

Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative**Mid-Year Report 2021- 22****Introduction**

The requirement to provide six monthly reviews of the adoption service is set out in Regulation 39 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019. This report provides a summary and analysis of the activity of the service during the first two quarters of 2021-22. This report should be read in conjunction with the Quarter 2 Performance report which provides performance data against key indicators for the period up until 30 September 2021.

Service Development & Governance

The office has remained closed during this period although a couple of Business Support staff attend the office on allotted days to carry out core administrative tasks. The office has also been risk assessed to allow a small number of Social Work staff to utilise the office space for specific purposes and to improve work life balance. The service has continued to be delivered via a hybrid mix of face to face and virtual working.

The service has continued to face increased pressures, particularly in relation Adoption Support during this time. These pressures are set against an ever-increasing national agenda and the implementation of the NAS Good Practice Guides during 2021-22. A review of capacity issues and the impact of the implementation of the new initiatives upon service delivery was undertaken in April 2021 and presented to VVC Management Board. The report contained an options appraisal for additional resources to meet the increased demand in the immediate, medium and longer term. These options were further considered by the regional Heads of Service in July & September 2021. Additional investment to employ 2.5 Support Workers within Adoption Support and additional capacity within the Business Support Team was agreed and has been submitted as part of the cost pressures process in each of the four authorities.

Meetings of VVC's Management Board were held in April & July 2021 and the Joint Committee met in May. An additional Joint Committee meeting was convened in September to consider the proposals to meet capacity pressures prior to the budget setting process.

There has been no change to the membership of the Management Board during the year although a new elected member has been appointed to the Joint Committee to represent Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council. The Operational Group met in May & October 2021. Due to competing demands placed upon local authority representatives and the impact this has had upon quoracy for meetings, the terms of reference for the Operational Group were revised. These revisions have been agreed by Management Board and they now allow a quoracy of three officers from the partner authorities and an agreed mechanism for agreeing matters outside the meeting where one partner is absent.

The agendas for all these levels of regional governance have been full, incorporating a range of matters including budget approval, performance reporting, setting service priorities and relevant aspects from the national agenda. IPC attended the July meeting of the Management Board to present the regional findings in respect of IPC'S Evaluation of the Adoption Support Framework.

The service has continued to comply with all required performance monitoring and reporting to NAS. Internal data collection systems have been adapted to incorporate the increased range of measures required. The Regional Manager is part of a working group initiated by WB developing the adoption modules for WCCIS. Once completed it is intended that the service will transfer their record system onto WCCIS.

The Regional Manager and Team Managers remain active participants in national forums and subgroups. The Regional Manager contributed to the development of the guidance in respect of the transfer of Adoption Support cases at the three year point. The Recruitment & Assessment Manager was part of the group developing the Welsh Early Permanence Strategy.

Staffing

The overall staffing establishment has remained the same, although there has been some staff turnover in all teams, particularly in the Recruitment & Assessment Team. Within this team, three experienced Social Workers began their maternity leave during late spring/early summer. In real terms, this meant the team lost the equivalent of two and half Social Workers. In addition, another experienced fulltime member of staff changed roles to fill a vacancy in the Adoption Support Team. Attempts to fill these vacancies were made with the roles being advertised on three occasions. The permanent full time and temporary part time post was successfully filled, leaving two full time Social Worker positions vacant. Monies have been allocated to buy in independent support to meet some of the backlog of assessment work in relation to non-agency applications.

Within the Adoption Support Team, an experienced member of staff left at the beginning of the period to take up a post within NAS Central Team although this position was filled via internal transfer. Some agency cover has been provided to address some of the pressures within the team funded from the reserves.

In terms of the grant funded posts, the Children & Young Person Co-ordinator left to take up a post within Children's Services at the end of July 2021. This post was however successfully recruited to by September 2021, leaving only a small gap in service. The Transitions Worker based within the Family Finding Team left at the end of the reporting period although this post has now been filled via an internal appointment.

Similar to other services, VVC has experienced more staff contracting COVID-19 during this period requiring periods of absence, self-isolation and recuperation.

Family Finding

Family Finding and its' associated activities remains a key area of activity for the region and the ability to place children effectively and promptly underpins all other activities.

90 children have been referred for adoption from April 2021 – September 2021. 2020-21 saw a total of **171** children and therefore the half-year position reflects a slight increase to referrals continuing the trend in recent years.

Of the children referred so far this year around **1/3** were withdrawn within the first half of the year. Although lower than the withdrawal rate of 43% in 2020-21 many of the children referred so far this year will still be within proceedings and we anticipate a withdrawal rate for 2021-22 similar to those seen in previous years.

During the first half of this year **46** 'Should be Adopted' decisions were made in respect of children. If this rate continues through the remainder of the year this would be an increase from the previous 2 years (80 and 81 respectively). If the number of referrals continues to increase, we would anticipate the number of SBA decisions also to increase.

The region has recorded **46** Placement Orders being made between April and September 2021. If this trend continues this would reflect a marked increase in Placement Orders from the 2019-20 and 2020-21 figures. VVC noted a reduction in Placement Orders earlier than the current national trend and are now seeing these numbers increase again. It is not yet known whether this will be a sustained rise and whether this is in part due to the impact of the pandemic.

43 children have been placed for adoption at the mid-year point. Compared with **65** for the whole of 2020-21 this is an increase, and we expect to meet and likely surpass this figure for 2021-22. VVC continue to utilise the NAS Transitions Risk Assessment under Covid restrictions to ensure that the pandemic is not causing delay in placing children for adoption.

The average waiting time from Placement Order to Placement for the first half of 2021-22 is around **8.5** months which is a reduction from the previous year's figures. This also includes several children who have been waiting longer due to their individual needs who we have now succeeded in matching.

VVC has continued to place a high proportion of our children with VVC approved adopters (**70%**) maintaining a similar level to the previous couple of years and reflecting the work done by the Recruitment and Assessment team to increase in-house approvals.

At the end of September 2021 there were **61** children on Placement Orders awaiting an adoptive match and a further 9 children had a very strong link proceeding but not yet matched as at the end of March 2021 and so the number actively awaiting links was **52**. It is positive to see a continued decrease in the number of children waiting for adoptive placements.

From April 2021-September 2021 there were **38** Adoption Orders granted. Compared with the full year figure from 2020-21 this represents a decrease however this would be expected in line with a decreasing number of Placement Orders and therefore children being placed for adoption.

The performance in respect of LJW materials remains high with **100%** of life journey books being provided by the grant-funded workers in the local authorities with one exception due to extraordinary circumstances. The completion of later life letters by Childcare Social Workers also remains high but we have seen slightly lower figures for completion of this due to the capacity demands within the local authorities. Performance continues to be addressed through the Life Journey Work Co-Ordinator and the Operational Group.

The Transitions Worker worked with **25 children** over the first 6 months of the year providing essential support and preparation for children moving to adoption. At the end of quarter 2 this post became vacant and was recruited to with no gap in service delivery and from October 2021 a new worker is in post and continuing to offer this high-quality service to children and adopters.

VVC has continued to embrace the use of all available family finding methods over this year. The team liaises closely with the Adoption Register Wales (ARW)/LinkMaker team to ensure information is updated and monitored in a timely manner. Specialist family finding activities have been run since October 2021 which will be reported upon in the end of year report. We are also approaching our 9th placement via the Adopting Together Service.

The Family Finding Manager facilitated a series of workshops on matching for practitioners across the region in April & May of this year which were attended by 80 + participants.

Disruptions and Breakdowns

There have been no disruptions prior to the making of an Adoption Order in the year to date.

Recruitment & Assessment of adopters

On 1st April 2019 changes to the Adoption Agency Regulations came into force introducing a two-stage model of adopter assessment. Due to the pandemic Welsh Government allowed for an easement to the Regulations during 2020 enabling the two stages to run together. This, in effect, allowed services to carry on conducting assessments without the new stringent timescales being enforced. The temporary easement came to an end at the end of the reporting period and since 1st October 2021 any new enquiries are managed purely under the new model. VVC held a refresher training day for staff in September 2021 which was well received. At present members of the team are progressing some of their assessments which began prior to 1 October under the old regime and new assessments from this date require staff to implement the new approach. The new approach is still bedding in and will improve as the new way of working becomes firmly established. NAS have introduced a number of new measures to monitor performance and this data will begin to be

collected from Q3. VVC has had to revise internal spreadsheets to incorporate the new measures.

VVC continues to benefit from a Recruitment and Marketing officer. This role has proven itself to be invaluable over the past few years and has led to the service consistently achieving a 100% response rate to enquiries. Having a Marketing Officer has also enabled the service to develop a professional, consistent and evolving response to the way in which we raise VVC's profile and continue to improve the quality of information we share with service users. The Marketing Officer contributes ideas and expertise to the National Adoption Services all Wales marketing strategy. In addition, VVC also complements the national strategy by targeting members of the public specifically from our geographical area using pay-per-click advertising. We specifically use the platforms Facebook and Instagram. We use this method to identify members of the public who have generally already searched for the topic of adoption and/or fostering in addition to the geographical areas where we know we need to recruit more adoptive families.

VVC continues to receive a large amount of enquiries. During Q1 & Q2 a total of 165 enquiries were received. (*Cardiff – 67, Merthyr-Tydfil – 8, RCT – 52, Vale of Glamorgan – 25, Other – 13*).

This represents a small decrease when compared to Q1 & Q2 of 2020/21 as 176 households enquired.

Information evenings have continued to be held virtually approximately every six weeks.

Five events were held during Q1 & Q2 with 73 households attending.

30 households went onto request and receive an initial visit. This is the exact same number of initial visits conducted during the same reporting period of 2020/21.

Five preparations to adopt training courses were held during Q1 & Q2 with 37 households attending these courses.

Looking ahead, VVC's preparation to adopt training course has seen the most significant change. For a number of years, VVC's preparation training has been outsourced to a highly skilled independent trainer, who retired in September 2021. This change coincided with the changes to regulation requiring the content of the training to be adapted. VVC has used this as an opportunity to strengthen the partnership working already taking place with our neighbouring collaborative, Western Bay and since October 2021 the training course is now being co-delivered by a member of staff from VVC and a staff member from Western Bay. Whilst this change is new, the two courses held to date have received positive feedback from participants.

During Q1 & Q2 **26** new Registration of Interests (assessments) commenced. Since this time three have withdrawn as they each decided the either the timing or their circumstances were not right for them to adopt.

31 households had their approvals ratified within Q1 & Q2. This is a sharp increase when compared to the 20 approvals achieved during the same period last year. On balance, the performance in terms of approvals is very much consistent this year as it has been for the past three years.

Projecting ahead, VVC are currently on track to achieving our target of approving 60 new adoptive households this reporting year. At the end of quarter 2 there were however **27** adopter households awaiting placements. This number is part of a national trend due to the reduction in the number of children awaiting placements and increased complexity of needs of those who are waiting. The number of adopters waiting is now being collated by NAS and regions have to report on a quarterly basis for the reasons for the delay in them being matched with a child.

Adoption Panel

VVC's Panel has continued to meet on a virtual basis. 20 Panel sittings have been held during the period and 65 cases have been heard.

There has been no change to independent Panel membership during this period although pressures placed upon local authority partners has impacted upon Social Worker membership. There is a need therefore to recruit additional Social Workers to sit on Panel.

Post Adoption Support

Requests for assessment of post adoption support needs have not diminished during this period with **53** new referrals having been received. This is an increase on the same period last year as referrals only began to increase when schools resumed. The increase in workload is placing a significant burden on the team and has resulted in a large build-up of unallocated cases.

The team are putting in place an initial screening system for these referrals and an analysis of these cases is to be presented to Management Board in October to seek agreement for a letter to be sent out to all the families waiting informing them of the new process.

The team has continued to be proactive in seeking alternative means of supporting families with a monthly virtual quiz, a monthly toddler group and the development of a birth parent support group. The toddler group moved to outdoors during the summer but have recently resumed meetings inhouse.

By utilising some monies from the reserves, VVC has been able to commission an NVR course for 20 families facilitated by Adoption UK. Two courses on the Circle of Security have also run facilitated by an agency worker and team member. The service is also piloting a Welsh Language Support Group for Welsh speaking adopters facilitated by an external facilitator.

The grant funded posts are continuing to be embedded into the region and to enhance the overall service provision maintaining positive links with national counterparts. The Birth Parent Adviser has been proactive in developing group support for birth parents

and in developing links with Reflect. The newly appointed Children & Young person's Co-ordinator is supporting a number of young people in the community and co-facilitating the Connected groups with colleagues from Adoption UK. These groups have now resumed face to face working.

Policies and Procedures

At the end of 2020-21, VVC undertook an audit of policies and procedures to contribute to the work being commissioned at a national level by NAS to develop a common suite of policies for the service. This work is ongoing.

The Family Finding Manager has developed a Matching Guide for practitioners which is based upon the Good Practice Guide and relevant research. This Guide has been disseminated to Childcare Teams across the region.

The service has begun to use some of the new processes contained in the Good Practice guides such the Trauma Nurture Timeline and the revised Adoption Support Plan.

Consultation, Engagement and Quality Assurance

A priority area for the service is to develop our quality assurance framework. VVC managers have been working closely with the Vale of Glamorgan's Quality Assurance Officer in devising robust service user questionnaires. These are being used in order to gain the feedback of service users and to listen to the views on the areas for improvement. VVC has a well-established mechanism to gain the views of service users from the point of enquiry to attending our preparation training and reports are now being collated and the findings are shared with the service. Questionnaires have also been developed post placement and following the Adoption Order which are also now being collated. Going forward there is a need to seek constructive feedback at the point of approval which will provide reflections upon the assessment process, preparation and Panel experience.

In terms of Adoption Support, evaluation of the service has continued at key points of delivery and the TESSA Co-ordinator has developed a questionnaire for all families in receipt of TESSA which complements the evaluation being undertaken at a national level.

In terms of frequency of reporting, the Quality Assurance Officer has agreed moving forward to share the reports on a quarterly basis so any emerging themes can be weaved into the reporting cycle.

Complaints, Comments & Compliments

One complaint has been received during this period from an adoptive parent concerned about the availability of services to support her adopted son. This complaint was investigated and resolved at stage 1.

Staff within the service have continued to receive positive feedback on the range of services provided from a variety of sources. Staff are encouraged to collate this feedback to contribute to their own professional development plans.

Conclusion, Future Priorities & Challenges

Performance in respect of the placement of children and the approval of adopters has been maintained at a healthy level despite the ongoing constraints upon service delivery. In terms of children requiring adoptive placements, the challenge remains in being able to secure timely, appropriate matches for the cohort of children with increasingly complex needs. In terms of the recruitment of adopters, the challenge remains in being able to meet the approval targets set whilst managing the expectations of an increasing pool of approved adopters who are waiting.

Staff vacancies within the Recruitment & Assessment Team will likely impact upon performance well into the next reporting year. Additionally, the impact of the new model of adopter assessment is not yet known and so the need to monitor timescales for completion of assessments will be an ongoing priority.

Despite the innovative work being carried out within Adoption Support, the increase in demand for the service and the capacity issues within the team will continue to be a pressing issue for the service and key priority. The Welsh Government investment has provided positive benefits for the service, but the outcomes will need to be closely monitored and reported upon in the second half of the year to ensure continued funding.

The national expectation that the Good Practice Guides will be fully embedded into regional practice during the latter part of the year will impact upon our performance in a number of areas and the impact will need to be continually evaluated so that gaps can be clearly monitored.

Angela Harris
Regional Adoption Manager
December 2021