

Meeting of:	Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committee
Date of Meeting:	Tuesday, 08 December 2020
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Healthy Living and Social Care
Report Title:	Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative Annual Report 2019-20
Purpose of Report:	To provide Scrutiny Committee with the Annual Report and review of the Collaborative
Report Owner:	Director of Social Services
Responsible Officer:	Head of Children and Young People Services
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	The report will be presented to the respective Cabinets of the partner Authorities
Policy Framework:	This report is for Executive decision by Cabinet
<p>Executive Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC) is one of five regional Collaboratives which form part of the National Adoption Service (NAS) and provides an adoption service on behalf of the Vale of Glamorgan Council, Cardiff Council, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council. The Vale of Glamorgan hosts the Collaborative. • The report provides information in respect of the governance of the regional arrangement, staff changes and areas of service development. • The report outlines the performance of the region in terms of the placement of children for adoption, the recruitment and assessment of adopters and the provision of adoption support services. • The report details the additional Welsh Government funding awarded during the period to improve adoption support services across Wales. The report outlines the impact of the investment upon the regional service in terms of recruitment of a number of additional posts to meet key priorities. • The appendices to the report provide data in respect of key performance measures in respect of children, adopter recruitment, adoption support and the Adoption Panel. This information is shown by Local Authority. 	

Recommendations

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

Reasons for Recommendations

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

1. Background

- 1.1 On 28th November 2014, Cabinet approved the business case, service delivery model and implementation plan for creating the Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Regional Collaborative. The recommendations in the report were resolved also by the Cabinets in Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil during December 2014. The Vale of Glamorgan Council acts as host authority for the Collaborative, which became fully operational on 1st June 2015.
- 1.2 On 2nd November 2015, Scrutiny Committee considered a report outlining the progress made following implementation and agreed to receive a further report in line with the requirements of the Legal Agreement for the Collaborative. This was considered on 22nd November 2016, with agreement that reports would continue to be received on an annual basis, the last of which was considered on 12th November 2019.
- 1.3 The governance structure of the Collaborative involves a Joint Committee and a regional Management Board. The Joint Committee involves the lead Cabinet Member from each of the four Local Authorities and Heads of Service; it meets twice a year. The Management Board meets quarterly. It comprises the Heads of Service from the four Local Authorities which make up the Collaborative and representatives from Health, Education and the Voluntary Sector. During the reporting period the Management Board has been chaired by the Director of Social Services for Cardiff. Following revisions to the Legal Agreement, the Management Board have agreed that the Chair should rotate on a three-yearly basis between the Directors of the four local authorities. The Regional Adoption Manager reports to the Management Board and Joint Committee.
- 1.4 In addition, Regulation 39 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019 require the Collaborative to create and maintain a system to monitor, review and improve the quality of its service. Section 15 2 (c) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015 also requires each regional Collaborative to provide an Annual Report to the Director of Operations for the National Adoption Service. It is envisaged that the Annual Report attached at Appendix A will meet all these

requirements. The performance of the Collaborative has been regularly reviewed by the Management Board and the Joint Committee.

2. Key Issues for Consideration

- 2.1** The report outlines the performance and work of the Collaborative for the period, 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020. It summarises performance, progress, achievements and areas for development against regional and national priorities.
- 2.2** The report includes information on:
- Governance, staffing and service development
 - Performance in respect of children and family finding activity
 - Adopter marketing and recruitment
 - Adoption support services, service user engagement and consultation
 - Complaints and compliments
 - Adoption Panel
 - Future priorities.
- 2.3** In terms of regional performance, the report highlights further improvement in the number of children placed for adoption during the year and a reduction in the number of children waiting. It also highlights an increase in those being placed within the region enabling the region to utilise its existing pool of adopters effectively and providing easier access to support services for those families.
- 2.4** The report also highlights the positive impact of the Collaborative being able to develop a marketing and recruitment strategy upon performance. A significant increase in adopter enquiries was seen during the year and a significant increase in the number of households approved. The role of the Marketing and Recruitment Officer has assisted in developing a professional and consistent response to all adopter enquiries and has contributed to the development of a rich set of data which can be utilised in developing our marketing strategy. There continues to be challenges in being able to recruit sufficient adopters to be able to meet the range of needs of children referred and in being able to convert more enquiries into applications.
- 2.5** The report outlines the improvement in the provision of life journey work for children with a plan for adoption during the period alongside the ongoing challenges of meeting the target for completion in all cases. The take up of services by birth parents fell during the period highlighting the need to improve performance in this area.
- 2.6** The additional posts created within the Collaborative from Welsh Government investment are outlined in the report. These posts located within VVC and our partner authorities are linked to our key priorities; transition planning for children moving into adoptive homes, life journey work, birth parent support, support to adopted children and young and support to adoptive families.

- 2.7** The report outlines the measures put in place to monitor service improvements as a result of this funding and the requirements to report upon progress to the National Adoption Service and Welsh Government. Going forward this requirement will continue as the posts continue to be embedded within the fabric of the Collaborative to meet service objectives.

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

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

4. Resources and Legal Considerations

Financial

- 4.1** The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored and approved by the Management Board and Joint Committee. The end of year position reported an underspend in the budget for 2019-20. The Management Board and Joint Committee agreed to the retention of this budget by the Collaborative. Proposals to utilise the monies to improve IT equipment for

staff, training and support of adopters and provide additional capacity to meet COVID-19 recovery planning were agreed.

- 4.2** In April 2019 a new method of budget contribution was put in place. Part of the apportionment is now based on a fixed charge of 20% for each partner with 80% of the costs being classed as variable and based on activity/demand being placed on the service. The factors which are used in determining activity are the number of children looked after, referrals into the service, children placed for adoption and requests for adoption support. The calculation is based on the average previous 3 years' activity in order to smooth out any peaks and troughs in demand.

Employment

- 4.3** There are no employment consequences.

Legal (Including Equalities)

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

5. Background Papers

Appendix A - VVC Annual Report 2019-20

- Appendix 1 to the Annual Report – Family Finding
- Appendix 2 to the Annual Report – Recruitment and Assessment
- Appendix 3 to the Annual Report – Adoption Support
- Appendix 4 to the Annual Report – Adoption Panel

VALE, VALLEYS AND CARDIFF ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE (VVC)

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1st APRIL 2019 TO 31 MARCH 2020

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 fifth annual report and covers the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. This report seeks to combine the reporting requirements set out in regulation and the governance arrangements for the region in one report.

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 the same during this period with service delivery structured around three functional teams. A managerial vacancy within the service was filled in September 2019 by the appointment of a new Adoption Support Manager. The existing postholder transferred to manage the Family Finding Team.

- 2.2** In April 2019, as part of the Welsh Government award of £2.3M to improve adoption services in Wales, the region received a substantial investment of new monies which has enabled a number of new posts to be recruited across the service. The grant was allocated to national and regional services to support key priorities for improvement which were utilised by VVC Management Board in determining the distribution of the grant. As a result of these monies, VVC has been able to recruit two full time Social Workers to specialise in Transitions and Life Journey Work and a part time Social Worker to support birth parents. These posts were recruited from experienced staff within the service. VVC was however able to successfully recruit to the vacancies created by these appointments enabling the service to be fully staffed by the end of the reporting period.
- 2.3** The service has also recruited two new unqualified posts, a Children and Young People Co-ordinator to support adopted children and young people and a TESSA (Therapeutic Education Support Service in Adoption) Co-ordinator to support adoptive families. Both posts are linked to the national programmes being delivered by Adoption UK; the Connected service which supports young adoptees and the TESSA programme which supports adoptive families.
- 2.4** In addition to the posts located within the Collaborative, 10.5 practitioner posts have been created from the grant to support the provision of life journey work for children with a plan of adoption. These posts are distributed across the four partner authorities and link to the Life Journey Co-ordinator within VVC. All these posts had been successfully recruited to at year end with the exception of one authority. Contingency arrangements were however put in place within that authority to cover the work, pending the appointments being made.
- 2.5** As part of the deployment of the grant an Implementation Plan was developed by Welsh Government requiring reports to be submitted monitoring spend against the grant and the areas of improvement in service delivery as a result of the investment. The Regional Adoption Manager co-ordinated the response on behalf of the region and submitted monitoring reports to Welsh Government in October, December 2019 and at year end to secure continuation of the funding. The National Adoption Service (NAS) will, on behalf of regions, prepare the bid for the grant in

2020-1 and take over the monitoring function in conjunction with Welsh Government requiring regions to report upon progress to NAS. All posts created as part of the grant within the region are permanent positions.

- 2.6** Temporary arrangements have been put in place to cover a vacancy within our Business Support Team created during the first quarter of the year. This will enable a review of the structure of team roles to be undertaken to ensure that the service can continue to adapt to business need. VVC's office within the Dock Offices underwent refurbishment in the Autumn of 2019 to create some individual and meeting room space.
- 2.7** Following the revisions to the Legal Agreement agreed in April 2019, VVC's Management Board has continued to meet on a quarterly basis. The composition of the Board has remained the same although a new Medical Adviser was appointed following the retirement of the other representative. The Board has continued to be chaired by the Director of Social Services for Cardiff Council. The Vale of Glamorgan Director will take up this post in October 2020. This is in advance of the planned rotational change due to the departure of the current Director in Cardiff. In order to improve business continuity, the four partner authorities have agreed to change the rotation of the chair from an annual basis to a three-yearly cycle with the transfer taking effect at the end of the first quarter of the fourth year.
- 2.8** The overall remit and accountability of the Management Board is prescribed within regulation and the Legal Agreement underpinning the Collaborative. VVC's Management Board continues to play a key role in monitoring the performance and business plan of the regional service highlighting areas for improvement.
- 2.9** The second tier of governance within the Collaborative is via the Operational Group which comprises of senior managers from each of the four local authorities and regional managers from VVC. This group meets on a quarterly basis with meetings being scheduled a couple of weeks following Management Board to enable any matters remitted by Management Board to be considered. The Operational Group

provides a further mechanism for monitoring the performance of the region and is a vehicle for raising standards and improving practice consistency across the region. The Operational Group in conjunction with Independent Reviewing Officers across the region have developed a revised format and process for conducting reviews of adoption placements which is being piloted across the region.

- 2.10** The overall governance of the region remains via a Joint Committee which meets twice a year. Meetings were held in July and December 2019 as per requirements to approve the annual accounts, the annual budget and annual plan for the Collaborative. This structure is unique in Wales for adoption services but has been supported by NAS as the preferred model for regional governance.
- 2.11** The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored closely by the Management Board and Joint Committee. The end of year position reported an underspend in the budget for 2019 -20 partly created by grant slippage monies and staff vacancies. A proposal to retain the underspend within VVC has been agreed by Management Board and Joint Committee. These monies will be used to upgrade IT equipment for staff to enable more agile working across the region, improve support systems for adoptive families by facilitating specialist training and provide additional staff resource to undertake additional work as may be required due to COVID-19 .
- 2.12** 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 at the end of the reporting period and concluded that the "effectiveness of the internal control environment within the service was sound and Substantial Assurance could be placed upon the management of risks".
- 2.14** VVC is required to report to the National Adoption Service on a range of performance measures which are collected on a quarterly and annual basis under the NAS Performance Framework. VVC has complied with all reporting requirements during the period and has continued to develop more comprehensive

mechanisms to capture the measures, which have increased each year. Data Cymru have been commissioned by NAS to develop the Framework and each region is required to upload data onto this new system each quarter enabling performance data against specific measures for each regional service to be visible across Wales.

- 2.15** The National Adoption Service provide the region with mid-year and end of year reports. The draft report for 2019-20 was delayed due to COVID restrictions and the meeting with the Director of Operations and VVC to discuss the report and our mid-year position had to be rescheduled to early November 2020.

3. SERVICE FUNCTIONS

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

4. FAMILY FINDING

- 4.1** Family Finding and its' associated activities remains a key area of activity for the region and the ability to place children effectively and promptly underpins all other activities. As the largest regional Collaborative, the level of demand placed upon this area and our ability to meet the needs identified remains challenging.
- 4.2** The number of children referred for adoption totalled **143** which marks a 34% decrease on the previous year. There has been a continued downward trend in referrals which has also been observed across Wales. The reasons for this are likely to be varied and will reflect the work being undertaken by local authorities with the Welsh Government to reduce numbers of children looked after in Wales.
- 4.3** A similar pattern of withdrawn referrals was seen with **41%** withdrawn within the period (compared with 43% in 2018-19). There remains a commitment to develop alternative permanency plans for children and positively **88%** of those children who were withdrawn from adoption had the option of either a positive parenting or positive

connected person's assessment. Just 12% of those referrals (7 children) had a change of care plan to long-term fostering based on an assessment of their individual needs or sibling attachment relationship. Withdrawn referrals in many instances do not equate to a decrease in workload for the service as a lot of work has been undertaken to progress the adoption plan prior to it being discontinued.

- 4.4** The number of 'Should be Adopted' decisions made in respect of children reduced in 2019-20 by **34%** from the previous year. This is to be expected as the number of SBA decisions made will reflect the referrals made during that year and the previous year, as the number of referrals declines so will the number of SBA decisions. All but 1 region within Wales also experienced a downturn in SBA decisions during 2019-20.
- 4.5** The region has recorded **71** Placement Orders being made within the year, a 30% reduction from the previous year and again can be viewed in the context of a reduction in referrals over the past couple of years.
- 4.6** VVC placed **101** children for adoption during the year, a 1% increase on the previous year. This is particularly pleasing when considering the reduction in the number of Placement Orders over recent years. Continuing to place a high number of children reflects our continued commitment to securing permanence for children through adoption where this is the best outcome for the child. This includes successfully identifying adopters for children who have been waiting for a considerable length of time. The number of children waiting less than 6 months between Placement Order and matching for adoption is **24%** in VVC compared with **36%** across Wales as a whole and we have seen the average waiting time in VVC increase by 1 month since the previous year to **11.9 months**. It is important to note that this *mean* average time includes some high outliers of children waiting a significantly higher period of time than others with some 8 children waiting between 6-15 months longer than any other child, somewhat skewing the picture. A *median* average instead shows closer to **9.8 months** waiting time.

- 4.7** It has been very positive to see the increase in the number of children being able to be placed within the region (**72%** up from 65% last year) and this is a clear benefit from the increased recruitment of adopters within VVC. There is also a slight increase in placements made elsewhere in Wales (**10%** up from 9%) and a reduction in the placements made outside of Wales (**18%** down from 26%).
- 4.8** At the end of the year there were **73** children on Placement Orders awaiting an adoptive placement which is a reduction of **22%** from the previous year. A further 13 children had a very strong link proceeding but not yet matched as at the end of March 2020 and another child was awaiting a Placement Order revocation and so the number actually waiting was **59**. Of these as may be expected a significant proportion (40%) have additional factors i.e. aged 4 plus, BME, complex needs or a part of a sibling group which makes being able to secure appropriate matches more challenging.
- 4.9** There were **82** Adoption Orders granted during the year which is on a par with the previous year (83).
- 4.10** The level of placement breakdown continues to be low with two placement disruptions during the year, one of a 5-year-old girl who was placed for 9 months and the adopters felt that they could not continue with the placement. The second breakdown was a sibling group of two girls (aged 4 and 6) where again adopters advised that they could not continue with the placement.
- 4.11** The number of birth parents referred to the service for counselling fell during the year to **139**. **63%** of parents took up the service from VVC during this year which is significantly higher than the Welsh average of **25%**. This reflects the work of the Family Finding Team in offering this service to parents of children referred to us.
- 4.12** Performance in relation to the provision of Life Journey Material for children being placed for adoption has improved considerably over this past year although remains short of the 100% target as is the case across Wales. **84%** of VVC children (up from

44% in 2018-19) had life journey materials available at matching panel. This is the second highest in Wales and higher than the average of 59% across Wales. **60%** of VVC children (up from 46% in 2018-19) had finalised life journey materials available at the 2nd adoption review. This is the highest in Wales and higher than the average of 57% across Wales. There remain issues with ensuring that these figures are being accurately captured within the local authorities and we are seeking opportunities to work with them to ensure a robust system for data capture is in place. The increase in performance can clearly be linked to the additional Welsh Government funding which has enabled us to recruit a full time Life Journey Work Co-Ordinator from 1st October 2019 and the provision of life journey work practitioner posts within the local authorities which has been rolled out over 2019-20 and into 2020-21. As of September 2020, all practitioner posts have now been filled.

- 4.13** The Life Journey Work Co-ordinator offers regular support, advice and guidance to the life journey work practitioners and in addition has offered workshops/briefings to local authority teams and was integral in the recruitment panels for the practitioner posts. Further work is being undertaken to develop training opportunities within this role as well.
- 4.14** As previously outlined the additional investment from Welsh Government has enabled the creation of a Transitions Worker post within the Family Finding Team as of 1st October 2019. **31** children were referred to this service within the first 6 months of operation. For **22** of these children, direct work was provided to support their transition to an adoptive family, with an 'Understanding the Child' day being provided for several of these children to enable the adoptive parents to be provided with a detailed history of the child's early experiences. For **6** children these were younger children where work was being completed with the older children within the adoptive family to support the transition running smoothly and for a further **3** children work was being offered directly to the foster carer on a 1:1 basis to support them in their understanding of the child's needs. In addition, training has been developed for foster carers as well as ad hoc advice and support to other practitioners. This role has been of incredible value to the region in terms of the service we are able to offer to children

and to improve the overall transitions experience. There are many opportunities to further develop this role over the coming year.

4.15 VVC has continued to embrace the use of all available family finding methods over this year. The team liaises closely with the Adoption Register Wales (ARW)/LinkMaker team to ensure information is updated and monitored in a timely manner. We have also made use of the national Exchange Day event in October 2019 and the Welsh Adoption Activity Day in March 2020, each of which produced matches for children.

4.16 St David's Adoption Agency and Barnardo Cymru developed a new family finding service in 2018, Adopting Together. Adopting Together focuses upon the recruitment of adopters for children with additional needs who have been waiting for adoptive placements over six months. The scheme targets recruitment for specific children and provides ongoing specialist support to those children for a year following placement. The Vale of Glamorgan, as host authority has entered into a service level agreement with Adopting Together on behalf of our regional partners. As at March 2020, VVC has referred **27** children to the scheme since its' inception; **6** children were placed initially with a further **1** being placed last year. The Regional Adoption Manager and Family Finding Manager presented an overview of VVC's experience of working with the service at a national conference on Adopting Together held in March 2020. The Regional Adoption Manager is also a member of the Steering Group which oversees the development of the service.

5. RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT

5.1. VVC's Marketing and Recruitment Strategy has been further developed during the year and much progress has been seen in furthering its goal of raising the profile of the Collaborative with the wider public and in doing so increasing the number of enquiries received. The Recruitment and Marketing Officer's role has continued to prove crucial in creating the content and activity associated with the Strategy ensuring that this is co-ordinated with NAS' Marketing Strategy to increase the

number of adoptive families. The Marketing Officer has closely liaised with 'Cowshed', the marketing company commissioned by NAS to undertake national campaigns and represents the region on a national workgroup to promote activity. Links have also been established with local Comms Departments across the region to ensure that adoption features as part of their local advertising features. The Marketing Officer's role was made permanent in December 2019.

- 5.2.** Whilst also benefitting from the NAS' co-ordinated marketing campaign, VVC has also focused efforts in connecting with members of the public in our local areas. This has involved having both a physical and online presence. During 2019/20 VVC attended a variety of community events including Cardiff Pride, Barry Pride, Vale of Glamorgan Agricultural Show, the Big Wedding Show , Vegan Winterfest, St Donat's Craft Fair as well as attending a variety of faith settings in order to discuss adoption. We have enjoyed positive engagement at these events which have all contributed to raising the profile of the service.
- 5.3.** VVC has also developed its' online marketing and it now has a well-established presence on two social media platforms – Facebook and Instagram. These profiles are coordinated and managed by the Marketing Officer and these tools are useful in order to target a wider yet purposeful audience. These platforms are also used to promote the post adoption support services. Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising has been used to promote adoption and raise the awareness of our information events. Whilst the cost implications for PPC are relatively small, the audience we are able to reach, and the data captured to inform future advertising is significant. The social media presence is beginning to show dividends in terms of actual enquiries as we specifically capture where an enquirer heard about us. A pleasing and growing number of people are referencing the fact that they saw our profile or advert online, and this led them to read more about our service and adoption more widely.
- 5.4.** The recruitment activity has had a specific goal to increase the number of enquiries the agency receives. 2019/20 saw a significant and sustained increase in the number of enquiries – **340** in total compared to **259** received during 2018/19. This is a

pleasing outcome and our ability to provide a professional and structured approach to receiving, recording and tracking enquiries has led to this important increase in performance. The national marketing work in conjunction with regional input is also having a positive impact in providing a consistent and coherent message to the wider public.

- 5.5.** 2019/20 saw the Collaborative hosting six Information Evenings for prospective applicants. These events have always been well attended and feedback has continued to be positive.
- 5.6.** VVC's three day 'Preparation to Adopt' training course continues to be provided by an Independent Social Worker. Questionnaires have been developed by the Vale of Glamorgan's Participation Officer and are distributed at the end of training to gather views of the process from enquiry through to training. These questionnaires are collated and the feedback in respect of the training from participants is unanimous in its praise and appreciation for what they learn. In 2019/20 **six** courses were held. **51** households attended the course. Out of those **51** households **four** did not go onto submit applications to progress onwards to an assessment. These potential applicants have been followed up. Three households' feedback that they wished to take more time to consider their future plans and one household has not responded to follow up enquiries.
- 5.7.** During 2019/20 a total of **75** adopter approvals were presented to VVC's Adoption Panel and positive recommendations were made. **69** of these approvals were ratified within the reporting year. The approvals are broken down as follows: **RCT – 18, Cardiff – 29, Vale of Glamorgan – 14, Merthyr Tydfil – 1 and Other (Newport, Caerphilly and Kent) – 7**. This represented a pleasing increase of **35%** when compared to 2018/19's approval performance. In comparison to other Welsh regions who reported experiencing increases ranging from **8%** to **44%**, meaning VVC was one of the higher performing services.

- 5.8.** A total of **5** assessments were commenced and concluded with the applicants withdrawing / being counselled out. The level of work involved even where assessments don't conclude is considerable. This is not reflected in the performance figures but evidences the robustness of the decision-making process which supports this work.
- 5.9.** Out of the **69** ratified approvals achieved in 2019/20, **5** were foster carers assessed to adopt a specific child, **8** were second time adopters and **56** were first time adopters.
- 5.10.** **3** approved adopters have since withdrawn following approval for family reasons.
- 5.11.** The majority of the applicants approved during 2019/20 have gone onto be matched with children from within VVC. One has had a child placed from outside of our region from SEWAS. A further two are in the matching process of adopting non VVC children (a second child from SEWAS and a child from Scotland).

6. ADOPTION SUPPORT

- 6.1.** Referrals into the service for adoption support services had remained at a consistent rate for the past couple of years. However, the increased funding and support injected into adoption support services at a national and local level has in turn created an increase of adopters coming forward earlier for services following the making of Adoption Order.
- 6.2.** 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 **£207,470.6**. This is showing a rise in spending, however when this is consistent with the increase in the number of referrals into the service. The average spend per child is reduced and is only **£992.68** although this varies across LA the costs for

services are higher in Cardiff and the Vale compared to providers in RCT and Merthyr. On average **40%** of children referred from the region go on to receive funding requests, meaning **60%** are managed with in-house support such as direct work, training, and TESSA support. The emphasis of the service has been to continue to develop the skills of practitioners within the Adoption Support Team to be able to manage families by way of inhouse support without the need to rely on external input. The provision of external funding is monitored via the Operational Group and individual decision making arrangements have been agreed between the respective Operational Manager and the Adoption Support Manager. Discussion has taken place to further progress joint working across the region with the development of a preferred provider list.

- 6.3.** The largest funding costs are for attachment-based therapeutic work, complex emotional and behavioural therapeutic work and therapeutic life story work. These are the most frequently commissioned service and are in line with the types of need children present with. We anticipate that although the need for therapeutic life story work remains high at present, over the coming years with the investment in life journey work across the region this demand will reduce as the quality of the support being provided at an earlier stage improves. The spend on Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) training has reduced as VVC are now able to offer this training in-house and an NVR was provided during the year. A Nurturing and Attachment course was also facilitated in-house reducing the reliance on an external service provider and significant costs.
- 6.4.** **54** referrals for Access to Birth Records for adopted adults were received during the reporting period showing a small increase. **36** referrals for Intermediary Services have been received which are comparable to the previous year. There are two part time Social Workers aligned to this work which is by its very nature time consuming and requires dedication in being able to search and access information from historical records and a range of sources.

- 6.5.** Waiting lists for these services and allocation times have been managed so that applicants do not wait longer than two months for a service. The provision of an intermediary service is a power not a duty and therefore the service is not provided in all areas. It remains a significant strength of our service that intermediary requests are being supported and allows a natural follow on once the letterbox exchange ceases at the age of 18 and reaches out to support young adopted adults with understanding their identity post 18.
- 6.6.** The Birth Parent Advisor is a new role within the Adoption Support Team with the postholder taking up the position from November 2019. A referral process and information leaflet for Social Work colleagues across the region and an information leaflet for birth parents has been developed and disseminated. Nine referrals for individual birth parent support have been received and supported. The post is of benefit to parents post Adoption Order supporting them with a range of issues, contact matters and writing letterbox reports. It is hoped that some support to birth parents can be offered on a group basis going forward and that the role will continue to be promoted across the region.
- 6.7.** The TESSA Co-ordinator was also appointed in November 2019 shortly after the national launch of the service by Adoption UK. The aim of the service is to provide support services prior to adoptive families reaching crisis point. The Co-ordinator undertakes assessments of need and processes referrals of families who may be eligible. 17 referrals had been made to TESSA at year end by VVC.
- 6.8.** The Children and Young People Co-ordinator also took up post at the same time and since this time has been directly involved in running Connected groups on a Saturday once a month with staff from the Connected service. The service caters for children and young people 7 upwards and so the Saturday groups are into three groups according to age. During 2019-20 the service catered for 42 children from VVC. The aim of the service is to reach more young people who might benefit from such support and so the Co-ordinator's role is key to promoting the service across the region. In addition the postholder has provided direct support sessions to 11 children from the

region and has also supported a number of direct contact sessions for adopted children. Both Co-ordinators have taken over the running of the monthly toddler group for adoptive families which consistently supports eight families at a time.

- 6.9.** Evaluation forms have been developed within the team during the year to evaluate the service pre and post provision of therapeutic support and in terms of the new areas of service provision. The team also ask participants to evaluate the training which has been provided. The main objective is to ascertain the benefits of the service provided and to needs within families which may not have been addressed. It is however hoped going forward that the findings can be collated in a more systematic way to enable the feedback to be used constructively to improve service delivery.

7. ADOPTION PANEL

- 7.1.** The Collaborative has continued to operate a joint regional Panel from two sittings held on a fortnightly Monday and Wednesday basis. Work has continued in merging the central list to service both sittings and to spread Panel activity to enable the Panel to operate on a more equitable, unified basis.
- 7.2.** Panel business has remained at a high level during the year with 43 Panel meetings being held and 149 cases being heard. Two scheduled meetings were cancelled due to quoracy. Appendix 4 to the report provides a breakdown of the work of Panel.
- 7.3.** Maintenance of the central list of Panel members continues to pose challenges in terms of maintaining a sufficient number of Social Work members and a range of independent members. Ten new Panel members have been successfully recruited during the period and one Panel member resigned due to personal reasons.
- 7.4.** A programme of reviews of Panel members was developed at the beginning of 2020 and six reviews were conducted by the end of the reporting period.

- 7.5.** Panel training was provided for Panel members in March 2020 focusing upon the role and function of Panel and the requirements of the new regulations governing the approval of adopters due to be implemented in April 2020.

8. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

- 8.1** VVC has received three complaints during the period. Each complaint has been investigated by the Regional Adoption Manager and two were resolved at Stage 1 of the Vale of Glamorgan Social Services Complaint process. The third complaint has been referred to Stage 2 of the process and a stage 2 investigation has been commissioned.

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, share it for recording as part of the Collaborative's record, as contribution to their own personal development plans, and to promote the service more generally.

9. 9. CONCLUSION AND 2020-21 PRIORITIES

- 9.1** The priorities for VVC, alongside other regional Collaboratives stem year on year from our core business. The need to continue to recruit more adoptive parents to meet the needs of children requiring placements will remain constant features of the service we provide. Considerable improvement in both these areas was achieved during the reporting period which hopefully can be built upon year on year.
- 9.2** Significant progress has also been made in raising the profile of the region as a result of a consistent marketing strategy and this has produced results in attracting more enquiries from prospective adopters. The ongoing challenge for the service is being able to convert more of those enquiries into applications to ensure that we continue to build on our existing pool of adopters and to improve placement choice.

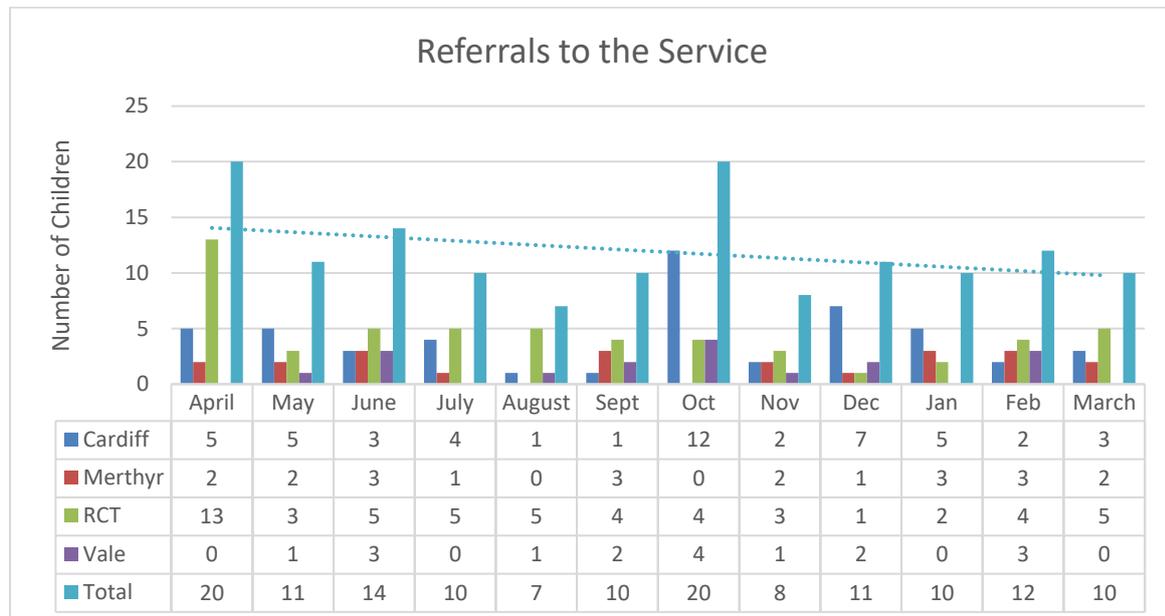
- 9.3** The other area where positive improvements have been seen is in the area of adoption support. The investment received from Welsh Government has been a significant, positive development for the service as a whole. VVC has during this time successfully recruited to all the specialist roles and there is already evidence of the benefits these posts have had on the service. These posts will continue to be evaluated in terms of service improvement and therefore will need to be further embedded across the region to ensure that performance targets are met. This is particularly important in respect of the provision of life journey work for the region due to the large amount of the investment secured for this work.
- 9.4** Just prior to the end of the reporting period the impact of the pandemic and national lockdown was beginning to take effect with staff working from home and key services temporarily halted. The service however adapted quickly to the challenges presented and has been able to deliver its core business partly on a virtual basis or via risk assessed face to face contact. This has enabled key functions to continue to be delivered although it is too early to assess the impact upon overall performance during this year. Going forward the service will need to continue to evaluate the effect upon services and develop plans to mitigate the overall impact upon service delivery.

Angela Harris
Regional Adoption Manager
October 2020

Appendix 1 – Family Finding

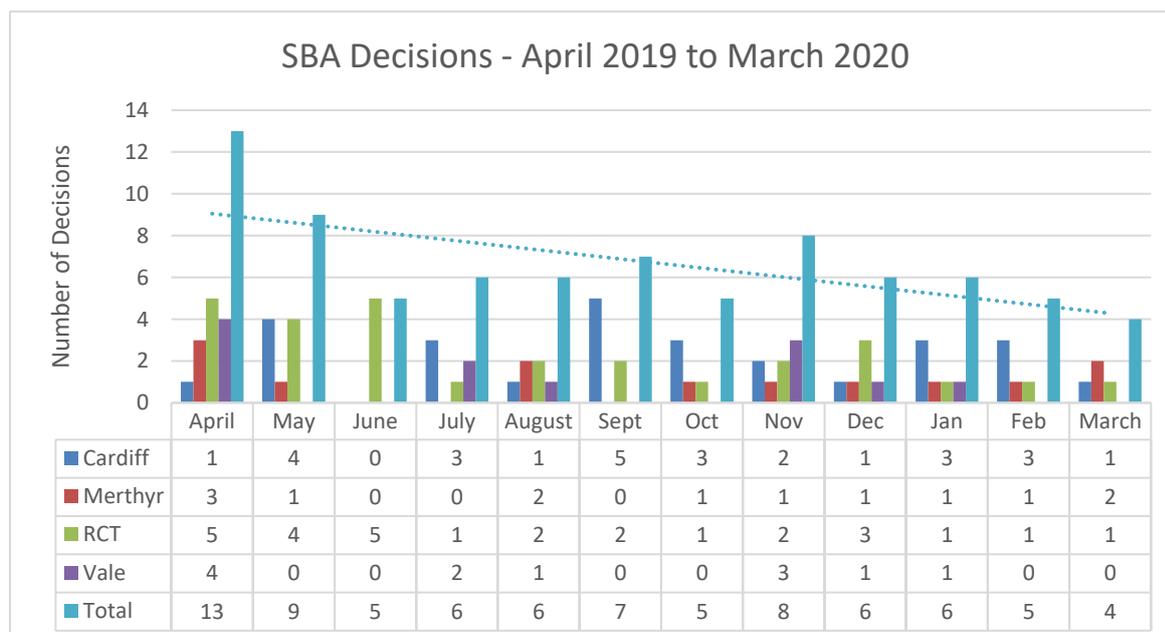
Children Referrals

143 children were referred to VVC during the reporting period. On average 12 referrals were received each month with 38% and 35% of referrals received from RCT and Cardiff respectively. 15% of referrals were received from Merthyr and 12% from the Vale.



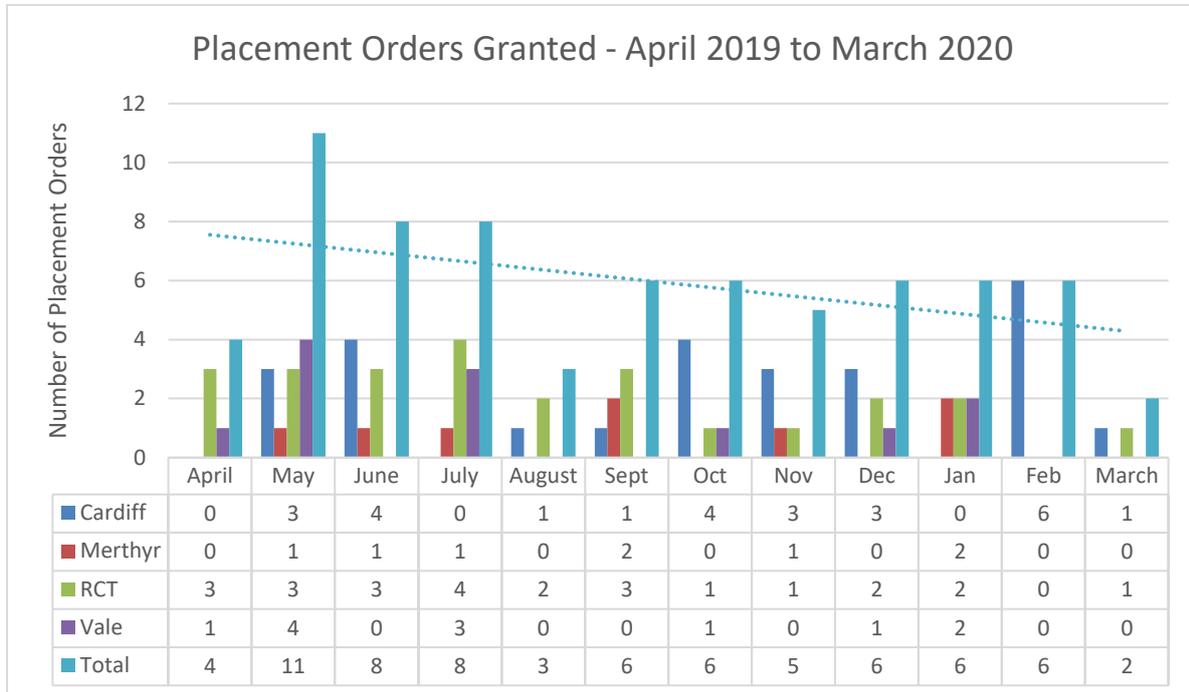
‘Should be placed for Adoption’ decisions

80 SBA decisions were made during the reporting period.



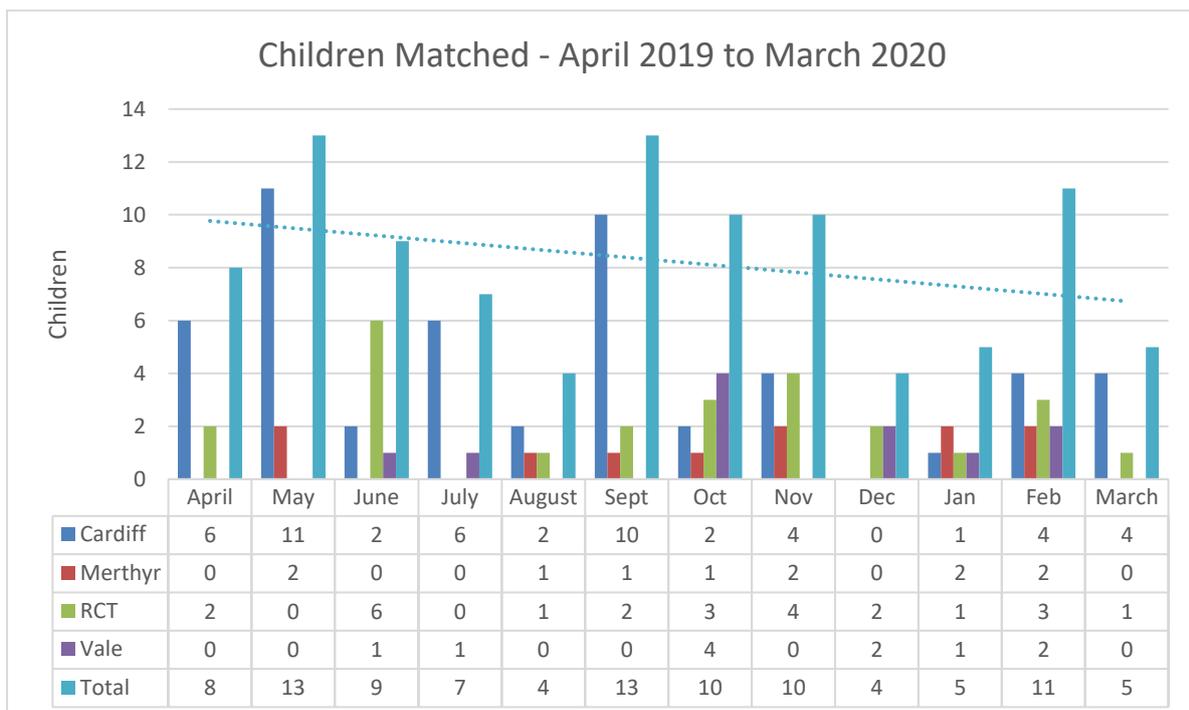
Placement Orders granted

71 Placement Orders were granted during the reporting period with an average of 6 Placement Orders granted each month.



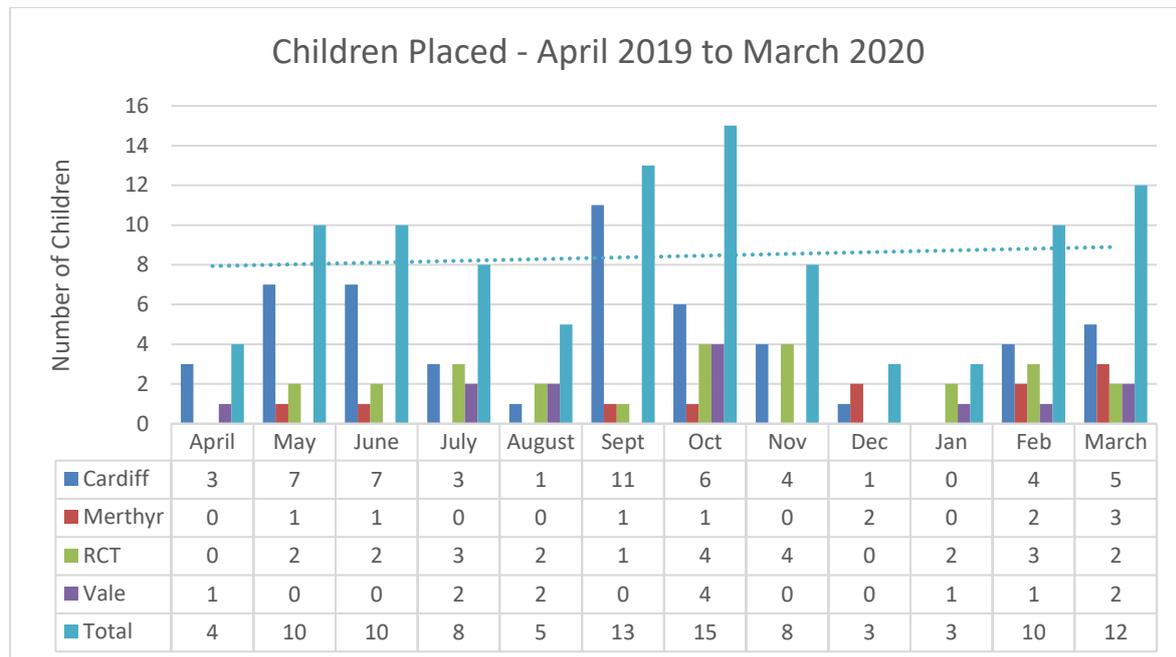
Children matched

98 children were matched with adopters during the period.



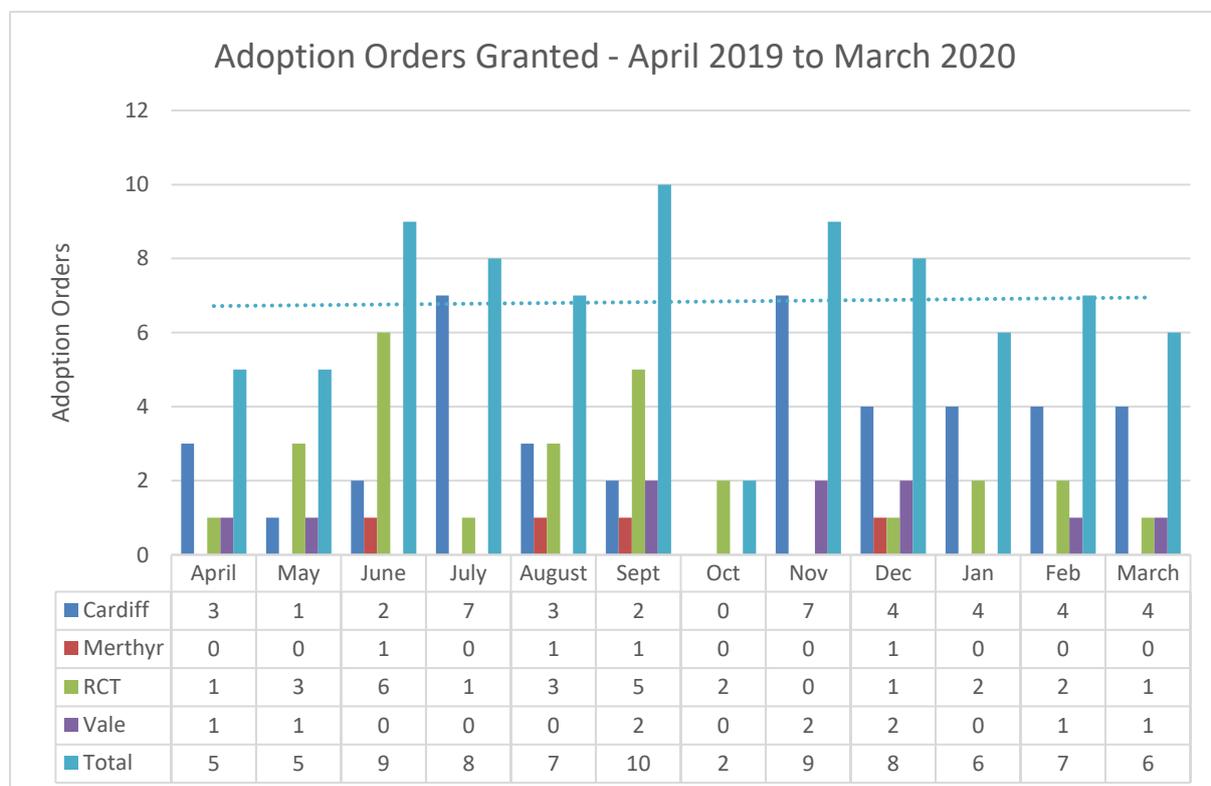
Children placed for Adoption

101 children were placed in adoption during the reporting period.



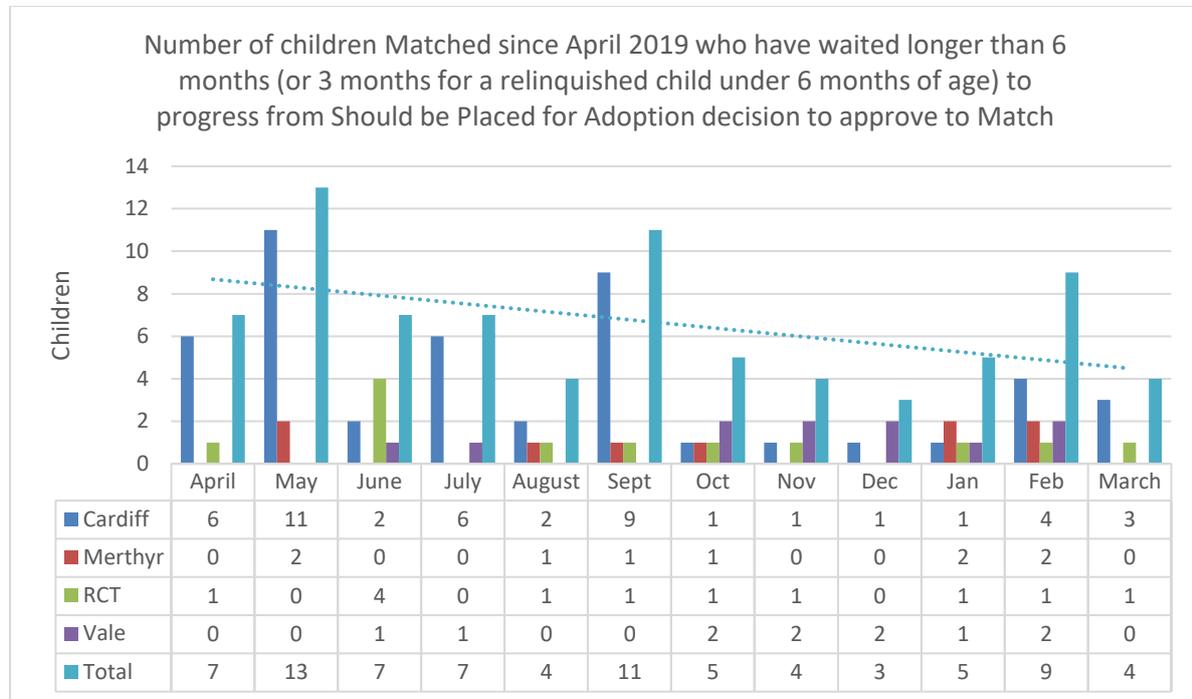
Adoption Orders

82 Adoption Orders were granted during the reporting period.

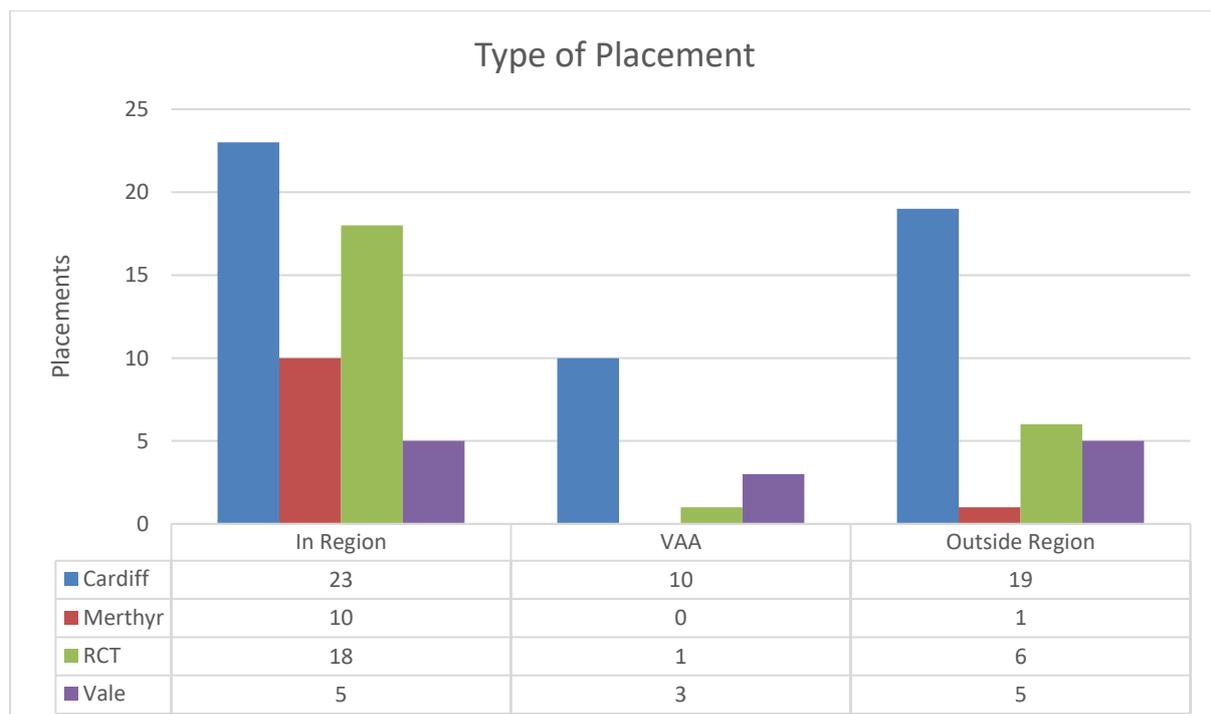


Number of children Matched since April 2019 who have waited longer than 6 months (or 3 months for a relinquished child under 6 months of age) to progress from Should be Placed for Adoption decision to approve to Match

79 of the 98 children matched had waited longer than 6 months to progress from a 'Should be placed for Adoption' decision to 'Approve to Match'.



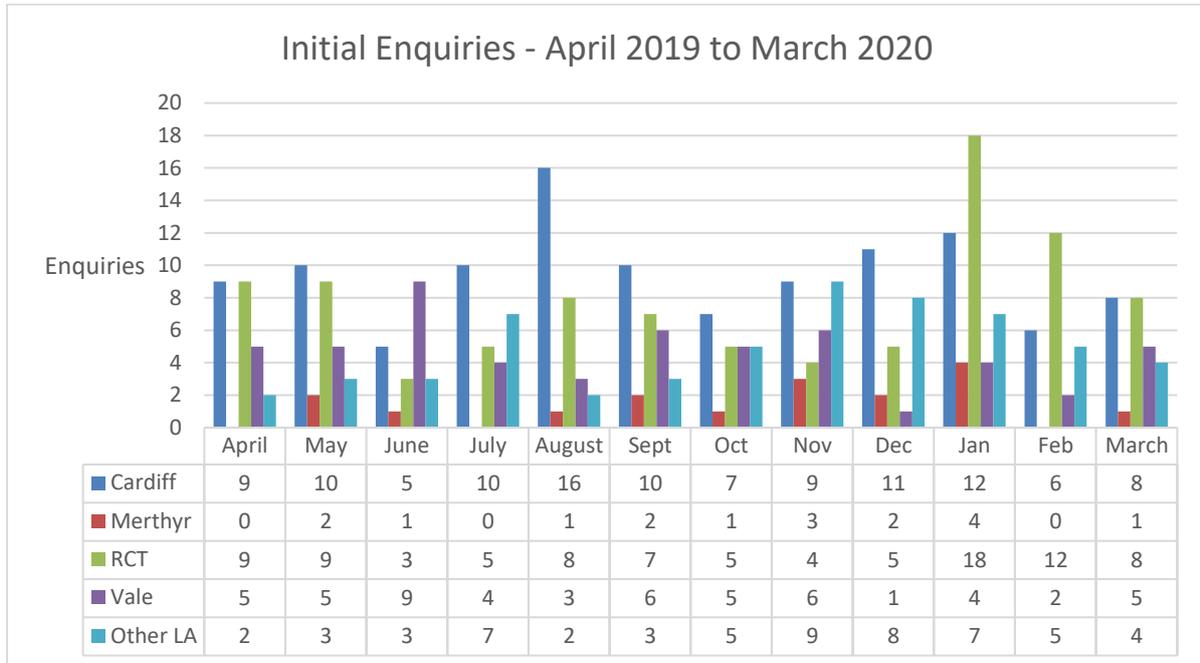
Type of Placement



Appendix 2 – Recruitment and Assessment

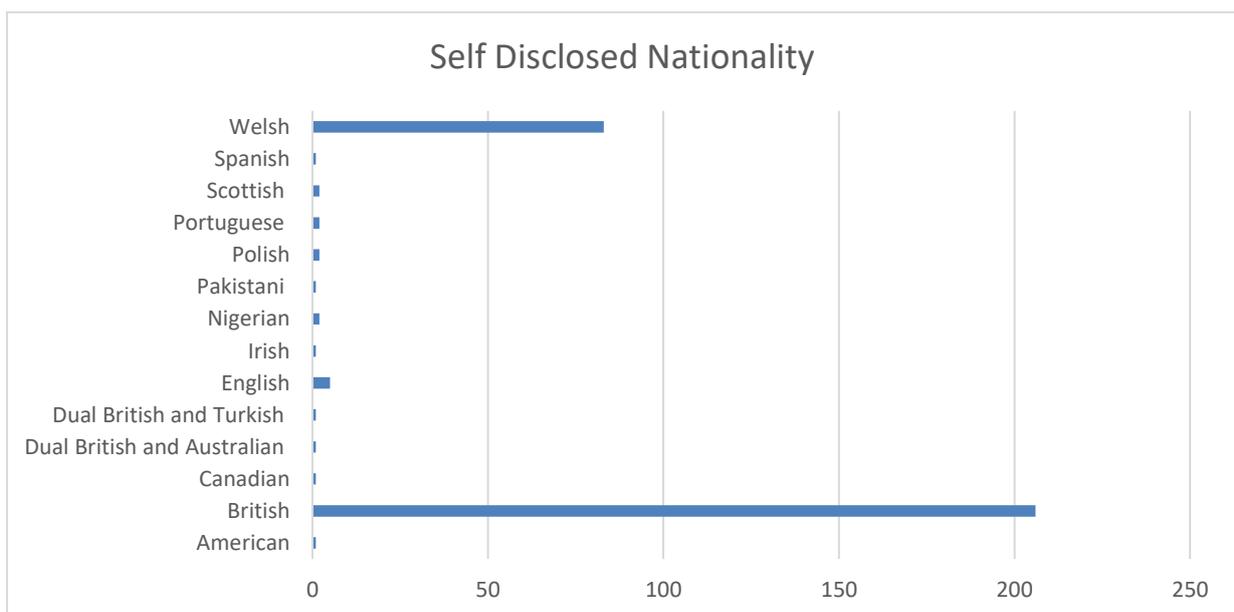
Initial Enquiries

278 enquiries were received from people living within our region. In addition, 58 enquiries were received from people living outside our area. There was a total of 336 enquiries.

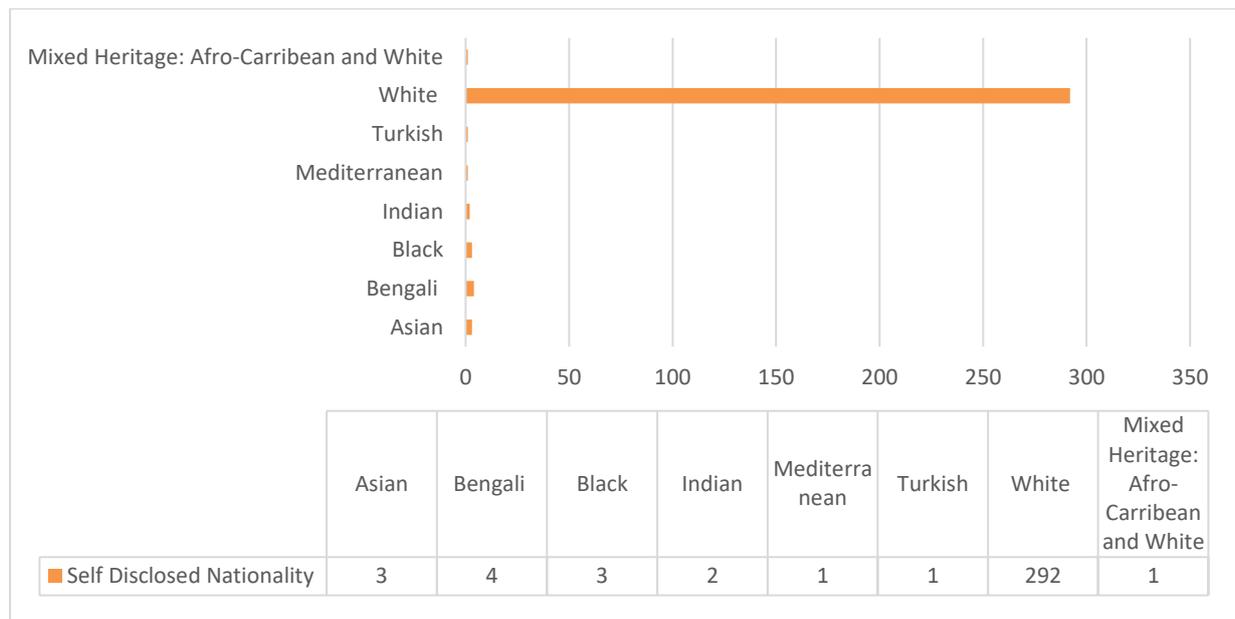


Demographics of Initial Enquiries

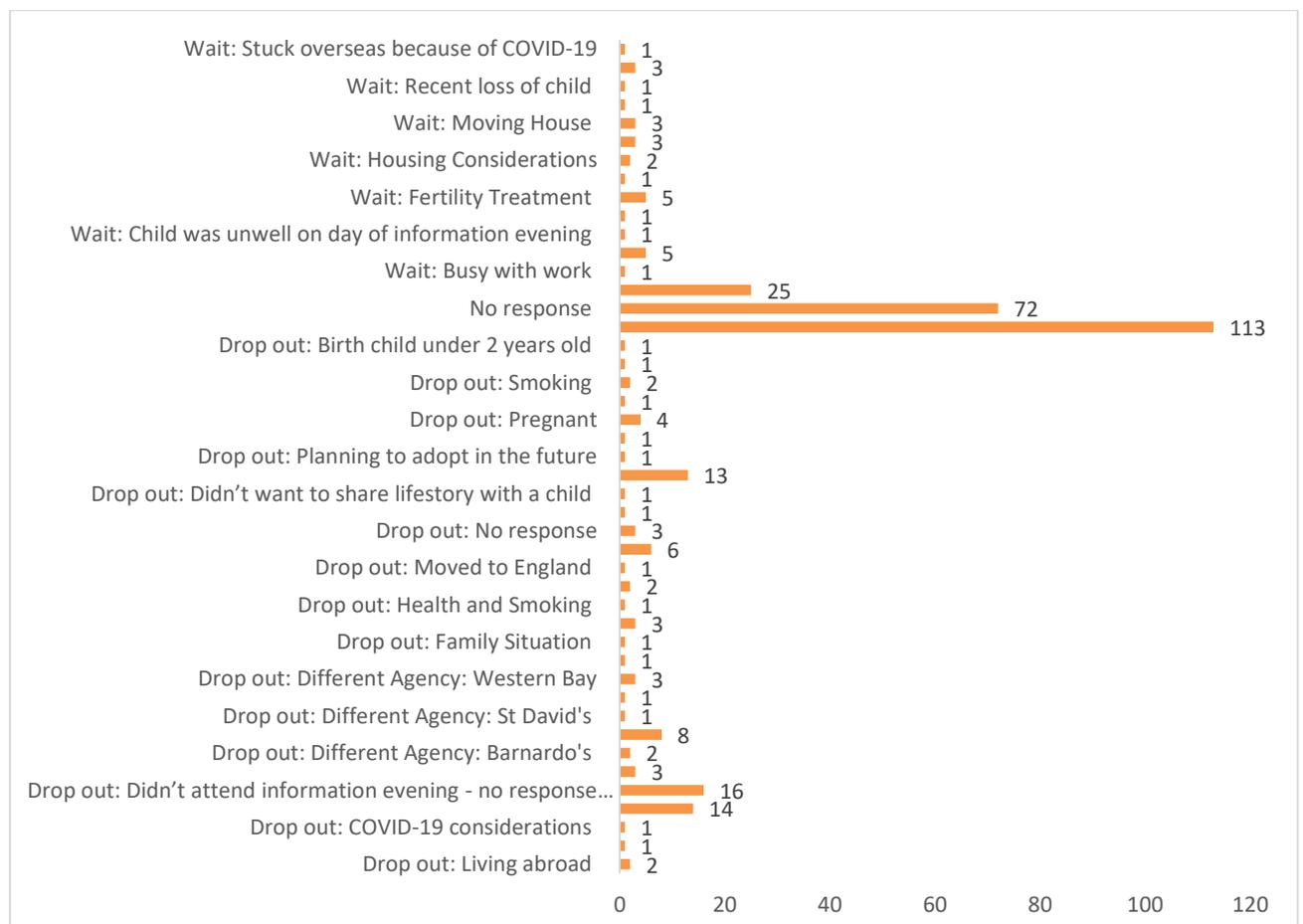
Self-disclosed Nationality



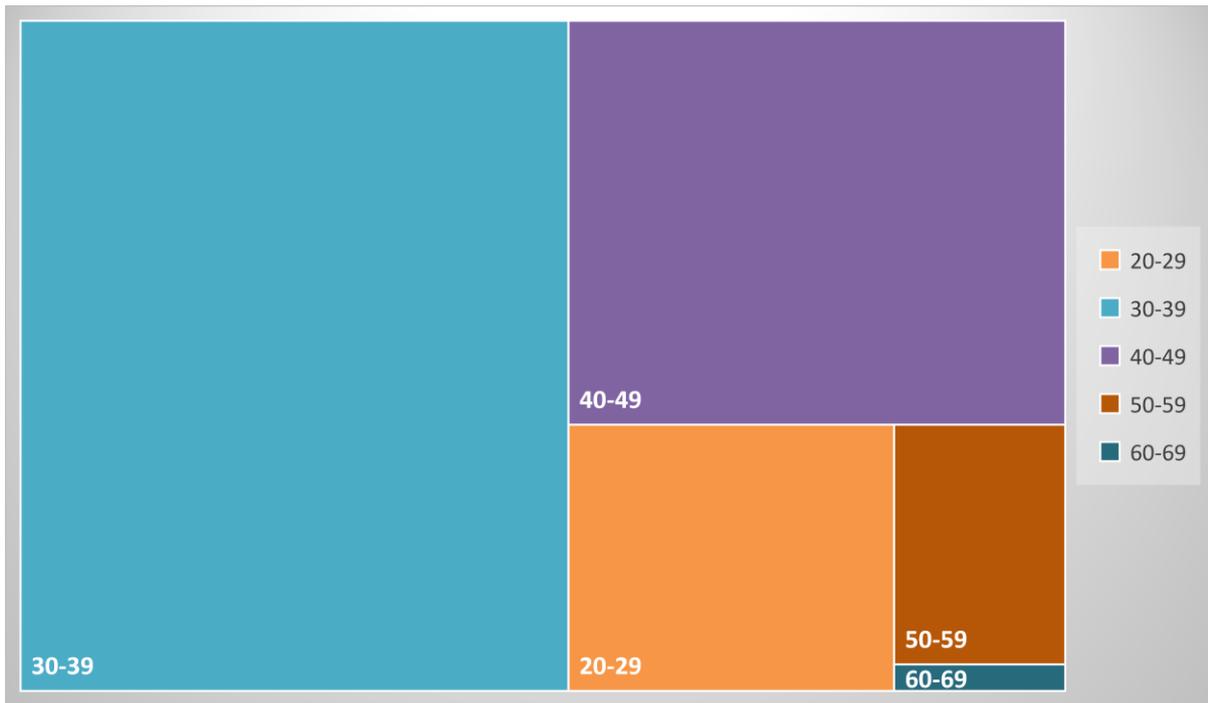
Self-disclosed ethnicity



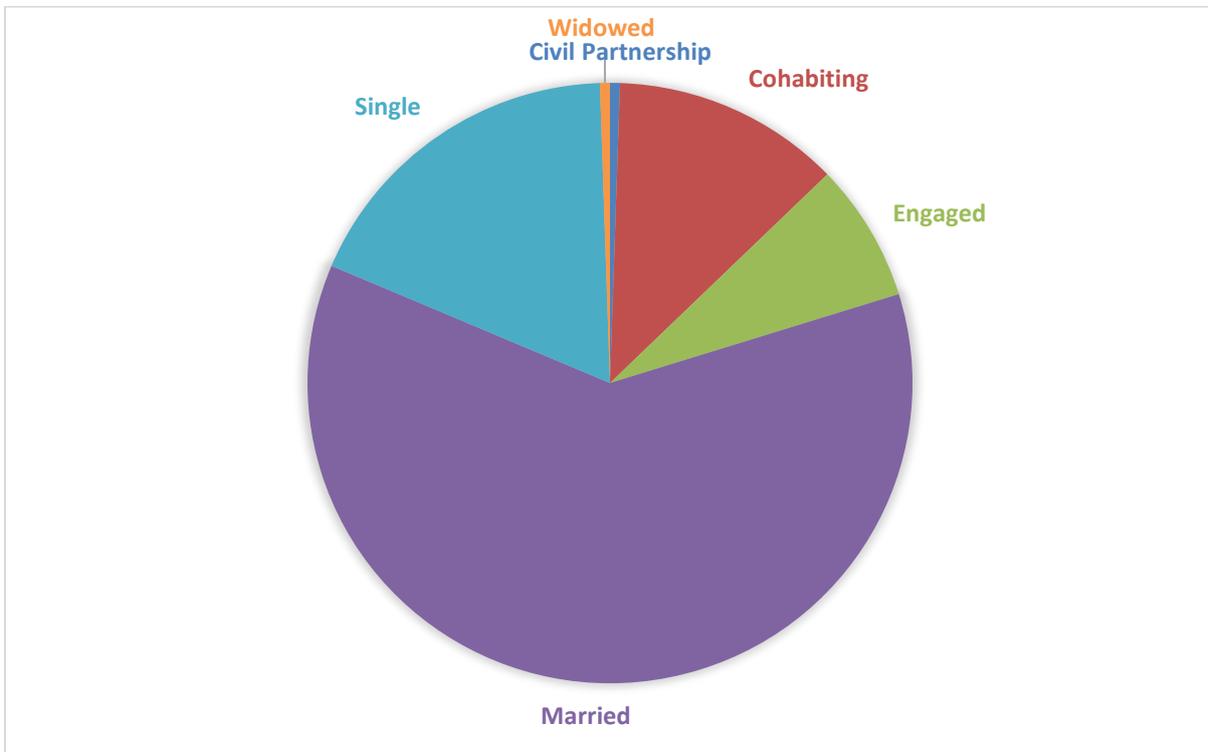
Self-disclosed Follow up - reasons for delay or withdrawal from adoption process before Information Evening



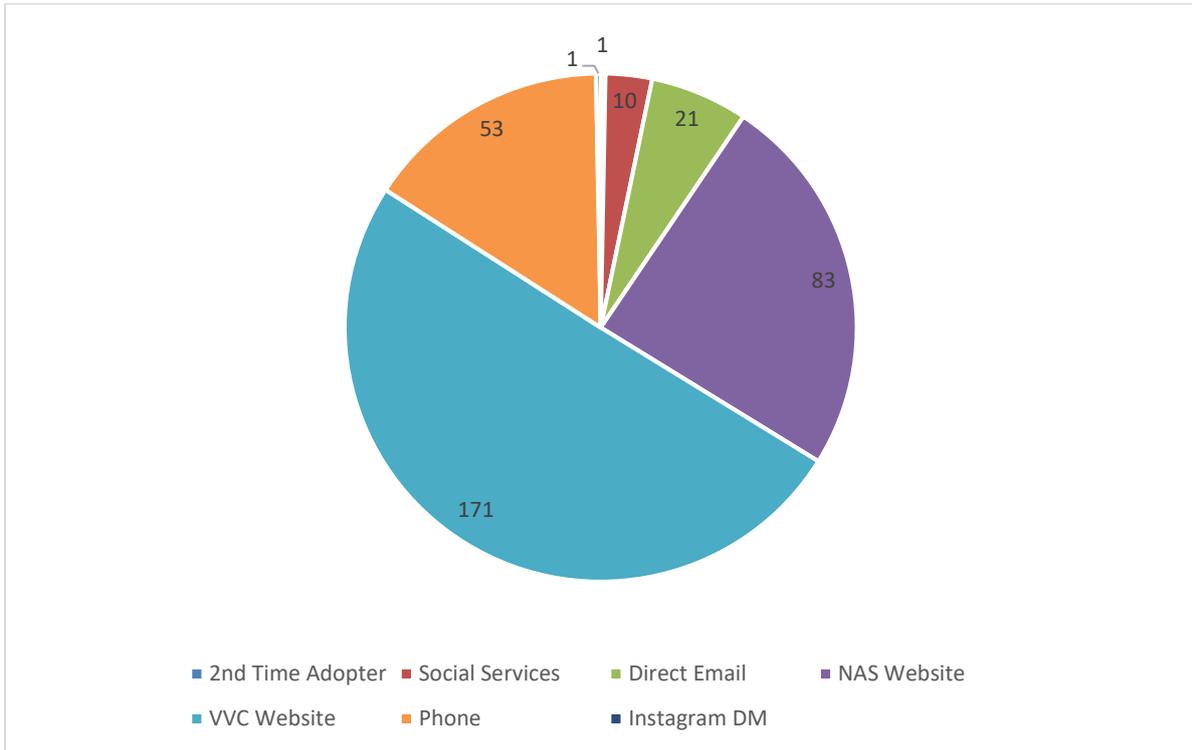
Age



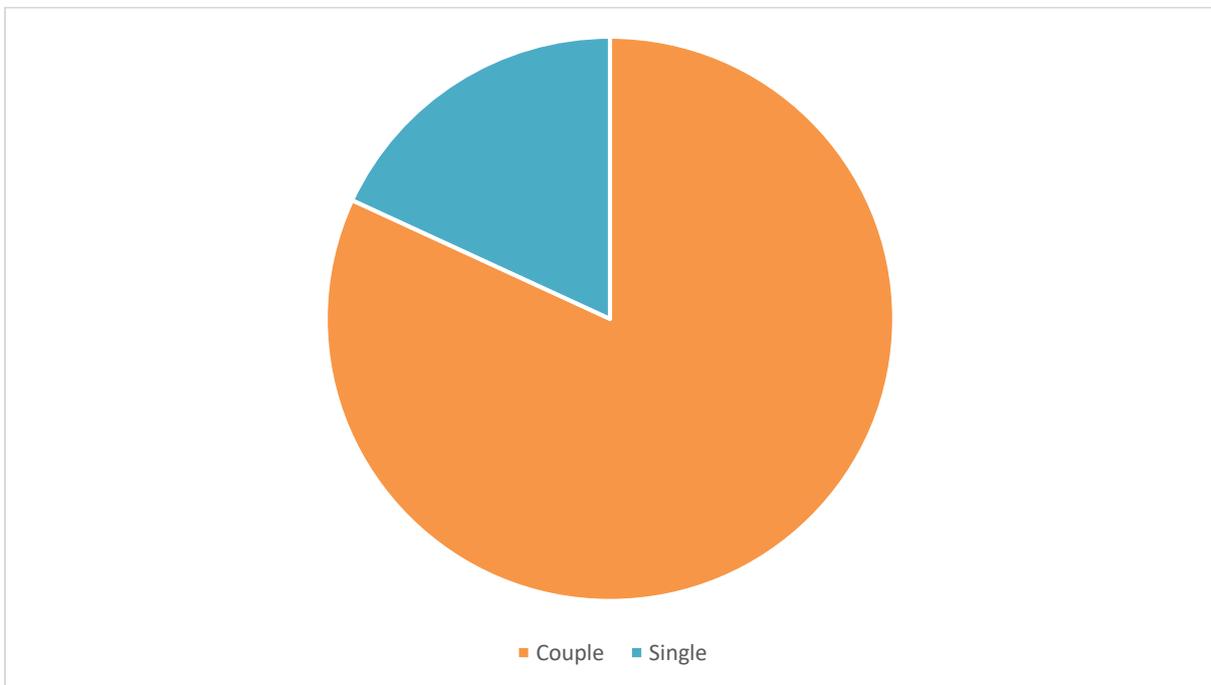
Relationship Status



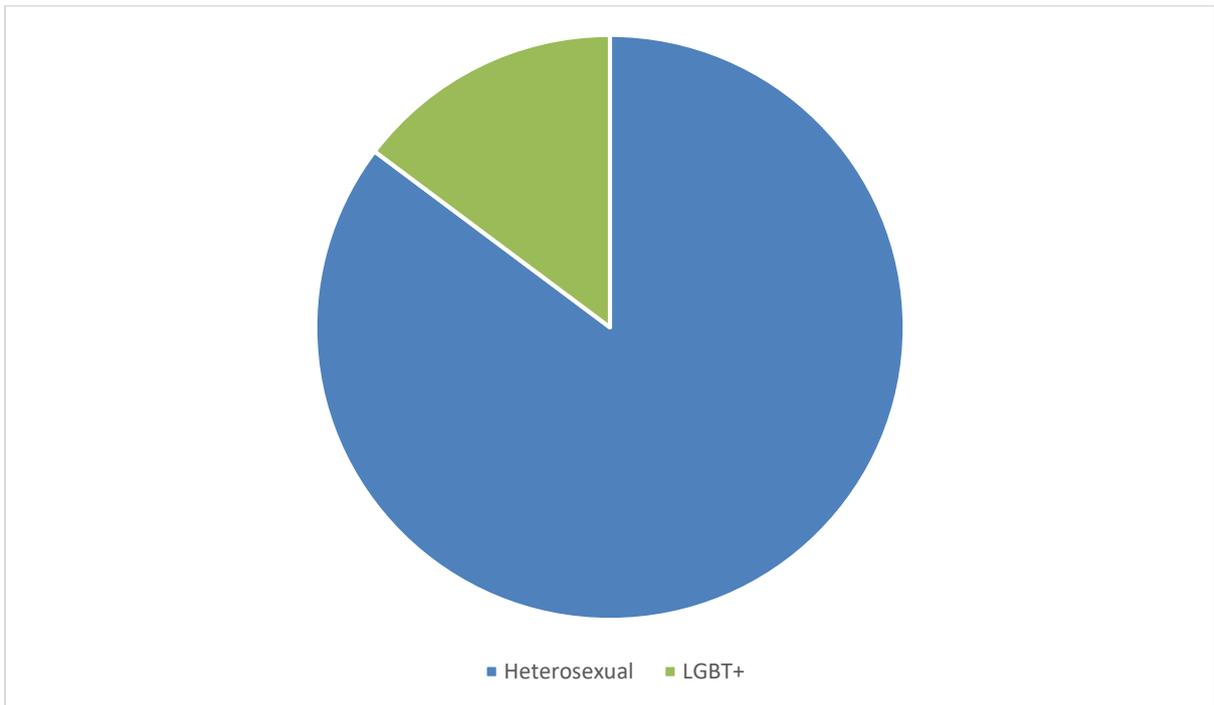
How they contacted us



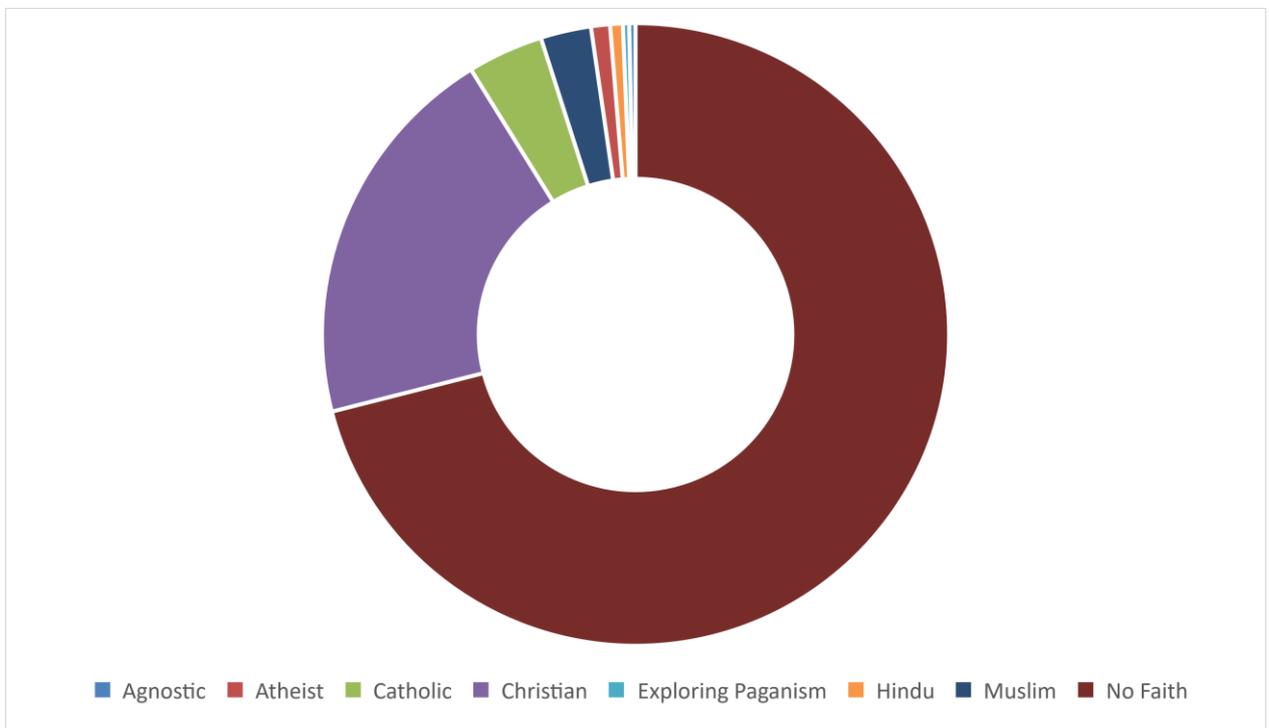
Couples and Singles



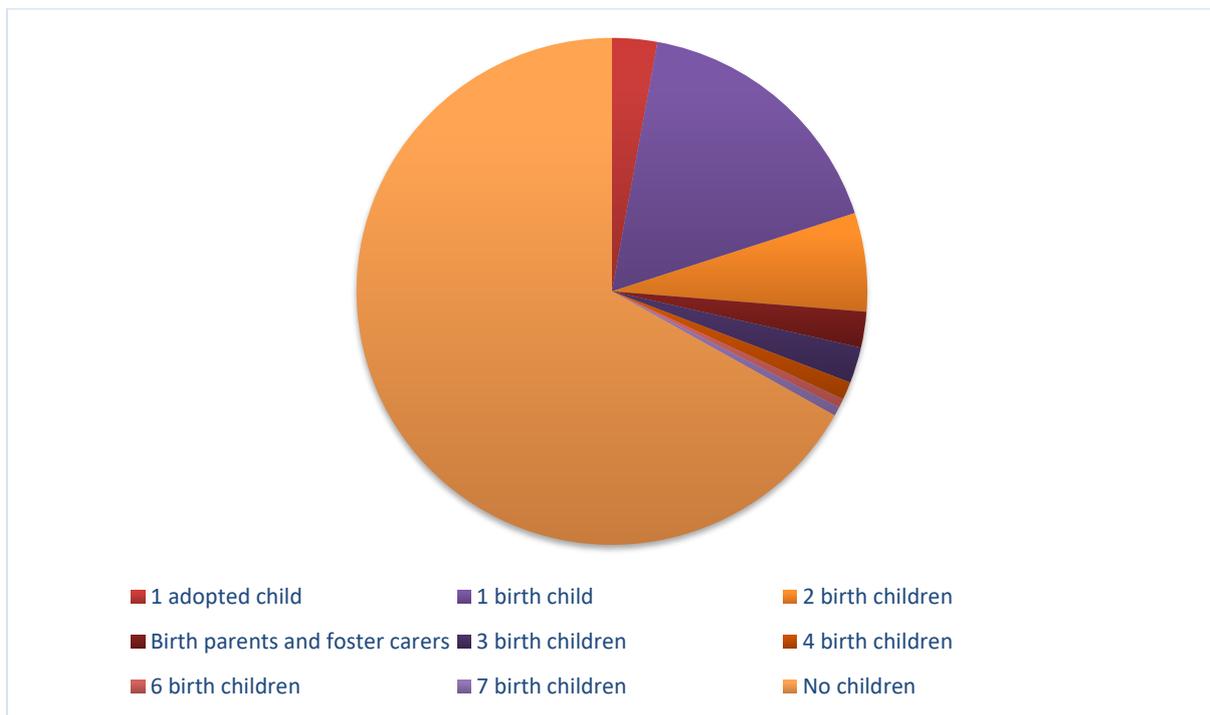
Couples: self-reported LGBT+ and Heterosexual



Self-reported Faith

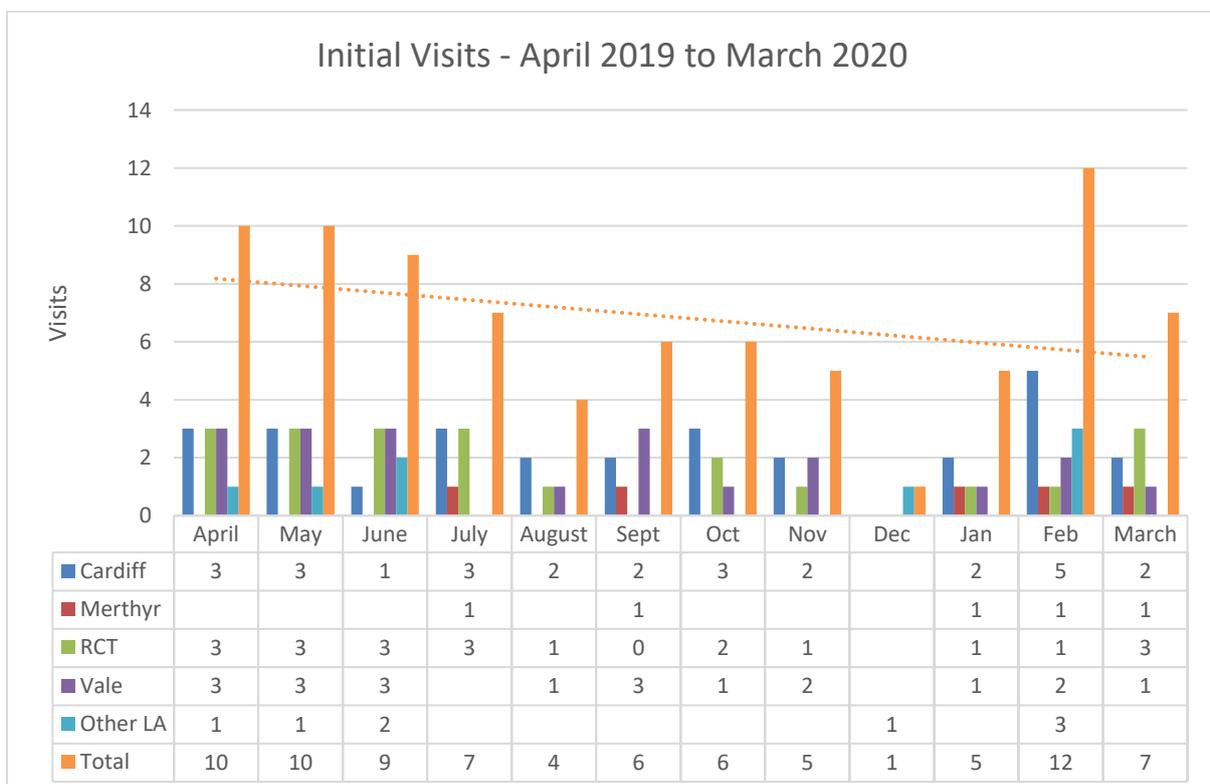


Adopting with children already in the household



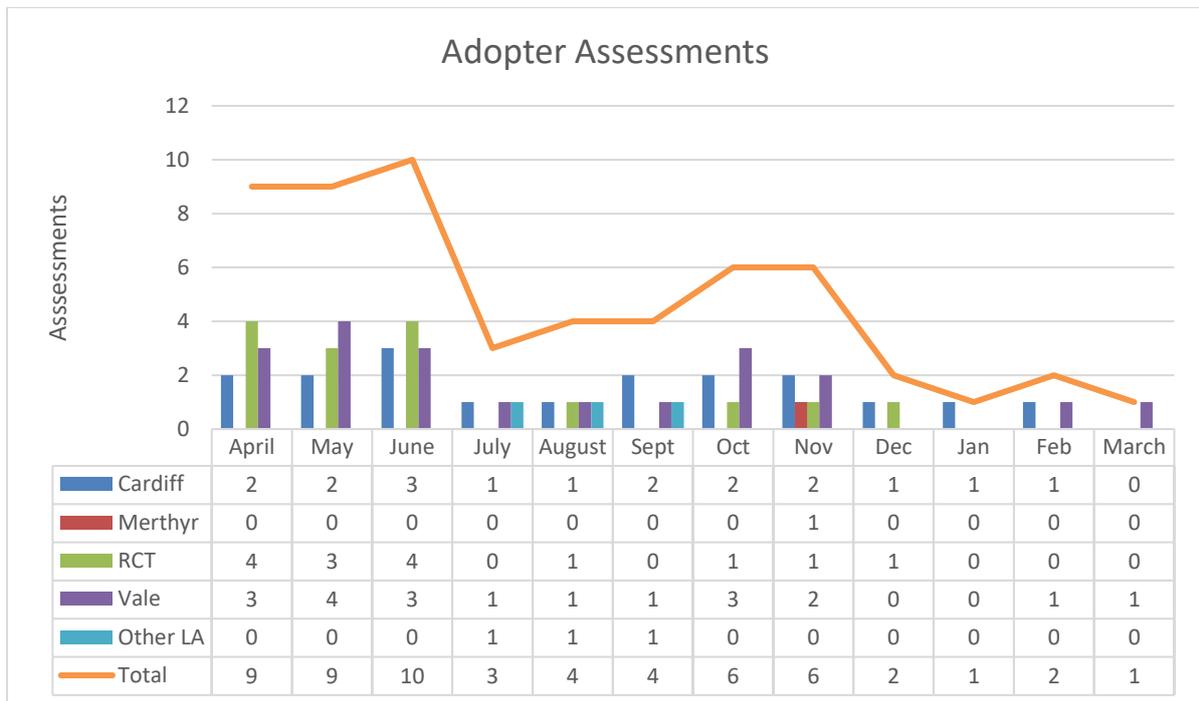
Initial Visits

82 initial enquiries took place during the reporting period.



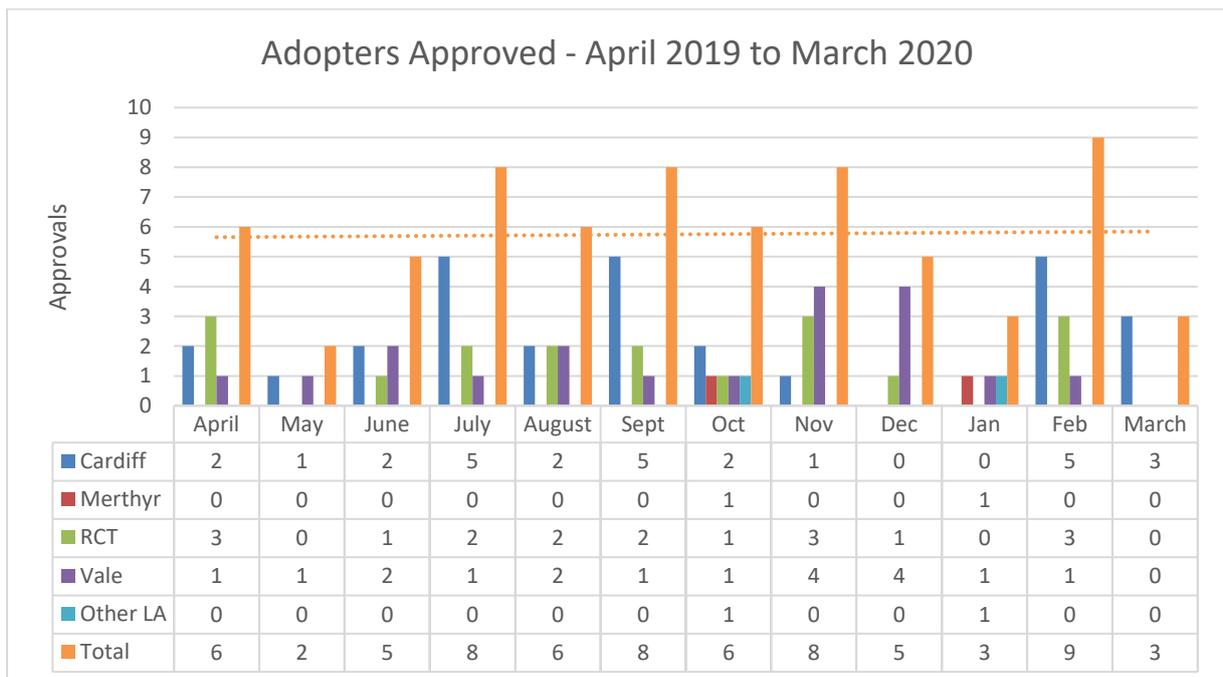
Adopter Assessments

57 adopter assessments were carried out during the reporting period



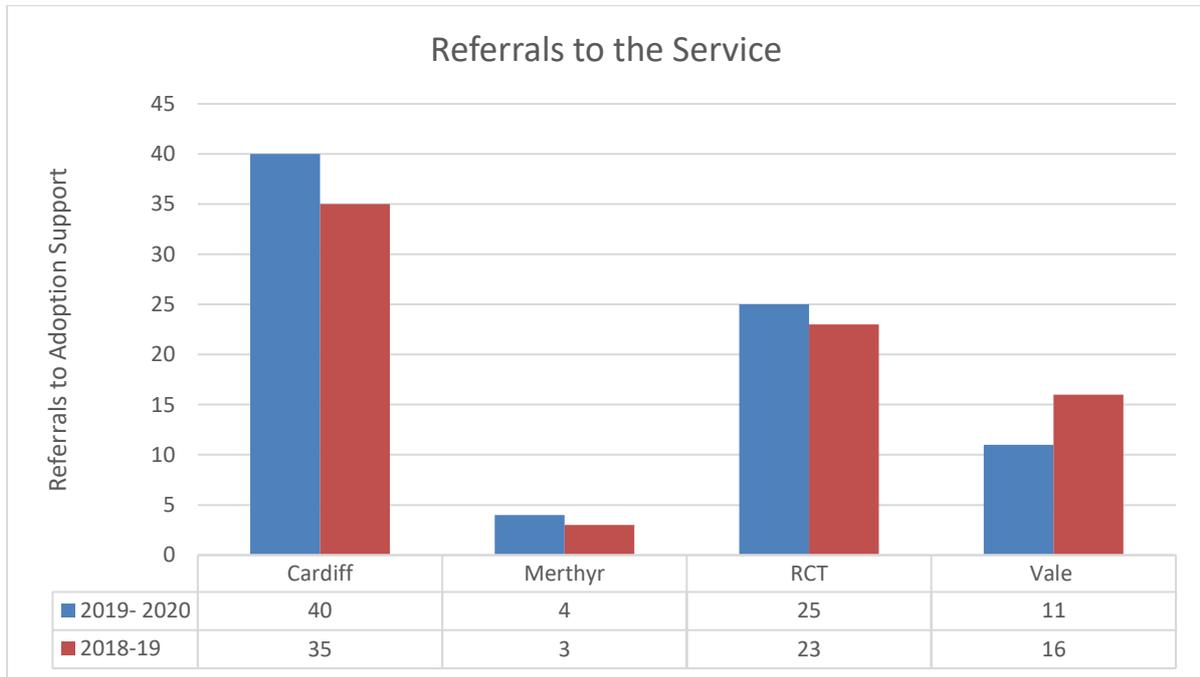
Adopter Approvals

75 adopter approvals were presented to the adoption panel, of these 69 adopter approvals were ratified during the reporting period.

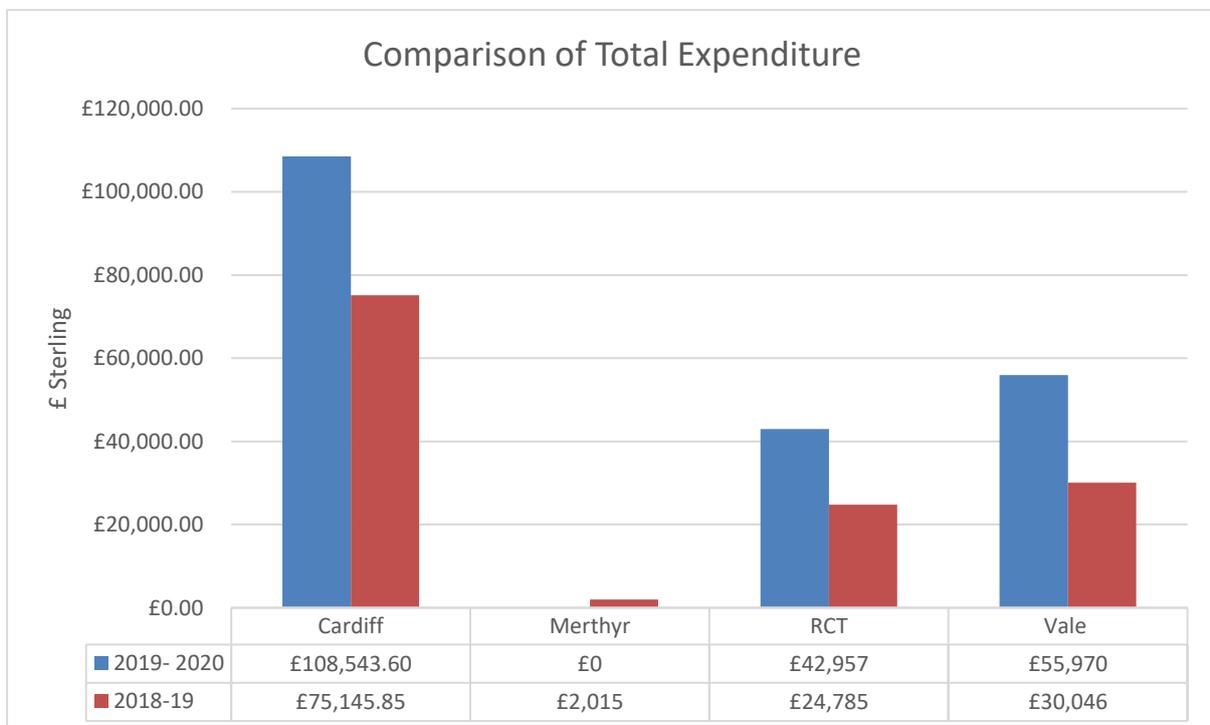


Appendix 3 – Adoption Support

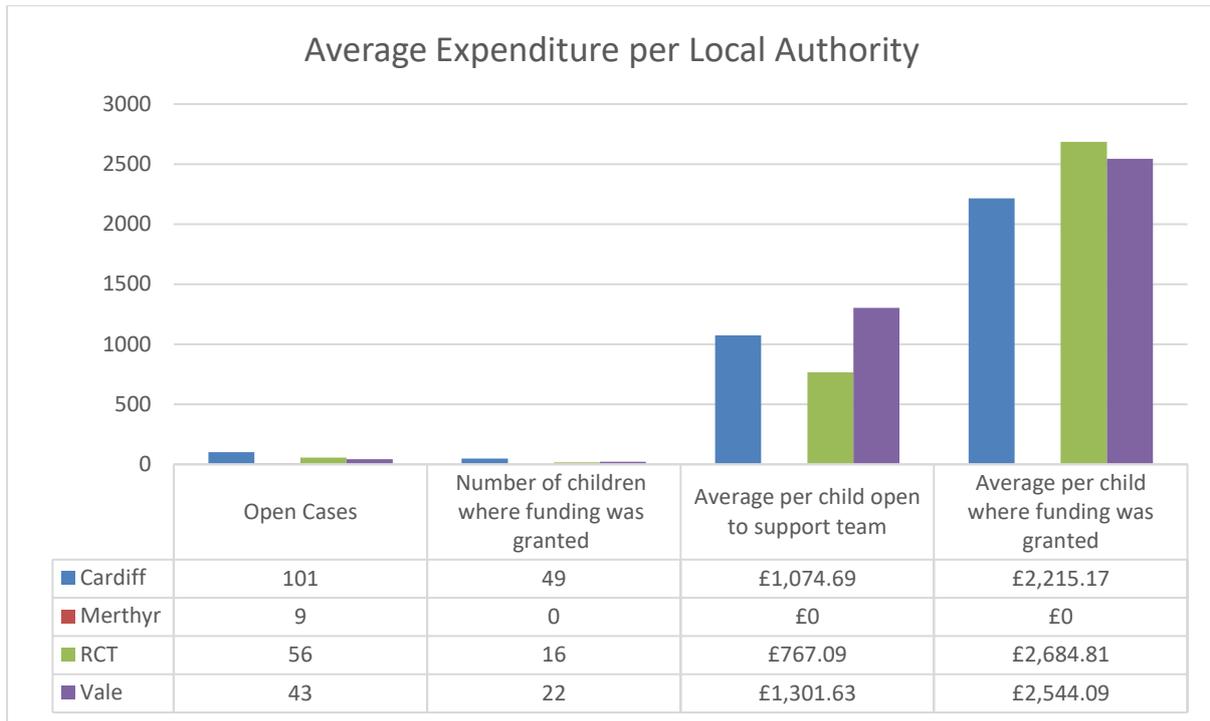
Referrals



Expenditure per Local Authority

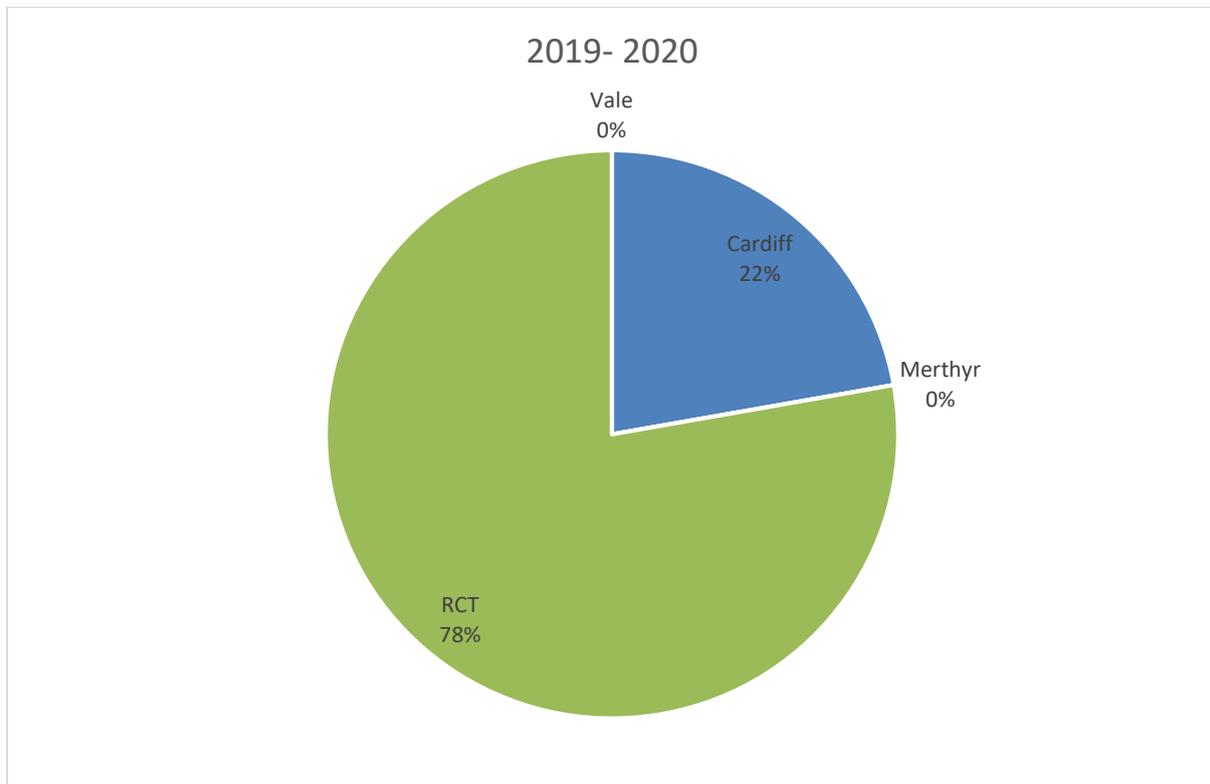


Average Expenditure per Local Authority

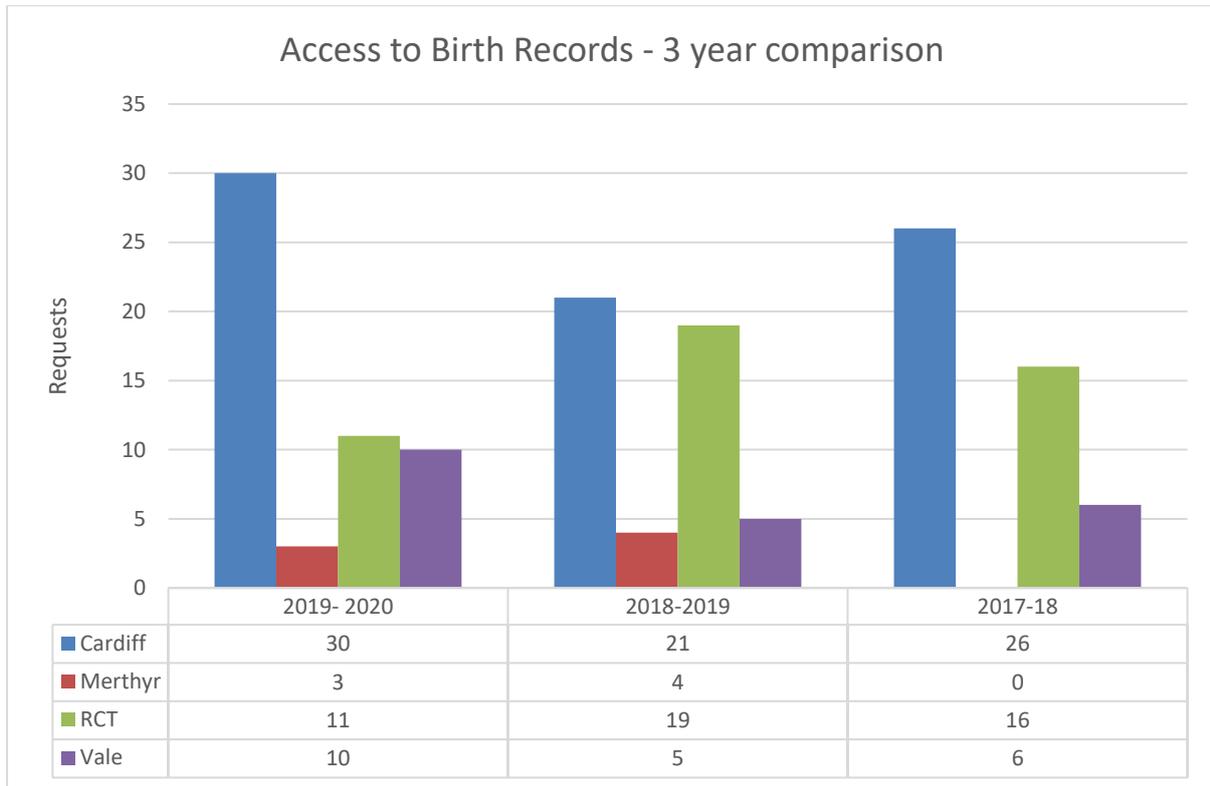


Other Services

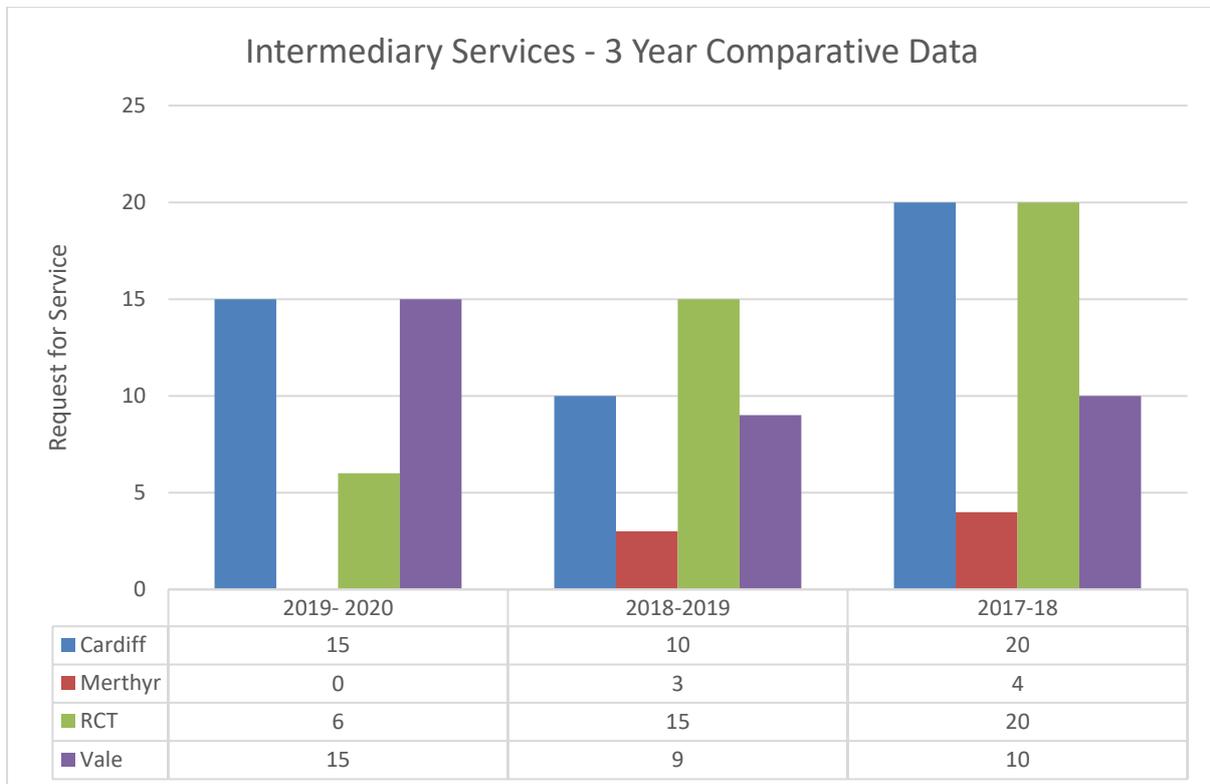
Birth Parent Support



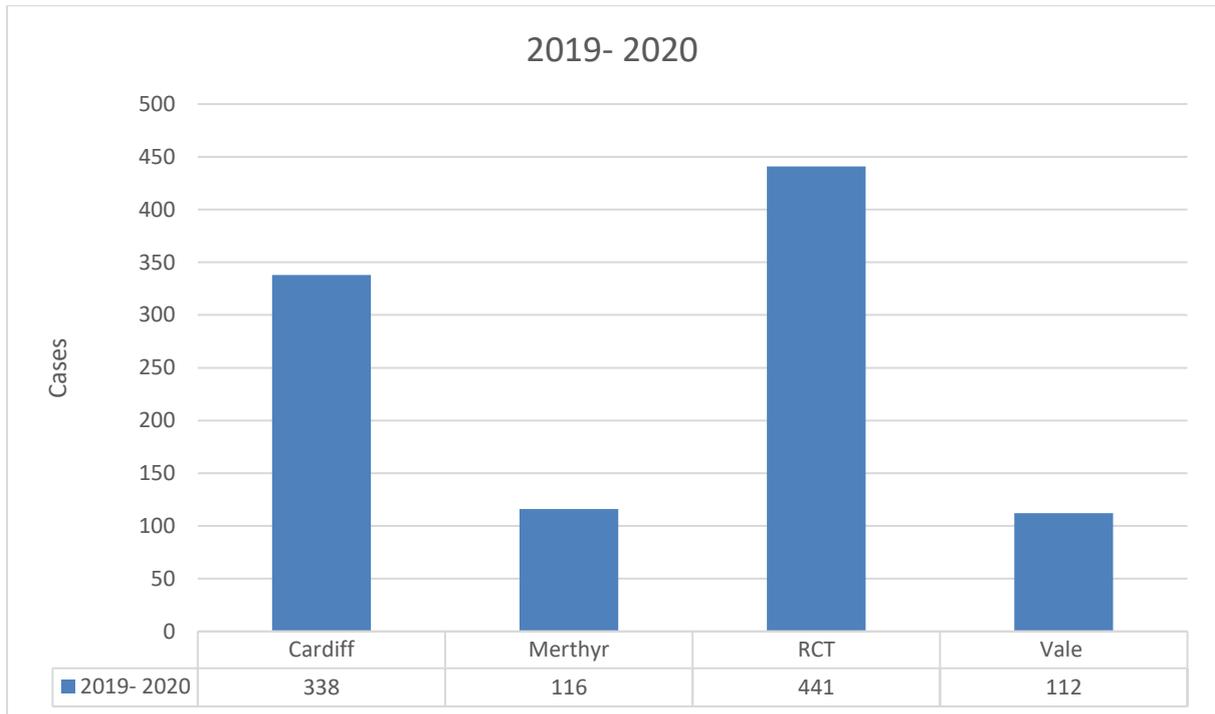
Access to Birth Records



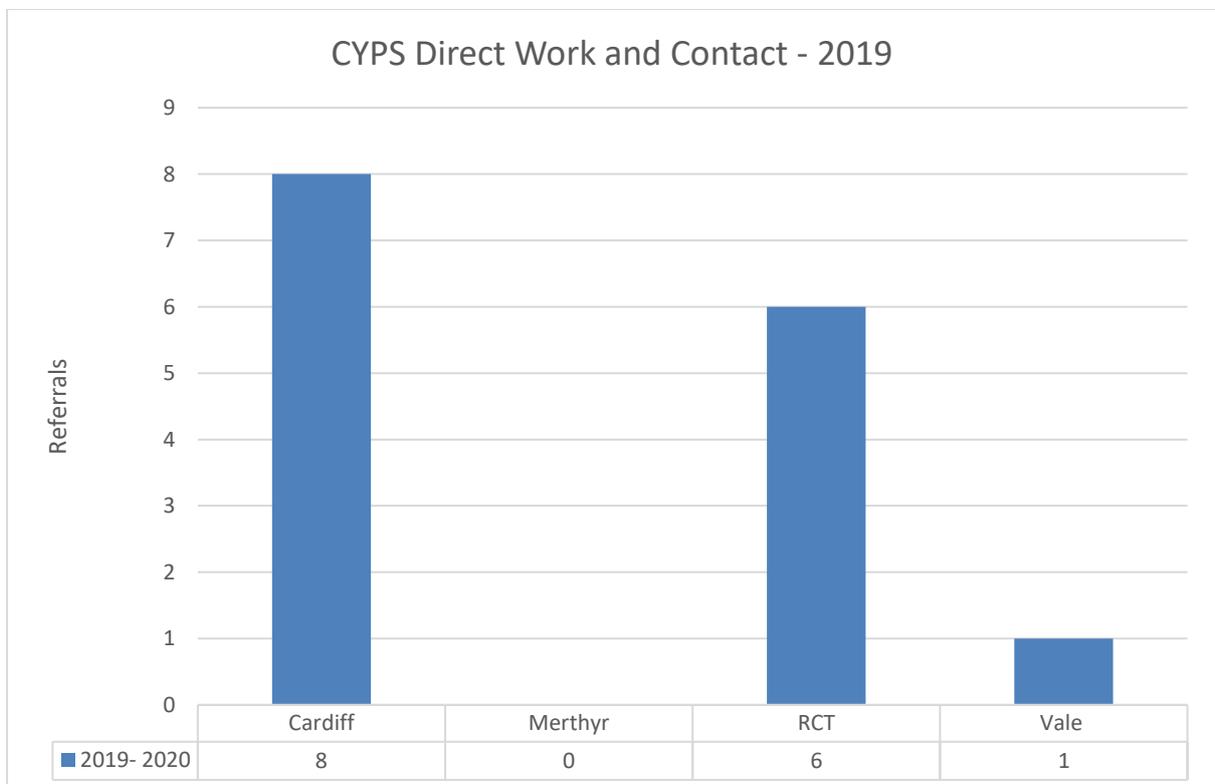
Intermediary Services



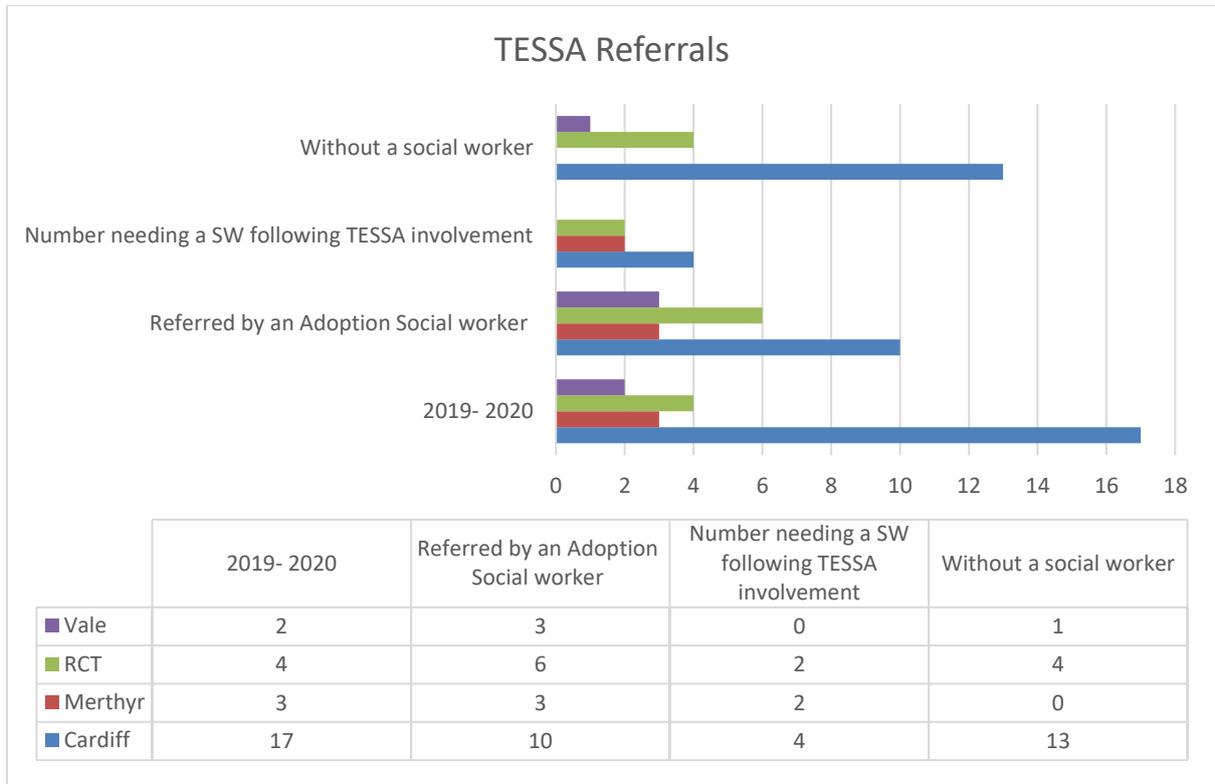
Letterbox



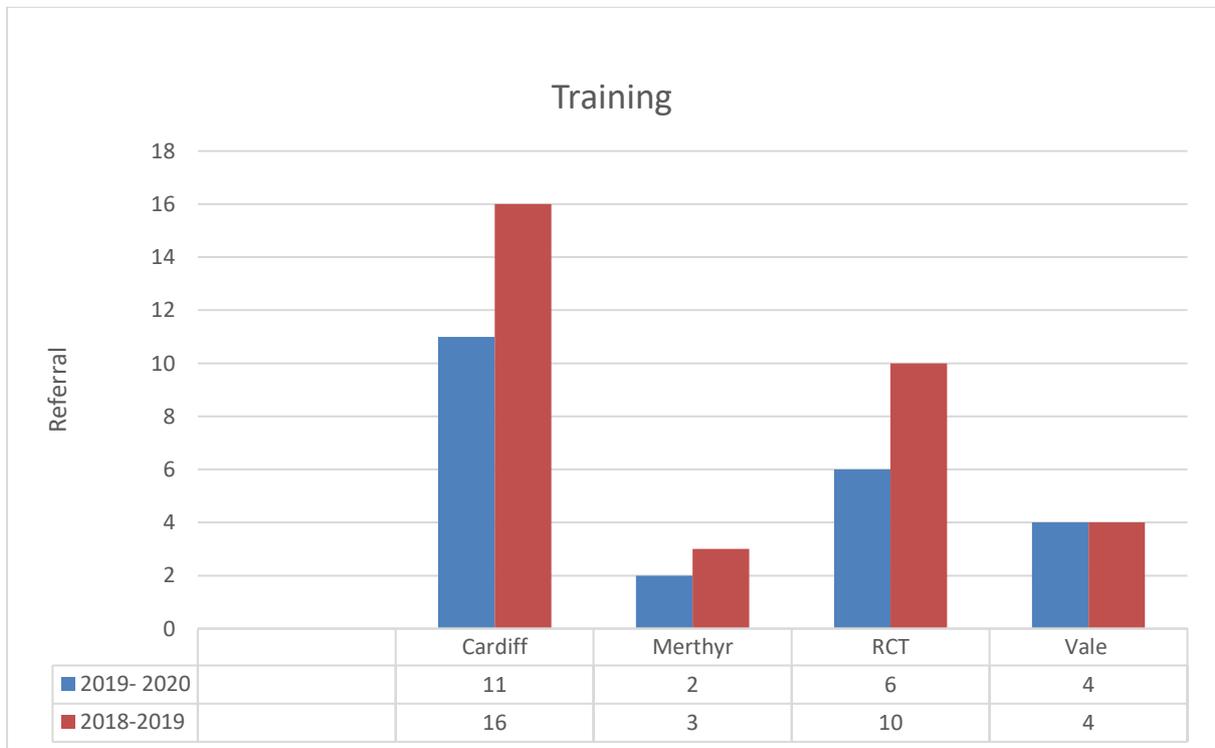
Children and Young People's Service



TESSA

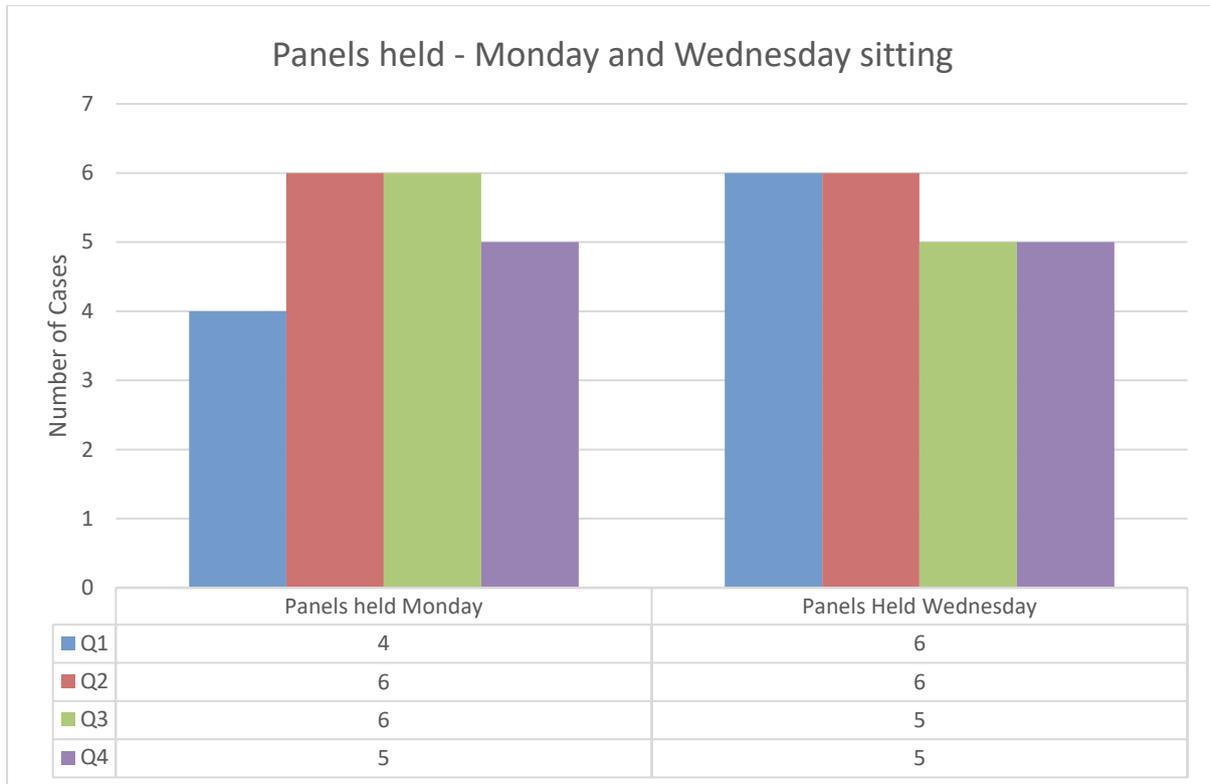


Training

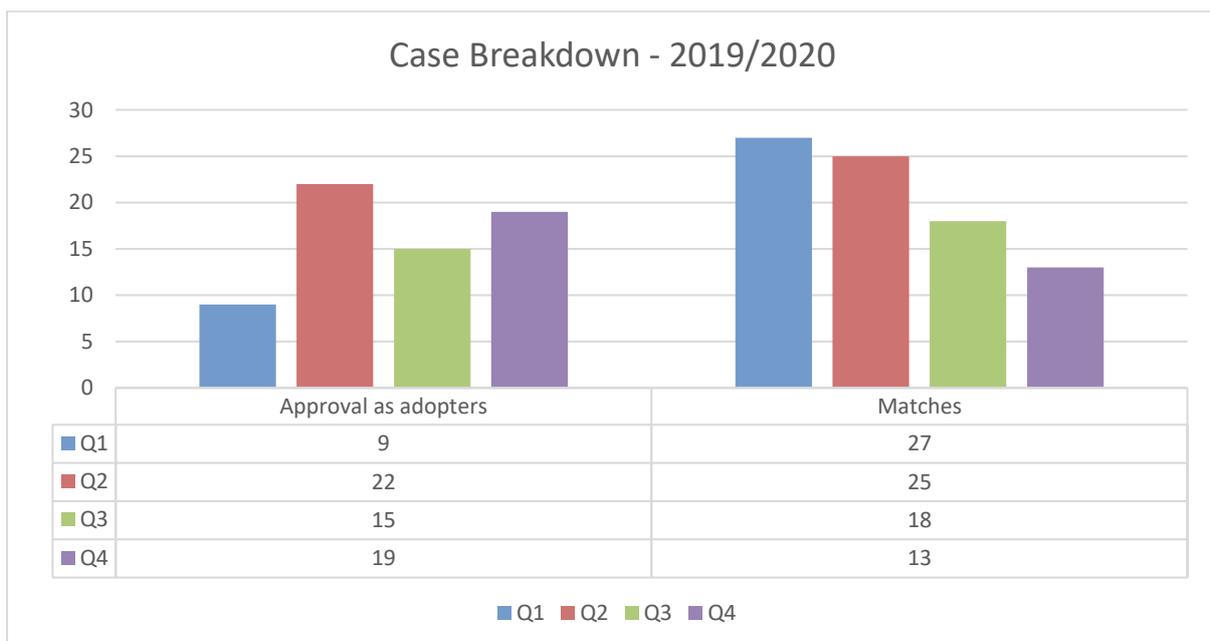


Appendix 4 – Adoption Panel

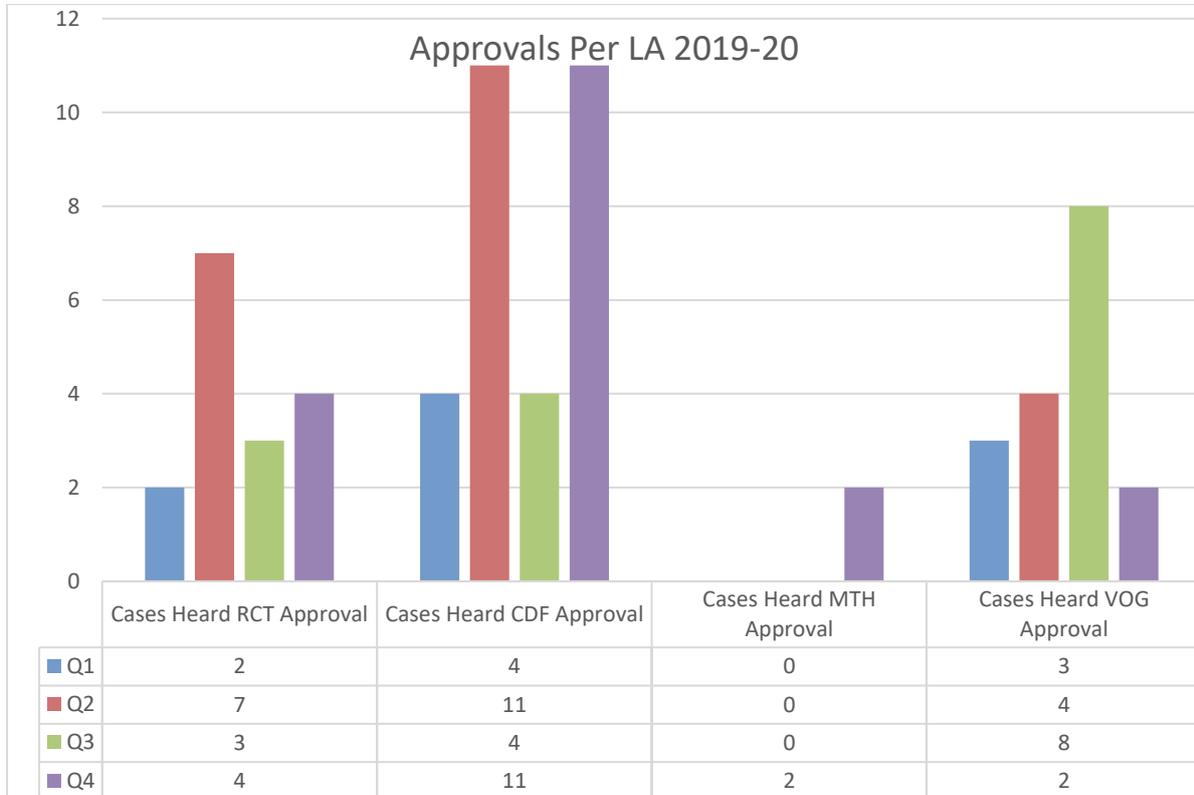
Panels convened



Case distribution



Approvals per Local Authority



Matches per Local Authority

