

Meeting of:	Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committee
Date of Meeting:	Tuesday, 12 November 2019
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Healthy Living and Social Care
Report Title:	Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative Annual Report 2018-19
Purpose of Report:	To provide Scrutiny Committee with the Annual Report and review of the Collaborative
Report Owner:	Director of Social Services
Responsible Officer:	Head of Children and Young People Services
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	This report will be presented to the respective Cabinets of the partner Authorities.
Policy Framework:	This report is for Executive decision by Cabinet

Executive Summary:

- Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC) is one of five regional Collaboratives which form part of the National Adoption Service (NAS) and provides an adoption service on behalf of the Vale of Glamorgan Council, Cardiff Council, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council and RCT County Borough Council. The Vale of Glamorgan hosts the Collaborative.
- This report is VVC’s fourth Annual Report and it covers the period from the 1 April 2018- 31 March 2019 although some areas have been updated with current information.
- The report outlines the performance of the region in terms of the placement of children for adoption, the recruitment and assessment of adopters and the provision of adoption support services.
- The report highlights the changes to the governance structure of the region brought about by the Best Value Review of the service and a review of the Legal Agreement underpinning the operation of the Collaborative which were agreed by Cabinet in April 2019.
- The report also provides information in respect of managerial and staff changes and areas of service development.
- The appendices to the report provide data in respect of key performance measures in respect of children, adopter recruitment and adoption support. This information is shown by Local Authority.

Recommendations

1. That Committee reviews the report and the work of the Collaborative undertaken to date.
2. That Committee continues to receive annual reports in line with the requirements of the Legal Agreement which underpins the Collaborative.

Reasons for Recommendations

1. To enable Committee to exercise scrutiny of this key statutory function.
2. To ensure that Committee maintain close scrutiny of this regional service on a regular basis.

1. Background

- 1.1 On 28th November 2014, Cabinet approved the business case, service delivery model and implementation plan for creating the Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Regional Collaborative. The recommendations in the report were resolved also by the Cabinets in Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil during December 2014. The Vale of Glamorgan Council acts as host authority for the Collaborative, which became fully operational on 1st June 2015.
- 1.2 On 2nd November 2015, Scrutiny Committee considered a report outlining the progress made following implementation and agreed to receive a further report in line with the requirements of the Legal Agreement for the Collaborative. This was considered on 22nd November 2016, with agreement that reports would continue to be received on an annual basis, the last of which was considered on 6th November 2018.
- 1.3 The governance structure of the Collaborative involves a Joint Committee and a regional Management Board. The Joint Committee involves the lead Cabinet Member from each of the four Local Authorities and Heads of Service; it meets twice a year. The Management Board meets quarterly. It comprises the Heads of Service from the four Local Authorities which make up the Collaborative and representatives from Health, Education and the Voluntary Sector. The Management Board is currently chaired by the Director of Social Services for Cardiff. In line with the Legal Agreement, this position rotates annually on a yearly basis between the Directors of the four local authorities. The Regional Adoption Manager reports to the Management Board and Joint Committee.
- 1.4 In addition, Regulation 22 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 require the Collaborative to create and maintain a system to monitor, review and improve the quality of its service and to provide an Annual Report (to the Director of Operations of the National Adoption Service). It is envisaged that the Annual Report attached at Appendix 1 will meet all these requirements. The performance of the Collaborative has been regularly reviewed by the Management Board and the Joint Committee. Section 15 2 (c) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales)

Directions 2015 allows a Minister to ask the Collaborative to provide information or allow an inspection of records in respect of the discharge of any of the Collaborative's functions.

2. Key Issues for Consideration

- 2.1** The report outlines the performance and work of the Collaborative for the period, 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019. It summarises performance, progress, achievements and areas for development against regional and national priorities.
- 2.2** The report includes information on:
- Governance, staffing and service development
 - Performance in respect of children and family finding activity
 - Adopter recruitment
 - Adoption support services, service user engagement and consultation
 - Complaints and compliments
 - Adoption Panel
 - Future priorities
- 2.3** In terms of regional performance, the report highlights improvements in the number of children placed for adoption during the year, the increased number of adopter households approved and a reduction in timescales for assessments of adopters.
- 2.4** The report however also highlights a downturn in the provision of life journey work for children placed for adoption and in the take up of services by birth parents. It also outlines the significant challenges posed by the region in terms of the number of children waiting for adoptive placements at year end and the scale of the adopter resource required to meet the needs of children referred.
- 2.5** The report describes the positive work being undertaken by the Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator in developing a professional and consistent response to all adopter enquiries and the rich data which we can now report on in terms of our adopter demographic.
- 2.6** The changes to the governance structure brought about by the review of the Legal Agreement and completion of the recommendations of the Best Value Review are outlined. Positive service developments in terms of increased staffing capacity and other service initiatives to improve performance are also detailed in the report.
- 2.7** Additional funding has been awarded by Welsh Government to further support adoption services in 2019-20 and the additional specialist posts identified as part of the plan to utilise this grant are outlined.
- 2.8** Regulatory changes to the recruitment of adopters in terms of the introduction of a two stage assessment process are being introduced from January 2019. These changes and the service development which will be brought about when

the specialist posts are in place will form the basis for our priorities going forward.

3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

- 3.1** The legal framework for the establishment of the regional Collaboratives is set in the Part 3 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 as amended by the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.
- 3.2** The governance of the Collaborative is delivered in partnership with Health, Education and the voluntary sector.
- 3.3** The principles upon which the Collaborative is based are aligned closely with the Five Ways of Working and the Council's Well-being objectives. The provision of an adoption service is a statutory function which serves to ensure that all children requiring adoptive placements are provided with this opportunity and that adoptive families and adopted adults are provided with support services.
- 3.4** The ability to work together with partner authorities in a collaborative way has opened up opportunities for children in the Vale of Glamorgan to be placed with adoptive parents in other parts of the region. Collaborative working has enabled resources to be pooled creating efficiencies and providing a more efficient, standardised adoption service for children, prospective adopters and others affected by adoption.
- 3.5** Feedback and follow up on the service received by prospective adopters is undertaken and this is being used to shape our plan to recruit more adoptive parents.
- 3.6** The Collaborative engages directly with adoptive families via the provision of a monthly toddler group, family fun days and training. VVC has supported families to contribute to national consultation exercises to ensure their views considered.

4. Resources and Legal Considerations

Financial

- 4.1** The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored closely by the Management Board and Joint Committee. The end of year position reported a slight underspend in the budget for 2018-19 which was subsequently returned to partners. 2018-19 marked the fourth year of operation for the Collaborative and as there had been no change to the apportionment of the financial contributions made by each partner since its inception, the Best Value Review recommended that the original funding formula be reviewed and updated. Work was therefore undertaken during the year by the four partner authorities to look at the best option and it was agreed that a funding formula based on activity and usage of each partner would be a more realistic way of apportioning costs.

- 4.2** In order to avoid large swings in contributions it was considered appropriate for part of the apportionment to be based on a fixed charge of 20% for each partner with 80% of the costs being classed as variable and based on activity/ demand being placed on the service. The factors which were agreed to be used in determining activity were the number of children looked after, referrals into the service, children placed for adoption and requests for adoption support. The calculation will be based on the average previous 3 years' activity in order to smooth out any peaks and troughs in demand. This new method of contribution was put in place from 1 April 2019.

Employment

- 4.3** There are no employment consequences.

Legal (Including Equalities)

- 4.4** The requirement to review the work of the Collaborative and report on an annual basis to the respective Cabinets of each of the partner agencies is set out in the Legal Agreement.
- 4.5** The requirement to review the quality of the service provided by the Collaborative is set out in regulation as outlined under the Background section of this report.

5. Background Papers

Appendix A - VVC Annual Report 2018-19

- Appendix 1 to the Annual Report - Children's data
- Appendix 2 to the Annual Report - Recruitment and Assessment of Adopters
- Appendix 3 to the Annual Report - Adoption Support

VALE, VALLEYS AND CARDIFF ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE (VVC)

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 APRIL 2018 TO 31 MARCH 2019

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC) as part of the National Adoption Service in Wales (NAS), provides a regional adoption service to the Vale of Glamorgan Council, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, Cardiff Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council.

1.2 This is VVC's fourth annual report and covers the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019 although due to the reporting cycle some areas have been updated with current service information. This report seeks to combine the reporting requirements set out in regulation and the governance arrangements for the region in one report.

Appendix 1 to the report sets out key performance data by quarter and local authority.

Appendix 2 provides information in respect of adopter enquiries.

Appendix 3 provides information in respect of Adoption Support.

2. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

2.1 The managerial structure of the service during the period has remained the same although the Family Finding Manager's post became vacant in November 2018 due the temporary manager leaving her employment and long term sickness on the part of the permanent post holder. This resulted in the Adoption Support Manager managing two teams until a permanent replacement was recruited in August of this year. The Business Support Manager also left in November 2018 but this post was successfully recruited from the agency cover put in place to cover the position.

2.2 During 2018, the service was enhanced with agreement to employ additional Social Work capacity, partly as a recommendation of the Best Value Review

but also following acknowledgement by VVC Management Board of the need to increase capacity to recruit adopters. This has resulted in an additional five Social Work posts; one in Adoption Support, four in Recruitment & Assessment and the appointment of a Marketing & Recruitment Co-ordinator on a fixed term contract. Two of the Social Workers appointed did not begin employment until this financial year. Successful appointments have been made to all posts and VVC continues to attract significant interest in terms of potential applicants.

- 2.3** The Business Support Team within the Collaborative has experienced some disruption both last year and into this year in terms of managerial cover, long term sickness and staff turnover. Temporary arrangements have been put in place which will enable a review of the business support functions to be undertaken.
- 2.4** At the latter part of the year, Welsh Government awarded a grant of £2.3M to improve the provision of adoption services in Wales. This grant has been allocated on a regional basis to support national and regional priorities. VVC Management Board agreed to utilise the grant to support the provision of life journey work, better planning for children being placed for adoption and improve services to birth parents with the result that a further 2.5 Specialist Social Worker posts are being recruited to within the region to support these areas. Two unqualified posts to support adoptive families and adopted children and young people are also being recruited to which will link directly to new initiatives being developed nationally by Adoption UK. In addition 10.5 Direct Work Practitioners to support life journey work for children being placed for adoption have been allocated from the grant monies across the four local authorities.
- 2.5** As outlined in the previous report, the service relocated permanently to the Dock Offices in Barry in September 2018. The move was achieved with minimal disruption to service delivery and staff have adapted well to the change. Agile working and remote working arrangements are in place to reduce the amount of travel time across the region.

- 2.6** The actions recommended by the Best Value Review of the service has resulted in some changes to the governance arrangements for the region. The Action Plan developed to take forward these actions has been met.
- 2.7** The Best Value Review of the service recommended a review of the Legal Agreement underpinning the Collaborative. This review was completed by the Regional Manager and the Vale of Glamorgan Legal Department and agreed by the Vale of Glamorgan Cabinet in April 2019. The revised Legal Agreement confirms the changes made to the governance structure and allows for a review of the Agreement every five years. These revisions have been agreed by the partner agencies.
- 2.8** The significant change in governance arrangements is that VVC Management Board has moved to meeting on a quarterly basis and a new tier of governance in the form of an Operational Group has been established. The composition of the Management Board has remained the same and chairing arrangements rotate on an annual basis. The Director for Cardiff Council is the current chair. The overall remit of the Management Board is unchanged and the Board continues to play a key role in monitoring the performance of the regional service highlighting areas for improvement.
- 2.9** The Operational Group comprises of senior managers in each of the four local authorities which meets on a quarterly basis with the regional managers within VVC. Terms of reference and a Business Plan for the Operational Group have been developed to further monitor performance against key priorities. Operational matters, policy and practice issues can also be remitted from the Management Board for consideration by this Group.
- 2.10** The overall governance of the region is via a Joint Committee. Meetings were held in June and December 2018 as per the requirements. The Joint Committee is comprised of one elected member from each of the authorities and is currently chaired by the member from the host authority. The Joint

Committee approved the annual accounts, budget and annual plan for the Collaborative.

- 2.11** The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored closely by the Management Board and Joint Committee. The end of year position reported a slight underspend in the budget for 2018-19 which was subsequently returned to partners. 2018-19 marked the fourth year of operation for the Collaborative and as there had been no change to the apportionment of the financial contributions made by each partner since its inception, the Best Value Review recommended that the original funding formula be reviewed and updated. Work was therefore undertaken during the year by the four partner authorities to look at the best option and it was agreed that a funding formula based on activity and usage of each partner would be a more realistic as a way of apportioning costs.
- 2.12** In order to avoid large swings in contributions it was considered appropriate for part of the apportionment to be based on a fixed charge of 20% for each partner with 80% of the costs being classed as variable and based on activity/demand being placed on the service. The factors agreed to be used in determining activity are the numbers of children looked after, referrals into the service, children placed for adoption and requests for adoption support. The calculation will be based on the average previous 3 years' activity in order to smooth out any peaks and troughs in demand. This new method of contribution was put in place from 1 April 2019.
- 2.13** The annual audit undertaken by Bridgend and Vale Internal Audit Shared Service in respect of the Collaborative again concluded that the effectiveness of the internal control environment within the service was sound and "Substantial Assurance" could be placed upon the management of risks.
- 2.14** The NAS provides a further tier of performance monitoring through the provision of quarterly and annual performance data which meet the requirements of the NAS Performance Framework. VVC has complied with all

reporting requirements during the period and has developed a more comprehensive spreadsheet to capture the measures, which increase each year. Due to the expiry of the existing contract, NAS has commissioned Data Cymru to develop a new Performance Framework which will enable data to be more easily uploaded by regions and will provide easier access to performance reports. This new system was trialled during the latter part of the year by the service. The Business Manager and Regional Adoption Manager have been part of a national Steering Group set up to oversee the development of the new Framework which will become fully operational during 2019-20.

- 2.15** The Director of Operations for NAS attended VVC Management Board in January 2019 to present the VVC's Mid-Year Report and met with the Head of Service for the Vale of Glamorgan and the Regional Adoption Manager in June 2019 to discuss VVC's End of Year Report. This Report was subsequently presented to VVC Management Board in July 2019. Reference is made to the overall findings in this report.

3. SERVICE FUNCTIONS

- 3.1** VVC has continued to deliver services via three functional teams and staff specialise in one service area which focuses accountability and improves consistency. Performance against each of these functions is outlined under the following sections of the report alongside areas of development.

4. FAMILY FINDING

- 4.1** 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. As the largest regional Collaborative the level of demand placed upon this area and our ability to meet the needs identified remains challenging.

- 4.2** The number of children referred for adoption totalled **218** which marks a decrease on the previous year. Significantly **43%** of those referrals were withdrawn during the period which represents an increase on 2017-18 and may be indicative of the commitment to develop alternative permanency plans for children. This in many instances does not equate to a decrease in workload for the Family Finding Team as a lot of work has usually been undertaken to progress the adoption plan prior to it being discontinued. VVC placed **100** children for adoption during the year, a **16%** increase on the previous year and a very pleasing result for the region. **65%** of the placements were made within the region, **9%** elsewhere in Wales and **26%** outside of Wales. **25%** of the placements made were for children in sibling groups.
- 4.3** At the end of the year there were **101** children subject of a Placement Order awaiting an adoptive placement which is less than the previous year. An analysis of these children at the end of quarter 1 this year indicates that **35** of these children have additional factors i.e. aged 4 plus, BME, complex needs or a part of a sibling group which makes being able to secure appropriate matches more challenging.
- 4.4** The region has recorded **103** Placement Orders being made during the year which is an increase by one on the previous year. The number of Adoption Orders made is **83** which is a **17%** increase on the previous year.
- 4.5** The measure in relation to the timeliness of the process from becoming looked after to being placed for adoption has been highlighted as a concern by the NAS End of Year Report as this indicates that on average children were placed within **17.1** months. The report highlights that this demonstrates 'a fall in performance and a move away from the national benchmark of 13 months or less'. The NAS report also states that the VVC average of **10.8** months from Placement Order to placement from adoption is an increase from the previous year and again a move away from the benchmark of six months. Within the region **31%** of children were placed within this timeframe.
- 4.6** The level of placement breakdown continues to be low with two placement disruptions during the year, one of a six year old girl who was placed for 10 months and the adopters felt that they could not continue with the placement.

The second breakdown was a four year old boy who was removed by the placing authority due to concerns regarding his care.

- 4.7** The number of birth parents referred to the service for counselling fell during the year to **212** in line with the reduction in children being referred to the service and of this number, **103** parents took up the service. This area continues to present a deficit in our current service and it is therefore hoped that the additional part time post to focus upon birth parents will bring about some improvement.
- 4.8** Performance in relation to the provision of Life Journey Material for children being placed for adoption has seen a downturn during the year and the improvements made during the previous reporting period do not appear to have been sustained. This information is currently collated by local authorities who reported that only **46%** of children were recorded as having life journey materials at the second adoption review. In April 2018, NAS introduced an additional performance measure to record the provision of Life Journey Materials at matching. VVC was able to collect data for one quarter from local authorities so internal mechanisms have been put in place to record this information. NAS has via some additional monies from Welsh Government provided a grant to the region to promote and develop Life Journey Work. This has enabled VVC to provide additional staff time for a part time member within the Family Finding Team to raise awareness of this work amongst the childcare teams and with adopters and deploy the NAS toolkit and direct work materials across the region. As part of the new monies this year, the region has recruited a full time Life Journey Work Co-ordinator who will take up post on 1 October 2019. It is anticipated that this post alongside the Practitioner posts within the local authorities will serve to drive up practice significantly in this area.
- 4.9** During 2018, Welsh Government undertook a tendering exercise to secure a new Adoption Register in Wales. Linkmaker was awarded this contract and the new Adoption Register Wales (ARW) became operational in March of this year. ARW provides a matching service for children and adopters so all

children subject of a Placement Order and all approved adopters have to be entered onto the Register.

- 4.10** VVC'S Family Finding Manager states "Valleys and Cardiff have embraced the new Adoption Register Wales (ARW) and are working hard to ensure that information is uploaded and updated in a timely manner. A new monitoring process has been introduced to assist with this. We have found the interface is much more user-friendly and responsive and has been a successful avenue for external links. In addition the use of targeted profiling to adoption agencies across the UK continues to prove a valuable source of family finding".
- 4.11** VVC continues to utilise a range of methods to support family finding. In July 2018 38 children were profiled in a national Exchange Day event and from this identified a link for a single child and a sibling group were identified. The Welsh Adoption Activity Day in March 2019 also proved to be a very positive event as two matches for sibling groups (including those with complex needs) were identified.
- 4.12** St David's Adoption Agency and Barnardos, the two voluntary adoption agencies operating in Wales have developed a new family finding scheme, Adopting Together. Adopting Together is a new national initiative and an extension of their usual service in that it targets recruitment for specific children and provides support to those children for a year following placement. Adopting Together focuses on the recruitment of adopters for children with additional needs who have been waiting for adoptive placements over six months. This scheme has been embraced by the region and supported by VVC Management Board. Ten referrals were initially made to the scheme and six children have been placed on a spot purchase basis. The Vale of Glamorgan, as host authority is now in the process of entering into more formalised contractual arrangements with the scheme on behalf of the partner authorities ensuring that referral to the scheme is a key consideration in our family finding process.

5. Recruitment & Assessment of adopters

- 5.1** The recruitment of a sufficient supply of adopters to meet the needs of children waiting is a significant and ongoing challenge both nationally and regionally. This has been highlighted in the NAS Annual Report for 2018-19 as during this period **212** adoptive placements were approved in Wales and yet there were **338** children waiting who had not been placed and almost a third of these were in VVC.
- 5.2.** The region received **259** enquiries from prospective adopters in total for the year 2018-19 which represents a **7%** increase on the previous year and which the NAS End of Year Report acknowledges is “encouraging and continues an upward trend”. The graphs contained in Appendix 2 highlight that this trend has continued into this financial year with **155** enquiries having been received to date. This is encouraging and hopefully indicative of the work which has been undertaken by the Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator in raising the profile of VVC and our needs.
- 5.3** The Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator was successfully recruited in August 2018. Since that time the Marketing Co-ordinator has focused upon a number of key areas of activity.
- 5.4** All enquiries from prospective adopters are responded to within two working days and well within the timescale of five days set by NAS. Enquirers are followed up within a week if no response has been received and at a month to ascertain if they wish to proceed further. Further follow up is conducted as agreed with the enquirer if they remain undecided. All initial visits are undertaken by the Marketing Co-ordinator and a Social Worker from the team providing a consistent, timely and professional response. Shortly after her appointment, the Marketing Co-ordinator undertook an analysis of all the enquiries received by VVC from April 2018 and developed a comprehensive spreadsheet which now captures a range of data in terms of our adopter demographic. VVC is now able to report on a range of indicators by geographical area and the reasons why prospective applicants delay or drop out of the process is being collated. This information is being utilised to inform and target our recruitment activity and is detailed under Appendix 2.

- 5.5** The work developed within VVC has been showcased at a national level as part of a national review of enquiries commissioned by NAS at the latter end of 2018 and has been hailed as a model of good practice. The Marketing Co-ordinator has spent time professionalising VVC's website, our range of written information and developing our marketing materials. Close working links have been developed with COWSHED, the nationally commissioned marketing agency to develop a Marketing & Recruitment Plan for the region and VVC is actively involved in the national Marketing Subgroup. In conjunction with COWSHED, links have been established with Communications Departments in each of the partner authorities.
- 5.6** VVC has been represented at national campaign activities such as the National Eisteddfod and Pride. VVC has also engaged in more localised marketing activity at the Vale of Glamorgan Show, the Barry 10K run and Llantwit Major and Barry Pride. The Marketing Co-ordinator and Recruitment & Assessment Manager has presented the work of VVC to the Vineyard Church on two occasions and have provided a stand at IKEA and a Wedding Fair. Adverts have been placed in local free publications in each of the local authority areas, in cinemas and links have been made with fertility clinics within the region.
- 5.7** VVC's Marketing Co-ordinator is responsible for updating and managing VVC's website and has recently obtained agreement to develop VVC's usage of Facebook and Instagram as a means of raising our profile. This is likely to become live in October of this year
- 5.8** As part of the Welsh Government grant allocation to improve adoption, three of the other regions have decided to use part of the money to establish capacity for marketing within their services. North Wales already had a post within their service but this had been vacant for some time. VVC's Job Description and Person Specification has been circulated to those regions to assist in their recruitment process and provide consistency across Wales.

- 5.9** In terms of performance, the number of enquiries, response times and conversion rates is regularly reported upon to NAS as part of our performance monitoring. The Marketing Co-ordinator plays a key role in this and the requirements to monitor this activity will increase with the implementation of the two stage model. It is too early to assess if the role has had a direct impact upon conversion rates although attendance at Information Evenings has increased this year with **86** people attending to date compared with **72** attendees for the whole of previous year.
- 5.10** The region approved **51** adopter households in the year compared with **46** in the previous year. A further five were recommended for approval but not ratified until April 2019 and five withdrew following concerns which had arisen as part of the assessment process. The approved adopters comprise of 36 first time adopters, 9 second time, 1 third time approval, 8 foster carers and 2 inter country. The increase in approvals has continued into this year with 35 being approved to date.
- 5.11** The increase in adopter approvals is acknowledged as a move in the right direction but falls short of the target of 100 approvals set by VVC Management Board and is a long way off the NAS projection of circa 160 placements which it forecasts will be needed to place children currently waiting.
- 5.12** In relation to VVC's overall performance in relation to the timeliness of assessments the picture has improved. The timescales from initial enquiry to approval has decreased from **13.5 months** to **11.3 months** and the timescale from application to approval has improved with an average of **5.8 months** overall, which is below the national benchmark.
- 5.13** During the early part of 2019, Welsh Government amended the Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005 to introduce a two stage assessment process for prospective adopters. The implementation of these amendments have now been postponed until 1 January 2020. The Regional Adoption Manager has been part of a national Policy & Practice Group commissioned

to develop a Good Practice Guide to accompany the Regulations and training has recently been provided for the whole team on the new requirements. The two stage process allows for a period of two months initially for training, preparation and checks to be undertaken on prospective adopters and a further four months for the assessment to be completed. This model has operated in England for some time and it is likely to significantly impact on performance until the system is embedded in practice. A range of new performance measures have been developed to capture compliance with each part of the process.

- 5.14.** As indicated in the previous report, VVC receives a high numbers of non-agency adoption referrals, the majority of which are from step parents wishing to adopt their step child. These numbers are collated by NAS. Again this is an area which poses significant challenges for the service as the need to prioritise the recruitment of adopters for children waiting to be adopted has resulted in a backlog. Significant efforts have been made to reduce this waiting list with the result that only a relatively small number remain unallocated.
- 5.15.** The team remain very committed to developing the service and the fourth day of training for prospective adopters is now well established alongside the preparation course on a bi-monthly basis. The team provided training for second time adopters twice during the year and are also keen to develop training for family and friends of adoptive families. The need to provide training in a tighter timescale with the two stage model that is to be implemented in Wales may require the frequency of training courses to increase and so some preliminary discussions have taken place with our neighbouring regions to see if this could be facilitated jointly.
- 5.16.** Training has also been provided for the team on inter country adoption and adoption law in an effort to address the knowledge gap within the service particularly from those staff new to working in adoption. Representatives of the service also attended a national event with NAS and the Inter Country

Adoption Centre (IAC) based in London and as a result a service level agreement for Wales with IAC has been agreed.

6. ADOPTION SUPPORT

- 6.1** Adoption referrals have remained at a consistent rate for the past couple of years. The proportion of referrals by local authorities have also remained consistent.
- 6.2** The total expenditure on Adoption Support Services for the reporting year was **£131,991.85**. The average spend per child is **£2,205.87** and is consistent across the local authorities. Cardiff's expenditure is considerably higher than previous years and includes a figure of approximately £15k on a high package of support for two children agreed over a two year period. Analysis of the figures over the past four years shows a correlation between the number of referrals in one year and the subsequent funding agreements received in the following year. On average **40%** of children referred from Cardiff and RCT go on to receive funding requests, meaning **60%** are managed with in-house support or sign-posting to other services. This figure is slightly higher for the Vale and much lower for Merthyr, although there is a very small data sample in Merthyr to draw from.
- 6.3** The largest costs are for attachment-based therapeutic work, complex emotional and behavioural therapeutic work and therapeutic life story work. These are our most frequently commissioned service and are in line with the types of need our children present with. We anticipate that although the need for therapeutic life story work remains high at present, over the coming years with the investment in Life Journey Work across Wales this demand will reduce as the quality of the support being provided at an earlier stage improves. The spend on Non-Violent Resistance support we anticipate reducing in coming years as we are able to offer this course in-house now, reducing the reliance on an external service. This year there has also been no spend on post-

adoption parenting courses as we have been able to deliver the 'Nurturing Attachments' course in-house rather than commission another course for families.

- 6.4** **49** referrals for Access to Birth Records for adopted adults were received during the reporting period. This remains consistent with the rate of referrals from previous year.
- 6.5** **37** referrals for Intermediary Services. This is a decrease when compared to 2017-18 statistics. In 2017-18 the service saw a significant increase in the allocations of those waiting to access their birth records which subsequently led to an increase in follow-on intermediary requests from adopted adults.
- 6.6** Allocation times have significantly improved for both access to birth records and intermediary services. Historically waiting times for access to birth records cases could be up to a year and intermediary cases up to 2 years. With investment in a designated part-time post for this work in addition to the adoption support team maintaining full staffing these waiting times have been able to reduce and currently there is no-one waiting more than 2 months for either service. It remains a significant strength of our service that intermediary requests are being supported as not every region in Wales has been able to offer this service and where they do, there remains lengthy waiting times.
- 6.7** As at 31st March 2019, the service has **905** open Letterbox cases. Of this, **700** are considered "active". The number of "active" cases has continued to rise in recent years with increased success in engaging both birth parents and adoptive parents. This is greatly aided by the investment of a part time post designated for this work. However, additional support is provided through our Duty system and our Business Support team to ensure that the workload is managed.
- 6.8** The Adoption Support team has developed an improvement plan which focuses upon providing opportunities for upskilling staff to reduce reliance upon externally commissioned services, training for adopters and improved overall provision. This plan is kept under review and plans are in place to facilitate

specialist training within the team utilising some of the slippage money arising from Welsh Government grant. In addition, the plan also focuses on maintaining our current universal services of; a monthly toddler group for adopted families and twice yearly fun-day. It is anticipated that when the specialist posts embed in to the service then further improvements will be noted.

- 6.9** In the reporting period, NAS commissioned Adoption UK to engage in a further “Adopter Voice” consultation with adoptive families. The consultation focused upon key priorities for development at a national and regional level, namely; life journey work, contact, post adoption support, mental health and education. VVC adopters were invited to participate in a regional forum, 15 families attended and 17 responded to an online consultation. The findings of the consultation exercise were presented in a regional report and provided to VVC Management Board. It is of significance that the proportion of families had adopted with the last three years presented a more positive view of the service received and were clear about where they could go to access to support.

7. ADOPTION PANEL

- 7.1** The Collaborative has continued to operate a joint regional Panel from two sittings held on a fortnightly Monday and Wednesday basis. Work has been undertaken to merge the Panel Members and the Panel activity to enable the Panel to operate on a more unified basis.
- 7.2.** Panel business has remained at a high level during the year with 47 Panel meetings being held and one scheduled meetings being cancelled due to quoracy.
- 7.3** Maintenance of the central list of Panel members continues to pose challenges in terms of maintaining a sufficient number of Social Work members. This issue has been raised by the VVC and some new Social Work representatives have been identified and are in the process of being vetted.
- 7.4** Panel training was not held during the year but is planned with the introduction of the new 2 stage model.

8. COMPLAINTS & COMPLIMENTS

8.1 VVC has received the following complaints during the period:

1. Complaint from an Assembly Member regarding delay in providing post adoption support package for an adoptive family.
2. Complaint from adopters of a sibling group regarding a delay in their assessment being undertaken for an older sibling.
3. Complaint from adopters regarding a delay in being informed of a data breach which had come to light during Court proceedings for a subsequent sibling and delays in the matching process for that sibling.
4. Complaint from an Assembly Member regarding removal of a child placed for adoption with one of his constituents. This was transferred to the placing authority for investigation.

All the complaints investigated by VVC have been resolved at stage 1 of the Vale of Glamorgan Complaint Process.

Two of the complaints highlight issues with the placement of siblings, but the concerns were significantly different and as such, it is not possible to draw any specific conclusions.

8.2 Regional staff continue to receive positive feedback on the service provided in terms of assessment of adopters, participation in adoption support activities and for the general service provided. This however, tends to be very individualised and so the service has begun to develop a more formalised feedback process. Work has been undertaken with the Vale of Glamorgan Participation Officer to develop questionnaires to be used during the assessment process. A questionnaire has been developed which will be distributed following the adopter preparation training and these returns will be collated.

9. CONCLUSION AND 2019-20 PRIORITIES

- 9.1** The priorities identified during the previous report in terms of completing the actions arising from the Best Value Review and managing the relocation of the Service to Barry have been met.
- 9.2** The other priorities in respect of VVC's performance relate to our core business and these will remain during the current year. As the largest regional Collaborative, VVC has the largest number of children awaiting adoptive placements and the biggest challenge in adopter recruitment. We envisage that these priorities in particular will be our main focus.
- 9.3** In terms of regional performance, the work undertaken by the regional Marketing Co-ordinator has had a positive benefit and we now have a rich set of data in respect of adopter enquiries and demographics in which to inform our recruitment strategy.
- 9.4** Positive performance has been noted in terms of increasing the number of placements made, the number of adopters approved and improved timeliness of the assessment process. VVC has seen a dip in the performance in the provision of Life Journey Work and the take up of services by birth parents, but it is hoped that the new posts identified as a result of the Welsh Government grant will go some way to improve this across the region.
- 9.5** The priorities for the service going forward are to ensure that the new service provisions are embedded into regional practice to improve consistency and service delivery. The other key priority is ensuring that the two stage model for the assessment of adopters is implemented fully and the impact upon regional performance is monitored closely.

Angela Harris

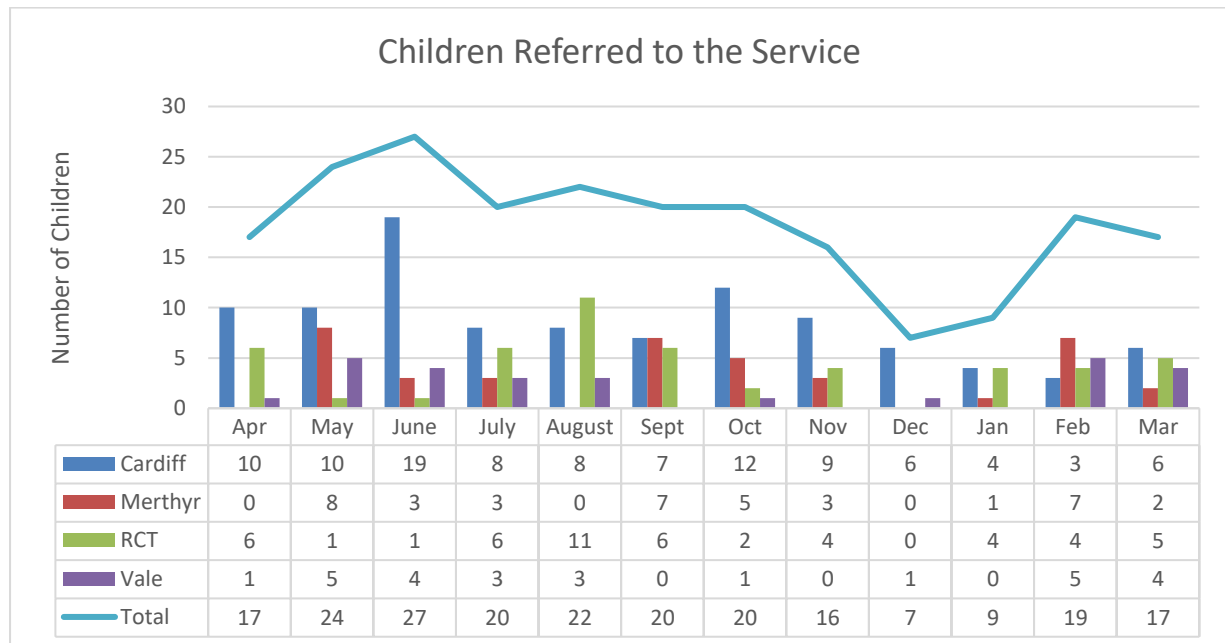
Regional Adoption Manager

September 2019

Appendix 1 – Family Finding

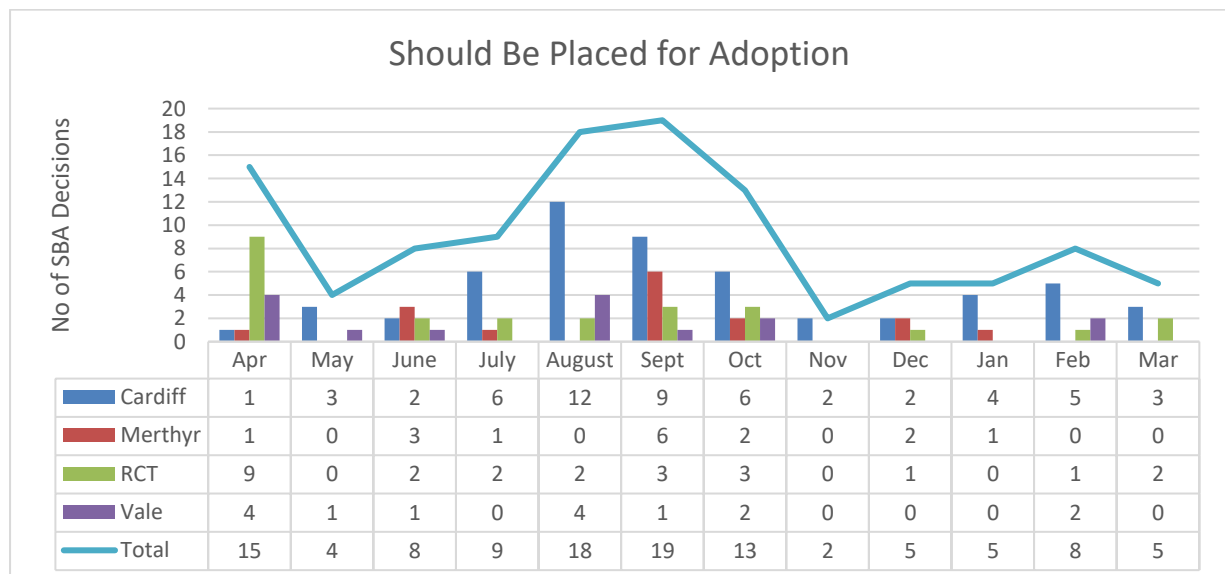
Children Referred.

During the period April 2018 and March 2019, 218 children were referred to the Service.



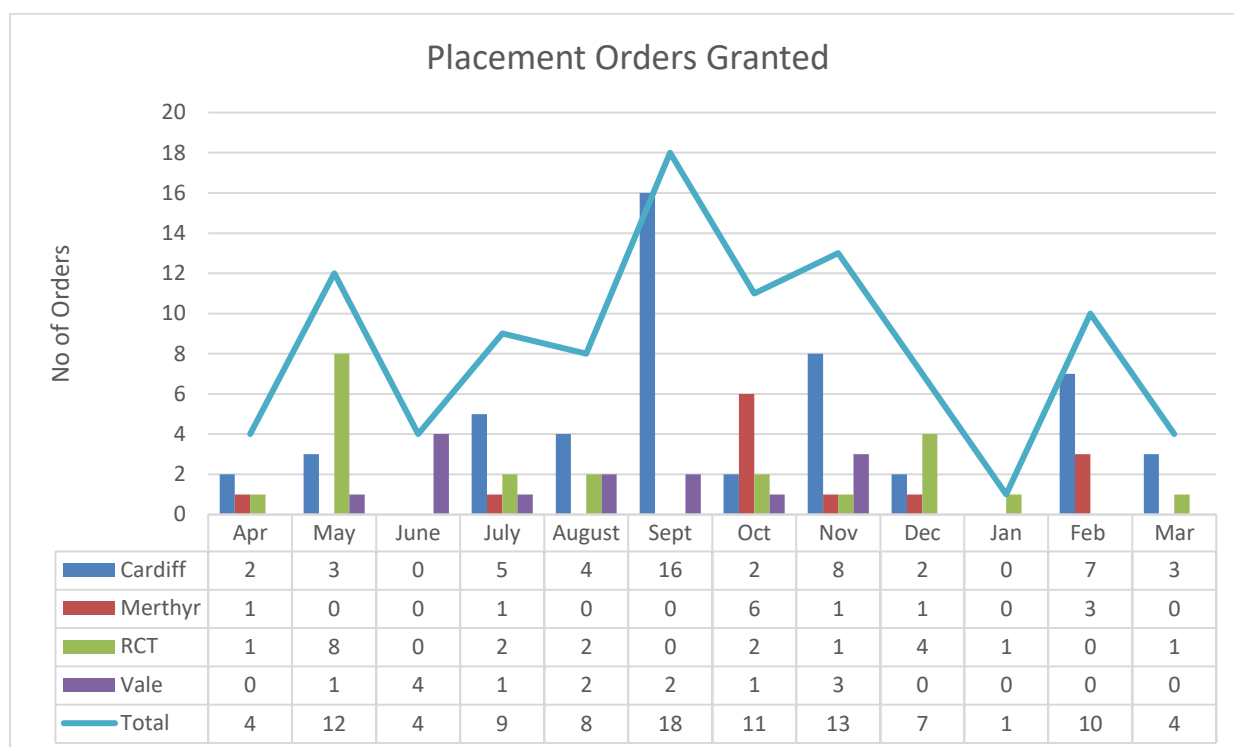
Number of “Should be placed for Adoption” decisions

During the reporting period, 111 SBA decisions were made in relation to children referred to the Service.



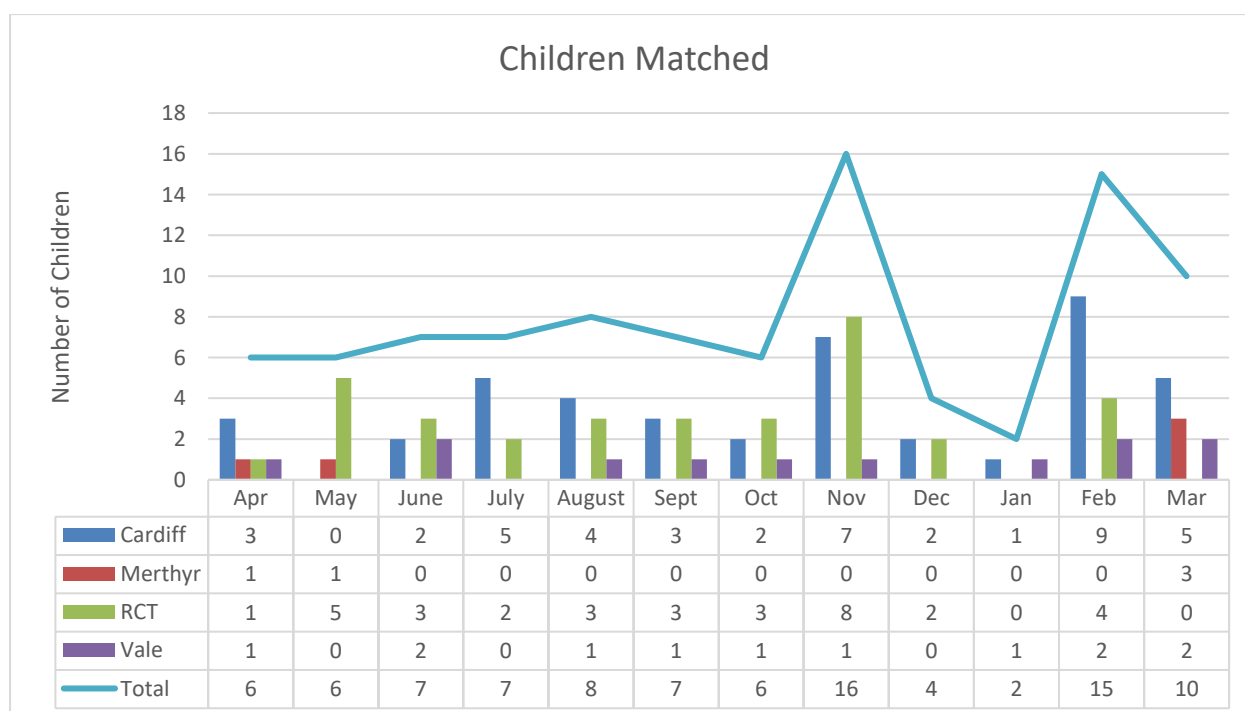
Placement Orders granted

During the reporting period, 101 Placement Orders were granted.



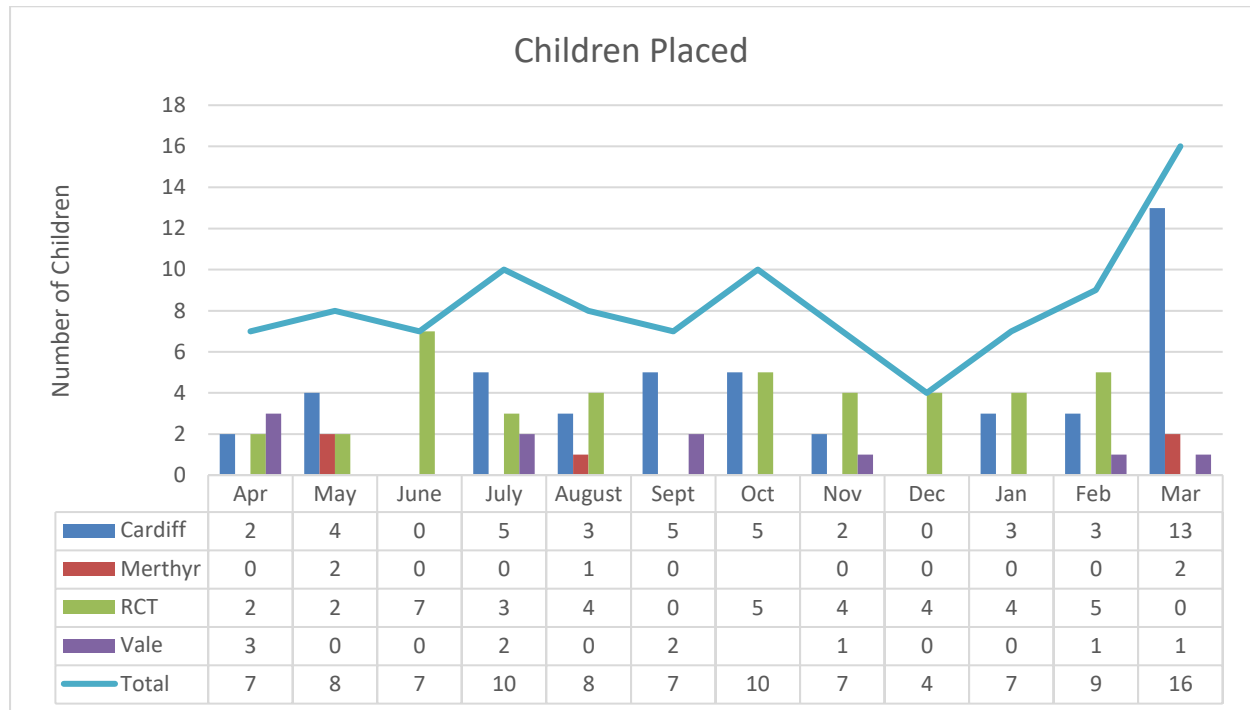
Children Matched

94 children were matched with prospective adopters during the reporting period.



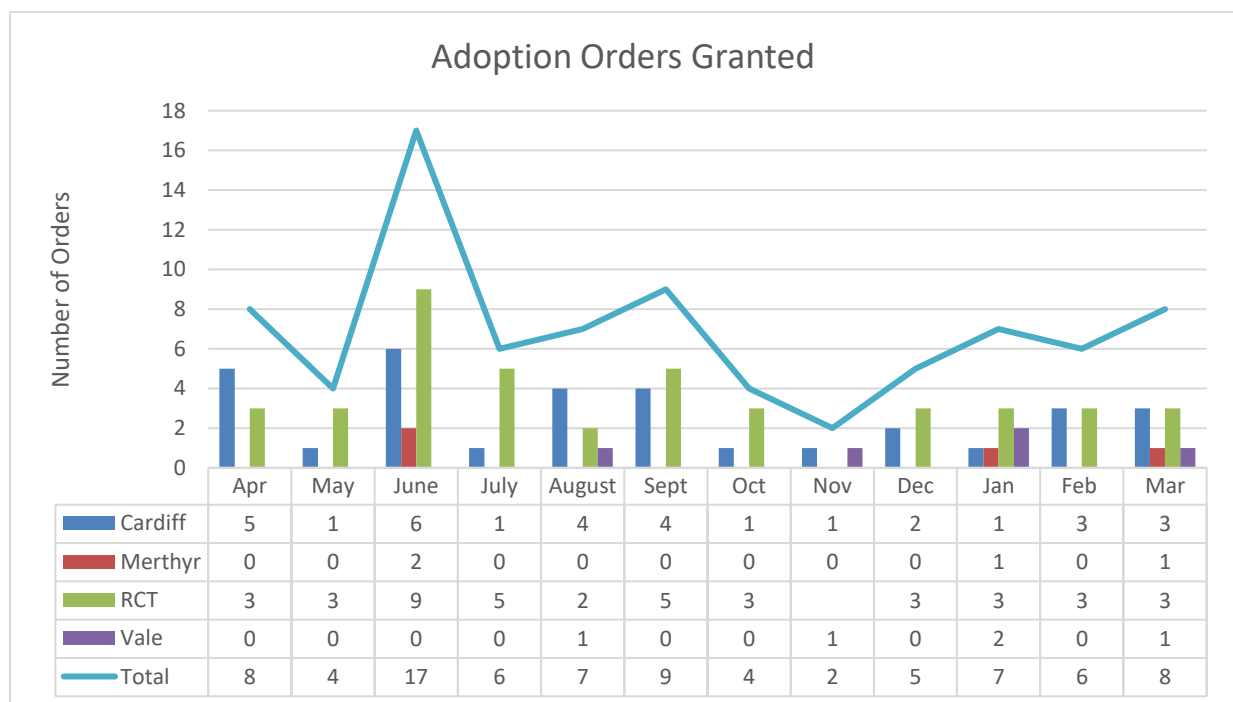
Children Placed

100 children were placed with adopters during the reporting period.



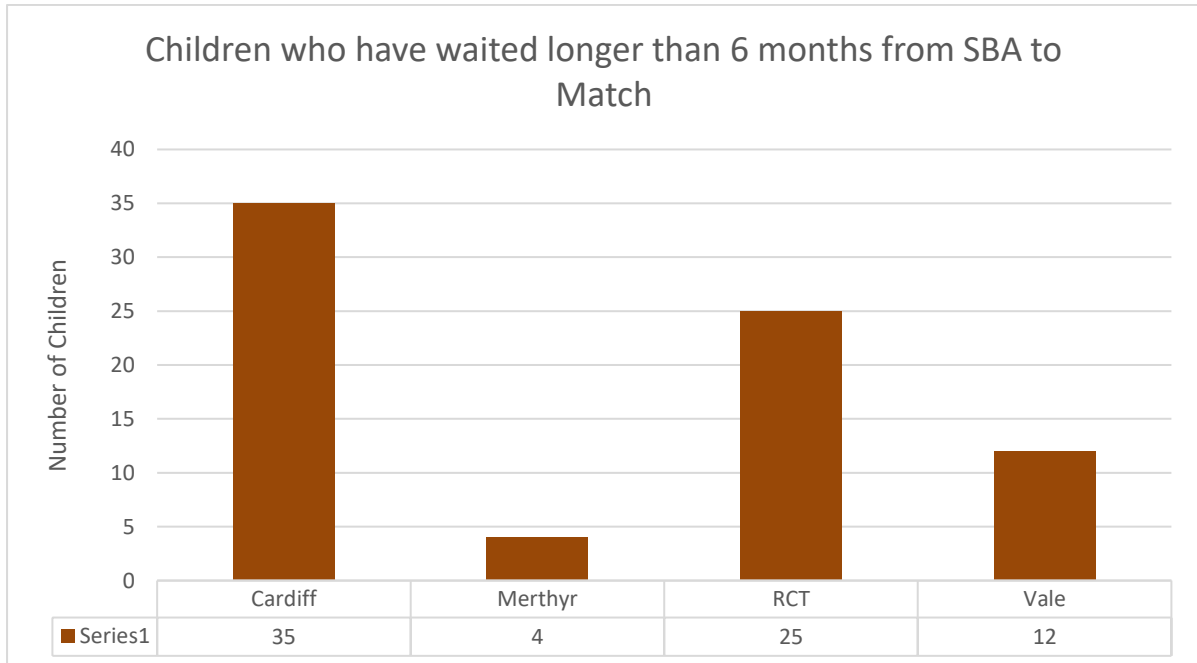
Adoption Orders Granted

83 Adoption Orders were granted during the reporting period.



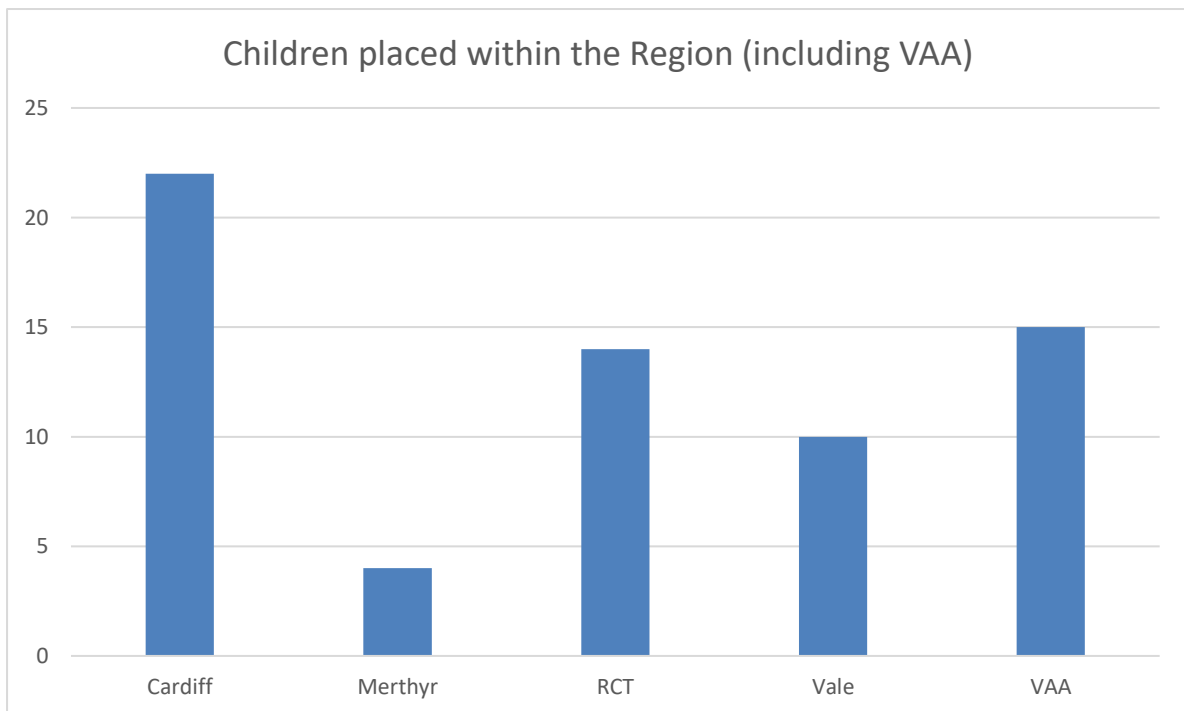
Children who have waited longer than 6 months from SBA to Match

76 Children waited longer than six months from the date of the "Should be placed for Adoption" decision and the children being matched with prospective adopters in the reporting period.



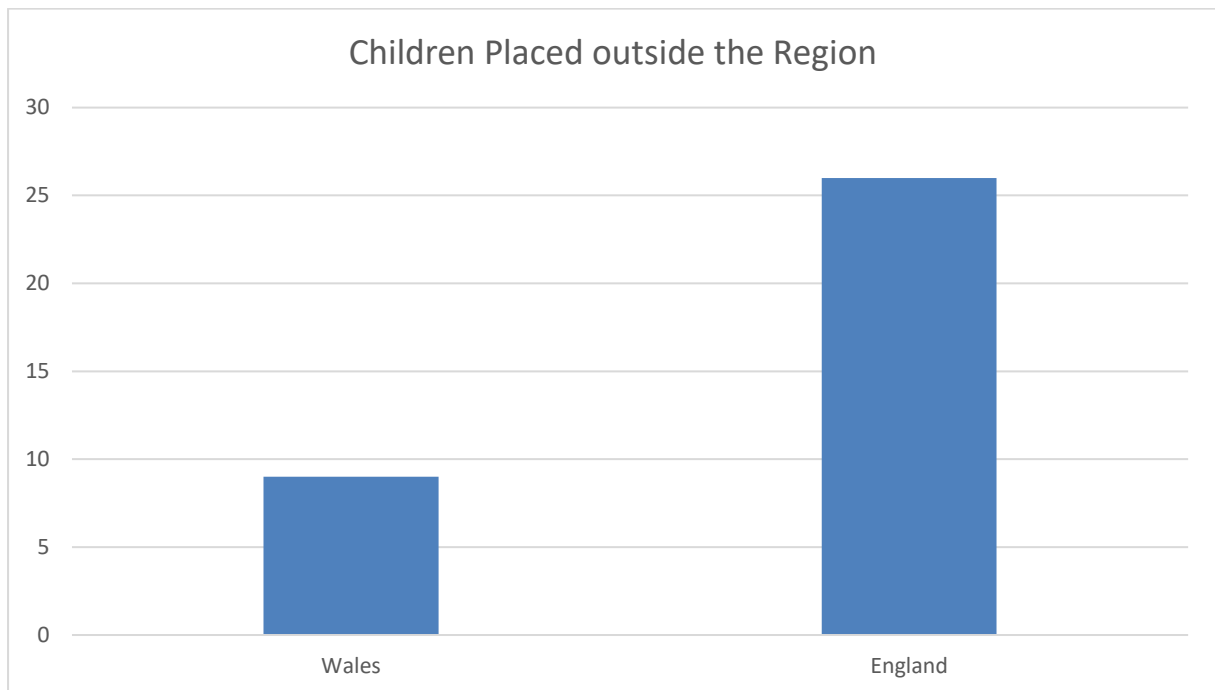
Children placed in the Region

64 children were placed with adopters living in the region. 15 children were placed with VAA adopters within the region.



Children placed outside of the Region

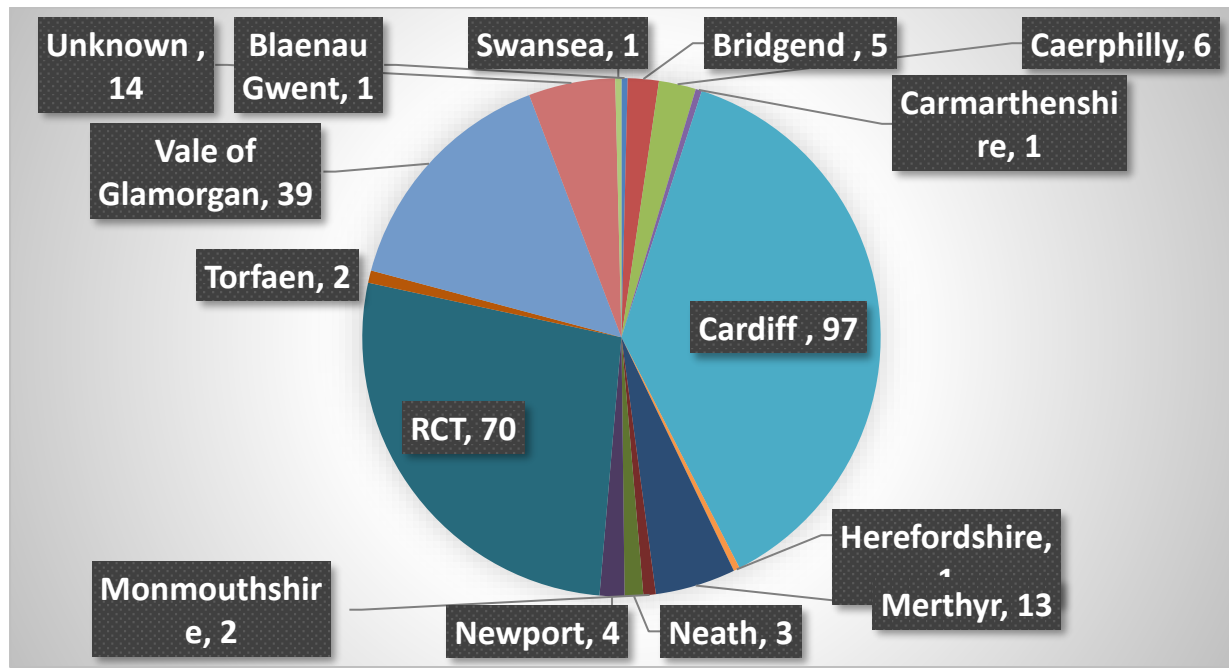
35 children were placed outside of the region, 9 of which were placed with adopters living in Wales.



Appendix 2 – Recruitment & Assessment

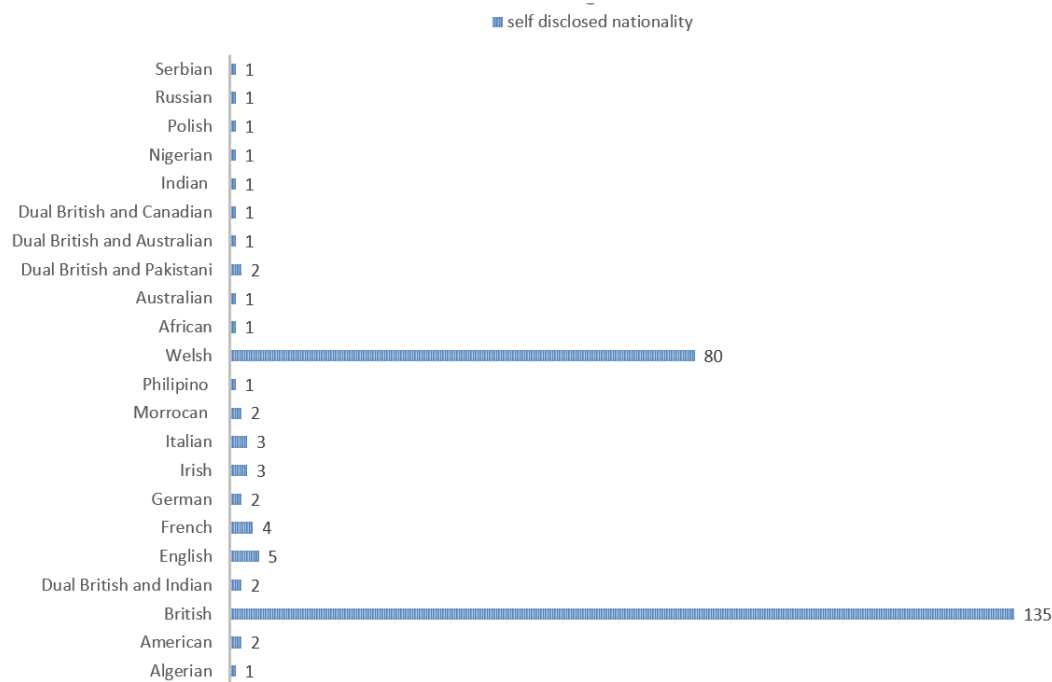
Enquiries

219 enquiries were received from people living within our region. In addition, 26 enquiries were received from people living outside our area.

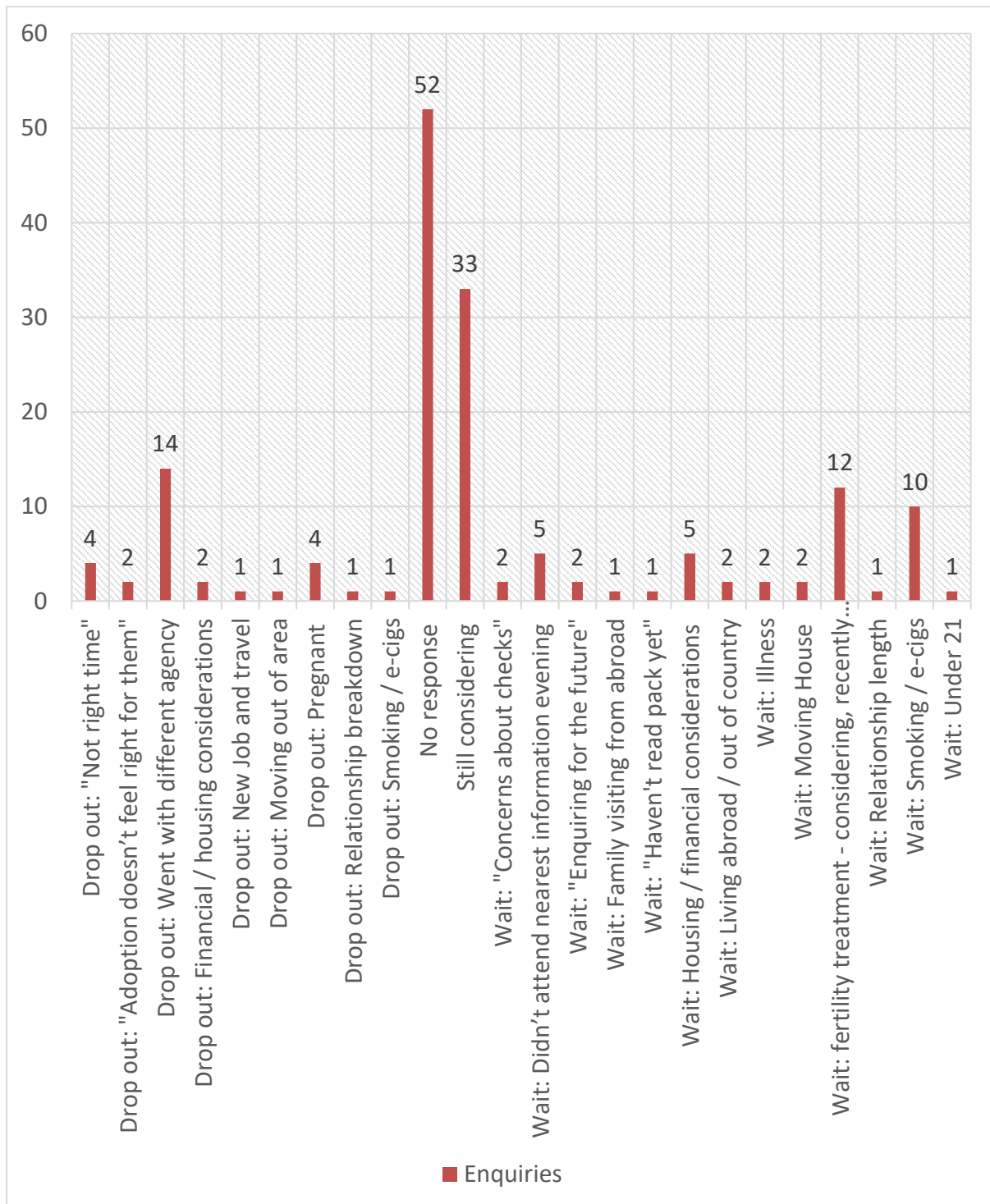


Self-disclosed Nationality

53% of respondents identified themselves as British and 31% of respondents identified as Welsh.

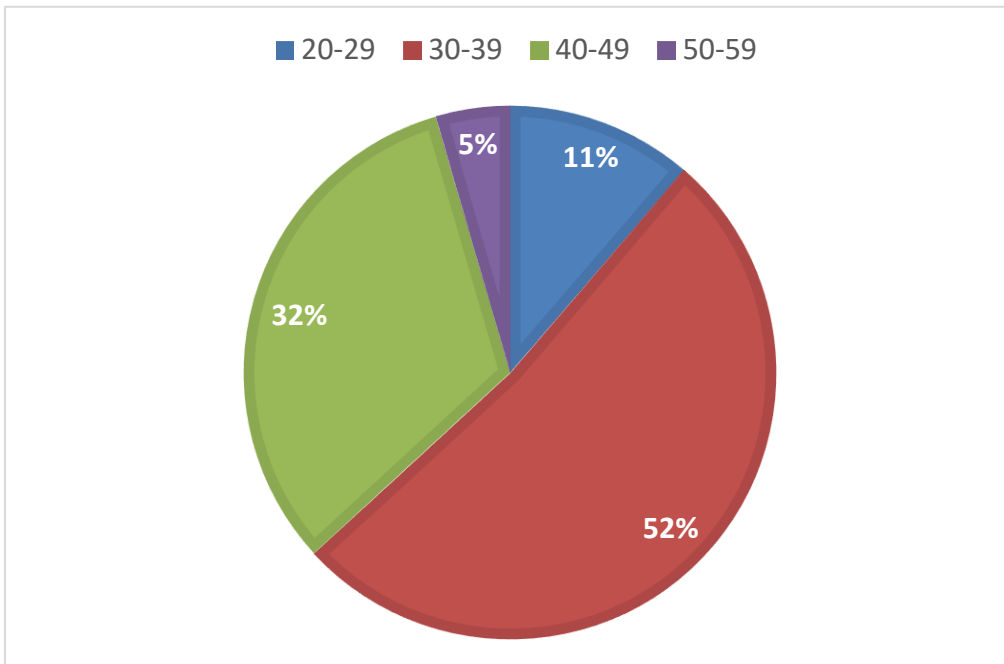


Follow up reasons for delay or withdrawal from adoption process

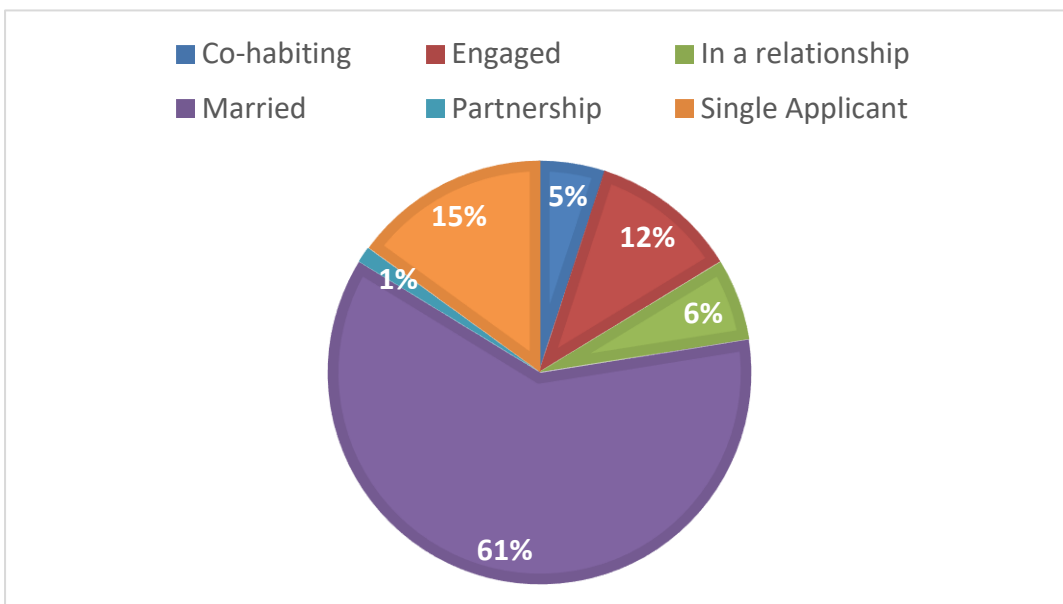


Example of demographic reporting 2019 (April 2019)

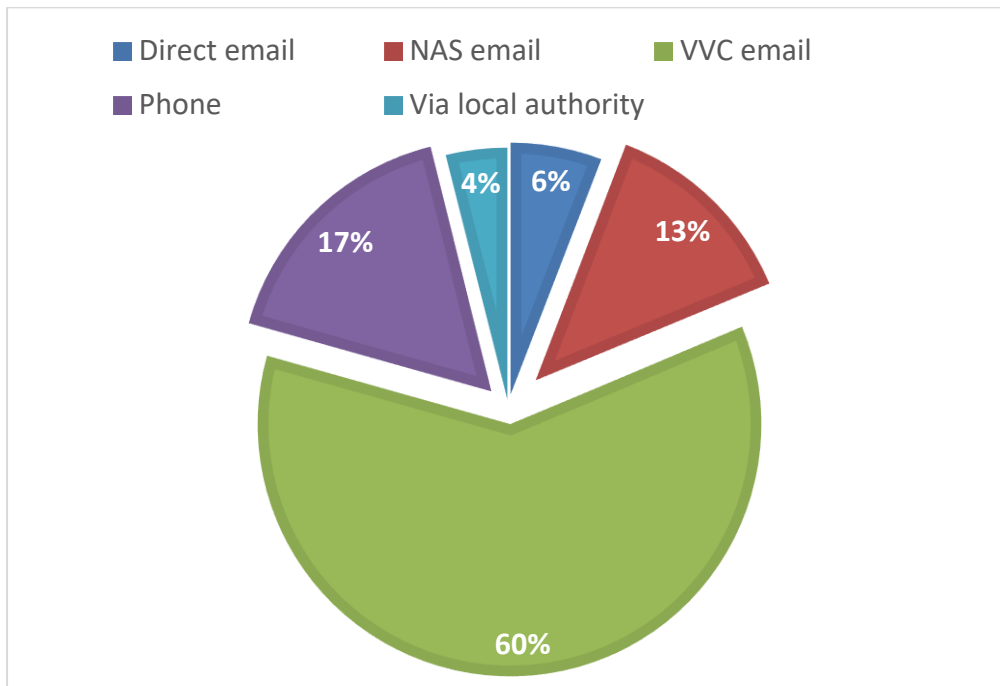
Age: April 2019 – Present (19/09/19)



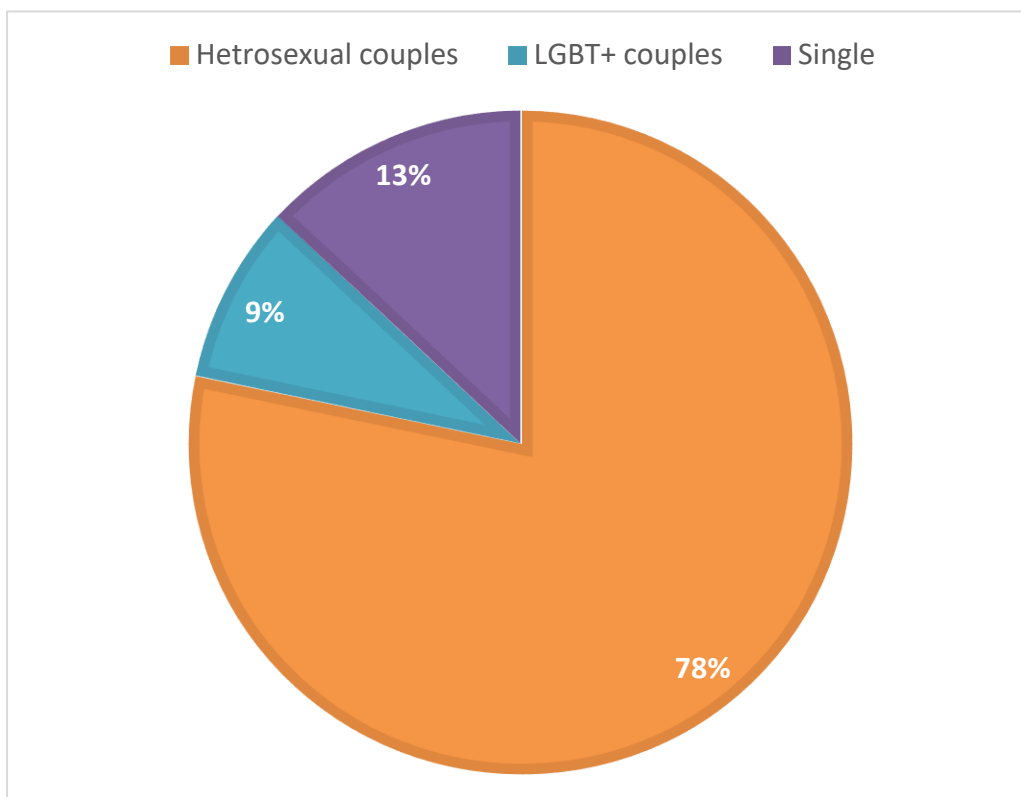
Relationship Status: April 2019 – Present



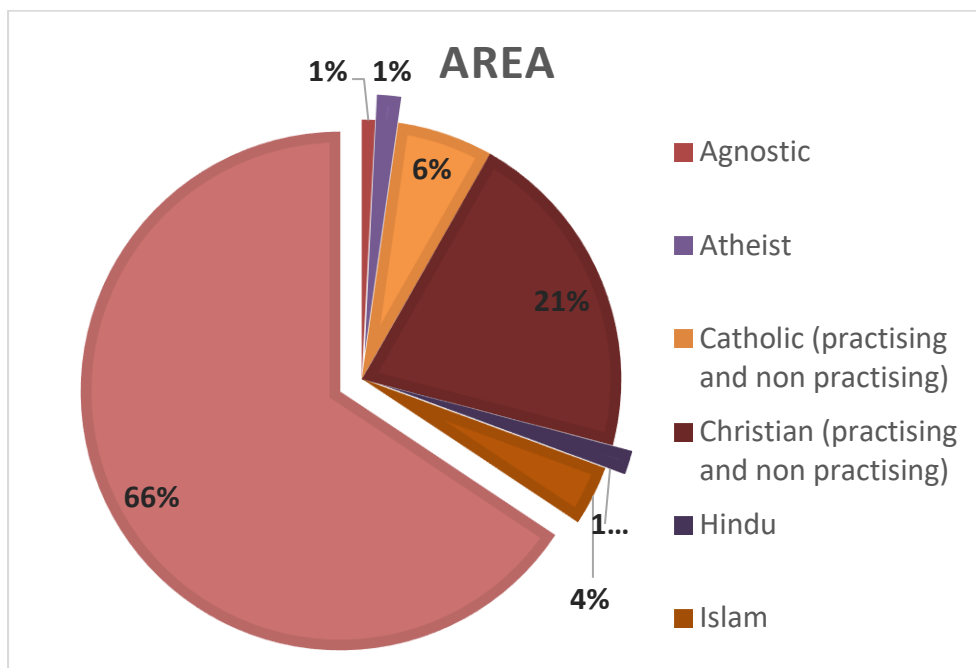
How they contacted us: April 2019 – Present



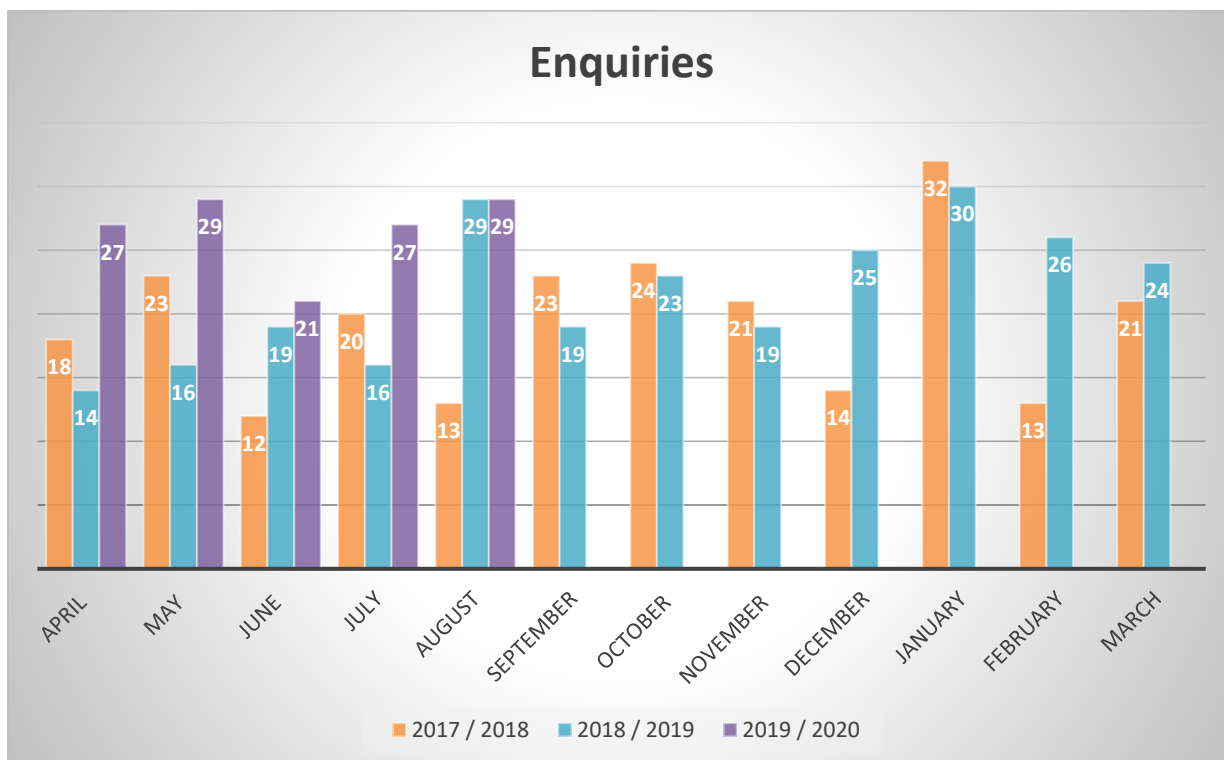
Sexuality: April 2019 – Present



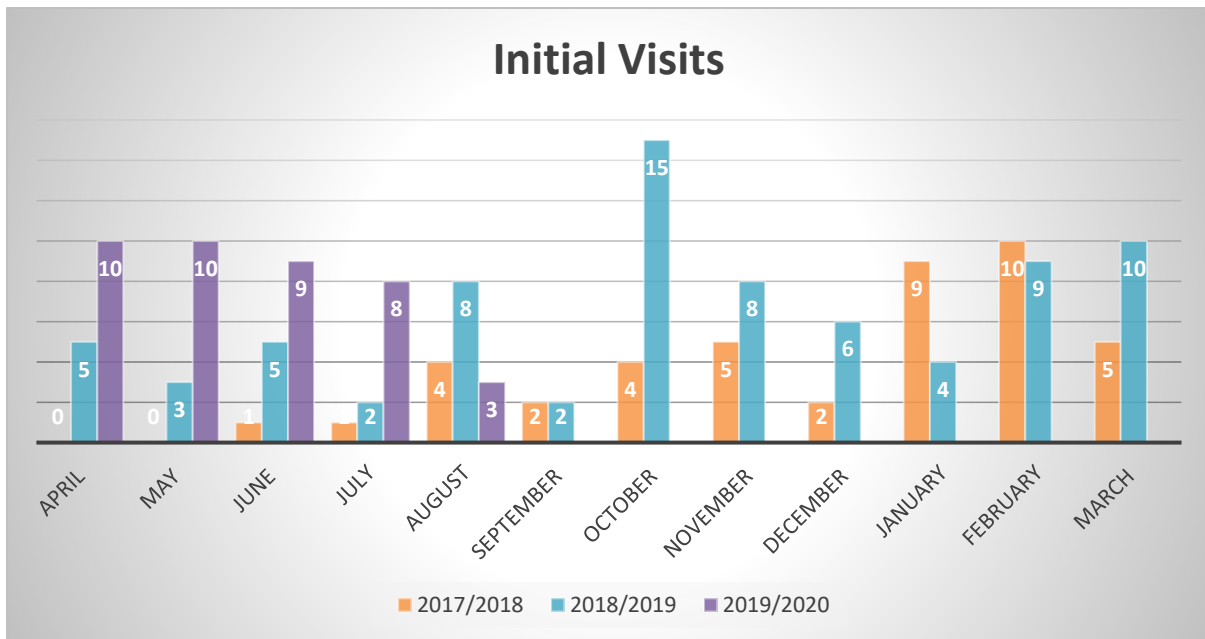
Faith: April 2019 – Present



Three Year comparison of Recruitment 2017-19 – number of enquiries

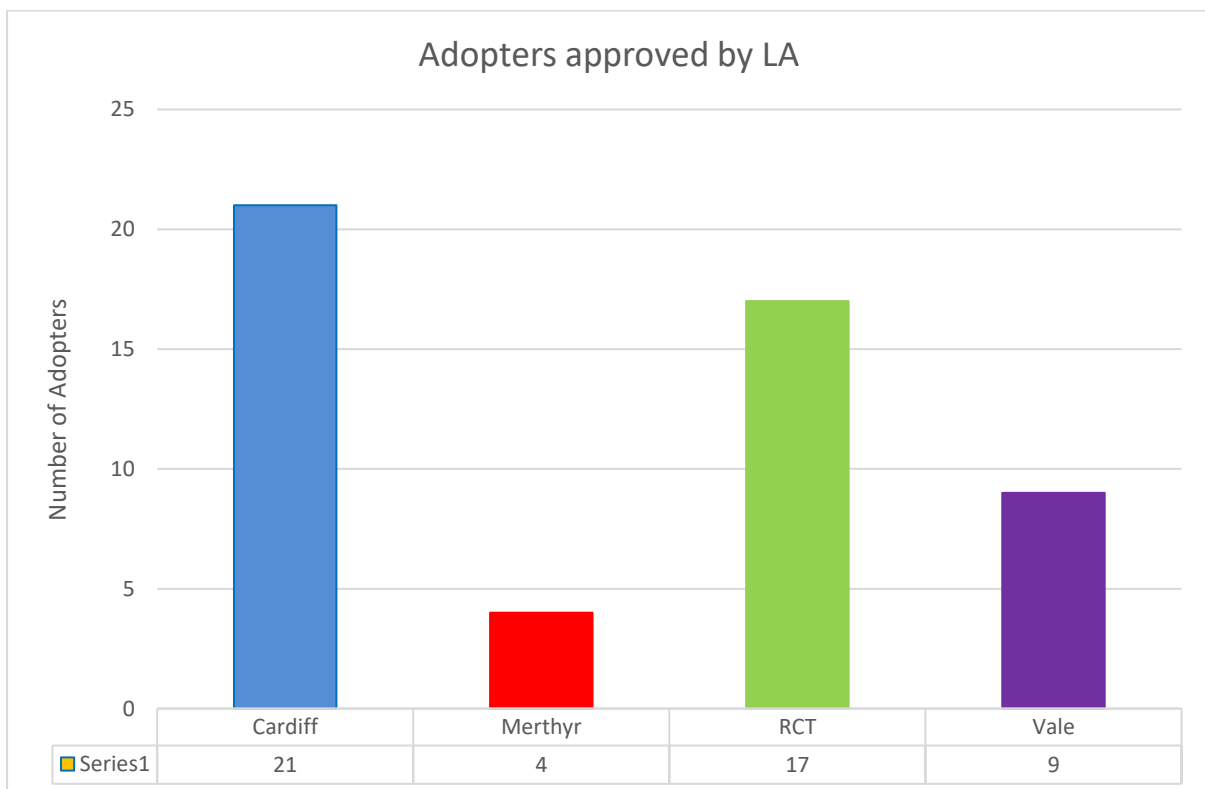


Three Year comparison of Recruitment 2017-19 – Initial Visits



Adopters Approved

51 Adopters were approved during the reporting period.



Appendix 3 – Adoption Support

Referrals to the Service

Referrals by L.A.		Comparison with 2017-18 data	Average by L.A. over 4 years (2015-2019)
Cardiff	35	43	33
Merthyr	3	4	5
RCT	23	23	23
Vale	16	11	14

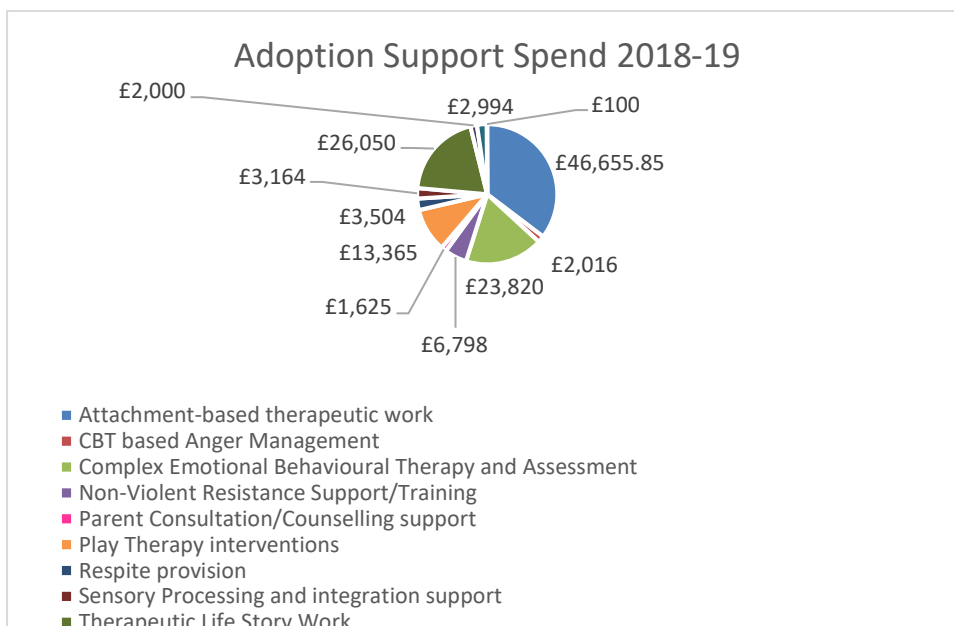
Total Expenditure

Spend by L.A.		Comparison with 2017-18 data	Average by L.A. over 4 years (2015-2019)
Cardiff	£75,145.85	£33,382.65	£43,155.41
Merthyr	£2,015	£6,718	£4,042
RCT	£24,785	£20,595.80	£27,072.41
Vale	£30,046	£52,024.10	£31,468.47

Average expenditure by Local Authority

Cardiff	£2,177.36
Merthyr	£2,309.71
RCT	£2,028.30
Vale	£2,275.87

Types of commissioned provision



Other Adoption Support Services

Access to Birth Records

Referrals by L.A.		Comparison with 2017-18 data
Cardiff	21	26
Merthyr	4	0
RCT	19	16
Vale	5	6

Intermediary Services

Referrals by L.A.		Comparison with 2017-18 data
Cardiff	10	20
Merthyr	3	4
RCT	15	20
Vale	9	10