

APPENDIX A



VALE, VALLEYS, AND CARDIFF ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE REVIEW OF SERVICE AND ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

For Period 1 April 2021 to 30 September 2022

NATIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE



**Achieving More Together /
Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd**

Contents

1.	Background	3
2.	Service Development and Governance.....	4
3.	Staffing.....	7
4.	Service Functions	8
5.	Family Finding.....	8
6.	Recruitment & Assessment	13
	i. Marketing.....	13
	ii. Adopters	14
7.	Adoption Support.....	17
8.	Adoption Panel.....	20
9.	Complaints and Compliments	21
10.	Consultation, Engagement and Quality Assurance.....	21
11.	Policies and procedures.....	22
12.	Conclusion, Future Priorities and Challenges	22

VALE, VALLEYS, AND CARDIFF ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE (VVC) ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1st APRIL 2021 to 30 SEPTEMBER 2022

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 seventh annual report and covers the period 1 April 2021 to 30 September 2022. The report has been extended to cover the first six months of this reporting year to incorporate the requirement to review the service under Regulation 39 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019. It also incorporates the reporting requirements set out in the governance arrangements for the region in one report. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information provided is an accurate record of the activity and quality of the adoption service.
- 1.3** The report has the following Appendices:

Appendix 1 sets out key performance data in respect of children by quarter and local authority.

Appendix 2 provides information in respect of adopter enquiries and recruitment of adopters.

Appendix 3 provides information in respect of Adoption Support.

Appendix 4 provides information in respect of Adoption Panel activity.

2. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

- 2.1** The organisational and managerial structure of the service has remained unchanged during this period with service delivery structured around Family Finding, Recruitment & Assessment, Adoption Support and Business Support.
- 2.2** The context for service delivery during a significant part of the reporting period has been the global pandemic and the impact this has had upon the way services are delivered. VVC's office has largely remained closed during this time with the majority of staff working from home. Some Business Support staff have continued to work from the office to carry out core tasks and staff utilise the office for specific purposes and to improve work life balance. Due to the geographical spread of the region staff had been used to agile working and so have adapted well to the hybrid mix of face to face and virtual working arrangements. Office working was subject to a risk assessment process during COVID -19, but this has been relaxed as national restrictions have eased.
- 2.3** Despite the restrictions the service has continued to face increased demands, particularly in relation Adoption Support. 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 Social Care Officers within the Adoption Support Team and additional capacity within the Business Support Team was agreed and was submitted as part of the cost pressures process in each of the four authorities.

- 2.4** Quarterly meetings of VVC's Management Board have continued to be held and twice-yearly meetings of the Joint Committee. An additional Joint Committee meeting was convened in September 2021 to consider the proposals to meet the capacity pressures prior to the budget setting process.
- 2.5** The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored closely by the Management Board and approved by the Joint Committee. Due to the vacancy position and revenue generated by VVC adopters being utilised by external agencies, the end of year position reported a significant underspend in the budget for 2021-22. A proposal to retain the underspend within VVC was agreed by Management Board and Joint Committee. These monies are being allocated to provide additional Adoption Support services, independent assessments, and the regional contribution to the TESSA programme.
- 2.6** VVC 's financial and governance arrangements are subject to an annual audit by Bridgend and Vale Internal Audit Shared Service. This audit was conducted remotely in May 2022 and recommended "Reasonable Assurance as a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control were in place". The areas for improvement which were identified related to the financial process in respect of purchasing cards and the need to review VVC's WASPI/ISP. An action plan in respect of the audit recommendations has been developed and an update against the plan has recently been provided for the auditor.
- 2.7** There has been no change to the membership of the Management Board during this period although the membership of the Joint Committee changed in May 2022 following the local elections. This caused a delay in convening the meeting scheduled for May 2022 and so a combined meeting of VVC Management Board and Joint Committee took place in July 2022. The Directors for the partner authorities also attended this meeting.
- 2.8** The Operational Group has continued to meet although competing demands placed upon local authority representatives and managerial gaps within VVC has impacted upon frequency of meetings and quoracy. As a result of this the terms of reference for

the Operational Group have been revised and agreed by Management Board to allow a quoracy of three officers from the partner authorities and an agreed mechanism for agreeing matters outside the meeting where one partner authority is absent. A joint Heads of Service & Operational Group meeting was held in June 2022 to look at Adoption Support issues and a further meeting of the Operational Group was held in September 2022 enabling the schedule of meetings to resume.

- 2.9** The agendas for all these levels of regional governance have remained 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 2021 meeting of the Management Board to present the regional findings in respect of IPC'S Evaluation of the Adoption Support Framework.
- 2.10** The service has continued to comply with all required performance monitoring and reporting to the National Adoption Service (NAS). Internal data collection systems have been adapted to incorporate the increased range of measures required to support the two-stage model of adopter assessment and the new raft of adoption support measures which will be collected from October 2022. The Regional Manager has been part of a working group initiated by Western Bay to develop the adoption modules for WCCIS. These have now been completed and work is underway to build them into the national system. Meetings have been held locally to begin the process of VVC transferring their record system onto WCCIS once the new system is live.
- 2.11** The Regional Manager and Team Managers remain active participants in national forums and subgroups. The Regional Manager attends monthly meetings for Regional Adoption Managers facilitated by NAS and monthly meetings which involve representatives from the voluntary adoption agencies. In addition, the Head of Service for the Vale of Glamorgan, as host authority and the Regional Manager attend bi - monthly meetings with other regional and national leads to plan the business delivery of the national service from a regional perspective. In 2021 the Regional Manager contributed to the development of NAS guidance in respect of the transfer of Adoption Support cases at the three-year point post Adoption Order. The Recruitment &

Assessment Manager was also part of a national group developing NAS' Welsh Early Permanence Strategy.

3. Staffing

- 3.1** The overall staffing establishment remained the same during 2021, although there has been some staff turnover in all teams. Within the Recruitment & Assessment Team, three experienced Social Workers began their maternity leave during 2021 and another experienced full-time member of staff changed roles to fill a vacancy in the Adoption Support Team. Attempts to fill all these vacancies were unsuccessful although a temporary part time appointment was made to fill one of the positions. Slippage monies were therefore allocated to buy in independent support to assist with some of the assessment work within the team especially in respect of non- agency applications.
- 3.2** 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.
- 3.3** In terms of the specialist posts funded from the 2019 Welsh Government investment for adoption services, the service monitors any movement of staff within these posts carefully to ensure that gaps are covered quickly, and performance is maintained. The Regional Adoption Manager completed six monthly returns to NAS during 2021-22 to report upon the performance of the region in relation to these posts to ensure continuation of the funding.
- 3.4** As a result of the discussions concerning capacity within the service regional partners agreed to some additional investment to support the work of the Adoption Support Team and to review the structure of the Business Support Team to take effect from April 2022. The new Social Care Officer posts have been created and recruited to and work is underway to reconfigure posts within the Business Support Team to provide additional capacity.

3.5 Similar to other services, VVC experienced a number of staff contracting COVID -19 during this period requiring periods of absence from work alongside a couple of staff on long-term absence. This was carefully monitored by the service and appropriate support systems were put in place.

4. SERVICE FUNCTIONS

4.1. Performance against each of the service functions is outlined under the following sections of the report alongside areas of development.

5. FAMILY FINDING

5.1 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.

5.2 The number of children referred for adoption totalled **155**. Over the past three years referral levels have shown slight fluctuation with an increase in 2020-21 which reduced again in 2021-22 but overall remain fairly stable. Nationally there is a trend towards a decrease in the number of children referred for adoption and therefore this will need to be monitored in 2022-23 for any noticeable reduction.

5.3 **48%** of children referred to VVC were withdrawn and did not require a plan of adoption which positively shows alternative Care Plans have been put in place for those children. This figure is an increase from the 43% of referrals withdrawn in the previous year and may reflect the work being undertaken by local authorities to reduce the number of children needing to be 'looked after'. As noted in previous years, withdrawn referrals in many instances do not equate to a decrease in workload for the service as a lot of work is undertaken to progress the adoption process prior to it being discontinued, particularly from administrative roles within VVC.

5.4 The number of 'Should be Adopted' decisions made in respect of children increased during this year to **90** (from the 80 and 81 in previous years). This is to be expected in

line with a higher number of referrals during 2020-21 which resulted in 'SBA' decisions within that year and in 2021-22.

- 5.5** The region has recorded **79** Placement Orders being made within the year, which shows an increase from figures in the past couple of years and which would be expected in line with increased referrals and Should be Adopted decisions. It is anticipated that this figure will continue to fluctuate but not significantly from this level based upon the number of referrals received during 2021-22. Should referral rates significantly decline there will be a noticeable impact on the number of Placement Orders granted.
- 5.6** VVC placed **85** children for adoption during the year which is a considerable increase from the 65 of the previous year. This would seem in line both with an increase in Placement Orders but also the successful recruitment of adopters undertaken by the region. Planning for placements in the early part of 2021-22 had to take into account Covid-19 risk assessments but as the year progressed this became less of a necessity. Due to the careful planning of Social Workers within the service the additional demands around Covid-19 have not caused significant delay in placing children for adoption.
- 5.7** Just **34%** of children matched with adopters waited more than the benchmark of 6 months from Should be Adopted decision to matching which is positive and reflects the increased availability of adopters within the region. VVC continues to place a high proportion of our children with VVC approved adopters (**72%**) maintaining a similar level to recent years.
- 5.8** At the end of the March 2022 there were **51** children on Placement Orders awaiting an adoptive placement (down from 63 in the previous year). Of these 17 had active links and went on to be matched with adopters during Q1 of 2022-23. It is positive to see a continued decrease in the number of children waiting for adoptive placements.

- 5.9** There were **80** Adoption Orders granted during the year which is a continued pattern from previous years. There were no placements which disrupted during 2021-22 which is hugely encouraging.
- 5.10** Performance in relation to the provision of Life Journey Material for children being placed for adoption has improved considerably over recent years and is 100% at matching and 90% of final materials at the 2nd adoption review. There remain some challenges for the capacity of Social Workers within the local authorities to finalise the later life letters for children which affects the 2nd review performance. The Life Journey Work Co-ordinators are developing further training and guidance to assist in improving the quality of the materials provided as well as on how to support local authority Social Workers to achieve 100% compliance. As a region we will be exploring the impact of the new performance indicators for 2022-23 in relation to life journey work which form part of the new measures to be collected from October 2022.
- 5.11** The Life Journey Work Co-ordinator post is now shared between two part-time workers due to the previous Co-ordinator leaving the post in autumn 2021. The Co-ordinators offer regular support, advice, and guidance to the Life Journey Work Practitioners within our partner authorities and in addition offer workshops/briefings to local authority teams. The Life Journey Work Co-ordinators support the allocation process within each authority and monitor performance across the region. The Co-ordinators are developing an Improvement Plan to support both improvement in measurable performance and in qualitative feedback on the materials themselves.
- 5.12** During 2021-22 the Transitions Worker supported **40** children through a combination of direct work, support for foster carers and adopters and completion of Trauma Nurture Timeline reports. Transitions support is provided for all our children aged 3+ and has become integral to the service that we offer and to our ability to provide an enhanced level of support to children moving on to adoption. The demand on this service over the past year has meant that priority has had to be given to the direct work needed for children and other aspects of the role have had to wait longer e.g., training and Understanding the Child Days. VVC has continued to review the impact

of the expectations from NAS Good Practice Guides and consider the capacity implications for our service.

- 5.13** VVC has continued to embrace the use of all available family finding methods over the year. The team liaises closely with the Adoption Register Wales (ARW)/LinkMaker team to ensure information is updated and monitored in a timely manner. We have been able to participate in national profiling events and an Activity Day over the past year. During 2021-22 we continued to refer children into the Adopting Together Scheme although the one match identified through this scheme could not proceed until the start of 2022-23 due to a legal challenge made by birth parents.

Family Finding Performance 1 April 2021 -30 September 2022

- 5.14** The number of children referred for adoption during the first six months of 2022-23 is **73**. If this trend continues for the remainder of this reporting year this will place referrals on a similar trend to previous years. Whilst nationally there has been a decrease in referrals into adoption this doesn't appear to be reflected regionally within VVC.
- 5.15** It is too early to consider the rate of children referred who have been withdrawn as many of these children are still within care proceedings and so the plan for adoption could change. In previous years this has been between 43-48% of referrals.
- 5.16** To date **34** 'Should be Adopted' decisions have been made. This could reflect a slight decline in the number of 'Should be Adopted' decisions for the year if this figure were doubled in the second 6 months however it is too early to draw any conclusions. Likewise, the region has recorded **33** Placement Orders being made which is in line with the number of 'Should be Adopted' decisions and rate of referrals. Should referral rates significantly decline there will be a noticeable impact on the number of Placement Orders granted.
- 5.17** VVC has placed **28** children for adoption during the year to date. There has been a slight reduction in Placement Orders over recent years which would result in less children requiring placement for adoption. However, family finding and matching

activity for the start of Quarter 3 is scheduled to be very busy and therefore we anticipate a higher rate of placements during Quarter 3.

- 5.18** 48% of children matched with adopters during the year to date waited more than the benchmark of 6 months from Should be Adopted decision to matching. This does however include a sibling group of 4 who were placed with in-house adopters, and which slightly inflate the figure. 75% of children placed this year so far have been placed with in-house adopters.
- 5.19** As at the end of September 2022 there were **53** children waiting for an adoptive placement. 20 of those children have an 'active link' defined as the matching meeting having taken place and the matching panel having been booked. 3 children have an alternative care plan being pursued where they will be remaining with their current foster carers and for 1 child's foster carers are currently being assessed as prospective adopters, albeit not defined as yet as an 'active link'. Therefore, there are 29 children still waiting for a link, 22 of which had their Placement Orders within the last 6 months.
- 5.20** There were **41** Adoption Orders granted within the first 6 months of 2022-23 which is a continued pattern from previous years. There have been no placements which disrupted during 2022-23 which is hugely encouraging. One match did not proceed to placement due to a sudden change in personal circumstances for the adopter during the introductory period.
- 5.21** Performance in relation to the provision of Life Journey Material for children being placed for adoption has been maintained at a similar level.
- 5.22** During the first 6 months of the year our Transitions worker has supported **30** children through a combination of direct work, support for foster carers and adopters and completion of Trauma Nurture Timeline reports. Some of these children were referred in 2021-22 and so work has continued into 2022-23 and 11 of these have been new referrals in this year.

- 5.23** As indicated earlier one child was placed in the first quarter of 2022-23 under Adopting Together and a further match for a sibling group of two under is being considered.
- 5.24** One child has also recently been placed under a Welsh Early Permanence arrangement which allows the adopters to foster the child prior to the plan for adoption being agreed.

6. RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT

Marketing

- 6.1** For the past few years, VVC's Marketing and Recruitment Strategy has continued to focus on raising the profile of the service and helping the public see the Collaborative as very much their first choice when they are exploring adoption. This has been achieved by ensuring VVC has a physical and virtual presence. The Recruitment and Marketing Officer's role remains essential in ensuring the service develops both platforms to continue to raise VVC's profile.
- 6.2** During 2021 -22, VVC utilised the opportunity to include an information insert into the Council Tax mail drops for all residents of Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf. Unfortunately, the Council Tax Team serving the Vale of Glamorgan confirmed they were not able to assist us for this particular year. Shortly after residents received the inserts, the service saw a small increase in the number of enquiries quoting the fact that they had received our details in the post, and this had prompted their enquiry. It is hoped that this type of marketing will serve as a reference point should individuals wish to consider adoption in the future.
- 6.3** As a result of COVID restrictions, the service continued to face challenges in exploring opportunities to attend in-person marketing events but as the restrictions have eased VVC has begun to focus upon some in person events. In August VVC were able to have a stand at the Vale of Glamorgan show. In addition, members of VVC staff assisted and represented the service at this year's National Eisteddfod of Wales. VVC also supported the national service in having a presence at this year's Cardiff Pride. Two of the three adoptive parents who participated in the Pride adoption discussion

were VVC adopters. More recently, VVC's Recruitment & Assessment Manager was interviewed live on BBC Radio Wales for an afternoon segment promoting adoption. All of these events have led to positive engagement with the public and supports the goal of raising the general awareness of the service.

- 6.4** Our Marketing Officer remains proactive in ensuring posters and physical information promoting the service is being displayed in high footfall areas across the region. In addition to physical advertising, VVC has utilised social media. VVC has active Instagram and Facebook accounts where we encourage existing adoptive families to remain engaged with us along with buying pay-per-click advertising. The service has experienced positive engagement through these platforms and the reach of the pay-per-click advertising is substantial.
- 6.5** Looking ahead, VVC intends to revisit the Council Tax inserts for all four local authorities, to continue building on our social media presence and explore all appropriate opportunities to attend in-person community events. To date the strategy appears to be working as over half of our enquirers continue to be members of the community who come direct to the service via our website.

Recruitment of Adopters

- 6.6** VVC received a total of **369** enquiries during 2021-22. This is a decrease when compared to the previous reporting year (377) but an increase when compared to 2019-20 (336). A reduction in the number of enquires has been reported by the other four regional Collaboratives and it is now a pattern being observed by our enquiry numbers for the first six months of 2022-23 where 98 enquiries were received compared with 165 for the same period last year.
- 6.7** VVC continues to maintain a well-established and professional tracking system whereby a response to all enquiries is made within five working days (typically within 1 working day). When tracking enquiries, as much information as possible is captured to understand the enquirer's circumstances and how they heard about our service. Every enquiry is followed up by the Marketing Officer on three occasions (within the first week, followed by 1 month and 6 months).

- 6.8** Whilst neither VVC nor the national service have commissioned any research into understanding the reasons behind the reduction, it is suspected that a number of factors are pertinent e.g., the cost of living and fuel crisis could be leading to people being more cautious about beginning the process at such an uncertain time. As part of the monitoring of enquiries, reasons for non-progression are recorded in order to better understand the decline in enquiries.
- 6.9** During 2021-22 the Collaborative hosted nine virtual Information Evenings for prospective applicants. These events were delivered remotely by VVC's Recruitment and Assessment Manager and Marketing Officer. 113 households attended these events and feedback received has continued to be positive. This represents a small decrease in the number of households that attended an Information Evening when compared to the previous year (136 households).
- 6.10** Since April 2022, five virtual Information Evenings have been held with a total of 50 households attending. This again represents a decrease when compared to the same period last year as 73 households attended. This is unsurprising given the reduction in the number of enquiries.
- 6.11** Since January 2021 VVC's virtual Preparation to Adopt training course has been jointly delivered with one of our neighbouring adoption collaboratives, Western Bay and a member of staff from VVC. This collaboration has worked well, as it affords applicants greater flexibility in attendance. The feedback regarding the course content and delivery is universally positive. In order to enable participants to build networks with other participants, a WhatsApp group has been set up for VVC participants which enables them to remain connected if they chose to do so.
- 6.13** The course was held on nine occasions during the last reporting year and on four occasions during the past six months. One course was cancelled due to this being scheduled for the same date as the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II.

- 6.14** During 2021-22 59 VVC households attended the preparation training. Out of these 59, four withdrew following the training as they no longer felt adoption was the right choice for them. A further four applicants withdrew during the assessment process. Reasons included ill-health, change of mind, and change of circumstances.
- 6.15** In addition to the Preparation to Adopt training course, the service also offers a bespoke second-time adopters 1-day training course. This course is scheduled when there are sufficient number of attendees. When numbers are insufficient to hold the training, individual assessing social workers weave the topics and themes covered in the training into their assessment sessions.
- 6.16** During the first six months of this reporting year, one further second time adopter training course has been held with a total of six households attending. One of these households withdrew following the training citing they felt they needed more time to reflect before deciding to adopt again.
- 6.17** During 2021-22 **64** adopter approvals were recommended by VVC's Adoption Panel with **59** of those recommendations being ratified by the Head of Service at 31 March 2022. This represents a small decrease when compared to previous year's performance where **66** approvals were ratified. Despite the reduction, this remains a significant number of approvals and is a pleasing outcome given the restrictions upon service delivery.
- 6.18** These approvals are broken down as follows, **25** RCT, **19** Cardiff, **9** Vale of Glamorgan, **3** Merthyr Tydfil and **3** other (**2** Bridgend and **1** Powys). Of those approved **45** were first time adopters, **12** were second time adopters and **2** foster carers were assessed for children already residing in their care.
- 6.19** The majority of the applicants approved during 2021-22 have been linked with children from within the region. Two families have been matched with children from other areas, one from North Wales and the second Wiltshire. Two applicants withdrew post their approval due to a change in their circumstances. As indicated under the family finding section, a significant number of VVC children have been placed with in-house

adopters. However, due to the reduction in the number of children waiting, VVC has accrued a significant of approved adopters who awaiting a suitable match. This trend has been noted across Wales and is being monitored by NAS.

- 6.20** During the first six months of 2022-23 **30** approvals were recommended by VVC Adoption Panel with **26** being ratified to date.
- 6.21** 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. The temporary easement came to an end on 30 September 2021 and since 1st October 2021 any new enquiries are managed under the new model. The new way of working and tighter timescales are being closely monitored and reported upon. A more accurate picture of compliance with the model will be available during second half of the reporting year.

7. ADOPTION SUPPORT

- 7.1** The service continued to experience an increase in the demand for post adoption support services and requests for assessment of post adoption support needs during 2021-22. **117** new referrals were received during this period when compared with **74** received during the preceding year demonstrating a **58%** increase in service demand. During the first half year 2022-23 referrals have stabilised with **32** new referrals received. However, the nature of these referrals are becoming increasingly more complex and therefore require more staff time.
- 7.2** Referrals for Access to Birth Records for adopted adults have stabilised during the period with a total of **47** referrals being received. There has also been a continuation in requests for information under the Post Commencement Regulations 2005 as a number of those enquirers have reached 18 years of age. **29** referrals for Intermediary Services have also been received.

- 7.3** Due to an existing backlog of work, there a waiting list for all Adoption Support services. Work has however been undertaken with the team to review the current workload and the role and remit of the service. An audit of caseloads is being undertaken. A triage process and a case priority system has been introduced into the service to ensure that critical cases are allocated.
- 7.4** 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.
- 7.5** By utilising some monies from the reserves, VVC was able to commission an NVR course for 20 families facilitated by Adoption UK during the year. Two courses on the Circle of Security have also been facilitated by an agency worker and team member. The service piloted a Welsh Language Support Group for Welsh speaking adopters facilitated by an external facilitator which will now be adopted at a national level. In addition, the ENFYS Psychology service for Cardiff and Vale offers Nurturing & Attachment courses which families have been able to access.
- 7.6** Due to the lifting of restrictions, VVC was able to support a programme of Easter activities for young people supported by the Children and Young Person's Co-ordinator and a successful family fun day was held for over **80** families in July 2022.
- 7.7** 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 a range of support mechanisms for birth parents. This however is a part-time role and the capacity to further develop this work is currently under consideration.
- 7.8** The TESSA Co-ordinator's role has had a positive impact on supporting lower priority needs. The Co-ordinator undertakes assessments of need and processes referrals of families who may be eligible for the service. **75** referrals have been made to TESSA by VVC during the period April 2021 to September 2022 which is one of the highest in

Wales. The role has also been important in sign-posting families to other relevant services.

- 7.9** The Children and Young People Co-ordinator has continued to be directly involved in supporting Adoption UK Connected groups on a monthly basis with staff from the Connected service. These groups have returned to face-to-face meetings. The service caters for adopted children and young people 7 upwards, **83** children and young people from VVC are registered with the service. In addition, the postholder provides direct support sessions to children within the region and has also supports direct contact sessions for adopted children.
- 7.10** The NAS Good Practice Guides place a number of expectations upon the service to continue to improve Adoption Support services. One aspect is the requirement to undertake check in visits with adopters and birth parents post Adoption Order. The service is developing a process whereby this can be delivered a year after the Adoption Order has been granted and at the three-year point. It is envisaged that the newly appointed Social Care Officers will assist with this process and the support to birth parents will be linked to the post adoption contact service. In addition, NAS has developed a strategic plan, Adopt Cymru 2025 which details several objectives to improve adoption support services. This plan will form the basis of the regional business plan going forward but will require additional resource to enable the objectives to be met.
- 7.11** A new service, MAPPS, has been introduced within RCT and Merthyr Tydfil in conjunction with Health and an independent provider to provide therapeutic support for children. Requests for therapeutic support packages for adopted families are now being considered by this service.
- 7.12** VVC does not manage a budget for the provision of adoption support services although undertakes assessments of support needs which may recommend an adoption support package to the respective authority where the adoptive family resides. The budgets to support such provision is held in the respective local authority. The total expenditure on adoption support services for the reporting year was **£186,484.95**

which covers **90** children. The average spent per child has increased to **£2072** per child, although this only represents **24 %** of children who are being supported by the team.

7.13 The Operational Group has discussed increasing demand for therapeutic services for adoptive families and additional mechanisms to screen the assessments are being put in place to ensure that families receive the best outcomes.

8. ADOPTION PANEL

- 8.1** VVC continues to manage a central list of Adoption Panel members. In terms of practical delivery, Panel sittings are scheduled four times a month and are currently held virtually.
- 8.2** The workload of the Panel remains high, and the new national templates have increased case preparation time for Panel members. During the eighteen-month period, **126** cases were heard.
- 8.3** During the past eighteen months, VVC has been proactive in recruiting several new Panel members, with a particular focus upon increasing representation of adoptive parents and adopted people. There is an ongoing need to increase our Social Worker membership from our partner authorities whilst recognising that workload constraints often prohibit this.
- 8.4** Panel member training has been restarted and a course was held in September 2022 facilitated by AFA Cymru for Panel chairs and members. Other national training opportunities have been offered to Panel members on the Good Practice Guides and Welsh Early Permanence.
- 8.5** As part of the recent audit, DBS checks for all Panel members are being updated and a programme of annual reviews is scheduled.

9. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

- 9.1** Two complaints have been received during this period. One complaint was from an adoptive parent concerned about the availability of services to support her adopted son. The second complaint was from an adoptive parent concerned about the level of therapeutic support available for her child. Both complaints were investigated and resolved at Stage 1.
- 9.2** Regional staff have continued to receive positive feedback on the range of services they provide from a range of sources: service users, local authority colleagues, other agencies, and the Adoption Panel. Staff are encouraged to collate this information, as contribution to their own personal development plans.

10. Consultation, Engagement and Quality Assurance

- 10.1** An ongoing priority for the service has been 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.
- 10.2** 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. Recent discussions have taken place with the Quality Assurance Officer to agree the best mechanism to undertake check-ins with birth parents.

11. Policies and Procedures

- 11.1** 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 nearing completion.
- 11.2** 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. A risk assessment tool has been developed to consider facilitating direct a contact session between prospective adopters and birth parents.
- 11.3** In addition, the service has begun to utilise some of the new processes contained in the Good Practice guides such the Trauma Nurture Timeline and the revised Adoption Support Plan.

12. CONCLUSION, FUTURE PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES

- 12.1** At the end of the reporting period, the service is able to report a healthy level of performance despite the constraints imposed upon service delivery during COVID - 19. Staff have demonstrated an ability to adapt to change and yet also focus upon core tasks. In terms of the placement for children a significant number have been placed in a timely way and there are less children waiting. The region has not experienced a marked reduction in referrals for adoption as apparent in other areas, but this will be continue to be monitored closely on a regional and national basis. Similarly, VVC has also been able to approve a significant pool of adopters during this time with the result that more children can be placed within the region. The need however, to continue to recruit more adopters for our more complex children remains a priority for VVC whilst at the same time managing the expectations of those adopters waiting. The reduction in enquiries to adopt again will need to be monitored carefully to ensure that the service can respond proactively and remain innovative in order to attract the best families.

- 12.2** Going forward Adoption Support probably represents the biggest set of challenges for VVC. The requirement to build robust Adoption Support plans for children with ongoing support as needed and for this to underpin our core offer for adopters does impact upon our ability to adequately resource these requirements. The need to reduce our waiting list for services and to ensure that our service is targeted to those most in need remain a priority.
- 12.3** The requirement to develop Adoption Support services is set against a backdrop of an ever-increasing national improvement agenda. The full implementation of the NAS Good Practice Guides places new expectations upon the way services work with adopters, birth parents and children and young people both pre and post adoption. The full impact of these new ways of working will need to be monitored and evaluated. The appointment of the Social Care Officers within the service provides the region with an exciting opportunity to meet some of these expectations especially in terms of follow up with adoptive families and birth parents post adoption and so their roles will need to be developed to meet these expectations. Meeting the objectives laid out in the NAS Adopt Cymru 2025 does also place other expectations upon the service which will have to be evaluated so that gaps in meeting these objectives can be identified.

Angela Harris

Regional Adoption Manager