Appendix 1

VALE, VALLEYS & CARDIFF ADOPTION SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative

For Period 1 April 2015-31 March 2016

Index

Subjects

Appended

Adoption Agency Annual Report
2015/16

1.	Introduction

The requirement to provide an annual review of the Adoption Service is set out in Regulation 22 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 and Section 15 (c) of The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015. The aim of this report is to bring into one document a presentation and analysis of the activity of Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative which can be used for the following purposes –

- The Review of Service (Regulation 22 report)
- The Annual Report to the Director of Operations for the National Adoption Service.
- The Review of the Collaborative for presentation to the Management Board and Joint Committee.
- Local authority reporting mechanisms to Corporate Parenting Boards and Scrutiny Committees.

This report is in respect of the period 1 April 2015- 31 March 2016. The narrative however applies to the period from the formation of the Collaborative on 1 June 2015 to the 31 March 2016. Some of the data is also only available for this period.

2.	Background

Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC) brings together the adoption services of the Vale of Glamorgan Council, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council , Cardiff Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council . It is one of the five regional Collaboratives which form part of the National Adoption Service in Wales (NAS) .The Vale of Glamorgan Council host the Collaborative.

In March 2015 Welsh Government published the (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015, known as " The Directions Powers ", which prescribe the regional areas and the governance structure for the service at a national and regional level.

The merger of the adoption services within the region in June 2015 was the culmination of much co-ordinated effort and joint working on the part of all partners in progressing the plan to implement the service

3.   Current Position

VVC became operational on the 1 June 2015 when adoption staff transferred to the employment of the Vale of Glamorgan Council under TUPE transfer arrangements. The team is based in an open plan office on floor 7 , Ty Pennant in Pontypridd. The accommodation is leased from RCT under a formal licence agreement.

A regional workplan to cover the work of Collaborative for the first ten months of operation was put in place in September 2015 and approved by the Joint Committee in December 2015.The plan was set against local and national priorities developed by NAS:

● recruiting more adopters for siblings and older children
● placing children more quickly
● providing better adoption support
● engaging with service users and improving performance.

This plan has been used as a baseline in order to measure progress in meeting objectives and achievements to date.

4.   Staffing

The service is managed by a Regional Adoption Manager (RAM) who has overall responsibility for the day to day running of the service. The Regional Manager is an experienced manager who is suitably qualified to meet the requirements of the Regulations.

There are 2.5 Managers who manage the specific service functions of Recruitment & Assessment of Adopters, Family Finding and Adoption Support and the individual staff teams. There is a Business Support Manager and 4 full time equivalent Business Support staff.

The service has a staff establishment of 16 full time equivalent Social Workers. Due however, to a number of vacancies created by the merger and maternity leave, a full staffing position has not yet been achieved. Prior to and following implementation, VVC has been actively involved in recruiting to these posts to ensure vacancies are filled and has been successful in recruiting a number of new staff Collaborative with a range of skills.

At the end of March 2016 there was one part time permanent Social Work vacancy which was in the process of being filled and 1.5 temporary maternity cover vacancies, although the full time member of staff on maternity leave was due to return to employment in May 2016.

Team & service development

The establishment of the Collaborative represented a significant organisational change both for staff and for the way adoption services were formerly delivered. The creation of the joint service has posed a number of challenges but considerable commitment has been demonstrated by all staff throughout the period of change to maintain service delivery and in minimise the level of disruption for service users.

Prior to the implementation of the Collaborative staff were involved in an extensive period of consultation and were involved in a staff workshop to assist in the development of the agreed service delivery structure. As part of the implementation process staff were asked to express a preference to work in a particular service function and allocated to functions accordingly.

The staffing position however has meant that the full implementation of the agreed service model according to specialist functional teams of Family Finding, Recruitment and Assessment and Adoption Support has been delayed .Managers however take lead responsibility for the particular functions but they also share a range of tasks, such as chairing matching and placement meetings for children and providing agency advice to the local authority Agency Decision Maker and the Adoption Panel.

Social Workers who transferred into VVC retained their existing caseloads and new work has been allocated across the whole staff team so that staff currently major in their particular area of preference whilst taking on cases from otherspecialisms. Newly recruited staff to the service have built up experience in all aspects of adoption via a generic workload. Business Support roles have been assigned to specialist tasks to provide consistency and economies of scale.

The management team within VVC has focused attention upon developing support structures for staff. Supervision is provided on a monthly basis for all Social Workers and annual appraisals were conducted for all staff in January 2016. Probationary reports have been completed for all new staff according the Vale of Glamorgan's requirements.

A regular schedule of monthly Team Meetings is in place for Social Work staff and a Team Development day was held in February 2016 for the whole regional team. Since then individual functional meetings have been put in place for staff involved in Family Finding & Recruitment & Assessment. Going forward the service will review the feasibility of implementing fully the functional model of service delivery.

Meetings have been held with Business Support staff to discuss specific issues and roles and responsibilities. The Business Support Manager attends all regional Team Meetings. Managers within the Collaborative meet on a monthly basis.

As part of the implementation of the service, workshops were held with Childcare Teams across the region to explain remit of VVC and the role and responsibilities of local authority partners. Interface meetings have now been set up with relevant

Managers in Merthyr, RCT and Cardiff to deal with performance and specific issues. Managers within VVC are part of the Children's Services Divisional Management Team within the Vale of Glamorgan where similar issues can be raised.

The RAM and all the Managers within VVC are members of the respective national subgroups set up by NAS to develop the service.

5.   Adoption Panel Membership / Advisers and Training

VVC managed four separate Adoption Panels until October 2015 when a Joint Regional Panel covering the four partner authorities was established. A central list of Panel members was drawn from the existing Panel membership including Panel Chairs & Vice-Chairs.

The Panel operates from two sittings, a south sitting covering RCT and Merthyr and north sitting covering Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan.

Panel training has not been held since the Joint Panel was set up but this will be planned for the forthcoming year. A consultation meeting was held in January 2016 with Panel Chairs, Vice Chairs and Panel Advisers to look at the draft best practice guide developed by the Family Finding Manager to improve consistency of Panel functioning and decision making.

In January 2016, a Project Group was established with colleagues within the Vale of Glamorgan IT Department to look at the development of a digital, paperless Adoption Panel system. This group has met on a regular basis and consulted with Panel members. Tablet computers have now been purchased for Panel members and a licence with Egress has been set up to enable secure transfer of Panel information.

Training is planned for Panel members on the new system within the first quarter of next financial year with a view to full implementation during the summer.

Appraisals of existing Panel members will be scheduled for autumn 2016.

All Managers within the Collaborative act as Panel Advisers. The main responsibility for this role however rests with the Family Finding Manager who advises the south sitting and the Recruitment and Assessment Manager who advises the north sitting of the Panel.The RAM and Adoption Support Manager act as Panel Advisers covering leave periods and general absence.

6.   Adoption Panel Activity/Workload Management

The south sitting of the Panel meets on a fortnightly basis and the north monthly, although north sittings increased in November 2015 and February 2016 to meet

workload demand. The south sitting meets at the Civic Offices, Barry and the north sitting in the Ty Pennant office, Pontypridd.

Panel meetings are co-ordinated by the Panel Co-Ordinators and cases scheduled in conjunction with Managers and Social Workers.

The table below shows the number of individual and Joint Panels held during the year. One Cardiff Panel was cancelled for lack of quoracy, one scheduled during the week of the merger could not go ahead and one was cancelled because there was only one case to consider. Two Merthyr Panels were cancelled due to cases being cancelled.

No Joint Panels have been cancelled.

	Period 15-16
Number of Panels held	Cardiff 10 RCT 7 Merthyr 4 VOG 5 VVC 19 TOTAL 45
Number of Panels cancelled due to lack of quoracy	Cardiff 1
Number of Panels cancelled for other reasons	Cardiff 2 Merthyr 2

The current central list provides a solid pool of experienced Panel members. More independent members are however needed to represent all aspects of the adoption experience. A tendering exercise to recruit new Panel members will be considered in the coming year. The current membership list is appended to the report.

A questionnaire for Panel attendees was devised by the Policy and Quality Assurance Officer in conjunction with the Family Finding Manager. The findings of this survey was used to inform and develop the best practice guide for the Panel. This guide is in the process of being finalised and will be rolled out to the wider Panel membership and attendees. A QA checklist forms part of this guide which will be used by Managers in approving reports being presented to Panel.

7.   Advertising and Marketing

For the year 2015-16 there has been no sole VVC advertising or marketing activity. Since the first day of the Collaborative coming together a high volume of adoption enquiries has been received and these are analysed in section 9.

The Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager has taken an active and vocal role on the NAS Marketing and Media subgroup and VVC have identified and put forward adopters who are willing to share their stories with the media for campaigns run by NAS.

VVC have developed their own website address, which is independent from any local authority within the Collaborative but this has remained as a landing page providing basic information on VVC. Work was undertaken prior to the merger, which considered the content and information contained on the four local authorities adoption webpages and researching the adoption pages of other agencies and local authorities but time constraints and competing demands has meant that this work has not been progressed. VVC recognise the need to develop the website, not solely for the purposes of marketing but also as a means of providing up to date family finding information to inform recruitment and Adoption Support information. It is also planned to use the website to share adopters' stories, review adoption literature and celebrate our work.

For the coming year VVC has secured some additional capacity in the form of an experienced Marketing Officer employed on a temporary basis by NAS to support the development of the website, provide information and advice around social media and look at branded literature.

8.	Children

As part of the range of functions delegated to the Collaborative, it was agreed that the Collaborative would receive adoption referrals on children from early on in the process and that VVC would co-ordinate the should be placed for adoption decision (SBPA) process on behalf of the four partner authorities. This has resulted in this being a key area of activity for the service and overall performance in relation to the placement of children for adoption is a key priority for the region.

A revised SBPA process was agreed in consultation with the Medical Advisers following the implementation of the Collaborative and cascaded to relevant staff within the region. This process incorporateS a more pro-active approach to the provision of birth parent counselling and frontloading of information to ensure that adoption medicals can be undertaken and the twin tracking timetable could be met. Processes have been put in place to track referrals and a monthly Placement Meetings have been set up with the Family Finding & Recruitment Teams to review all children on Placement Order and adopters waiting.

From April 2014, performance within the Collaborative has been reported on an individual local authority basis against the Performance Management Framework developed by Welsh Government. This practice of reporting continued until the implementation of the Collaborative in June 2015 when the responsibility for quarterly reporting transferred to VVC.

There are a number of performance measures which monitor performance in relation to the key stages in the adoption process for children with particular emphasis upon the overall timeliness of the process. Some of these measures relate directly to local authority performance and some are shared jointly between the local authority and the Collaborative.

The region placed **70** children for adoption during 15-16. This return represents a decrease from the previous year where the regional total at year end was **112** but reflects the national downturn in the numbers of children being brought forward for adoption. VVC however recorded a total of **67** Placement Orders for the year. The overall number of Placement Orders made in Wales fell by 20% in 2014-15 and NAS data suggests a further decrease during 2015-16.

At the end of the reporting period **71** children had a 'should be placed' for adoption decision (SBPA) but had not been placed for adoption , **9** of these children had a SBPA decision alone, **2** had been matched and not placed and **62** children remained with a SBPA decision and Placement Order.

The average time taken from the last LAC episode to placement for adoption is **15 months** and the annual average for VVC is **451 days** (national target 395 days). VVCs performance in relation to this indicator is comparable to other similar regions.

The average length of time for children to progress from adoption decision to placement is **10 months** and our annual average is **288 days**. The average length of time from Placement Order to placement for adoption is **9 months**.

There were **7** children who had been waiting longer than six months for a match at the end of the reporting period .The reasons for the delays are reported to NAS.

Other measures which relate directly to the service for children concern the provision of birth parent counselling and the provision of Life Journey Material for children placed for adoption by the time of their second adoption review.

Birth parent counselling now forms part of the child referral process and is offered on two occasions following referral. During the year **234** parents were referred for birth parent counselling and this was taken up by **94** which equates to **40%.** This is short of the national target set by NAS which is **50%** although overall regional performance has improved.

Performance in relation to the provision of Life Journey material, which is the responsibility of the local authority holding case responsibility for the child has been closely monitored within the region but overall performance remains poor with this being in place in only **30%** of placements. This issue has been raised at the Management Board (MB) and agreed as an improvement action for all Heads of Service to take back into their respective authorities. Regional training on life story work has been proposed for Childcare staff within the Collaborative which will be taken forward during the next year.

The following graphs present some additional information which has been collated by VVC.

Number of Children referred since June 2015.
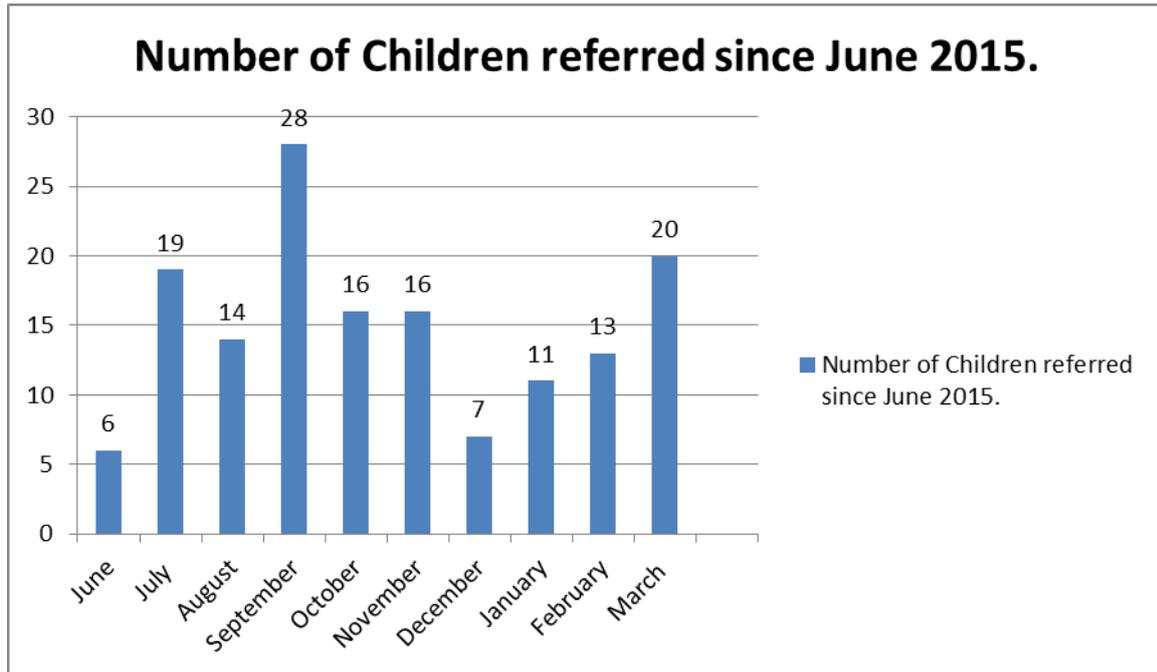
The number of referrals for adoption is not currently collated by NAS but has been recorded by VVC since June 2015. The total number of referrals received is **150.**

Of these numbers, **33** have had their plan changed from twin tracking for adoption which represents **22%.**

This number is further broken down by authority. The highest number of referrals has been received from Cardiff, followed closely by RCT, the Vale of Glamorgan & Merthyr.

Number of referrals from each local authority since June 2015.
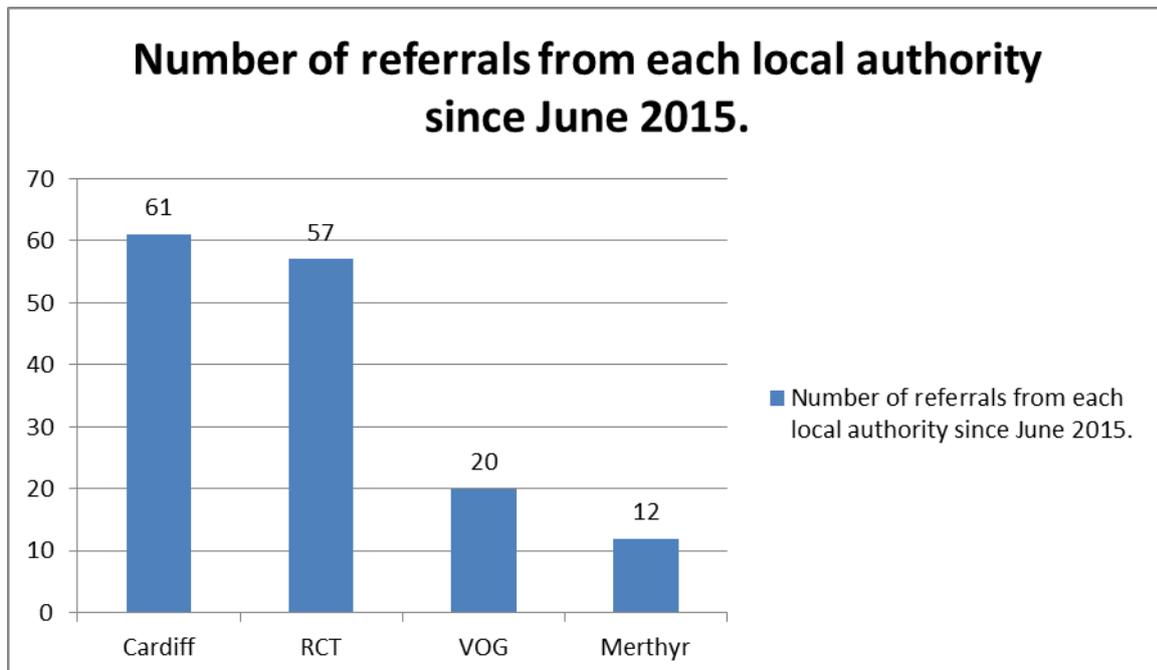
The figures below indicate the high level of work undertaken by the Collaborative and cases held during this period :
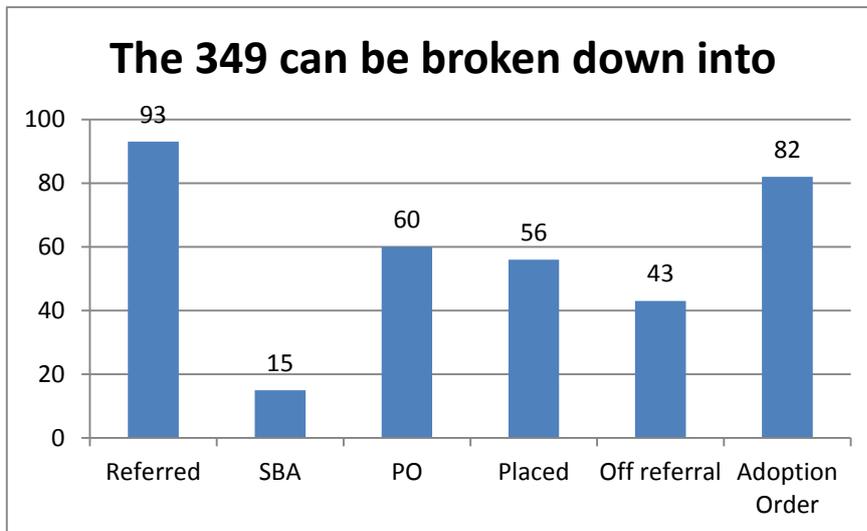
Total Number of Cases active within VVC since June 2016, including the Cases which Transferred = 349

Cardiff: 152
Merthyr: 25
RCT: 126
VOG: 46

Total Number of Cases Including the Cases which Transferred = 349
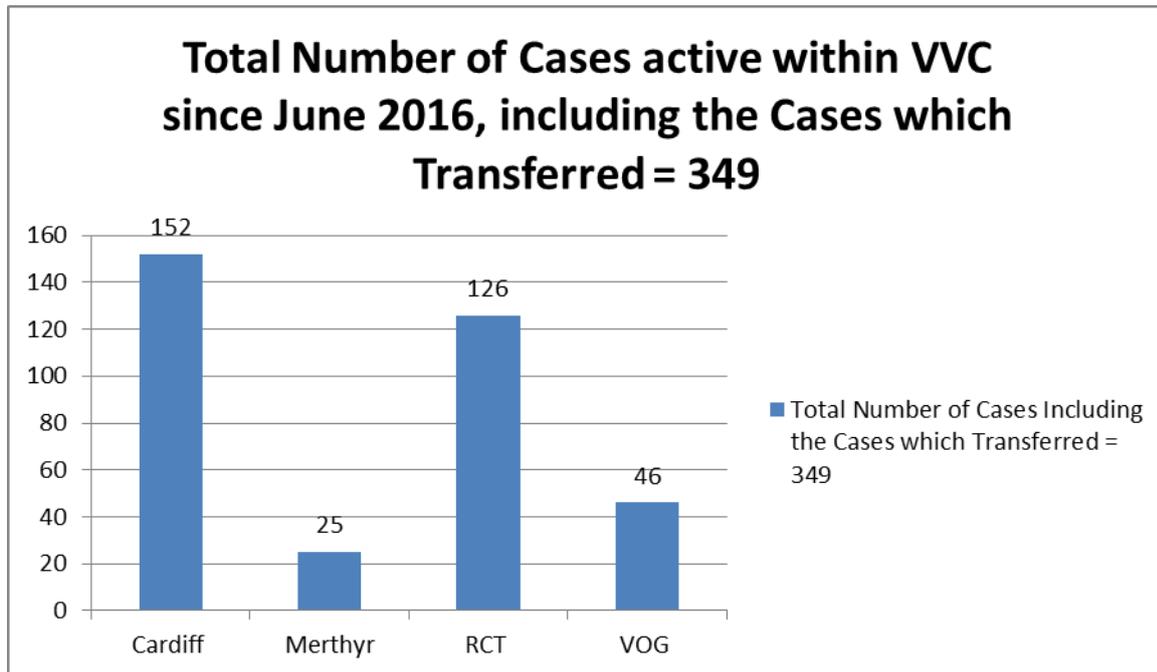
These figures can be broken down further into the following categories:

The 349 can be broken down into

Referred: 93
SBA: 15
PO: 60
Placed: 56
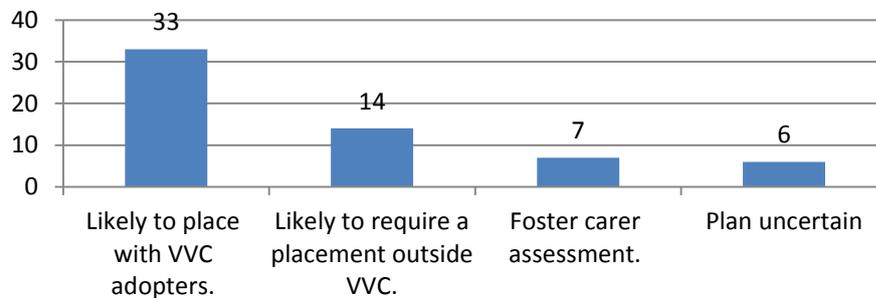Off referral: 43
Adoption Order: 82

The children who have had their Adoption Order's granted have been active cases in VVC between June 2015 – March 2016.

The children with Adoption Orders granted between April 2015 and March 2016 is 82. This can be broken down into LA:

Cardiff	27
VOG	9
RCT	33
Merthyr	13
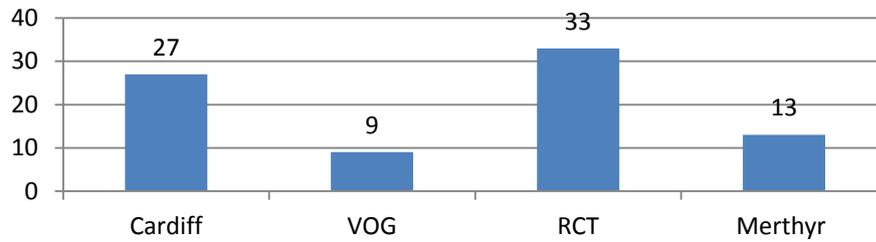
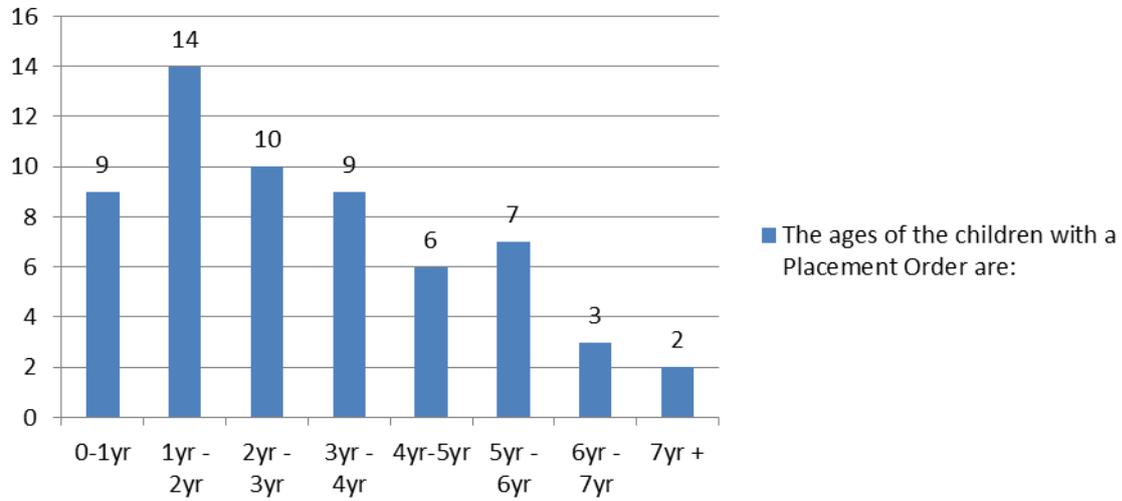At year end there are 60 children with Placement Orders. The following tables provide additional information in relation to the children on Placement Orders.

There are currently 60 Children with a Placement Order. These can be broken down into:

Likely to place with VVC adopters.	33
Likely to require a placement outside VVC.	14
Foster carer assessment.	7
Plan uncertain	6

The ages of the children with Placement Orders are :
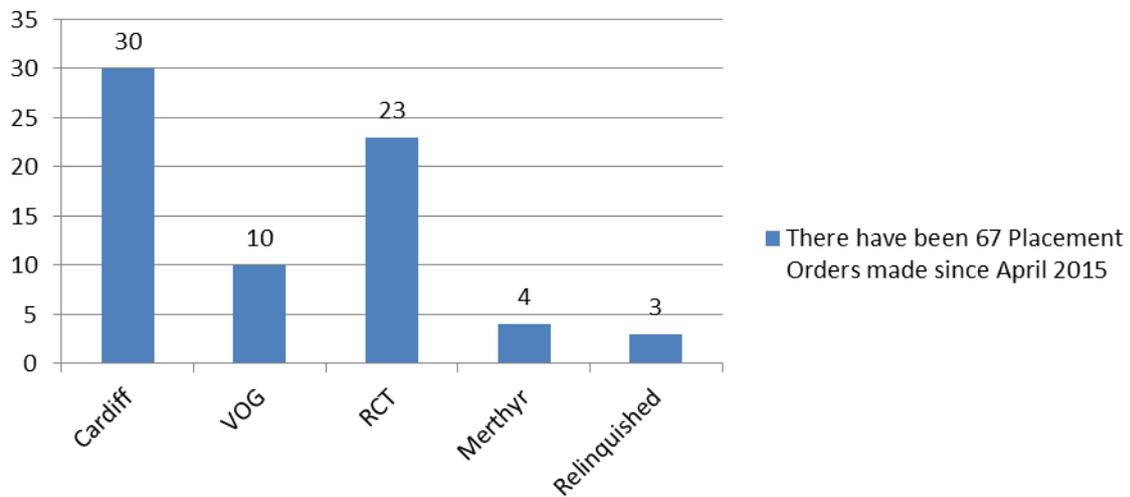
Bar chart showing the ages of the children with a Placement Order are:
- 0-1yr: 9
- 1yr - 2yr: 14
- 2yr - 3yr: 10
- 3yr - 4yr: 9
- 4yr-5yr: 6
- 5yr - 6yr: 7
- 6yr - 7yr: 3
- 7yr +: 2

There have been 67 Placement Orders made since April 2015

Bar chart showing there have been 67 Placement Orders made since April 2015:
- Cardiff: 30
- VOG: 10
- RCT: 23
- Merthyr: 4
- Relinquished: 3

VVC has made 67 Placements since April 2015. The ages of the children on the date of placement were:

Legend: VVC has made 67 Placements since April 2015. The ages of the children on the date of placement were:

Since April 2015 there have been 9 sibling groups of two placed;

Legend: Since April 2015 there have been 9 sibling groups of two placed;
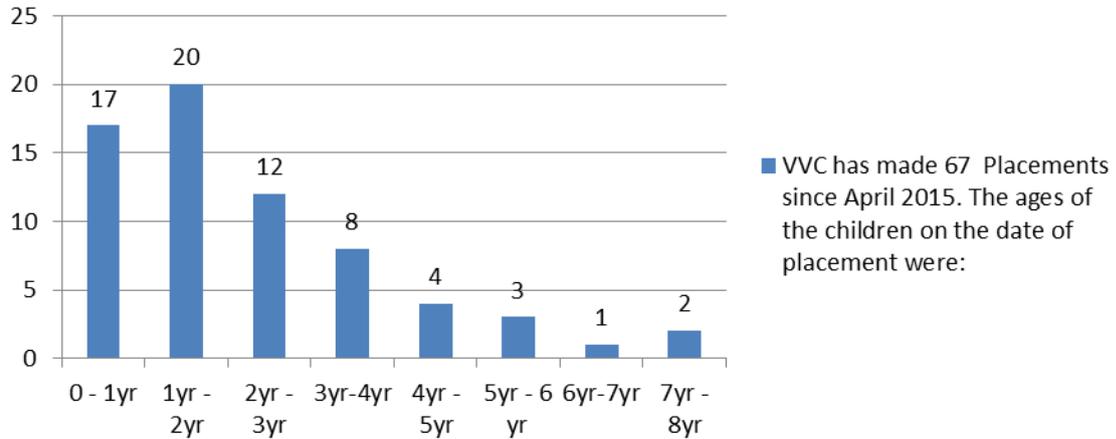
External Placements since April 2015 by L.A.
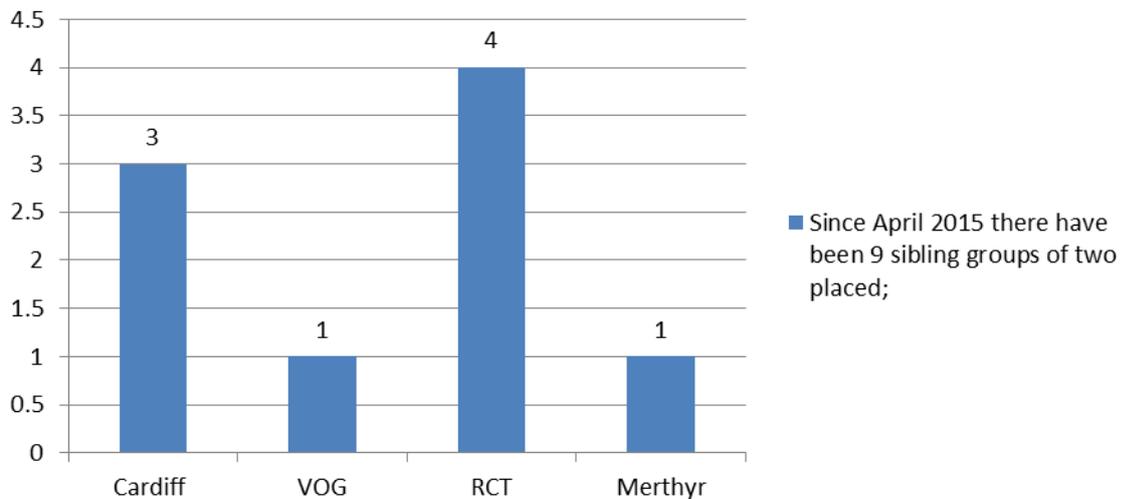
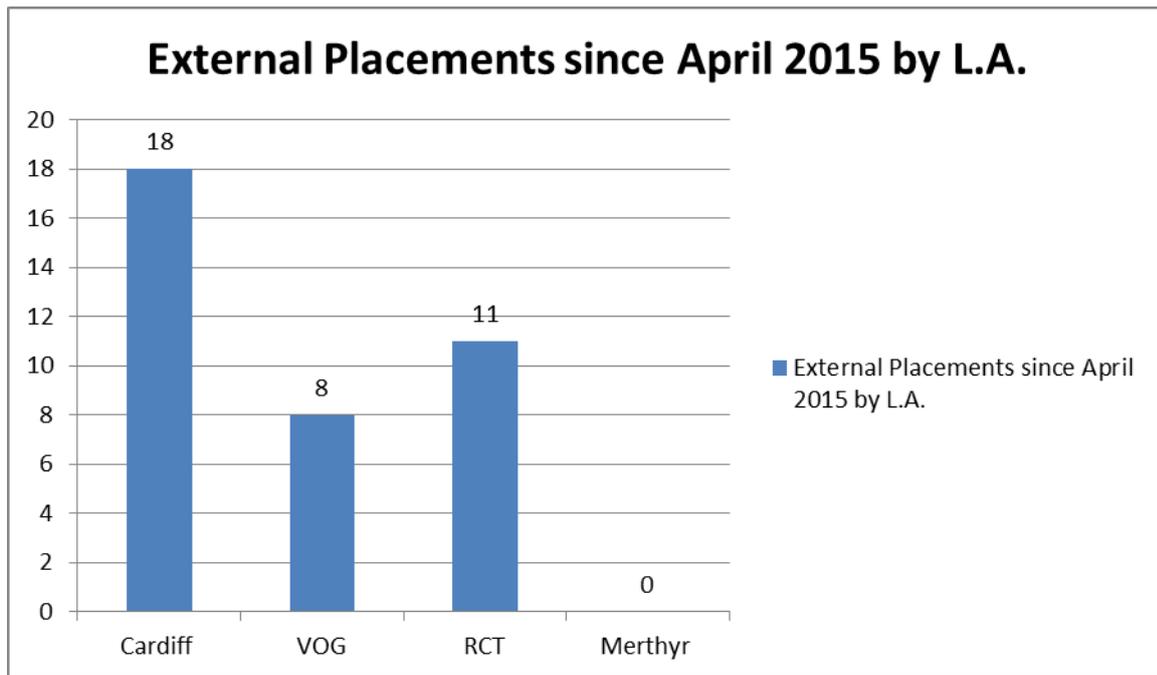The above graph details the number of children placed in external placements during the year which totals 37. The Collaborative has advertised externally for a small number of children, has utilised the service of Adoption Link, a national family finding service and refers and registers all children with the Wales Adoption Register (WAR). The region has also participated in a national Exchange Day last autumn facilitated by WAR.

The number of children placed externally reflects the range of needs which cannot be met in-house. This information is now being collated and will be used to inform recruitment practice in the coming year with the aim of trying to reverse this trend and place more children within regional resources.

9.   Matches

The table below highlights a small number of children who had been matched at Adoption Panel but not yet placed at the end of the year. The other part of the table highlights those placed but not yet adopted.

	Cardiff	RCT	Merthyr	VOG	Regional Total
Number of children matched but not placed at end of reporting period.	0	0	2	0	2
Number of children placed but where adoption order has not yet been granted.	19	19	4	8	50

10. Disruptions

During the period there were two children where the proposed match broke down during introductions. The reasons for the breakdowns are different. In one case, a little girl aged 4, the prospective adopter decided that the child was not the right match for her and has subsequently decided not to continue as a prospective adopter. The other case involved a young girl under one where during the introductions it emerged that the adoptive couple had marital difficulties.

There have been four placement breakdowns following placement. One breakdown involved a one year old little boy where the adoptive parents felt it was the wrong match and the female adopter felt unable to attach to the child. A sibling group of two older female children broke down when the adopters felt unable to cope with their behaviour and there was a breakdown of an 11 month old girl where the adopters decided that they no longer wished to adopt.

All the placement disruptions have been the subject of Disruption meetings chaired independently of the service. Findings of the meetings have been considered on a case by case basis. Due to the range of circumstances described, it is difficult to assess the wider implications for practice. The local Family Finding process which is being developed puts in place a range of actions on the part of the Family Finder to minimise the risk of breakdown by ensuring that the needs of the child are fully explained. There are obvious lessens for recruiting and assessing Social Workers in terms of ensuring assessments are robust but there are always circumstances which can develop which cannot be foreseen. Finally the outcome of breakdowns need to be routinely reported to the Adoption Panel to ensure that their role remains robust un terms of considering potential matches.

	Cardiff	RCT	Merthyr	VOG	Regional Total
Number of children matched but where, following Panel and prior to placement the match does not proceed.	0	2	0	0	2
Number of children placed or adopted but where the placement disrupts.	3	1	0	0	4

11. Adopters

As noted in section 7, there has been no active recruitment activity by VVC since its inception in June 2015. Since June 2015 we have received in excess of **200**

enquiries from potential adopters. It is clear from the breakdown of those enquiries that almost half of them come from people living within the Cardiff area, with RCT recording the next highest amount, followed by the Vale of Glamorgan and Merthyr Tydfil.

As per the Performance Management Framework **99%** of these enquiries were responded to in 5 working days. Improvements have been noted in our response time due to improvements made to the logging and recording of enquiries and prioritising this task as part of the daily duty system.

Local Authority	Numbers of Enquiries
Cardiff	85
RCT	50
Vale of Glamorgan	32
Merthyr Tydfil	11
Unknown (email address)	32
Non VVC - LA	4
TOTAL	214

In the year 2015/16 there were **55** adopters (households) approved. This equates per head to **109** adopters.

Of these 55 adoptive households we have had **39** matches/placements generated (16 placements in 2015/16 and 23 placements/booked matches in 2016/17). We have had one approved adopter who has since advised that she no longer wishes to pursue adoption due to changes in her personal life.

Of these 55 adoptive households they were recommended for the following:

Up to 3 children	2
Up to 2 children	12
1 child	35
Specific approval	6

Up to 3 years	26
Up to 6 years	20
Over 6 years	3
Specific	6

This table indicates that that over half of the approvals were for 1 child and that just over half were approved for children under 3 years of age.

In addition to those adopters approved during the year the region also inherited a significant number of approved adopters who were awaiting placements. A meeting was held in January 2016 with all adopters in the region to explain the current situation in relation to children waiting and the matching process. The meeting was also used to profile some harder to place children.

There have been three occasions in the year 2015-16 where adopters have voluntarily withdrawn from the assessment process. The reasons were due to pregnancy in one case, marital difficulties in another situation and concerns raised during the assessment which related to a history of domestic abuse in relation to one partner.

The number of adopters who do not proceed from initial visit to application to adopt is one of the performance measures collated under the Performance Management Framework. During the past year this has been recorded as 10. Since the merger the service has begun to collate wherever possible the reasons for potential applicants not proceeding. There are a various range of reasons recorded.

There were two initial visits undertaken where one of the prospective applicants had a significant medical condition that warranted an early medical and the Medical Adviser then stated that they could not recommend the applicant.

Other reasons ranged from a very new relationship in one case, lack of a support structure in two instances, limited childcare experience and unrealistic expectations in another situation.

VVC has seen a decrease in the numbers of children being placed for adoption on the previous year but continues to receive a significant number of enquiries from prospective adopters. Referral trends also demonstrate that more children with additional needs and sibling groups require placements. In order therefore, to better meet the needs of the children currently requiring placement within the region the Management Board has agreed a more targeted approach to the recruitment of adopters.

This approach involves providing more information around the needs of looked after children much earlier in the process. The format of Information Evenings for prospective adopters has been amended to include a fuller presentation on the range of needs and those currently waiting .The team has also put together an information pack which includes information around neglect, drug & alcohol misuse etc for prospective applicants to consider before progressing to a home visit. Applicants who can consider a wide age range and range of needs will then be prioritised for assessment.

VVC is currently undertaking **39** assessments at the end of the reporting period with a further **6** to be allocated following the next training. In addition **5** requests for second time adopter assessments have been received.

The Performance Framework also measures the length of time taken for adopter approvals from initial enquiry to decision. In the last year that the average time taken was **181** days which is less than the national target of **8 months (243 days).** In order to keep assessments on track all Social Workers are expected to use assessment plans and mid-point reviews are now increasingly being used to measure progress in assessments. The Recruitment and Assessment team are keen to develop and share assessment tools in order to ensure that processes are robust.

VVC also undertakes a significant number of non-agency adoptions, with the majority being step adoption applications. There have been **39** enquiries from 1st June 2015 to 31st March 2016 in respect of non-agency applications. The geographical breakdown is shown in the table below.

Local Authority	Number of Enquiries
Cardiff	13
RCT	19
Merthyr	2
Vale	4
Unknown (email)	1

The overall picture in relation to adopter activity during the past year is summarised in the table below:

Number of adopter enquiries	214
Number of adopter approvals	55 households (109 individuals)
Number withdrawing during assessment	3
Number of unsuccessful applications	0

12.   Adoption Support

The Collaborative has a small Adoption Support Team comprising of a part time Manager and 3 full time equivalent Social Workers. This section provides a summary of the workload of the service.

Adoption Support Referrals (one off service / advice as well as on-going work*)*

	Cardiff	Merthyr	RCT	VOG	Regional Total
Referrals since 01.06.2015	**25**	**3**	**17**	**11**	**56**

The figures above refer to referrals from 1ˢᵗ June 2015. Unfortunately there was no clear data for referrals received in April 2015 or May 2015. Below however are details of the open cases to the 4 local authorities as at 31ˢᵗ May 2015 which transferred into the Collaborative:

	Cardiff	Merthyr	RCT	VOG	Regional Total
Open cases as at 31.05.2015 (Referral date not recorded)	12	0	21	9	42

Adoption support referrals can be made directly from adoptive families or from local agencies and teams. As part of the functions delegated to the Collaborative it was agreed that where required VVC would undertake the assessment of support needs for adopted children and the vast majority of current referrals have been direct requests for support from families themselves. This model was agreed as the preferred option in order to provide assessments of need from a specialist adoption perspective and for the families we would consider that this model has worked well. On occasion VVC has had to make a referral into the local authority Children's Services Team where it has been considered that the presenting needs or risks are beyond solely adoption support and where there are safeguarding or other child in need factors to be assessed. The region has continued to receive a high number of referrals for adoption support services and challenge of this model is being able to respond to the demand for assessments in a timely manner.

The budget for the Collaborative does not contain an element for funding adoption support packages and so where the outcome of the assessment recommends funding a therapeutic support package or other financial support these assessments are referred to the relevant decision maker in the local authority responsible for the child.

There are currently no service level agreements between the Collaborative and other providers and agencies of support services, although individual arrangements have previously been in existence within some of the local authorities in the past. VVC has sought to establish a list of potential providers of services which can be drawn upon

to provide support services to families. Developing a service level agreement may be considered in the future in consultation with our local authority partners.

Two reviews of the service have been undertaken by the Adoption Support Manager since the Collaborative was established. The purpose of this has been to consider the level of demand for services and how this is currently being managed within available resources as well as capturing a clearer picture of a service area which has historically not gathered as much consistent data as other service areas. It has provided us with some overview of the recurring presenting difficulties as well as the range of support services that have been put in place. This information was presented to Management Board in March 2015 and has enabled the service to propose some additional short term measures to support the service over the coming year. This pilot was agreed as part of proposals to utilise an underspend in budget by the Management Board and Joint Committee.

As may well be expected, the most commonly recurring presenting needs within referrals received by the Collaborative have been:

- Attachment difficulties
- Behavioural difficulties
- Identity and emotional difficulties
- Violence/physical aggression from the child
- Additional complex needs such as learning disability, ADHD, Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

The table below highlights the type of service being received during the past year:
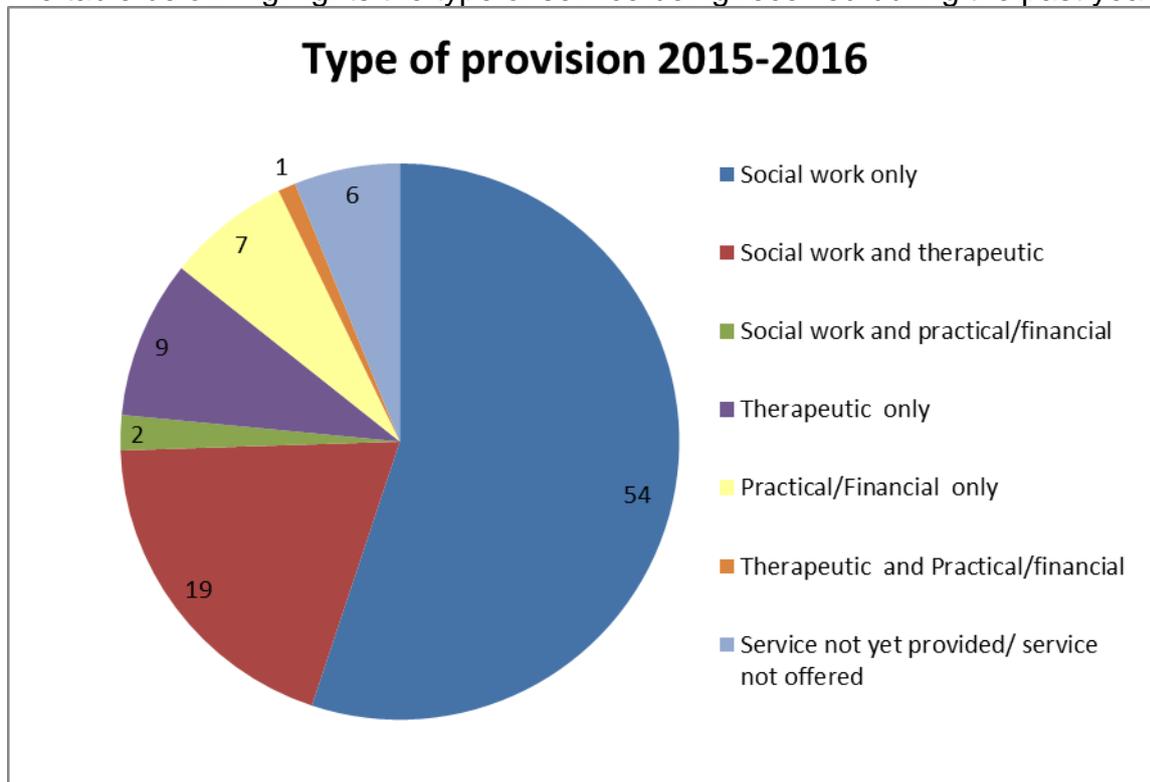
Practical/Financial does not include Adoption allowance requests which are managed separately. Practical support includes the facilitation of direct contact arrangements

Of the **28** cases receiving therapeutic support (either solely or alongside Social Work support) 20 different providers have been commissioned and as outlined previously the service is now beginning to identify a range of providers of therapeutic and other relevant services particularly given reliance on specific providers within different local authorities.

Within adoption support assessments and referrals mainstream and universal services are considered and VVC has established links with Health and Education departments to ensure that children are accessing the services that should be available to them. In some instances families have been supported to access CAMHS or liaison has taken place with the LEA regarding Pupil Deprivation Grant funding.

Training has been identified as a priority for the service particularly in the area of adoption support. Agreement has been given in the coming year to fund some places for staff on TheraPlay, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), Parenting with PACE, Life Story Work and Non-Violent Resistance training. The intention of specialist training is both to equip practitioners with the skills to provide some of the direct work and interventions currently being commissioned externally for families and also to increase the range of training and workshops that the service can offer as preventative or early intervention.

Access to Birth Records/Intermediary Services

The service also provides a service for persons wishing to access their birth records and an intermediary service.

Number of Referrals for Birth Records Counselling /Intermediary Services

	Cardiff	Merthyr	RCT	VOG	Regional Total
Number of Referrals since 01.06.2015 for Birth Records Counselling	28	6	24	12	70
Number of Referrals since 01.06.2015 for Intermediary Services	8	0	9	2	19

As with adoption support referrals, there were also cases open to the four local authorities prior to the 1st June 2015. The majority of these birth records counselling or intermediary service requests were not yet allocated.

Below are the figures for open cases:

	Cardiff	Merthyr	RCT	VOG	Regional Total
Number of Open cases as at 31.05.2015 for Intermediary Services	0	0	10	8	18
Number of open cases as at 31.05.2015 for Access to Birth Records Counselling	10	0	6	16	32

Unfortunately due to the high volume of adoption support referrals for children and families received a number of these cases have remained unallocated although priority has been given to those waiting the longest.

There are no service level commissioning arrangements in place in relation to access to birth records or intermediary services and no external providers have been commissioned on an individual basis. As part of the pilot to enhance adoption support within the region there are plans in place to appoint a temporary part-time Social Worker to assist with the significant backlog of this work and reduce the waiting list.

In order to assist with intermediary searches we have a TraceIQ account for which we purchase credits to use for searching.

Letterbox Contact
The Collaborative manages a high volume of letterbox contact arrangements which is currently managed by the whole staff team via a specific allocation of cases. A review of the service is underway and due for completion in April 2016. It is acknowledged that this area poses significant challenges for the regional service in managing such a complex set of sensitive information and the sheer volume of cases. As part of the evaluation of the service plans are in place for a temporary appointment of a part-time Letterbox Co-ordinator.

Current letterbox figures for the four local authorities stand at:

RCT	328
Merthyr	92
Vale	97
Cardiff	188
TOTAL	**705**

Taking into consideration those files which have not had any active correspondence for over 2 years it is estimated that 482 of the 705 contacts are 'active'. However those cases where there has not been contact for over 2 years remain open as new correspondence can be received.

Service User engagement

VVC has not run any specific service user engagement events since being established however it supported the event organised by the National Service in our area in March 2015. This provided opportunity for families to give feedback regarding the type of support that they are seeking, the findings of which have now been received within the region and will be utilised to inform future planning. These findings will be presented to the Management Board. Adoptive parents from the region also participated in an event facilitated by NAS in November 2015 looking at recruitment practice across the regions with the aim of introducing a two staged approach. The launch of the collaborative at our Christmas Fun Day in 2015 also enabled some feedback from adoptive families in the region and was attended by members of the Management Board and the Director of Operations for NAS.

The Collaborative has sought to build upon the existing support groups that were run by one authority prior to the merger (Rhondda Cynon Taff) and to extend these out to the other local authorities.

Monthly toddler groups have been run since the outset of the Collaborative aimed at adopters with pre-school children which in the majority of cases have been accessed by families with children recently placed as a form of support during the early stages of placement. This is run on a rota basis by Social Workers across the service.

Two family fun days are held per year, one in the summer and one at Christmas and both were successful events in 2015 with over 80 children in attendance.

In addition to these ongoing events, quarterly support groups for adoptive parents have been run from the autumn of 2015 .The first of these took place with the theme of 'Non Violent Resistance'; the second of these focussed upon Letterbox and direct contact arrangements. Further events are planned for this next year.

A newsletter for adoptive families was launched in 2016 with the intention that this will be produced 3 times a year.

New children's guides and letterbox contact guides have been prepared and are due to be launched at the 2016 summer fun day.

Short- Medium Term improvement plans

There are temporary plans for a Letterbox Co-ordinator, a Social Worker for Access to Birth Records and to increase the Adoption Support Manager post to full time for a

time limited period to enhance the service. These measures will then be reviewed to assess the effectiveness of this temporary intervention in addressing the current pressures facing the adoption support team.

The support group programme for the year is to be established with dates and themes for these to be clearly set out for families in advance. In addition to this the service is also exploring a range of suitable venues for support groups and family events across the region to ensure that this is accessible to all.

Currently Adoption Allowances are being managed by the four local authorities who retain the budget for these Allowances. However it has been proposed that the administration of these Allowances should transfer to the Collaborative. A review of current arrangements is required to assess the practical and resource implications of this proposal.

Some steps have already been taken to improve the communication around the placement of children outside of the regions and the role of the Adoption Support Services Adviser. This needs further development to ensure that the process is consistent.

The training for staff which has been agreed needs to be progressed. Some arrangements are already in place to take this forward in the coming year. A training programme for adoption families on Non Violent Resistance (NVR) is also planned commissioned via Adoption UK..

Training for staff and local authority social workers in life story work to be arranged.

Within ongoing development of the VVC website there needs to be clear information and guidance for families as to how to access services and the type of support available.

Longer term aims for improvement

Long-term aims for the service are to explore a more multi-agency approach involving greater links with Psychology, Health and Education services. The opportunity of providing a consultation service with a number of different professionals as a form of signposting and early intervention has been suggested and needs further exploration.

Consideration of specific service level commissioning for therapeutic providers.

Other support groups and events need to be developed including birth parent support groups and events aimed at children of primary school age and their parents.

We have experienced a small number of disruptions within the first year of the collaborative and the majority of these cases would appear to be in the very early stages of placement. This has certainly informed decision making around matching

and introductions, assisted us in improving guidance and support to families during the introductions process and early stages of placement as well as being integral in assessments of adopters. From the 'Beyond the Adoption Order' research we are aware of a number of factors connected to adoption disruption post-adoption order, one of which is child to parent violence. The theme of one of our support group meetings was on 'non-violent resistance' which we commissioned and we have also accessed a workshop for staff on this through Adoption UK. We are currently due to pilot an NVR course for families which we are commissioning through Adoption UK.

13. Policies and Procedures

The development of policies and procedures within VVC has focused upon day to day operational processes to ensure that service delivery is maintained. The Collaborative has established a clear process for co-ordinating the adoption referral and decision making process for children across the region and this has been cascaded to all Heads of Service and local Childcare Teams.

Managers within the region contributed to the development of a national Family Finding guide and a localised process is being developed.

The Recruitment & Assessment Team have revised the format for Information Evenings and the recruitment process is being realigned to the development of a more targeted approach.

An Adoption Support Policy covering the provision of adoption support services has been developed and an agreed process to access funding from the respective local authority in respect of support packages and Adoption Allowances has been agreed.

There is a draft best practice guide for the Adoption Panel in place which needs to be finalised alongside procedural guidance to support the work of the Panel.

There are other policies and procedures to develop to support the work of the Collaborative but time constraints and operational pressures have delayed their completion. This area needs to be given some priority in the coming year given the need to comply with Welsh language translation requirements.

14. CSSIW

The agencies within the Collaborative were last inspected during 2012-13. The Head of Service for the Vale of Glamorgan, RAM and the Family Finding Manager attended a day facilitated by CSSIW looking at the revised methodology for the inspection of adoption services in November 2015. The CSSIW Self Evaluation based upon this revised methodology was completed and returned to CSSIW by the 1 March 2016.The schedule of new inspections was to begin in April 2016 but no date has yet been received for inspection of the Collaborative.

15. Local Monitoring and Governance

The host authority for VVC is the Vale of Glamorgan. Governance and reporting arrangements are set out in the Legal Agreement underpinning the Collaborative which was signed on 1 June 2015. The regional Management Board (MB) meets bi-monthly and is chaired by the Director of Social Services for the Vale of Glamorgan. The vice chair is the Director for Merthyr Tydfil CBC. The chair of the MB will rotate each year amongst the local authority Directors within the Collaborative.

The membership of the MB comprises of the Heads of Service from the four authorities which make up the Collaborative with membership from Health, Education and a VAA.

Agendas for the meetings are set in advance. Standing items include performance reporting, budget monitoring, service user engagement and communicating with stakeholders. The Health, Education & VAA representatives bring relevant issues and interest from their particular sectors.

The overall governance of the Collaborative is by way of a Joint Committee (JC) comprised of lead elected members from the four authorities and the Heads of Service. The JC meets twice a year and is responsible for approving the annual plan for the Collaborative and budget. The Regional Manager reports to both MB and JC.

The service fully complies with the reporting requirements set by NAS in terms of performance reporting. A mid-year report was prepared for NAS and an annual report will also be prepared by the end of April 2016. Performance is reported on a quarterly basis to the MB and six monthly to the JC. This annual report will be presented to the MB & the JC.

16. Consultation

Service user views are gathered as part of the casework process and are key elements in adopter assessments and Panels. As outlined earlier a questionnaire was developed for applicants attending Panel and the results of this feedback was used to improve consistency in Panel functioning.

Adoptive families within the region have participated in national consultation exercises including a NAS group to look at the recruitment and assessment process and a general consultation event held in March 2016.

A meeting was held in January 2016 for all adoptive families waiting for placements and members of the team. This provided an opportunity to engage, explain the current context of family finding and to gather their views.

Adoptive families have been involved with the planning and assisted with the running of activities during family fun days.

It has however acknowledged by all aspects of the service that more user feedback is required to inform service development and that customer surveys need to be more routinely embedded in practice within the Collaborative. This is an area for future development.

17.	Compliments, comments, complaints and representations

Complaints against the Collaborative are managed via the Vale of Glamorgan's Complaints process.

Since June 2015, VVC has received four complaints which have been resolved at stage 1. The details are as follows:

1. Complaint from AM on behalf of adopters concerning delays at Adoption Panel.
2. Complaint from MP concerning the provision of an Adoption Allowance and settling grant. This was responded to on behalf of the respective local authority.
3. Complaint from London authority regarding the provision of an inter-agency agreement.
4. Complaint from adopters concerning post adoption contact.

In addition the Collaborative has provided contributions to six complaints received by individual local authorities within the region and three representations made to Welsh Government from individual adopters. The latter have been passed to NAS and so regional reports have been supplied to NAS to assist with their responses to the complaints.

There is currently no overall system within the Collaborative for recording compliments except from positive feedback and comments received on an individual basis by members of the team. A log of all compliments received will now be maintained and forwarded to the central Complaints Unit.

There have been no representations against Adoption Panel decisions.

18.	Future Priorities

The regional service going forward needs to consolidate and build upon the progress made in the first year of operation, to continue to identify gaps in provision and areas

for development of the service in order to respond effectively to the range of needs being presented.

Specific improvements and priorities for 2016-17 can best be summarised as follows:

1. To review the feasibility of implementing a more specialised, functional model of service delivery.

2. To improve efficiency and reduce administrative costs of the Adoption Panel by implementing a paperless Panel system.

3. To develop VVC's website and to improve the range of information available for users of our service.

4. To develop the family finding process within the region to improve practice in relation to the timely placement of children .

5. To target the recruitment and assessment of adoptive families to better meet the needs of children awaiting placements within the region and reduce reliance upon external sources of placement.

6. To develop the plan to enhance the Adoption Support service in the short term and evaluate its' effectiveness to inform future planning of the service

7. To further develop processes, procedures and guidance to support the work of the Collaborative ensuring compliance with Welsh language requirements.

8. To develop opportunities for engaging and obtaining feedback from service users.

19.   Conclusion

The overall vision of the Collaborative is to provide a comprehensive, high quality adoption service to all those requiring such a service within the regional area. Through collaborative working, pooling resources and joint effort it is hoped that the region will continue to be able to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people receiving adoption services.

VVC was the last of the regions within NAS to be established. The implementation of the Collaborative in June 2015 was the culmination of much planning and inter-agency working on behalf of the four partner authorities. The relatively smooth transfer of services and staff to the employment of the Vale of Glamorgan Council was mainly achieved as a result of the level of co-operation which existed and which has continued to be evident through the work of the Management Board and Joint Committee.

At the end of the reporting period there is emerging evidence to demonstrate that collaborative working is beginning to enable a unified, consistent approach to service delivery and easier identification of need and gaps in provision. Overall the region has performed well in certain key areas and as the report hopefully demonstrates that the Collaborative has managed a large volume of work and demand for services during its first year. Positive outcomes can already be seen in the timely placement of children, the recruitment of adopters and an improved service to birth parents.

Whilst much has been achieved , the challenges faced in continuing to develop the service whilst trying to meet increasing demands, particulary in Adoption Support cannot be under estimated. The large agenda for change and improvement in adoption set by the development of the National Adoption Service whilst positive is resulting in increased awareness and expectation at a local level. The service will therefore need to be able to develop mechanisms and resources to ensure that it is able to respond effectively to the improvements required and to ensure better outcomes for all those requiring a service.

Appendices

The current membership of the Joint Adoption Panel is appended to the report.

Report compiled by:

Angela Harris, Regional Adoption Manager
Bethan James, Family Finding Manager
Elizabeth Dickinson, Adoption Support Manager
Mary- Lou Rixon, Recruitment & Assessment Manager.

July 2016.

Appendix: Regional Panel Members and Advisers.

Name	Panel Role
Members	
Artie Meakin	Independent Chair
Mark Roszkowski	Independent Chair
Charles Twining	Independent Member / Vice Chair
Kay Owen	Independent Member / Vice Chair
Margaret Dickson	Vice Chair
Rachel Whiston	Independent Member
Tracey Payne	Independent Member
Erica Beddoe	Independent Member
Fiona Robinson	Independent Member
Joanne Weston	Independent Member
David Issac	Local Councillor
Howard Hamilton	Local Councillor
Sue Lent	Local Councillor
Sharon Rees	Local Councillor
Rhian Graham	Local Councillor
Elaine Williams	Social Worker
Claire Canham	Social Worker
Louise Davies	Social Worker
Lorraine Thomas	Social Worker
Hilary Coombes	Social Worker
Carol Ann Roberts	Social Worker
Martyn Blackmore	Social Worker
Amy Goddard	Social Worker
Rebecca Wells	Social Worker
Advisers – Formal	
Angela Harris	Panel Adviser
Bethan James	Panel Adviser
Mary-Lou Rixon	Panel Adviser
Liz Dickinson	Panel Adviser
Administrator	
Melanie Beere	Panel Coordinator
Lisa Gibbs	Panel Coordinator
Panel Advisers – Specific	
Carolyn Sampeys	Medical Adviser
Bethan Williams	Medical Adviser
Zed Sibanda	Medical Adviser
Niema Awadalla	Medical Adviser
Marilyn Skyrme	Medical Adviser