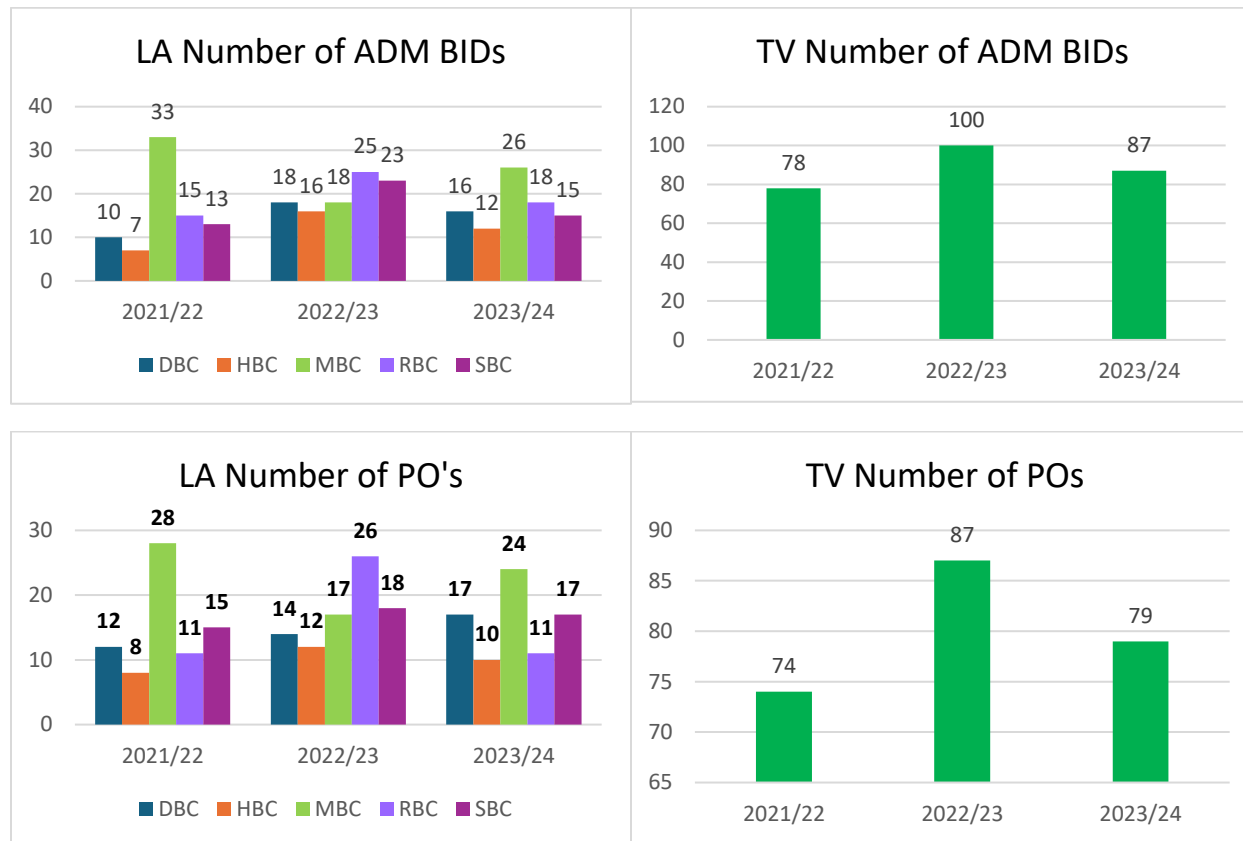
### 4. Children Referred, Permanence Planning, Matching and Placements

#### 4.1 ATV and Local Authority Data

The numbers of children referred to ATV has significantly decreased within this period, compared with previous years. We don't know why this is, as numbers of children with a LA decision on a plan for adoption and Placement Orders granted has reduced, but not by the same level as referrals. The LA's may be improving the earlier planning, and referring children who are more likely to go on to an adoption plan.

In the previous year the conversion from referral to ADM was 45%, while in this year the conversion rate was 63%. This means the children referred are more likely to go on to have an adoption plan.

The numbers of children where the Local Authority has made a Best Interests plan of adoption (ADM BID) has decreased by 13% to 87, and the numbers of children who have gone on to Placement Order (PO) is 79, a decrease of 9% on the previous year.



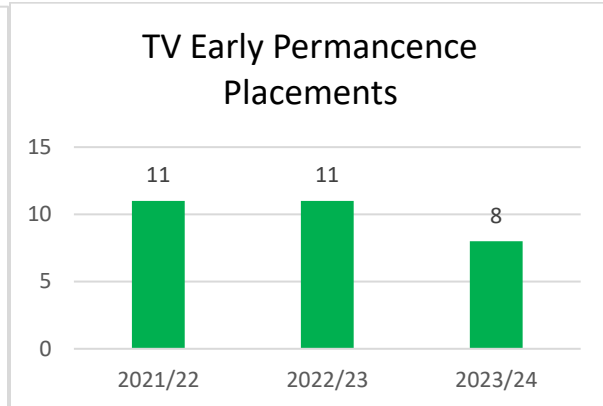
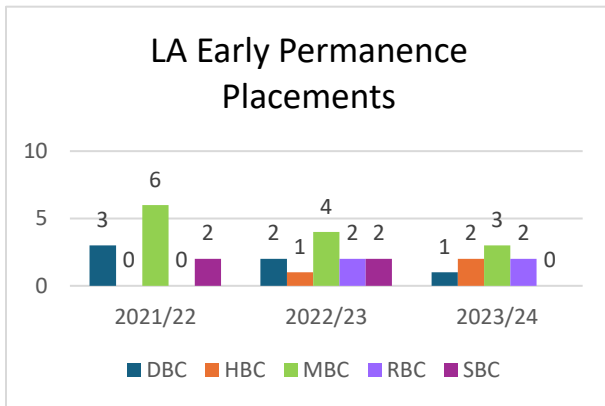
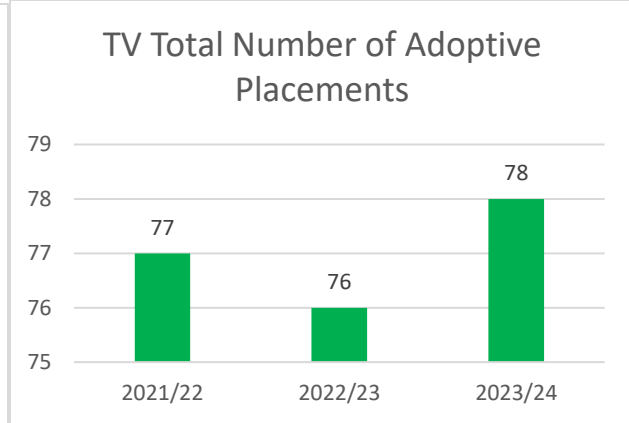
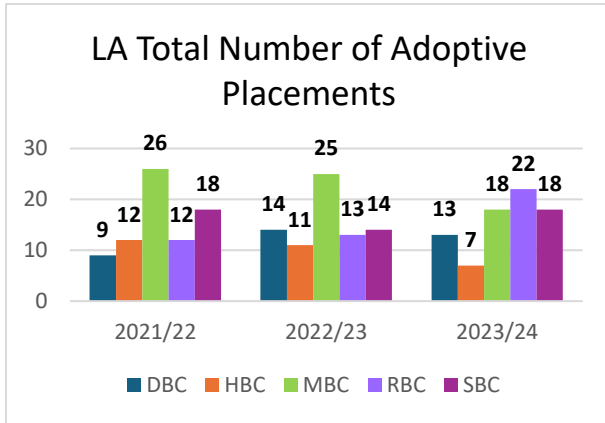
For individual Local Authorities, Middlesbrough has returned to the numbers of ADM's and PO's that is more consistent with previous years after a dip in adoption plans last year.

Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton have reduced the numbers of ADM's compared with the previous year, and Redcar and Cleveland had a significant drop in Placement Orders, from 26, to 11.

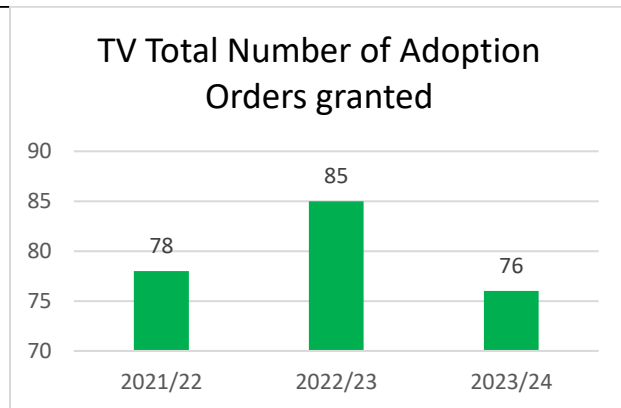
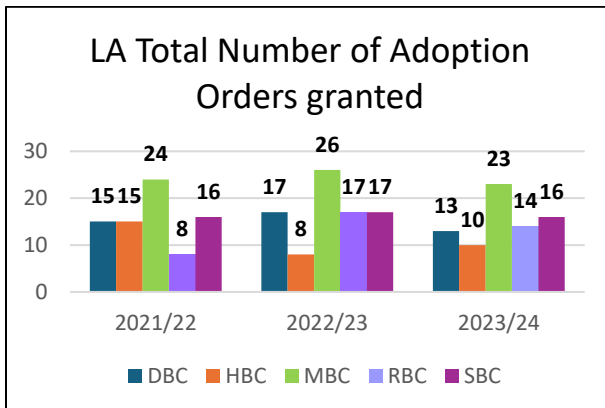
Hartlepool is seeing a year on year rise in the numbers of children with PO.

The number of children placed for adoption has remained consistent, while placements through early permanence have dropped by 27% (3) since last year.





The numbers of adoption orders have decreased by 10% compared with the previous year.



#### 4.2 Disrupted Placements prior to the Adoption Order

The biggest area of concern over this period has been the numbers of disruptions with 12 children having had a disruption compared with just 1 in the previous year.

In all cases an independently chaired disruption meeting has been convened to understand the reasons why a placement didn't continue as was planned.

Some notable factors have emerged during this analysis, case by case, enabling themes to be considered and analysed.

- All but one child were in a sibling group.
- All the sibling groups included a child over age 7 at the time of placement.
- All but 1 of the children were placed with external adopters, from VAA's or another RAA/LA.
- All but one of the children were placed some distance from the home area.

Other factors associated with assessment of children's needs, care planning, transitions, adopter assessment and contingency planning have emerged. There has been significant reflection on learning from the disruption meetings including with partner LA's at Board, and within ATV. New measures have been put in place to address factors identified from learning and review. However, it is recognised that for older children, there are some inherent risks that moving to a new family, especially at some distance may not work out as planned.

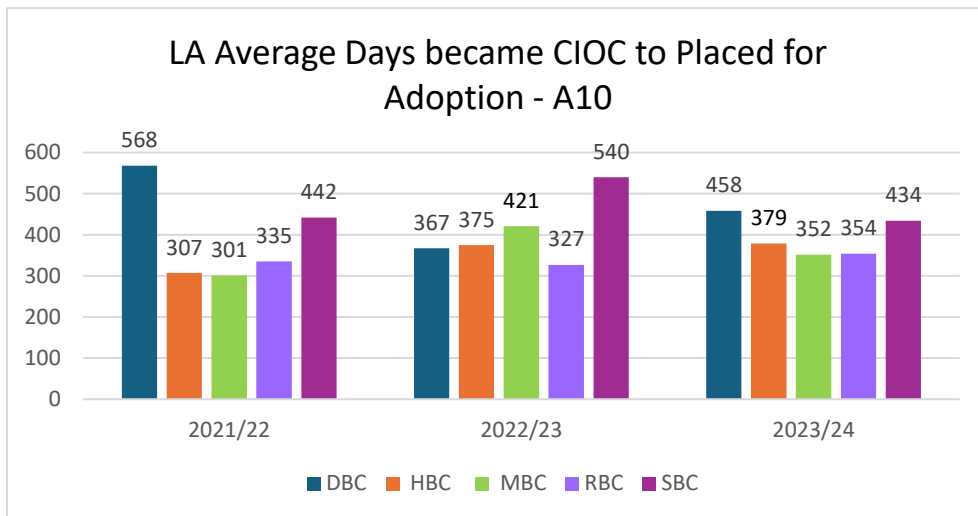
The ATV Board has agreed that increased access to assessment of children's therapeutic needs is required when planning for adoption, and it is agreed that such specialist assessments will be resourced in more cases, and especially for older children and sibling placements.

#### 4.3 Timescales for children for matching and moving in with their adoptive family

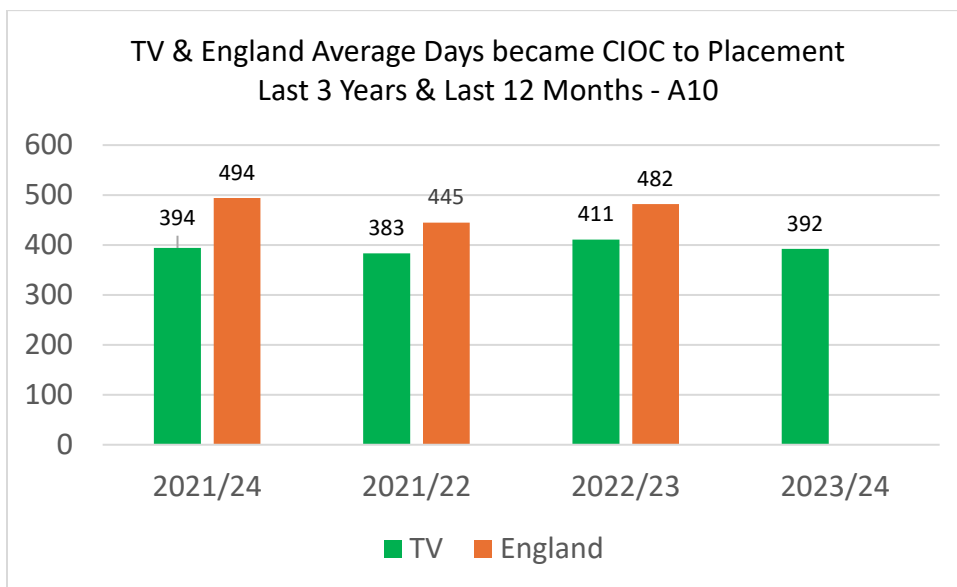
Timeliness of adoption for children has improved compared with the previous year, and ATV continues to find families and progress them to match and placement in good time, on average.

### A10- became Child in Our care, to Moving in with Adopter

In adoption we focus most significantly on the time between the child becoming a child in our care and moving in with adoptive parents. This is the A10 timescale, and the government sets 421 days as its target.



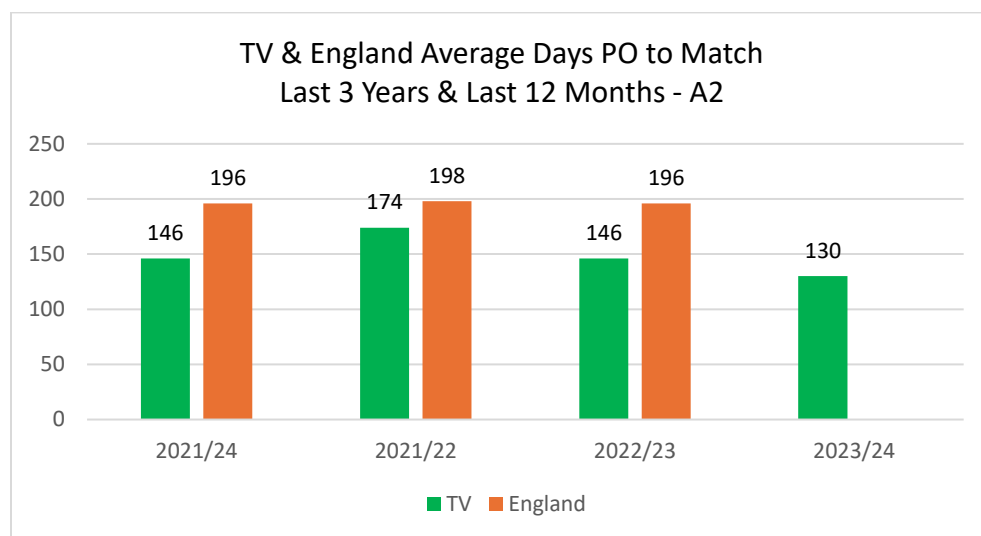
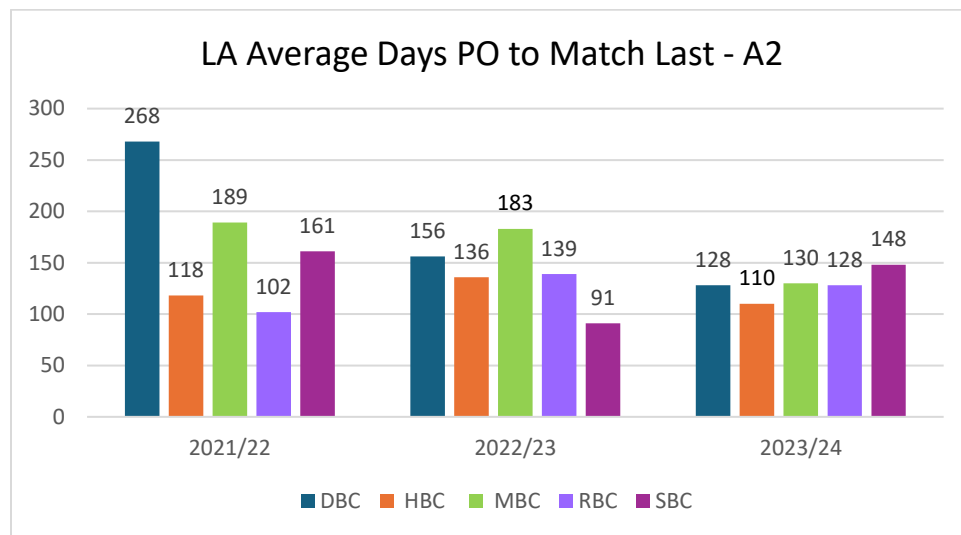
(Data based on children who have been adopted in this year).



ATV continues to perform well against national comparisons and has improved this year. There is an embedded process for early referral of children, and early consideration of potential families who may be linked to the child, in advance of the Placement Order being granted. Its important therefore to monitor the numbers of referrals to ensure that all children are considered at an early stage, even where adoption does not go on to be the final plan.

## A2- Placement Order to Match

ATV also measures the time between Placement Order (PO) and matching a child for adoption, this being the time beyond Court decision to award a PO to confirming the match with a family. This is the A2 figure, and the government target timescale is 121 days.



In Tees Valley this figure has reduced over the previous year on average, but remains a little over the government target, although has been better than England average for RAA's.

There is variation in the Local Authority performance around timescale over this year, and caution should be noted in that numbers in adoption are relatively small, therefore small changes in numbers can affect averages.

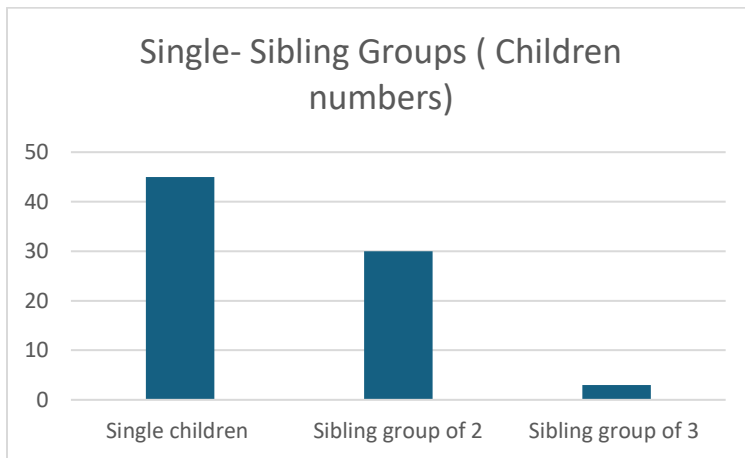
For children adopted in Middlesbrough and Stockton this year, the timeliness of becoming a child in our care to move in with adopters has reduced considerably, while it has increased for Darlington children.

For children from Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland, timeliness from Placement Order to match has reduced in this year, while it has increased for Stockton children.

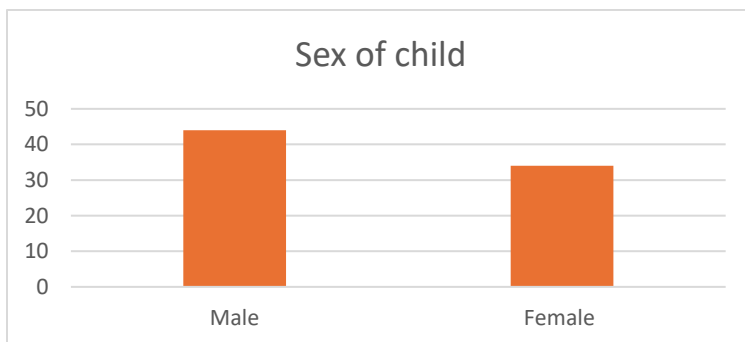
The data is based on the timescales for children who have been adopted in the year.

#### 4.4 Needs of Children Placed and Children Waiting with Placement Order

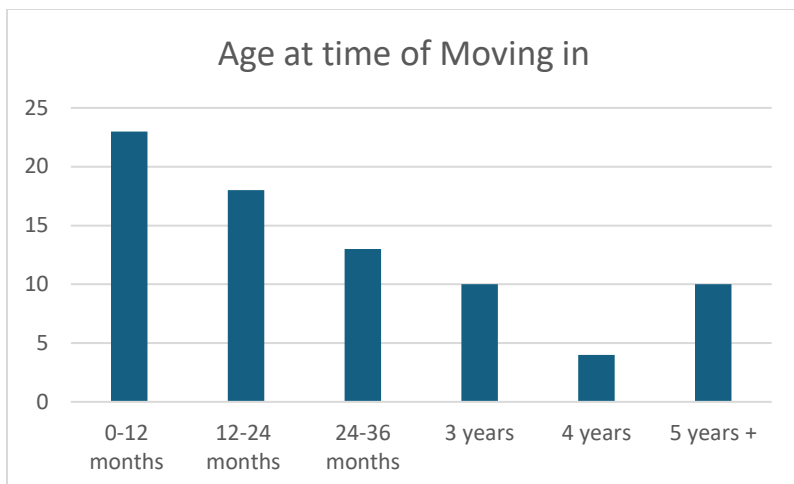
##### Children Placed



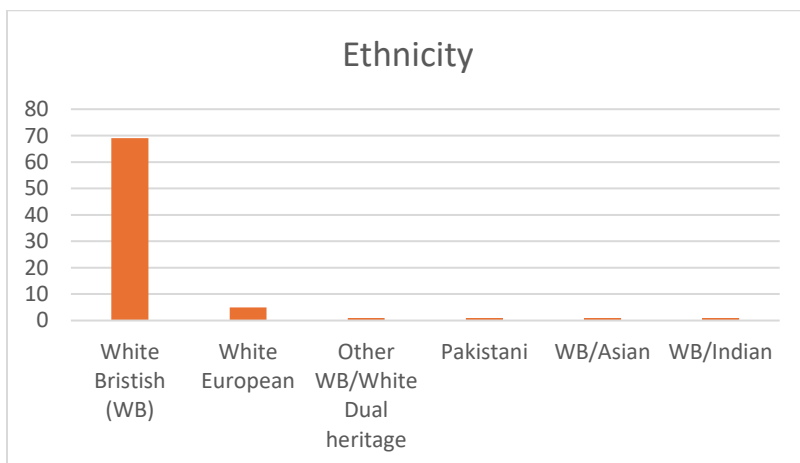
58% of children placed were single children, and 42% of children were in a sibling group, with one sibling group of 3 having been placed together.



56% of children placed were male, and 44% female.



While it continues to be the case that most children placed for adoption are aged under 1 year (29%), and aged 1-2 years (23%) the data shows that in this year 18% of all children were over 4 years, and 13% of the children were over 5 years. ATV has therefore been seeking to find suitable families for a high number of children who are considered harder to match due to age, and factoring in the older children in sibling groups, shows how there are greater risks of disruption, or of not finding suitable families.



The significant majority (88%) of children placed within this year have been of White British background. There were 5 children of White European background, and 4 children of Asian ethnicity, with 3 of these being dual heritage.

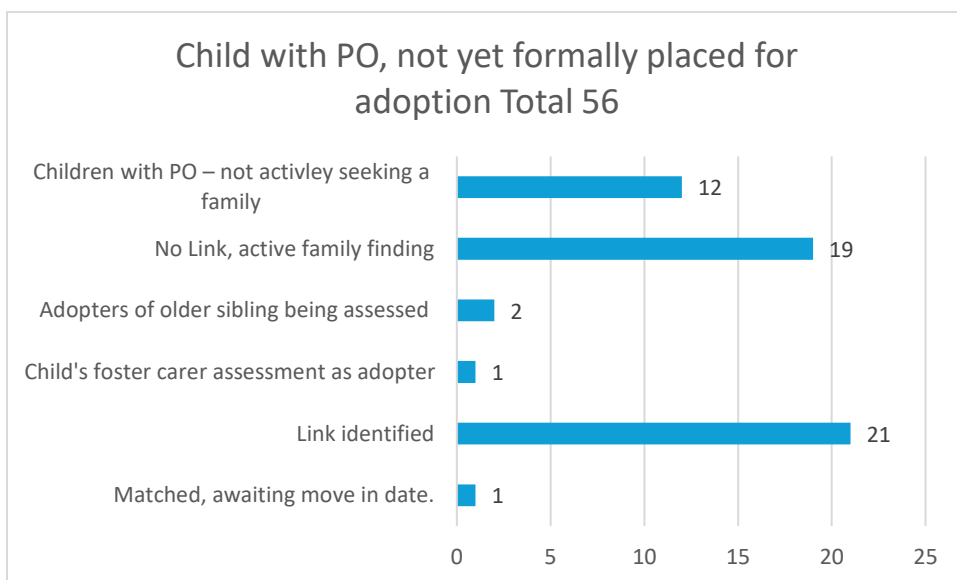
Of the children placed, 13 were considered to have significant emotional/health/learning or neurodivergent needs.

Children waiting with a Placement Order, not yet placed as of 31.3.24.

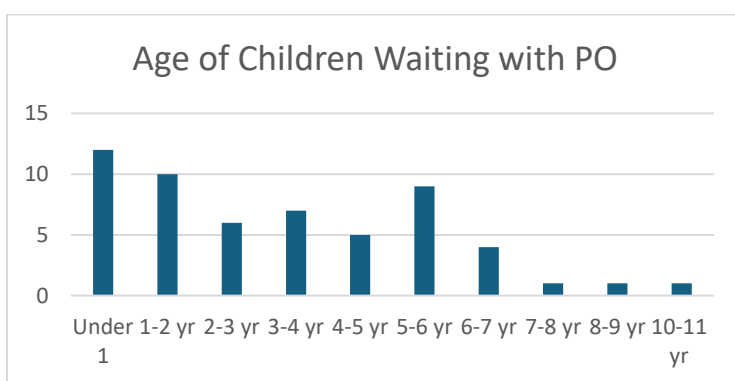
There were 56 children with a Placement Order not yet formally placed for adoption on 31.3.24.

25 had active plans progressing to be adopted by an identified linked family, 19 had no link at that time, and a further 12 were children for whom the Local Authority had ceased active family finding, including children who had had a disruption.

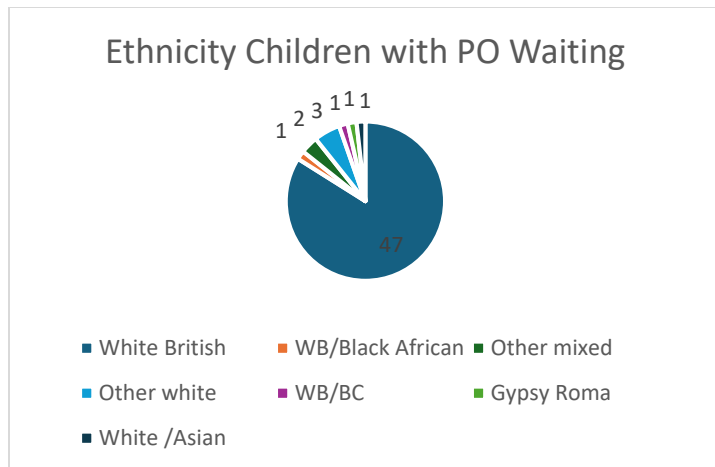
Thus, of the 56 children with a PO, not placed, 19 were children for whom there was active family finding.



Needs of children with a PO, not placed



- Single children- 27
- Sibling groups of 2 children – 10 groups, 20 children
- Sibling groups of 3 children – 3 groups, 9 children



22 children waiting were identified as having additional complex needs, including emotional, attachment, behavioural, and neurodivergency needs.

#### 4.5 Summary of the priority needs for children requiring adoption in Tees Valley

In summary, ATV is currently identifying a high number of children who have a plan of adoption, and with a Placement Order who:

- Are in sibling groups
- Are older children, aged 4 +
- Have additional complex needs associated with early health ( FASD), trauma, attachment difficulties, and neurodivergent conditions.

Many of the older children have experience of living in harmful environments, with poor care, and have moved around the foster care system, prior to coming for a plan of adoption.

The implications for strategic planning, and assessment of these children's needs will be part of the forward planning priorities, and vision for ATV moving forward.

#### 4.6 Finding Families for Tees Valley Children

The priority for seeking suitable families for Tees Valley children is internally approved ATV adopters.

Where it is clear no suitable family is available for a child with a progressing adoption plan, ATV uses the strong links established with regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies to seek a placement. The agency also seeks placement with other RAA's in the region.



Children are placed on Linkmaker, the data system for sharing details nationally of children needing families, and of approved adoptive families. Through Linkmaker families are identified across England who wish to express and interest in children waiting.

ATV has promoted children for adoption through Activity Days, funded nationally, and Activity Days held within the RAA's own centre.

#### 4.7 Internal – External Placements

| Year    | Internal ATV | External | Total |
|---------|--------------|----------|-------|
| 2021-22 | 58 (75%)     | 19 (25%) | 77    |
| 2022-23 | 52 (67%)     | 25 (33%) | 77    |
| 2023-24 | 51 (65%)     | 27 (35%) | 78    |

There has been an increased reliance on external VAA's for ATV placements over this year. This is due to lower numbers of approvals, and ATV adopters being unwilling to consider older children and older children in sibling groups.

Notably in this year, more children have gone to VAA's outside of the North East region, with 6 regional VAA placements, and 12 wider external VAA placements.

21 children have been linked through Linkmaker; 1 through an Activity Day; and 4 through local VAA meetings.

### 5. Recruiting, Preparing and Approving Adopters

Recruitment of adopters has been challenging in this period, for reasons outlined in the Executive Summary.

Additionally, there have been some challenges with timescales for assessment, with stage 1 timescales having met significant delays in some cases due to a small number of factors:

- Delays associated with medical checks. There have been some delays in awaiting the Medical Advisor summary, and in turn the MA's awaiting GP reports. Where prospective adopters (PA) complex health needs, these require further understanding by the MA in stage 1, and this can take time, as the PA consultant is required to provide their opinion.

To address delays, ATV has now worked with the ICB to introduce an additional MA, who will have responsibility for all adult health reports and working with regional GP's.

- Delays associated with worker absence or change of worker.

|   | Total 2022-23 | Total 2023-24 | Current c/w previous | England 2023-24 where applicable |
|---|---------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Initial contacts/enquiries</b>                     | 309           | 232           | Dec 25%              |                                  |
| <b>Initial Visits to prospective Adopters</b>         | 106           | 92            | Dec 13%              |                                  |
| <b>Stage 1 Starts</b>                                 | 58            | 60            | Inc 3%               |                                  |
| <b>Stage 2 Starts</b>                                 | 51            | 50            | Dec 2%               |                                  |
| <b>Adopter Approvals</b>                              | 55            | 38            | Dec 31%              |                                  |
| <b>Carers approved who can do early permanence</b>    | 10            | 6             | Reduced              |                                  |
| <b>Numbers in assessment at the end of the period</b> | 38            | 41            | Inc 8%               |                                  |
| <b>Numbers waiting to be matched at end of period</b> | 29            | 22            | Dec 24%              |                                  |
| <b>Timescale S1 (Govt target 60 days)</b>             |               | 101           | Improved             | 134                              |
| <b>Timescale S2 (Govt target 121 days)</b>            | 156           | 139           | Improved             | 150                              |

The key challenge is achieving adoptive parents in this region for the needs of children who require adoption. The high numbers of children who have had a disruption to placements, almost all of which were out of area, indicates that we need to find more people in this region who can offer permanence via adoption to our children.

During this year there has been an adjustment to the settling in allowance offered to the prospective adopters of siblings, whereby all the budget is now

profiled to adopters who will take siblings, with a payment of £3000 to adopters internally approved, who adopt siblings. This in recognition of the very real financial pressures of taking on more than one child at the same time. We need to consider more active profiling of this allowance, and additional supports available to adoptive parents, to encourage more people to feel confident to take the children we need to find families for.

The numbers of prospective adopters who want to do early permanence has reduced in this year which is a downturn from the previous year, and goes against the national trend, which is an increase.

There is a Pan Regional Project for early permanence, which ATV are actively involved in. The reflections from the project consultant, based on analysis of the ATV data is that ATV is operating with a threshold for a concurrency project- a greater emphasis on children returning home, which is leading to more families dropping out of the EP route. This feedback has also been received from adopter feedback. To address this, ATV are refocusing on the balance between preparing carers for the potential for a child to return home, with a realistic picture that most who are placed through EP go on to be adopted.

## **6. Early Permanence**

### **6.1 Support to Early Permanence carers.**

The following supports are available to early permanence carers:

- Dedicated adoption social worker throughout the process
- Training and preparation for early permanence- a 2 day course
- Social Worker led EP support group- STEP
- Additional training and preparation around the fostering role.
- Peer buddy system
- Allocated supervising social worker from the Fostering Service
- Fostering allowance during the fostering period

The Adopter Survey completed in April 2024 gave positive views from adopters who had undertaken early permanence, especially in relation to the support received for EP carers (average 4.8/5). The survey provided feedback that the training is very focused on preparing carers for a child returning home, and as detailed above, the balance of preparation is being reviewed.

Carers feel clear about their fostering role, and the expectations of them during this period, and feel the benefits are an earlier relationship with the child.

## 6.2 EP Children's Care Plan Outcomes

In this period, all 8 children placed under early permanence have continued with an adoption plan, with no children having been reunified with parents.

## 6.3 Working in Partnership with LAs and other agencies

Following national learning, ATV has worked with the 5 LA's to implement the practice of an ATV worker attending all Legal Gateway meetings. This means early permanence is discussed before the LA initiates care proceedings. At the time of this report, this practice is embedded in 2 of the 5 LA's- Stockton and Middlesbrough. We are now beginning to see effectiveness in this practice, with more early referrals of children and consideration of EP more widely.

We know we need to influence wider stakeholders to understand and feel confident in planning for early permanence, including understanding it is not a plan of adoption until the PO is granted, and that EP carers are well prepared for this.

There will be a pan regional conference in October 2024, aimed at wider stakeholders in LA's, CAFCASS and the Judiciary to promote a shared understanding of EP.

There is a decision to plan an Adoption Subcommittee of the Local Family Justice Board, to ensure wider stakeholder engagement with early permanence.

## **7. Adoption Support**

Adoption Tees Valley continues to offer a 3 tier Adoption Support Offer.

| <b>Tier 1</b> | <b>Universal</b>  |
|---------------|---|
|               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allocated Social Worker until 12 months post adoption order</li><li>• Adoption Support Plan in all cases</li><li>• Young People's Group, exclusively for adopted children within a local youth club venue (age 7-16)</li><li>• Play and Stay group weekly in ATV, providing support and relationships for adoptive parents and younger children (age up to 5)</li><li>• Access to CATCH</li><li>• Loud and Clear music group, run by the Sage within ATV</li><li>• Family and Friends Network training</li><li>• Parties and activity days within ATV</li></ul> |

|   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support to Keep In Touch (formally Letterbox) – for children, birth parents, and adoptive parents.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Tier 2 Targeted</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Therapeutic parenting support training</li> <li>• Future Stars</li> <li>• Nurturing Attachments</li> <li>• Non-Violent Resistance</li> <li>• Education Support from ATV Education Support Worker</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Tier 3 Therapy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Therapeutic services provided commissioned services, and funded through the Adoption Support Fund</li> <li>• Specialist assessment, where needed, through commissioned services</li> <li>• Allocated social worker, for assessment of adoption support needs, and development of an adoption support plan to meet needs.</li> </ul> |

### 7.1 Assessment of Adoption Support Needs

ATV has implemented a different process for beginning the assessment of adoption support needs when this is requested by an adoptive parent. There is now an early duty response and a booked telephone session to commence the assessment.

In this period there were 127 assessments of adoption support needs completed, compared with 126 in 2022-23.

The average timescale from enquiry to allocation to a social worker was 7 days.

The number of applications to the Adoption Support Fund was 267. In many cases the applications are repeated applications and have not had a new assessment of adoption support needs. In 2022-23 this was 289.

The value of applications submitted was £943,112.35, compared with £1,060,650 in the previous year.

68 Adoptive parents completed the survey around satisfaction of timeliness of adoption support, and the average rating was 3.99 out of 5.

The overall satisfaction with adoption support provided was 4.12 out of 5

It's been brilliant to know we have support if we need it

They have explained all the processes and kept me informed throughout, they have provided good training opportunities and tailored them for my circumstances. They have been a great support through an emotional time. I feel reassured and have no doubts that they will continue to support us after the adoption order has been granted.

My child is benefiting from Theraplay and she is processing information well. Having sessions myself with the same therapist is helping me to help my child and to teach school good therapeutic parenting strategies to help my child. whilst also gaining confidence in the way that I am doing things and handling behaviours at home.

While there were many positive examples of how adoption support assessments have helped children and families, we know some families still feel they wait too long. We aim to increase early access to a social worker where needed and reduce waiting times. We will do this by reviewing the case allocation system and introducing new staff to support Adoption Support Fund applications, giving our social workers more time to undertake face to face work with children and families.

We are introducing a new set of national measures through our case management system to help us improve the quality of data and management oversight of cases, and of timeliness of completion of assessments.

## 7.2 Stay and Play

The group continues to run weekly within ATV and is well attended by adoptive parents and children in the pre school years. The groups tend to be attended while parents are on adoption leave.

On average 8 parents and their children attend the Play and Stay group each week.

19 families have accessed this support group over the year.

The average satisfaction with Stay and Play in the Adopter Survey was 4.71 out of 5.

To be with other adopters is an amazing source of support and advice.

I love attending group, I feel a connection with all the parents and it's great to discuss my thoughts and get others advice.

We will continue to run our weekly Stay and Play sessions, which we know is great source of peer support, and early help for families.

### 7.3 Education Support

Education Support is funded via the partnership of the Virtual Schools within the 5 Local Authorities of ATV and continues to be a unique offer within Tees Valley, when considered across the national adoption system. The education support offered is through advice and information, rather than direct classroom support to children, which is provided through the education plan for the child, where needed. The Education Support worker is trained in the Thrive Approach, which is a developmental and trauma sensitive approach and model, also used within education and development settings within this region. The Thrive approach helps to identify gaps in the child's development due to early life experiences and uses games and activities to start helping to address those needs. It is a holistic approach so that schools and parents can deliver the games and implement a consistent approach.

The ESW is also delivering a course on attachment for schools, as part of the Local Authorities and Schools Qualification for teachers. The course is rooted in attachment awareness and trauma informed practice, with an aim of helping education staff to attend to the attachment systems of children, to better help them to settle and to learn.

The course utilises Virtual Reality headsets to help participants engage experientially with the child's lived experience.

The dedicated education support worker within ATV has this year worked with 118 children. This is an increase of 10 children on the previous year, and 26 more than in 2022-23.

The breakdown by Local Authority is set out below.

|            |           |            |           |            |           |                  |           |            |           |
|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| <b>DBC</b> | <b>23</b> | <b>HBC</b> | <b>14</b> | <b>MBC</b> | <b>18</b> | <b>R&amp;CBC</b> | <b>24</b> | <b>SBC</b> | <b>38</b> |
|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|

In the adopter survey 43 families said they were aware of the education support service, 18 said they weren't aware, and 10 were not sure.

Of those who had used the service, the satisfaction with the education support service was 4.67 out of 5

She (ESW) has attended meetings at school and provided school with Thrive training

Attended meetings with school and I to support my son in getting the right help in school to meet his needs.

School staff have also fed back, showing the beneficial impact of the course for teaching staff ...

It was really interesting training, and I loved the VR headsets, as it created a real-life feeling for what some children experience in their everyday life. I still think about it to this day., and how I can adapt my own approaches to fully support our children.

The training yesterday was very eye opening for me. I did the training in my teacher training year with RCTTP and it was hard to relate to the training as much as I couldn't really apply it to my class as I didn't have one at the time. Now having my own class and redoing the training it helped me identify children who could be vulnerable or need additional support.

#### 7.4 Pan Regional Commissioning Project – Innovation in Adoption Support

ATV is working with the wider pan regional RAA's on a commissioning project to innovate in adoption support services. This project is managed alongside the MDASS Project and has input from the North Tyneside lead Commissioning Manager in Children's Services. The vision is that all 3 NE based RAA's will use the experience and guidance of the commissioning project to develop a new adoption support offer across the 3 RAA's, which will serve to better unify the supports available to all North East based adoptive families, and will meet current gaps in service delivery.

This funded project is in its early days, however, a needs analysis exercise has taken place, and all adoption staff across the 3 RAA's have been surveyed for their views on where are the gaps, and what the barriers are.



## 7.5 Birth Parent Support and Access to Records

ATV has commenced a new contract for these 2 elements of adoption support, following a re-tendering process, supported by Stockton BC Procurement team.

The contract was awarded to Arc Adoption NE, having previously been delivered by Adoption Matters. Arc Adoption NE provided best value in tendering and offer significant expertise in the specialist adoption arena.

The contract commenced 1.4.23 and is a 2 year contract.

### *Birth Parent Support*

Arc Adoption NE provide the statutory independent birth parent support through counselling advice and information, from the time at which adoption is the local Authority plan for the child. This service is complemented by ATV who can offer support to birth parents, in setting up Keep In Touch arrangements, and with ongoing Keep In Touch.

There were 94 new birth parents referred to the service within this period.

At the yearend, 74 birth parents were "active" to the service, i.e. actively engaged with receiving a service from Arc Adoption NE in respect of support around their child's adoption.

### *Access to Adoption Records*

Arc Adoption provide the statutory service to adult adoptees and their birth relatives in respect of accessing birth records around adoption. The service requires sensitive and experienced counselling, redaction of records as required, and provision of a report for the adult adoptees. The service interfaces with each of the 5 Local Authorities in the partnership, who continue to hold children's adoption records.

55 individuals accessed their birth records in this period, of which 48 were pre-commencement and 7 were post commencement. This refers to the legislation governing access at the time of the adoption, which changed in December 2005, to increase rights and access to information for any adopted person over the age of 18.

Overall, Arc Adoption NE have worked closely with ATV to take on the existing cases, and new referrals, ensuring a smooth transfer of responsibility for this

sensitive area of the work. ATV and Arc meet quarterly to review the contract and ensure any anomalies are given due focus.

## **8. Voice and Influence of Young People, and Adoptive Parents**

ATV has an established young people's group which has run for the previous 2 years and was in operation prior to the pandemic.

Over this year, the groups for young people have changed, with the previous 2 young people's group being brought to one single group, for adopted children and young people aged 7-16 years.

A second group is the Voice and influence Group and has a clear focus on enabling children and young people to have a voice and influence ATV practice and that beyond.

### 8.1 Young People's Group

In ATV we are proud that we now have an established group for adopted young people and have directed its development with the feedback received from young people and their parents. We have brought together adopted children from age 7-16 to meet monthly, with the aim of promoting a positive identity for young people around adoption and enabling them to build friendships and confidence through the group.

Young people fed back last year that they would like more opportunity for activities and a more "young person" focused setting. Previously the group ran in the ATV Centre, however, now runs in a local youth club, with dedicated access only to ATV for that evening session. This means that ATV can offer the opportunity for young people with a wide range of needs and preferences to meet and use the facilities and activities on offer, while building friendships and relationships. Activities such as table football, crafts, and games consoles are taken up by the young people. The young people wanted to have a tuck shop available which is now running, and there is also a sensory room for young people who need a calmer environment.

Feedback is positive from children and parents, with many parents also taking the opportunity to meet with other adopters and build their own networks too.

In the period November 2023- July 2024 there have been 8 sessions run in the Youth Club, with 29 young people accessing this group regularly, and 9 who have attended all sessions.

Children said...

I have made 2 friends, and they are nice and so are the ladies who are there.

I have enjoyed meeting other adopted children.

A parent said....

"As a family I wish we had done this a long time ago. It is really heartwarming to us all as a family especially A and myself. Knowing that there is support. Also, it helps both boys build up a resilience. Seeing others in a similar situation. I feel this will help both of the boys feel and see that adoption is just part of life. They are no different. To see other children feel as ease., play, chat. .. take part in activities gives them all a great foundation and positive memories to hold on to always".

"For a little while B has often felt different due to being adopted and has had lots of questions. She finds it reassuring and comforting when she spends time around other adopted children, she finds it comforting that she's not the only one. B benefits from attending the group as it gives her the chance of socialising with other adopted children".

Feedback through the Adopter Survey indicated that there is a gap for children aged 5-7 as children pre-school can access the Play and Stay Group and aged over 7 can access the Youth Group. Currently, ATV doesn't have staffing resources to run a third group, however, we will continue to look at what can be offered to children in this age group, on a regular basis.

## 8.2 Voice and Influence

The ATV Voice and Influence group has been running now for around 12 months. 4 young people are active members. ATV reached out to all families in regular contact, however, this small group are the pioneers of Voice and Influence in ATV. The group have named themselves AdoptBats, and they meet monthly with 2 staff from ATV.

Currently, they young people are bringing together their voice and view through a creative project with Blue Cabin which is co-producing a film about what its like to be adopted. Young people are concerned about how adopted

young children feel and cope in school; about life story work, and about Keep in Touch arrangements with birth family and parents.

Current plans are underway to deliver a launch of their film, at a dedicated event for wider stakeholders, which will include Board members, Virtual School Heads, adoption social workers and other young, adopted people.

The young people attended and met with the Middlesbrough Council Corporate Parenting Board in 2023, to share their ideas about what work they are doing and what's important to them.

### 8.3 Adopter Forum

ATV Adopter Forum runs monthly and is a small group of adoptive parents who meet with managers from ATV to review agency practice with adopters' views in mind. The Adopter Forum have supported the implementation of a weekend event and have advised that more support forums and groups should be held outside of usual working hours, leading to a co-produced event with the Darlington heritage railway museum due to take place in July 2024.

The forum has shared views about the way in which early permanence is supported and have assisted with development of the 2024 adopter survey, and have reviewed feedback.

## **9. Panel**

The Adoption panel sits weekly and is now held once per month as a face to face panel, with all other panels being virtual. Due to pressure on panel, it has been operation practice to schedule 5 panels per month.

There have been 61 panel meetings in the year.

There are 2 Independent Chairs of Panel, and 2 vice chairs of panel, 3 of whom are social workers, with significant senior management experience in adoption work, and one who is an adoptive parent with significant panel experience. There are 32 central list members, and 5 Medical Advisors. Diversity of adoption panel members has increased over the last year in respect of more males, and a member with lived experience of being adopted. Despite significant efforts it has not been possible to recruit a more ethnically diverse panel to date.

Panel is managed and led by a manager within ATV, who also acts as the Agency Advisor to Panel.

The panel manager has developed a stronger quality assurance (QA) mechanism, with QA feedback from all people who are involved in panel helping to improve quality, consistency and the experience of adopters and others attending. There is a quarterly quality assurance report which is provide to Local Authority senior managers to provide feedback on the quality of reports presented.

Central list members have a programme of training and engagement, with quarterly newsletters providing feedback on the outcomes of panel, and updates on relevant agency or legislative matters.

Panel members have undertaken training within this year on:

- Cultural Humilities
- Trauma Timeline, and trauma informed practice
- Early permanence
- Culture change in adoption

A full report on panel business and quality of practice is provide to the ATV Board on a 6 monthly basis.

## **10. Quality Assurance**

ATV operates from a position of continuous improvement, across all areas of the work. The service continually develops and seeks to improve through alignment with wider sector influences, changes, and developments; its own feedback mechanisms; audit; research; inspection; self-assessment.

Quality assurance is carried out through a variety of mechanisms. Key means of assuring quality are outlined below, and the service plan 2023-25 is underpinned by a cross cutting platform of continuous improvement and quality assurance. The ATV Board has a role in being assured of quality of the service delivery, and a risk register is in place around key areas of risk for delivery, and/or quality concerns. At a recent Board Away day it was decided that we will work together to review the vision for ATV moving forward.

### *Service Plan*

There is a service plan, which has been developed through work with managers and staff, and is reflective of local development, and the national strategy and agenda on adoption. This plan will be updated quarterly and presented to the ATV Board with monitoring of progress against target measures, and outcomes.

### *Practice Models*

The service adopts elements of several key practice models in delivery of the adoption service.

The **Secure Base Model** (Schofield and Beek) is an operational model of attachment for children placed with alternative care givers and is used in preparation training and in assessment of adopters, and adoption support.

The **UEA Moving on to Adoption** is adopted in practice in many cases and is adapted dependent on the needs of the child, and family. Learning from our disruptions indicates we have more work to do within the wider system to understand the core principles of this model and implementation in practice. Moves due to foster carer circumstances remain a stubborn issue in this region. As detailed above, the service has adopted the **Trauma Timeline**, and is promoting trauma informed practice, within the RAA's own work, and across partner agencies.

Aspects of **Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy and Practice (DDP)** (Dan Hughes) are supported through the service delivery, including PACE parenting. 8 staff have now received level 1 training in DDP and it is planned for more to undertake this.

The Education Support worker is trained in the **Thrive** approach and adopts this within work with families and across schools.

ATV adopts a relational based approach throughout its work, both with families and children, and with staff in the service.

### *Performance Monitoring*

The RAA collates detailed adoption performance data, as required by the (former) ASGLB for quarterly returns. ATV has a key role in co-ordinating with partner LAs on adoption performance data. A quarterly balanced scorecard (BSC) is produced, which details performance measures, as set out within this annual report. There is a quarterly meeting with each Local Authority adoption service lead, to review each individual LA performance, key practice themes, and also for the LA to be assured about the adoption service. The BSC is presented quarterly to the ATV Board.

### *Panel*

Panel forms a key QA function for the work of ATV and partner agencies. In this year a separate Panel Quality Assurance Action plan has been developed, which is shared and reviewed by the Panel manager, Service Manager, and panel chairs.

### *Surveys and Feedback*

An adopter survey has been undertaken, as reported on above. Changes have been made as a result of feedback and will continue to be made.

Children and Young people have fed back on the groups that have been run. The voice and Influence group will have a role in seeking children and young people's views more widely.

### *Policies Review 2024*

ATV policies have been reviewed to ensure that they reflect current and most up to date practice and expectations.

Policies will be available on the ATV website.

### *Supervision*

All staff receive monthly supervision in ATV, which includes reflective practice. All staff have an annual appraisal which sets out their further personal development plan for the year ahead, aligned to their own career and role, and service planning.

### *Workforce Development*

The service offers and supports workforce development, aligned to service and sector development, and learning needs of staff. Workforce development may be through attending a training event, shadowing, or through group reflective sessions.

Examples within this year are:

- Culture Change in Adoption
- DDP training – level 1
- Matching Standards Training
- EP Practice Standards

3 managers have undertaken level 5 management qualification. This will strengthen the management capacity in ATV and support overall succession planning.

### *Audit*

Audits have been regularly carried out with staff involved in individual cases. The audit process has been LA specific in this year, due to a number of partner LA's undergoing full ILACS inspections by Ofsted.

Audit has helped the service reflect on quality of case records and ensuring that records reflect what an adopted person may need in the future. It has also informed practice standards and implementing these within the team.

*Ofsted*

One of the partner LA's, Hartlepool, has been inspected by Ofsted, which includes inspection of the RAA- Adoption Tees Valley, through the lens of the Local Authority. Hartlepool received an Outstanding grading, and ATV was positively recognised within the report.

**11. Finance**

11.1 2023/24 Financial Year End Position

The year end position for the Adoption Tees Valley budget is presented below:

| <b>Expenditure</b>    | <b>Budget<br/>2023/24</b> | <b>Outturn<br/>2023/24</b> | <b>Variance<br/>2023/24</b> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Employees             | 1,767,000                 | 1,680,000                  | (87,000)                    |
| Running Costs         | 264,000                   | 349,000                    | 85,000                      |
| Support Service Costs | 113,000                   | 115,000                    | 2,000                       |
| Interagency Fees      | 500,000                   | 525,000                    | 25,000                      |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>2,644,000</b>          | <b>2,669,000</b>           | <b>25,000</b>               |

Employee costs underspent due to delays filling vacant posts in year and savings on staff mileage.

Running costs overspent due to:-

- additional utility costs of premises, noting that the Emergency Duty Team has been co-located for the past 24 months and utility costs have risen due to this (24-hour heating and lighting)
- additional adoption support and post adoption costs, associated with placements with Voluntary Adoption Agencies where the child (ren) has not been adopted within a 12-month period.

11.2 Interagency Fees

Interagency fees exceeded the budget figure by £25,000. Additional contributions from each Local Authority are as follows:



|                    | Percentage     | Budget<br>23/24 | Actual Cost<br>23/24 | Additional<br>23/24 |
|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Darlington         | 15.95%         | 80,000          | 84,000               | 4,000               |
| Hartlepool         | 14.22%         | 71,000          | 75,000               | 4,000               |
| Middlesbrough      | 27.16%         | 136,000         | 142,000              | 6,000               |
| Redcar & Cleveland | 15.95%         | 80,000          | 84,000               | 4,000               |
| Stockton           | 26.72%         | 133,000         | 140,000              | 7,000               |
|                    | <b>100.00%</b> | <b>500,000</b>  | <b>525,000</b>       | <b>25,000</b>       |

### 11.3 Contributions for 2024/25

Contributions from each Local Authority will remain at the same percentages in 2024/25, as in 2023/24.

The ATV Board has commenced a review of the financial contribution percentage from partner local Authorities, to ensure that there is an equitable and fair allocation of costs, commencing 2025-28.

## 12. Priorities for Forward Planning

The annual report and review provide the data evidence, linked to the wider national adoption strategy, for setting priorities for ATV for the forthcoming year. As detailed in the Executive Summary, ATV Board have sought to establish a Vision for ATV for the next 3 years, based on national adoption developments, and learning from practice through independently chaired disruption meetings. What is clear is that children's long-term outcomes, and the wellbeing of adoptive and birth families is a high priority for ATV, and its partner agencies. The priorities for the forthcoming year are:

1. Recruiting more adoptive parents locally, who can take the children we need to find families for.

We will strengthen marketing, and the first contact enquiry process, to reduce delay, and strengthen a consistent approach from a small dedicated and experienced team.

We will promote the offer of the settling in allowance for ATV adopters who can take siblings.

We will continue to review the core “offer” for adopters for more complex children with our partner LA’s and Board.

We will work together with partner LAs to ensure that there is an adoption experienced, ATV led consideration of local adopters, for children, when planning for permanence.

2. Children’s voices will be heard, and young people will have an influence in how adoption services and wider services consider the needs of adopted people.

We will produce the Voice and Influence film with Adoptbats, and will ensure that it s used for wider stakeholder awareness raising.

We will hold an event for Board and stakeholders, with Adoptbats, to share young people’s views on what needs to change.

We will ask Adoptbats to help achieve the engagement and views or more adopted young people, to make sure we are listening to, and involving adopted children in having their say.

3. Learning from Disruptions

We will use the learning from independently chaired disruptions to inform ATV practice, and wider LA practice in care planning for adoption.

ATV Board will have oversight of disruptions in adoption.

We will work with the national planned research into disruption in adoption.

4. Early Permanence Planning will continue to be a priority

We will review the balance of key messaging around what early permanence is for adoptive parents in the early stages of their journey with ATV.

We will work with all 5 LA’s to develop mechanisms for ATV involvement in legal gateway planning.

We will involve ADM's in the LA where there is a difference of view between ATV and the LA around an EP plan for the child.

We will contribute to leadership of the pan regional conference on EP for wider stakeholders.

We will contribute to a LFJB plan for early permanence, and be part of a wider Adoption Sub Committee on Adoption.

5. Culture change in adoption practice will be promoted through ATV and partner agency practice and development

We will hold a team event on Culture Change in Adoption.

We will promote learning and awareness through workforce development in partner LA's and wider stakeholders.

The ATV Board will provide leadership on Culture Change through their role in ATV and in partner agencies, and through a shared vision statement.

We will promote the pan regional conference at which the UK leading adoption academic, Professor Beth Neil, will provide the keynote speech on Culture Change and Early Permanence.

6. Access to Adoption Support – the right help at the right time.

We will review the caseload allocation and our case holding system, to reduce active case holding by a social worker, enabling swifter access to assessment of adoption support needs.

We will work with the pan regional MDASS service, and with the pan regional commissioning project, to seek to implement new and better ways of allocating the right assessment and support to families.

We will implement the new data reporting measures in the AS system, to ensure we can deliver the new national AS data reports.

We will continue with our 3 tier adoption support system, encouraging take up and access to all tiers, by children and parents.

## 7. Retaining a high-quality staffing team

We will work to ensure that staff have access to high quality training and supervision that gives high job satisfaction and maintains skills and motivation.

We will create opportunities for progression and development wherever possible.

We will creatively use the skills and experience of ATV staff to help ATV development, and to develop the workforce in wider partner agencies.

**Vicky Davidson Boyd**

**July 2024**