

Meeting of:	Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committee
Date of Meeting:	Tuesday, 09 November 2021
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Healthy Living and Social Care
Report Title:	Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Collaborative Annual Report 2020-21
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
<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 and scrutiny of the regional arrangements at a local level, staff changes and areas of service development. • The report provides key performance information relating to the placement of children for adoption, recruitment and assessment of adopters the provision of adoption support services. • The report outlines the impact of COVID 19 on service delivery and how the service adapted to respond to these challenges and reduce delay. • The report highlights some of the key challenges and future priorities for the service in terms of maintaining core business but also embracing changes being brought about at a national level with the implementation of Good Practice Guides and the two-stage model of adopter assessment. • The appendices to the report provide data in respect of key performance measures in respect of children, marketing activity, adopter recruitment, adoption support and the Adoption Panel. It also highlights activity in respect of the new grant funded posts. This information is broken down 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 8 December 2020.
- 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 is comprised of the Heads of Service from the four Local Authorities which make up the Collaborative and representatives from Health, Education and the Voluntary Sector. The Management Board is chaired by a Director from one of the partner authorities. In October 2020, this transferred to the Director of Social Services for the Vale of Glamorgan. 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 continues to be 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 2020 to 31st March 2021. 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
 - Consultation, Engagement and Quality Assurance
 - Complaints and compliments
 - Adoption Panel
 - Future priorities and challenges
- 2.3** In terms of regional performance, the report outlines the ways the service adapted to the challenges imposed by COVID 19 and developed new ways of working to reduce delay and engage with service users.
- 2.4** The report provides information in respect of children against key performance indicators set by the National Adoption Service Performance Framework. It highlights a healthier end of year position in respect of children placed for adoption despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and the overall decrease in Placement Orders. The report provides information in respect of the number of children waiting and the reasons for this. It also highlights a continued increase in those children 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.
- 2.5** The report outlines the positive impact of VVC's Marketing Strategy and the use of social media platforms to raise VVC'S profile. A further increase in adopter enquiries was noted during year, and the number of households approved was comparable to the previous year despite the constraints on the service. There continues to be challenges in being able to recruit sufficient adopters to be able to meet the more complex range of needs of children referred.
- 2.6** The report provides information in respect of post adoption support services and the increase in workload in this area and the impact upon the capacity of the service to meet the increased demand.
- 2.7** The report outlines the posts created as a result of the investment from Welsh Government and the way these roles have enhanced service delivery within the region. There has been a significant improvement in the provision of life journey work for children with a plan for adoption during the period largely as a result of the investment. Other positive developments can be seen in improved transition planning for children moving into adoptive placements and birth parent support.

- 2.8 The posts linked directly to national programmes, TESSA and the Connected service have also become more established during the reporting period and activity levels associated with these roles have been significant.
- 2.9 The report outlines the ongoing requirement to report upon performance and the additional measures imposed as part of the investment to the National Adoption Service and Welsh Government.
- 2.10 The report highlights the key challenges going forward in terms core business specifically the placement of more complex children, adopter recruitment and meeting the ever-increasing demand for adoption support services. It also outlines some of the new challenges imposed with the implementation of the Good Practice Guides and the two-stage model of adopter assessment.

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 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 and adoptive families on the service provided is used to identify gaps and shape future service development.
- 3.6 The Collaborative engages directly with adoptive families via a range of mechanisms, individually and via group support and training. These mechanisms have been adapted to meet the challenges imposed by COVID 19 and virtual platforms have been developed. VVC has supported families to contribute to national consultation exercises to ensure their views are considered.
- 3.7 Two posts created as part of the Welsh Government investment work directly with the voluntary sector in delivering a service to adopted children and young people and adoptive families.
- 3.8 The three voluntary agencies for adoption in Wales are part of the National Adoption Service alongside regional Collaboratives.

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 budget for 2020/21 was £1.898m and the end of year position reported an underspend of £30.5k. The Management Board and Joint Committee agreed to the retention of this underspend by the Collaborative to provide the regional contribution to the TESSA programme.
- 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 adoption service is set out in regulation as outlined under the Background section of this report.

5. Background Papers

Report to Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committee – 8th December 2020; 12th November 2019; 6th November 2018.



Vale, Valleys
and Cardiff
Adoption | **Mabwysiadu**
yn y Fro, y Cymoedd
a Chaerdydd

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

For Period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021

NATIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE



Gwasanaeth
Mabwysiadu
Cenedlaethol | National
Adoption
Service

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

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Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption Service
Review of Service Report
1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021

1. Introduction

1.1 The requirement to provide six monthly reviews of the adoption service is set out in Regulation 39 of The Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019. The aim of this report is to bring into one document a presentation and analysis of the activity of each of the local authority adoption agencies, operating as a regional service.

1.2 The report will be used for:

- ❖ The Review of Service (Regulation 39 report).
- ❖ Annual reporting requirements to Cabinet/Scrutiny Committees as per the governance arrangements set out in Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Legal Agreement.

1.3 This is VVC's sixth annual report and covers the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information presented is an accurate record of the activity and quality of the adoption service.

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. Background

2.1 Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC), as part of the National Adoption Service in Wales (NAS) was established on 1 June 2015. It 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. The Vale of Glamorgan hosts the service.

- 2.2 The governance structure for the Collaborative is set out in a Legal Agreement agreed in 2015 and amended in 2019.
- 2.3 The organisational and managerial structure of the service has remained unchanged since its' original inception although the staffing establishment has grown. Service delivery continues to be structured around three functional teams with a separate Business Support Team.

3. Service Development and Governance

- 3.1 The context for the delivery of our service during this reporting period has been the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 and the impact this has had upon VVC's performance. In late March 2020, our office closed, and staff began remote working from home. This has largely remained the position since this time. As with other services, staff were required to adapt quickly and a new infrastructure to promote virtual working was developed. Due to the geographical spread of the region, staff within VVC had already been used to a pattern of agile working and so the new way of working did not pose too many challenges. Early on we identified those core tasks which required an element of office working and arrangements were made for one of the Business Support team to attend the office two days per week to deal with basic administrative functions. The office space was also risk assessed to allow a small number of staff to utilise the office space on a restricted basis to carry out specific functions and to improve overall work life balance.
- 3.2 The National Adoption Service facilitated regular Regional Manager / VAA meetings to monitor the impact of the pandemic upon services and to develop consistent approaches to key areas of service. This provided an opportunity to raise key issues affecting the service and which required a standardised approach. In addition, the Regional Manager attended Vale of Glamorgan

Divisional Manager Meetings to address issues at a local level and monitor progress.

- 3.3 In line with Welsh Government advice several risk assessment processes were developed locally and nationally. NAS developed a Transitions Risk Assessment for authorisation by the respective Head of Service and Regional Manager to ensure a safe transition of children into adoptive placements.
- 3.4 NAS also in conjunction with Medical Advisers and regional services developed a protocol to reduce the delays in adopter medicals being undertaken.
- 3.5 On 1 April 2020, the two-stage process for the assessment of adopters came into force. Welsh Government allowed an easement to the Regulations to allow both stage 1 and 2 to run concurrently. VVC contributed to the development of a piece of national guidance to assist agencies in implementing the new process. The easement to the Regulations has continued but full implementation will take place from 1 October 2021.
- 3.6 The Recruitment & Assessment Manager within VVC developed a risk assessment process to enable part face to face and part virtual assessment sessions for prospective adopters to be undertaken which was adopted on a national level.
- 3.7 During the year, the National Adoption Service commissioned AFA Cymru to develop a Series of Good Practice Guides covering Adoption Support, Transitions, Contact and Working with Birth Parents. These guides were formally launched in the autumn of 2020 and regional training for managers and staff across the region was provided in the last quarter of the year. These guides will have a significant impact upon practice and will impact upon the resources needed to support their full implementation later this year.
- 3.8 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 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. As a result of these monies VVC was 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.

- 3.9 The service was also able to recruit two new unqualified posts, a Children & 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 national programmes being delivered by Adoption UK; the Connected service which supports young adoptees and the TESSA programme which supports adoptive families.
- 3.10 In addition to the posts located within the Collaborative, 10.5 practitioner posts were 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.
- 3.11 As part of the deployment of the grant a national Implementation Plan was developed requiring reports to be submitted monitoring the spend against the grant and detailing areas of improvement in performance in service provision. The National Adoption Service prepared the bid for the grant in 2020-1 and took over the monitoring function in conjunction with Welsh Government requiring regions to report upon progress to NAS. The Regional Adoption Manager completed the monitoring reports against the grant in October 2020 & March 2021 to enable the full allocation to be awarded to the region.
- 3.12 VVC's Management Board has continued to meet on a quarterly basis during the year although meetings are held virtually. The composition of the Board has remained the same although a representative from NAS now attends meetings to improve links between the national and local agenda. The Director of Social Services took over as chair of the Board in October 2020.

- 3.13 The overall remit and accountability of the Management Board is prescribed within regulation and the Legal Agreement underpinning the Collaborative. VVC's Management Board has continued to play a key role in monitoring the performance and business plan of the regional service highlighting areas for improvement.
- 3.14 The second tier of governance within the Collaborative is via the Operational Group which is comprised of senior managers from each of the four local authorities and regional managers from VVC. This group has also met on a quarterly basis during the year, although competing priorities within local authorities has impacted upon quoracy of some meetings which has required a mechanism to be put in place to agree matters discussed outside the formal meeting. 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.
- 3.15 The overall governance of the region remains via a Joint Committee which meets twice a year comprised of lead Members from each of the four authorities. It is chaired by the Cabinet Member for the Vale of Glamorgan. Meetings were held in May and December 2020 as per requirements to approve the annual accounts, the annual budget and annual plan for the Collaborative.
- 3.16 Following a review of NAS' governance structure by IPC, a National Partnership Agreement was developed by NAS for sign up by each of local authority in Wales. This Agreement lays out the national and local requirements in terms of governance. The recommended local governance structure for regional services outlined in the Agreement is modelled upon VVC's. The Partnership Agreement was signed off by the four partner authorities during November and December 2020.
- 3.17 The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored closely by the Management Board and Joint Committee. The end of year position reported a small underspend in the budget for 2020 -21

created partly by revised working methods and some staff turnover. A proposal to retain the underspend within VVC has been agreed by Management Board and Joint Committee. These monies will be held over to provide the regional contribution to the TESSA programme.

- 3.18 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 “generally there was a sound system of governance, risk management and control in place but two areas of improvement were noted”. These areas related to revision of the WASPI Agreement and the audit trail of a couple of invoices which have now been addressed.
- 3.19 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. Due to the pandemic a shortened list of indicators was agreed for submission and uploading to the Data Cymru database. VVC continued however to collate data against the full range of measures to enable fuller reporting upon performance at a regional level.

4. Staffing

- 4.1 The overall staff establishment has remained unchanged during the period. Two permanent vacancies arose during the year, a part time Social Worker in the Adoption Support Team and part time Birth Parent Adviser. They were filled on a temporary basis until they were successfully recruited to in December 2020.
- 4.2 A temporary vacancy in the Recruitment & Assessment Team due to maternity leave has been covered by a part time member of staff taking on additional hours.
- 4.3 Temporary arrangements to cover a vacancy within our Business Support Team have continued whilst a review of the structure is being undertaken.
- 4.4 A staff repurposing exercise undertaken at the beginning of the pandemic resulted in two staff being redeployed on a short-term basis to Adult Services.

5. Children

- 5.1 Family Finding and its' associated activities remains a key area of activity for the region and the ability to place children effectively and promptly underpins all other activities.
- 5.2 The number of children referred for adoption totalled **171** in the year which marks a 20% increase on the previous year. This follows a previously sustained reduction in referral rates. It is unknown at this time to what extent the pandemic has impacted upon referrals to adoption; however, we note the rise in referrals in relation to the workload within the region, albeit not as high as observed pre-2019.
- 5.3 The rates of our referrals which were withdrawn remained steady at **43%** of those referred in 2020-21. This can be seen as a positive as alternative care

plans for these children meant a vast majority of these either returning to parents' care or being placed with Connected Persons following positive assessment. Withdrawn referrals, in many instances however do not equate to a decrease in workload for the service as a lot of work and staff capacity is invested in progressing the adoption plan prior to it being discontinued.

- 5.4 The number of 'Should be Adopted' decisions made in respect of children has remained steady at **81** (up from 80 the previous year). If the number of referrals continues to increase, we would anticipate the number of SBA decisions also to increase.
- 5.5 The region has recorded **62** Placement Orders being made within the year, a slight reduction from the 71 of the previous year and again but should be viewed in the context of reduction in referrals overall within the past couple of years. The reduction in Placement Orders is a trend seen in other parts of Wales although it is less noticeable within VVC.
- 5.6 VVC placed **65** children for adoption during the year which is a considerable drop from the previous year but is however significant given the constraints upon the service. Alongside COVID restrictions, the other inhibiting factors were the reduction in Placement Orders and therefore a reduction in the number of children within the region requiring placement for adoption. The number of children placed was as a result of the service having to adapt quickly and respond to the challenges of bringing together different households for the purposes of transitioning a child from one placement to another. VVC utilised the NAS Transitions Risk Assessment and developed a process for this within the region to prevent delay in moving children on to adoption because of the pandemic. Transitions have included in most cases the use of self-isolation for both households and supplemented using lateral flow testing where complete isolation could be maintained.
- 5.7 One of the positive developments brought about by the pandemic has been the increased use of virtual communications between adopters and children prior to face-to-face introductions commencing. Whilst we have not used this

to reduce the face-to-face time needed for children, it has enhanced the relationship building and familiarity between child, adopters and foster carers and the feedback from those involved has been overwhelmingly positive about the impact this has had on the overall introductions. This now forms part of all transitions plans for children moving into adoptive placements.

- 5.8 The average time from Placement Order to placement has remained at a similar rate at **10.6 months**. Some of the reasons for the delay includes some slightly delayed plans at the start of the pandemic until safe systems were in place to move children on and reflects some high outliers of children waiting a significantly higher period than others. It is positive however, that have seen an increasing number of placements for older, potentially harder to place children although the preparation and placement for adoption in such cases may take longer to ensure this is taken at the child's pace.
- 5.9 VVC has continued to place a high proportion of our children with VVC approved adopters (68%) maintaining a similar level to the previous couple of years.
- 5.10 At the end of the year there were **63** children on Placement Orders awaiting an adoptive match which is a reduction of **14%** from the previous year. A further 5 children had a very strong link proceeding but not yet matched as at the end of March 2021 and so the number waiting was **48**. It is positive to see a continued decrease in the number of children waiting for adoptive placements.
- 5.11 There were **83** Adoption Orders granted during the year which is a continued pattern from previous years. There were no placements which disrupted during 2020-21 which is hugely encouraging.
- 5.12 **172** birth parents of children referred during 2020-21 were offered birth parent counselling and **35%** took this up which is lower than in previous years. Opportunities to offer birth parent counselling virtually and via phone calls have been utilised during the pandemic, however lots of opportunities to

provide this in person, usually following a direct contact session for parents with their children have not been possible for much of 2020-21 due to contact moving to virtual arrangements during the strictest lockdown measures. Following the easing of restrictions, we have offered parents a range of options: in-person, virtual or telephone according to their individual circumstances.

- 5.13 Performance in relation to the provision of Life Journey Material for children being placed for adoption has improved considerably and at the point of matching this was 100% by the end of Q4. Overall, for the year this was 83% but with a quarter-on-quarter increase. The provision of finalised materials at 2nd adoption review has increased from 60% in 2019-20 to 84% in 2020-21 however again we saw this increase to 100% in Q4.
- 5.14 The increase in performance can clearly be linked to the additional Welsh Government funding which has provided the region with a Life Journey Work Co-Ordinator and Life Journey Work Practitioners based within the local authorities.
- 5.15 The Life Journey Work Co-ordinator offers regular support, advice, and guidance to the Practitioners and in addition has offered workshops/briefings to local authority teams and was integral in the recruitment panels for the Practitioner posts. There are regular meetings established now between the Practitioners and the Co-ordinator supports the allocation process and monitoring of performance across the region.
- 5.16 Our Transitions Worker post has become integral to the service we offer and to our ability to provide an enhanced level of support to children moving on to adoption. Over 2020-21 the Transitions Worker has supported **46** children with direct transitions work. This includes ongoing post-placement support for children who were placed in 2019-20 and 26 new referrals for direct work in 2020-21. This means that 40% of our children being placed for adoption were in receipt of this service which is aimed at children over the age of 3 years. In context, 55% of our children placed were under the age of 2. The Transitions

Worker accepted referrals for some children aged 2+ where it was considered appropriate to work directly with them. Understanding the Child Meetings were held in respect of **20** children during 2020-21 along with the completion of Trauma/Nurture timelines for these children. There were an additional **2** families who were having a sibling placed with them where the Transitions Worker supported the children already within the family to manage the transition. The Transitions Worker has also led training for foster carers on moving children on to adoption and assisted in the delivery of training for 2nd time adopters.

- 5.17 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. The service delivered a virtual regional profiling event for 18 adopters and 17 children where 6 potential links were identified and are working with NAS to run a further event. VVC has not been able to access a Welsh Adoption Activity Day as these have not been run in person due to the pandemic however some available spaces have been utilised at other events run in England on. A Welsh Activity Day is planned for later this year.

6. Disruptions and Breakdowns

- 6.1 There were no placement disruptions during the year.

7. Advertising and Marketing

- 7.1 VVC's Marketing and Recruitment Strategy has continued to focus on raising the profile of the service and helping the public see the Collaborative as very much their first choice when they are exploring adoption. The Recruitment and Marketing Officer's role is crucial in creating a flexible and relevant approach. Our Marketing Officer ensures our Strategy continues to be influenced by the National Adoption Service 's Strategy and she has

developed links with her counterparts in other regions to ensure there is cohesive approach.

- 7.2 The Marketing Officer has also continued to work closely with Cowshed, the marketing company commissioned by NAS to develop the national strategy and to support regional activity. VVC is recognised by the national team as being an active contributor when it comes to adopters who can share their lived experience of adoption during media events and campaigns. Four VVC adopters contributed to a podcast during National Adoption Week and a webinar. A single male adopter from VVC participated in a BBC feature on single male adopters.
- 7.3 Previously formed links with local Comms Departments across the region continue to be useful resources as they ensure adoption features as part of their local advertising particularly during such events as National Adoption Week.
- 7.4 In the previous year, the Collaborative had been proactive in having a physical presence at a variety of community events e.g., National Eisteddfod, Cardiff Pride, the Vale of Glamorgan's Agricultural Show and we had engaged with different faith organisations, all activities to raise the profile of the region. COVID-19 meant however that these face-to-face events were cancelled and so the service had quickly to adapt to alternative mechanisms and to further develop our social media presence. VVC specifically uses pay-per-click (PPC) advertising on Facebook and Instagram. This approach has been cost effective as it allows us to target specific geographical locations and provides us with a rich pool of information about the profile of those engaging with our posts.
- 7.5 In addition to using our social media platforms, the service decided to trial including information about the Collaborative in council tax notifications within the areas of Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan. Unfortunately, Cardiff Council were unable to provide the service. During the weeks after these inserts were delivered, the service experienced a sustained

increase in the number of visits to our website and in enquiries received. As a service we capture feedback from any enquirer to ascertain where they learn about us and positively many people referred to receiving information within the council tax letter.

- 7.6 Moving forward in 2021/22, it is our intention to repeat this approach with all four of our local authority areas, in addition to continuing our PPC advertising.

8. Adopters

- 8.1 As outlined above, our continued marketing activity has had a specific goal to increase the number of enquiries the agency receives. 2020/21 saw a significant and sustained increase in the number of enquiries – **374** in total compared to **336** received during 2019/20. 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 the well-established regional input is also having a positive impact in providing a consistent and coherent message to the wider public.

- 8.2 2020/21 saw the Collaborative hosting seven Information Evenings for prospective applicants. These events were delivered remotely but were well attended and feedback received has continued to be positive.

- 8.3 VVC's three day 'Preparation to Adopt' training course continued to be provided by an Independent Social Worker during the period but again this had to be quickly adapted to a virtual means of delivery. In preparation for the implementation of the two-stage process of adopter assessment and to avoid delay, the frequency of our training was increased in the latter part of the year. Since January 2021, our preparation training has been delivered jointly with Western Bay region which has allowed us to increase the number of training courses from six a year to 10 per year without any increase to overall costs as trainer's fees are shared equally with Western Bay.

- 8.4 With the recent retirement of our independent trainer, the service has used this as an opportunity to redevelop the training content and from October 2021 the frequency of the training will increase further to 11 preparation training courses a year. These will now be delivered by an experienced member of the VVC Recruitment & Assessment Team and an experienced member of the Western Bay Post Adoption Support Team.
- 8.5 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 received has been continued to be positive.
- 8.6 **71** households attended the courses. Out of those **71** households three did not go onto submit applications to progress onwards to an assessment. These potential applicants have been followed up. All three households' feedback that they wished to take more time to consider their future plans.
- 8.7 During 2020/21 a total of **67** adopter approvals were presented to VVC's Adoption Panel and positive recommendations were made. **66** of these approvals were ratified within the reporting year. The approvals are broken down as follows: **Cardiff – 26, Merthyr Tydfil – 4, RCT – 17, and Vale of Glamorgan – 19 (included in the Vale of Glamorgan figures are approvals for four adopters outside of our area (2 - Newport, 1 - Caerphilly and Powys - 1)**. This represents a small decrease to the previous year but against the background of the challenging COVID-19 environment, this performance is a pleasing result.
- 8.8 Out of the **66** ratified approvals achieved in 2020/21, **9** were foster carers assessed to adopt a specific child, **6** were second time adopters and **51** were first time adopters.
- 8.9 The majority of the applicants approved during 2020/21 have gone onto be matched with children from within VVC. Four have had a child placed from

outside of our region: two from SEWAS region, one from Scotland and one from Devon. A further two are in the matching process of adopting non VVC children

9. Adoption Panel

- 9.1 VVC continues to manage a central list of Adoption Panel members. In terms of practical delivery, VVC typically holds four Panel sittings a month. Again, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in Panel sittings being delivered remotely which in many respects has proved more efficient, especially in reducing travel time etc.
- 9.2 Panel membership has seen several changes during the year with the retirement of one of our independent Chairs just prior to the pandemic and then one of our Vice Chairs, leaving just one Chair & two Vice Chairs to maintain all Panel meetings. As the year progressed, our one remaining independent Chair also stepped down and one of the Vice Chairs with the result that an expression of interest was sent out to members in respect of the vacant positions. As a result of this process our one remaining Vice Chair was successful in being appointed as Chair alongside one of our independent members. Our new Chairs have demonstrated flexibility in being able to cover each other where required and in supporting the ever-increasing Panel workload. There is however a need to recruit a new Vice Chair.
- 9.3 Also, during the past year, VVC has been proactive in recruiting several new Panel members, with a particular focus upon increasing representation of adoptive parents and adopted people. There is an ongoing need to increase our Social Worker membership from our partner authorities whilst recognising that workload constraints often prohibit this.
- 9.4 During the past year the importance of understanding diversity and unconscious bias has been recognised as an important area of development for Panel members with the result that NAS provided training for all Panel

members across Wales on this topic. This training explored a range of equality and diversity issues and was attended by 23 members of VVC Panel.

- 9.5 Our Panel Chairs have also benefitted from participating in several information sessions and training events linked to the launch of the National Adoption Services Good Practice Guides.
- 9.6 During 2020/21 42 Adoption Panel meetings were held. The workload of the Panel is outlined in Appendix 4.

10. Adoption Support

- 10.1 Referrals into the service for post adoption support services dipped in the first quarter of the year but then increased during the second quarter and have continued to rise. This increase is in line with the previous reporting year and reflects the focus from the NAS on improving awareness of support services for adoptive families. **92** referrals were received during the year which has created a backlog of unallocated work and a waiting list. When compared to previous years, the service has observed a 20% increase in the number of referrals received over the past three years.
- 10.2 The increased focus on adoption support services at a national and local level has in turn enabled adopters to request earlier services following the making of Adoption Order. It is anticipated that this will increase as with the implementation of the Good Practice Guides which emphasise earlier involvement of the Adoption Support Service in planning for the child and maintaining contact with the adoptive family post Adoption Order.
- 10.3 Referrals for Access to Birth Records for adopted adults have also seen a rise this year with a total of **68** referrals. There has also been a rise in request for information under the Post Commencement Regulations 2005 as a number of those enquirers have reached 18 years of age. **31** referrals for Intermediary Services have also been received. COVID restrictions have impacted to

some extent on our ability to access paper records as offices have been closed which has also contributed to our waiting list.

- 10.4 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 **£167.550.50** which covers **64** children. The average spent per child has increased to **£2618** per child, although this only represents **24 %** of children who are being supported by the team. 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.
- 10.5 The Adoption Support Team embraced the constraints imposed by the pandemic and developed a range of virtual support mechanisms for families. The monthly Toddler Group was facilitated remotely until the easing of restrictions allowed some outside gatherings. A quiz for adoptive families was also developed. The team also facilitated a Nurturing and Attachment Course and two courses on Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) remotely. A support group established following the NVR training has also been run remotely. The mechanisms put in place have been well received and take up has increased as families have found, in most instances, it easier to engage with virtual platforms of delivery.
- 10.6 ICF funds within Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan has been utilised to commission a Psychology Service, Enfys which includes support for adopted children. The Adoption Support Team can refer a small number of cases and the service provides consultation and peer supervision for staff within the team undertaking direct work with families.
- 10.7 The Birth Parent Adviser's role post has become more established within the service despite the change in the postholder. A referral process and

information leaflet for Social Work colleagues across the region and an information leaflet for birth parents has been disseminated with the aim of promoting the service and increasing support to birth parents. A birth parent group has been developed and is been delivered on a hybrid basis (part virtual and part face to face) to enable a wider reach and to meet differing needs. **35** referrals for individual birth parent support have been received and supported.

- 10.8 The TESSA Co-ordinator's role has also been further established within the region during this period. The Co-ordinator undertakes assessments of need and processes referrals of families who may be eligible for the service. **41** referrals have been made to TESSA by VVC during the year which is the highest in Wales. The TESSA Parenting group was unable to run due to COVID restrictions and so these families were redirected to one of the training courses being provided by VVC.
- 10.9 Since being established the Children and Young People Co-ordinator has been directly involved in running Connected groups on a Saturday each month with staff from the Connected service. During lockdown the frequency of these groups increased to fortnightly on a virtual basis which the Co-ordinator continued to service. The service caters for adopted children and young people 7 upwards, **59** children and young people from VVC are registered with the service. In addition, the postholder has provided direct support sessions to **17** children from the region and has also supported **8** direct contact sessions for adopted children, which can be as frequent as 3 times a year and can also include separate sibling contact.
- 10.10 There is a need to continue to collect data from the Evaluation forms that have been developed. The main objective is to ascertain the benefits of the service provided and the 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.

11. Policies and Procedures

11.1 The first six years of operation has seen great strides in delivering a service that meets objectives set both locally and nationally. Whilst there have been numerous examples of regionalising the paperwork, processes and systems, the development of general policies has been limited due to capacity.

11.2 The need to address gaps in our policy framework and to standardise processes has been acknowledged across regions. NAS have therefore commissioned Practice Solutions to develop a common set of policies and procedures and VVC has contributed to the initial audit undertaken to scope the work involved.

12. CIW

12.1 The service has not been inspected by CIW.

13. Consultation, Engagement & Quality Assurance

13.1 During 2020-21 VVC has developed a range of consultation and feedback tools at various points for all functions with the overall aim of improving our service user engagement and to develop our quality assurance system. Additionally, the evaluations undertaken have enabled us to ascertain the benefits of the service provided and identify needs 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. In addition, VVC adopters contributed to Adoption UK Barometer Study and IPC's review of the Adoption Support Framework commissioned by NAS.

14. Complaints, Comments and Compliments

14.1 There was one complaint received during the reporting period.

- 14.2 Complaint from a birth parent concerning the role undertaken by the Family Finding Social Worker and the delay in receiving her post adoption letter from the adoptive parents. This complaint was investigated by the Regional Manager under stage 1 of the Vale of Glamorgan Complaint Procedure.
- 14.3 Regional staff have continued to receive positive feedback on the range of services they provide from a variety of sources. These compliments are recorded, and staff are encouraged to collate this information to contribute to their own personal development plans. The new services established because of the investment, particularly the role of the Transitions Worker, have been particularly well received.

15. Conclusion, Future Priorities & Challenges

- 15.1 In terms of key performance indicators the end of year position presented a much healthier position than was anticipated at the beginning of the reporting year. Despite the restrictions imposed upon service delivery, the region was successful in placing a significant number of children and in approving a comparable number of adopters to the previous year. The priorities going forward remain as in previous years. We need to continue to build upon our performance and ensure that we can meet the range of needs presented by children requiring adoptive placements within the region. The increased complexity and profile of the harder to place children will continue to challenge our ability to secure timely, appropriate matches for these children.
- 15.2 The report hopefully highlights the ways the service quickly adapted to the need to develop new ways of working to reduce the impact upon service delivery by the pandemic. The use of virtual platforms has been beneficial in many parts of our service and has enabled us to reach more families. Going forward there is a need to evaluate which functions can continue to be delivered in this way and which parts of the service will require a combined approach. This will continue to inform our recovery planning.

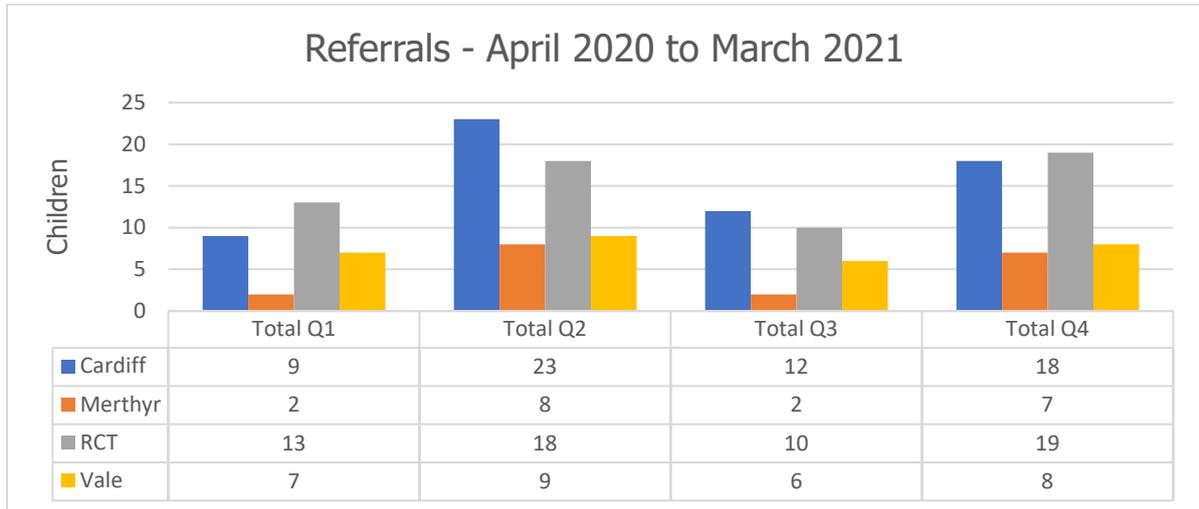
- 15.3 The investment received from Welsh Government has been a significant, positive development for the service as a whole and there is clear evidence of the benefits of the additional roles in enhancing performance. These improvements will however need to continue to be monitored and evaluated to meet the objectives and targets set by NAS. This is particularly important in respect of the provision of life journey work due to the large amount of the investment secured for completion of this work.
- 15.4 One of the key priorities for the service highlighted during the period and continuing into the current year is how best to address the ever-increasing demand for post adoption support services. The raised awareness of adoption support services at a national and local level can only be seen as positive for families in need of support but it has also highlighted the shortfalls within the service to meet these needs in a timely way. The investment monies have served to enhance the range of preventative services we can offer but they have not impacted significantly upon the services required for families in crisis. An urgent evaluation of the resources needed to support such families is required.
- 15.5 The full implementation of the Good Practice Guides will impact directly upon our Family Finding practice and our Adoption Support Service, although the need to promote ongoing and in some cases direct contact with birth families will need to be factored into our assessment process for prospective adopters. Again, an evaluation of the resourcing implications in respect of the new ways of working promoted by the Guides will need to be undertaken.
- 15.6 The easement to the Regulations in respect of the two-stage process for adopter assessments ceases on 30 September 2021 and the new process is to be fully implemented from 1 October 2021. VVC will need to collect data in respect of compliance with the new timescales for assessments and performance will need to be closely monitored.

Angela Harris
Regional Adoption Manager
October 2021

Appendix 1 – Family Finding

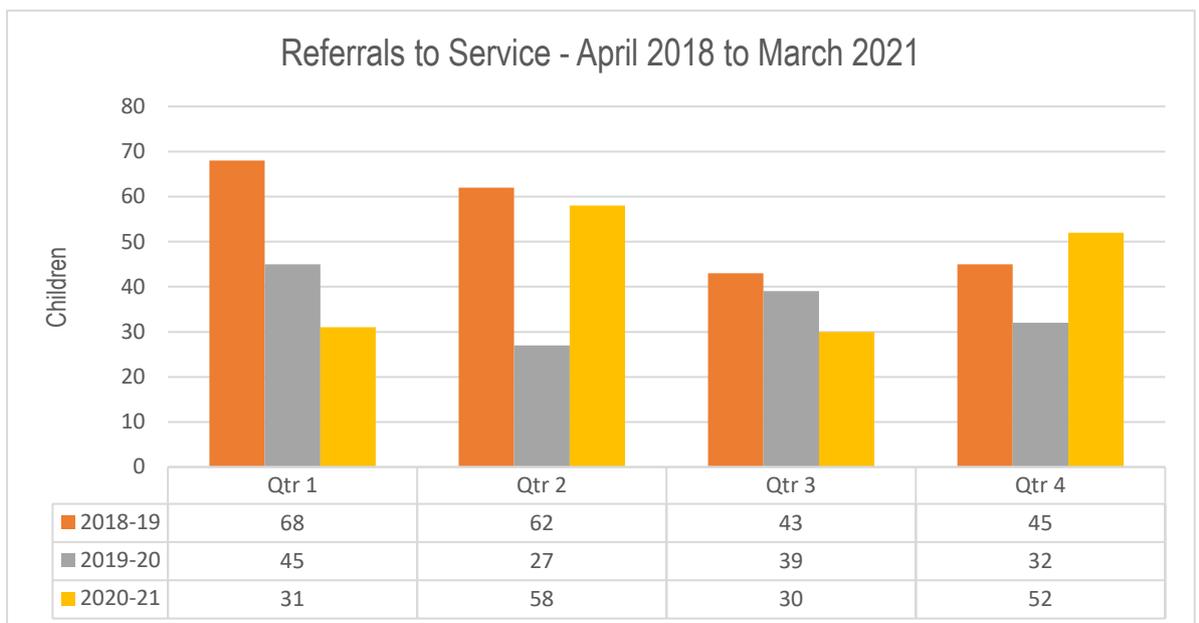
Children Referrals

171 children were referred to the service during the period April 2020 to March 2021. On average 14 referrals were received monthly, with 36% and 35% of referrals received from Cardiff and RCT respectively. 18% of referrals were received from the Vale of Glamorgan and 11% from Merthyr Tydfil.



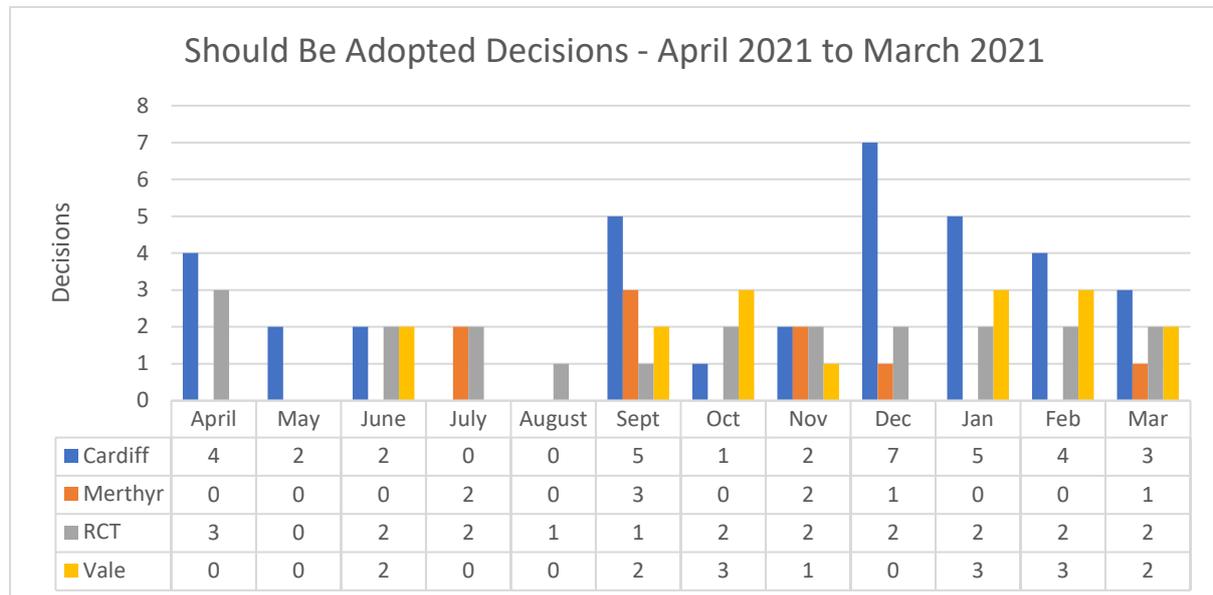
Comparative Data

Comparative data for 2018-19 and 2019-20 noted a 34% decrease in the number of referrals made to the service and was in line with national trends. However, when 2020-21 data is compared with 2019-20, a 20% increase is noted.



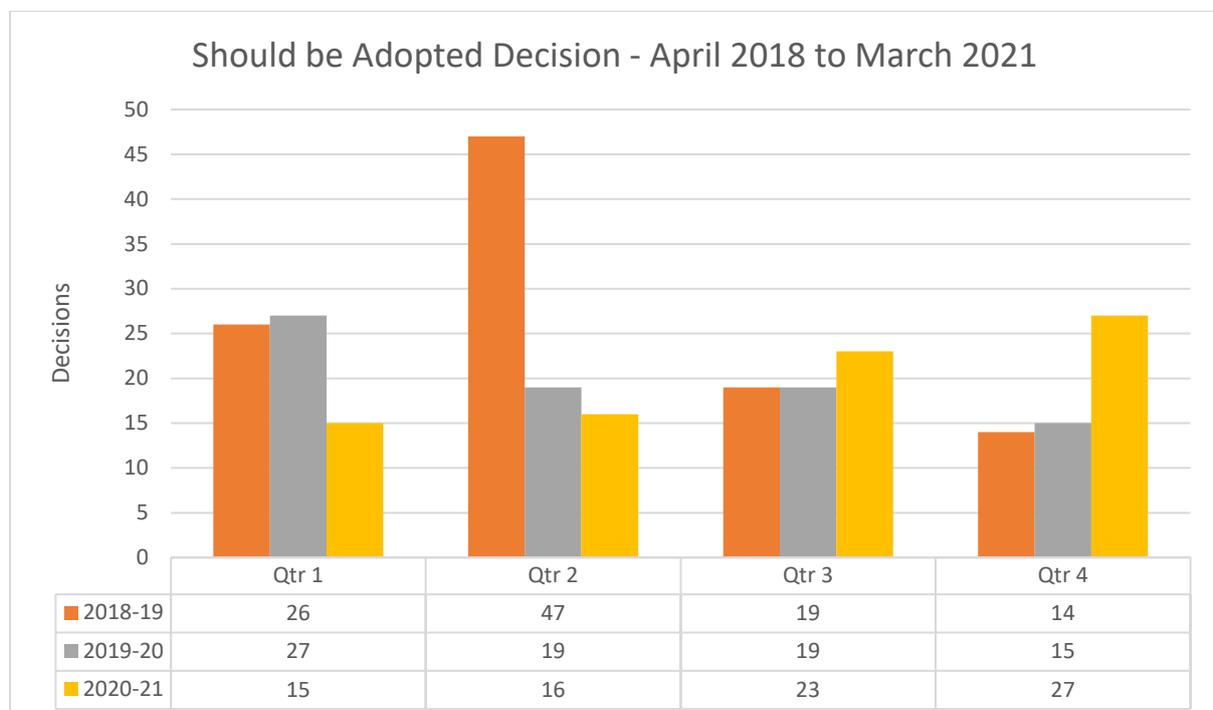
‘Should be Adopted’

81 SBA decisions were made during the period April 2021 to March 2021. This is consistent with previous years.



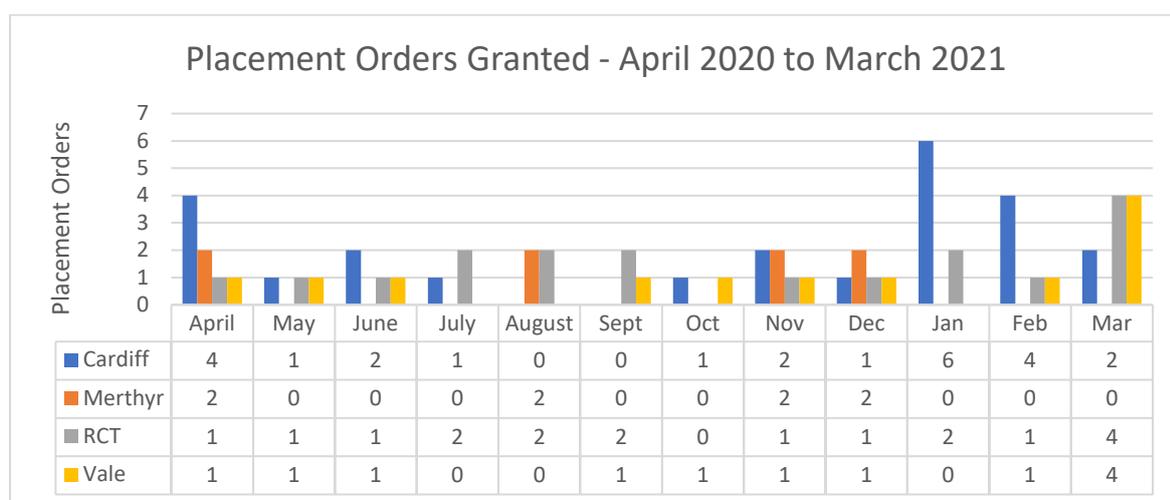
Comparative Data

Comparative data demonstrates a 23.5% decrease of SBA decisions when compared to data held for 2018-19 and is consistent with national trends.



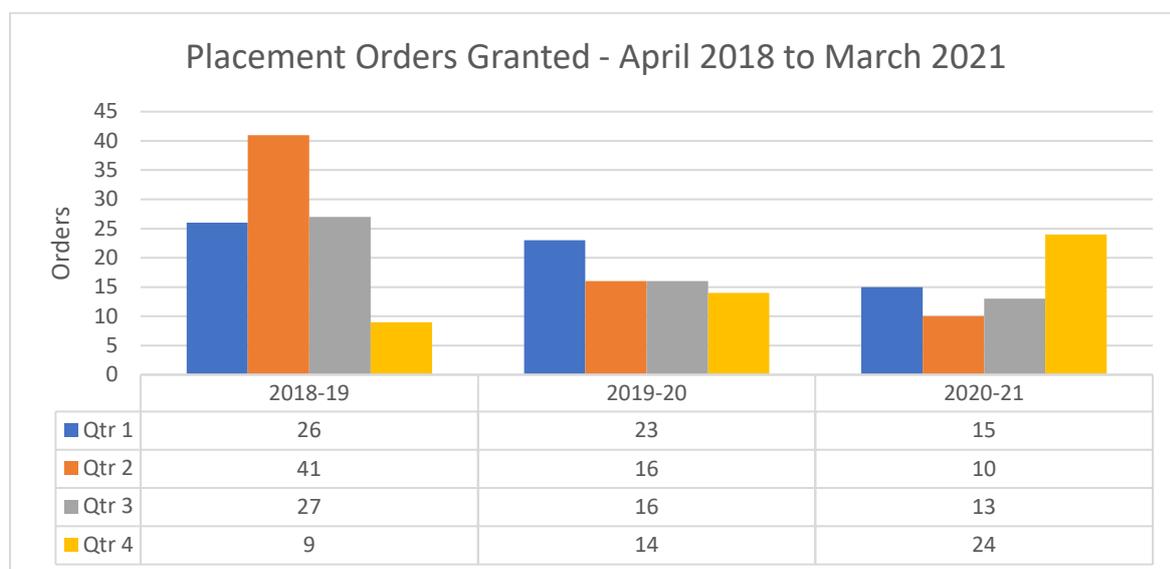
Placement Orders

62 Placement Orders were granted in the first half year, which is **13%** lower than the same period in previous year, however we are slowly seeing an increase in the number of Placement Orders being granted. The active family finding data monitored by Welsh Government shows 53 children with a Placement Order who are yet not linked, matched, or placed and whose care plan remains one of adoption. This number of children 'waiting' has significantly reduced through a combination of increased adopter recruitment, utilisation of specialist family finding measures and the reduction in Placement Orders over the past two years.



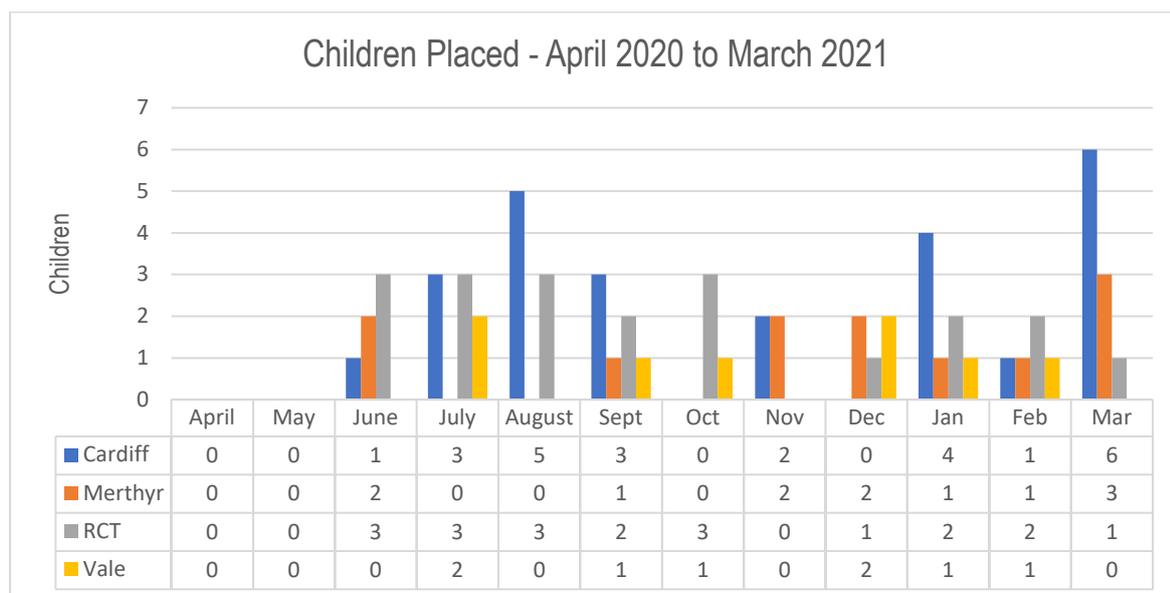
Comparative Data

Comparative data indicates a marked decrease (33%) in Placement Orders granted during the period 2018-19 and 2019-20 which is indicative of national trends.



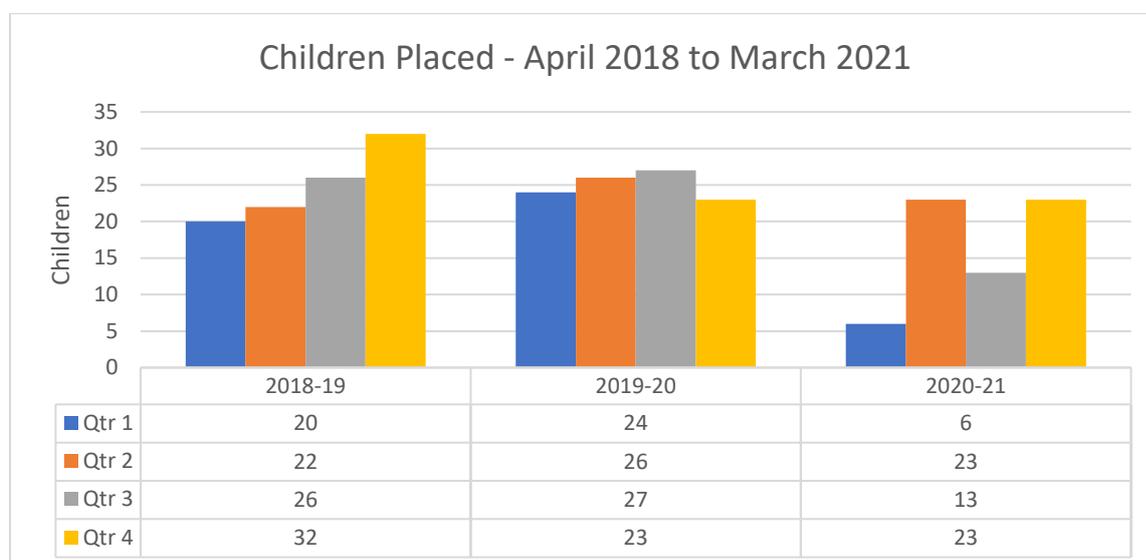
Children Placed

65 children were placed between April 2020 and March 2021. Whilst there was an initial delay in being able to place children early on due to the coronavirus pandemic, there have been no ongoing delays because of this, and the transitions risk assessment process is enabling placements to continue.



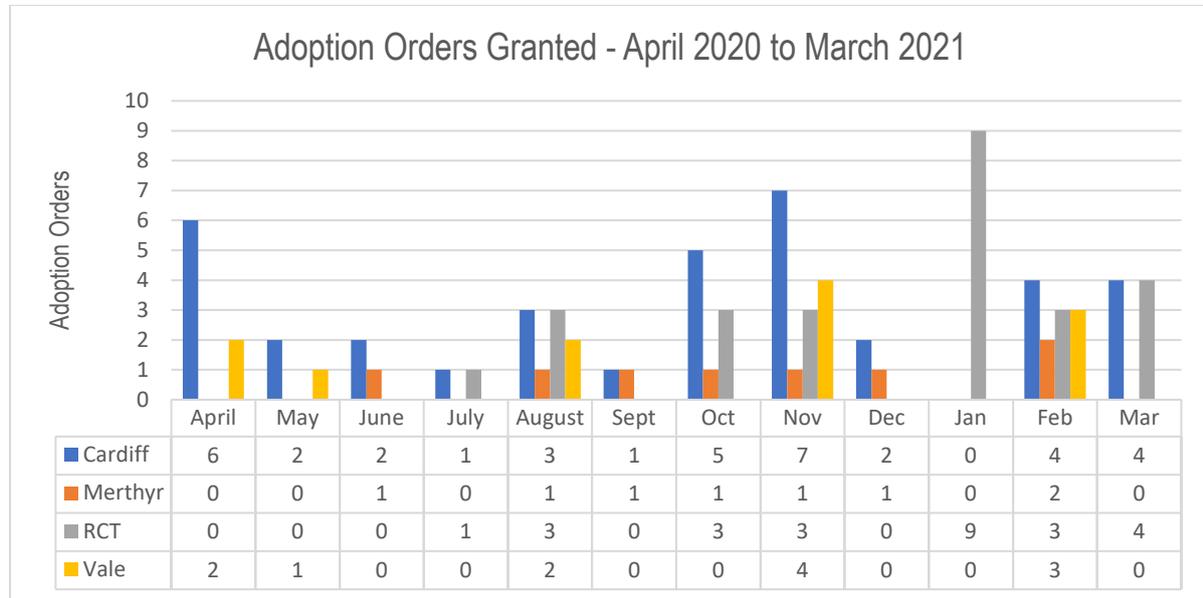
Comparative Data

The number of children placed is lower than in previous years, in line with the overall reduction in the number of children requiring adoptive placements observed over the past two years.



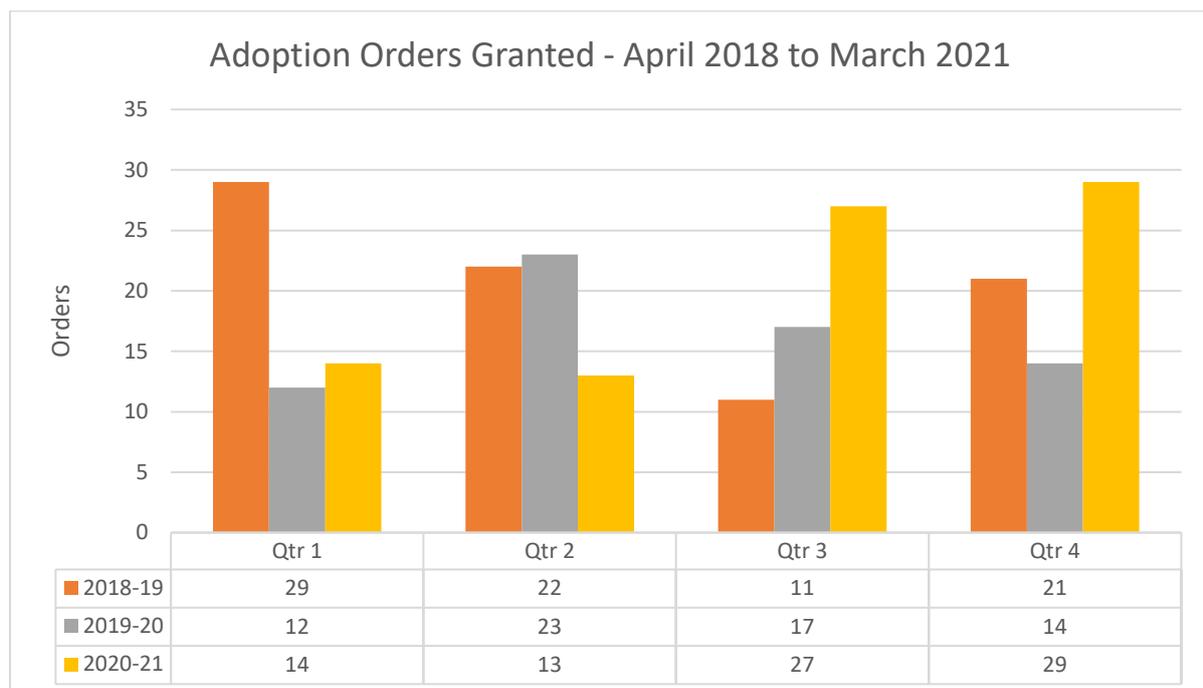
Adoption Orders

83 Adoption Orders were granted in the reporting period. There has been a significant increase from the first two quarters to the end of quarter 4 in line with an increasing number of final adoption order hearings which have been able to take place following the initial delays earlier in the pandemic.



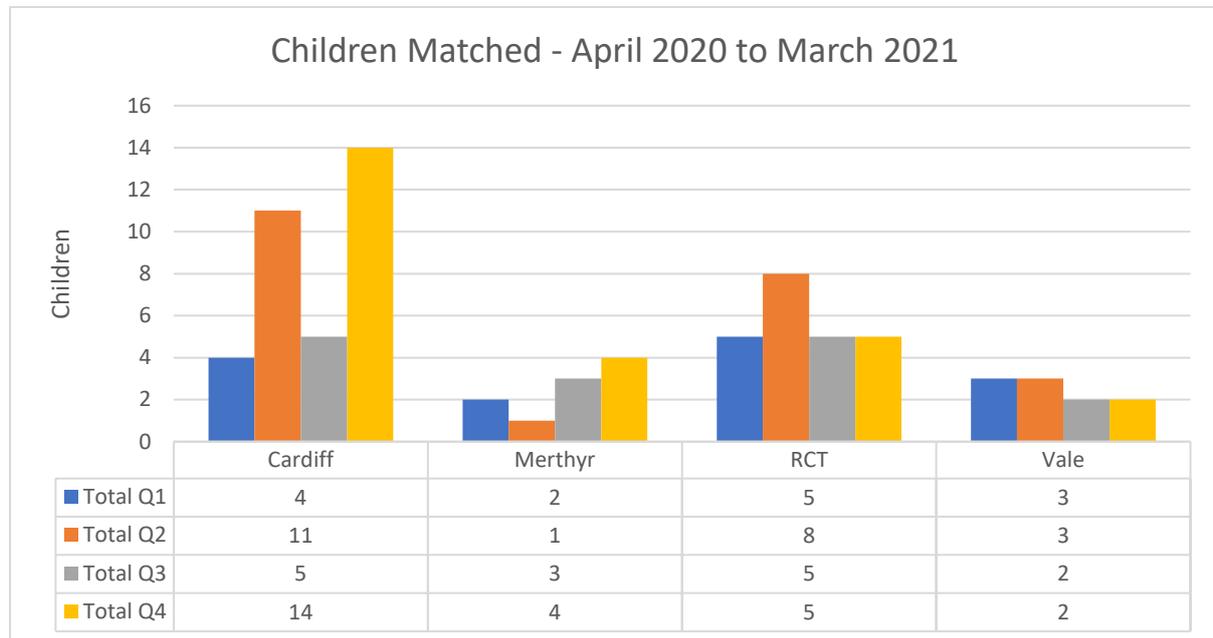
Comparative Data

Adoption Orders granted during 2020-21 are comparable with data held for 2018-19. A slight decrease (16%) in Adoption Orders granted was noted in 2019-20.



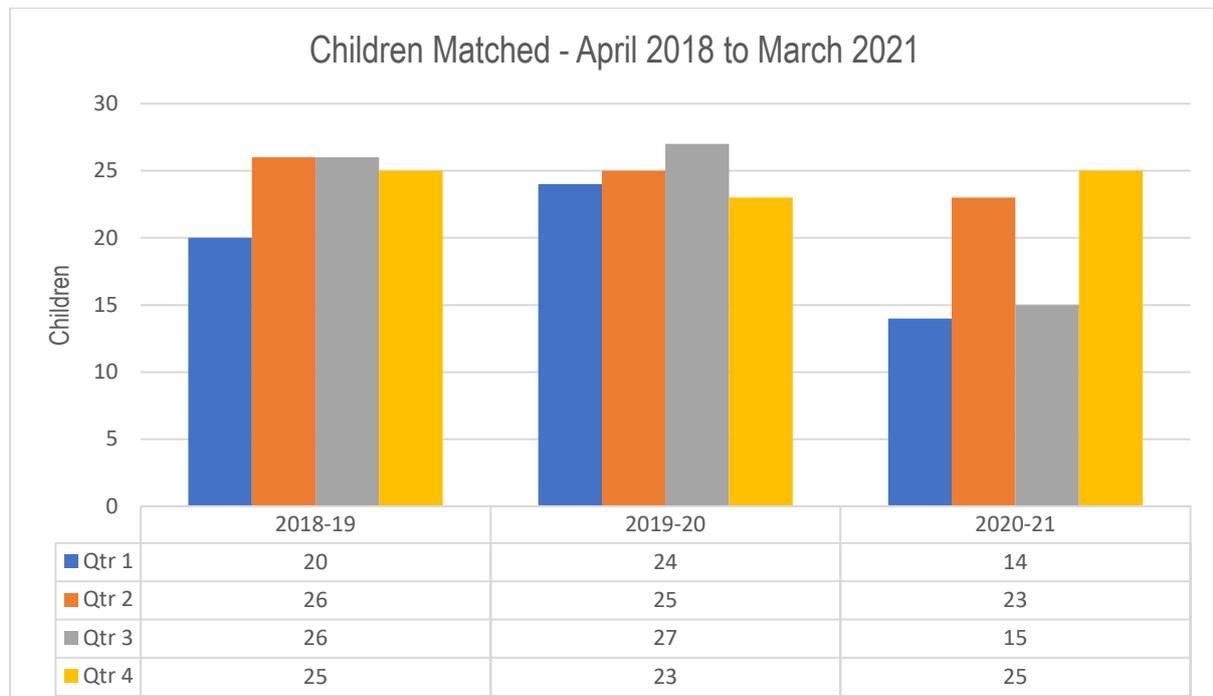
Children Matched

77 children were matched to adopters during the reporting period. This figure is **22.22%** lower when compared to the same period in previous year.



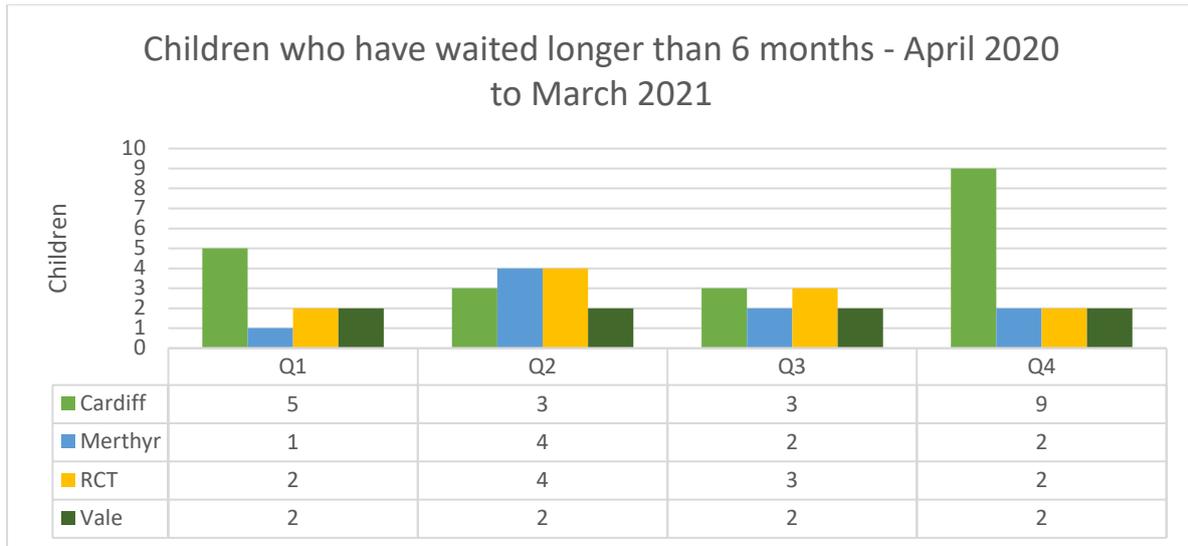
Comparative Data

The service continues to consistently match children. It should be noted however, children placed in 2020-21 is 21% lower when compared to previous years.

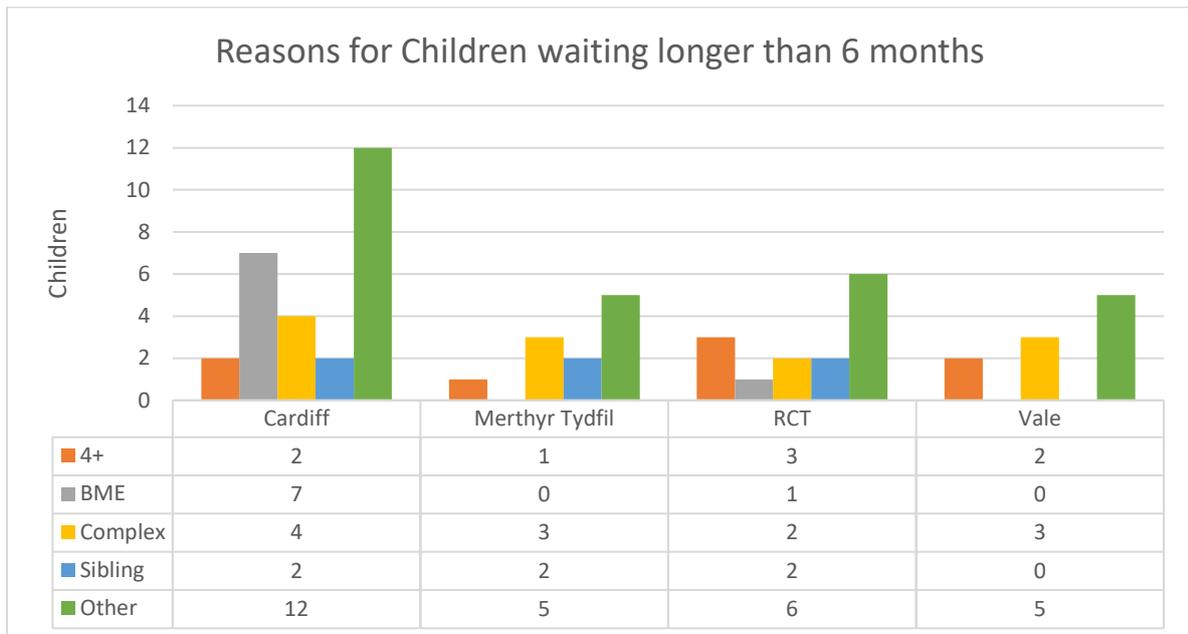


Number of children Matched since April 2020 who have waited longer than 6 months (or 3 months for a relinquished child under 6 months of age) to progress from “Should be placed for Adoption” decision to approve to Match

48 (73.84%) children matched in 2020-21 have waited longer than six months to progress from SBA to approve to match. This includes several children with additional/complex needs whose adoption searches have taken time but also whose matching with adopters has been drawn out over a longer period to ensure both that adopters have had sufficient time and information to proceed and that children have been able to be prepared.

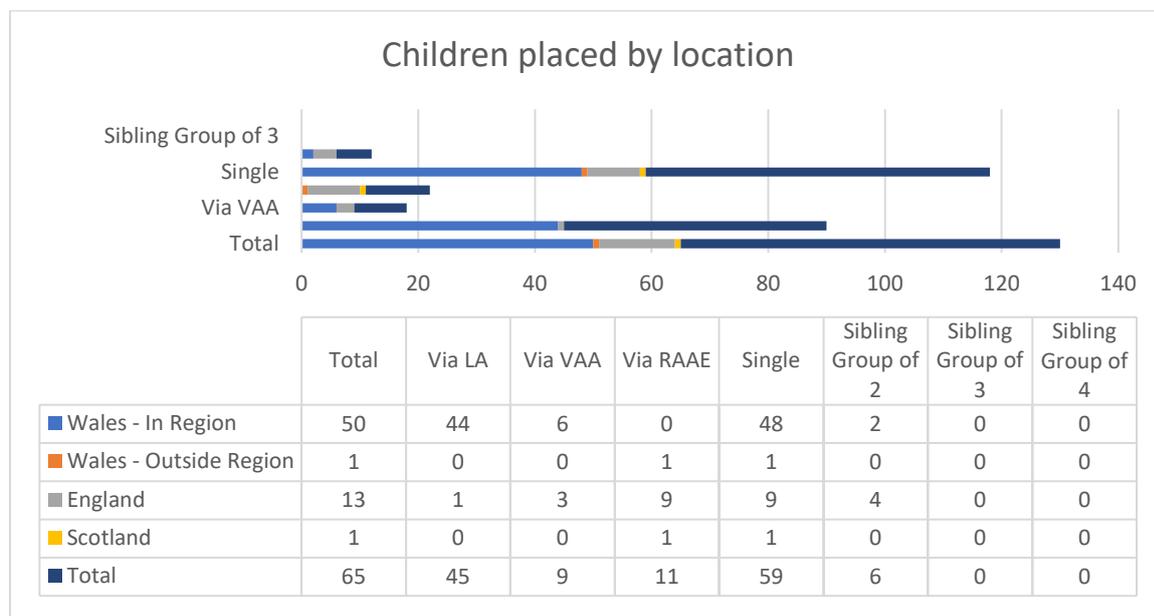


In many cases, children who have waited longer than six months come under more than one category.



Type of Placement

68% of the children have been placed with VVC adopters



Life Journey Work

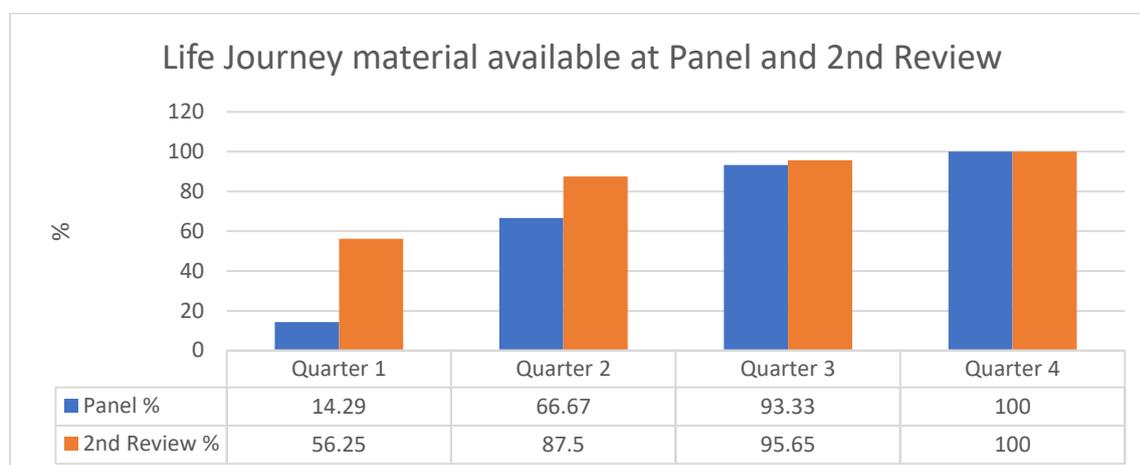
Amendments to the performance indicators for Life Journey work came into effect on 1st April 2020.

M20A The number of children during the quarter where life journey material has been provided by the time of matching panel. ***Life Journey material at matching panel has been defined as: draft later life letter; and draft life storybook.***

M20 The number of children for whom life journey material has been provided to adopters by the time of the second adoption review.

M21 The number of children during the quarter who had their second adoption review.

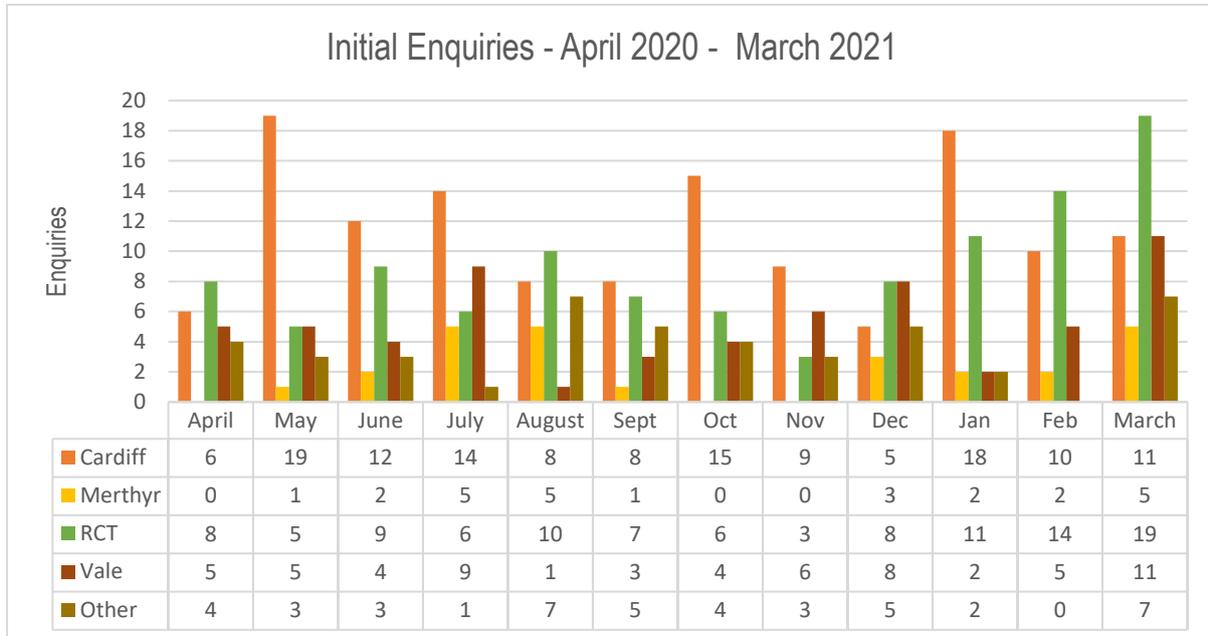
Quarter on quarter we can see a steady increase in performance with most local authorities achieving 100% compliance. Given the relatively small numbers of children involved in both measures, just 1 child can show a significant impact on the overall %.



Appendix 2 – Recruitment and Assessment

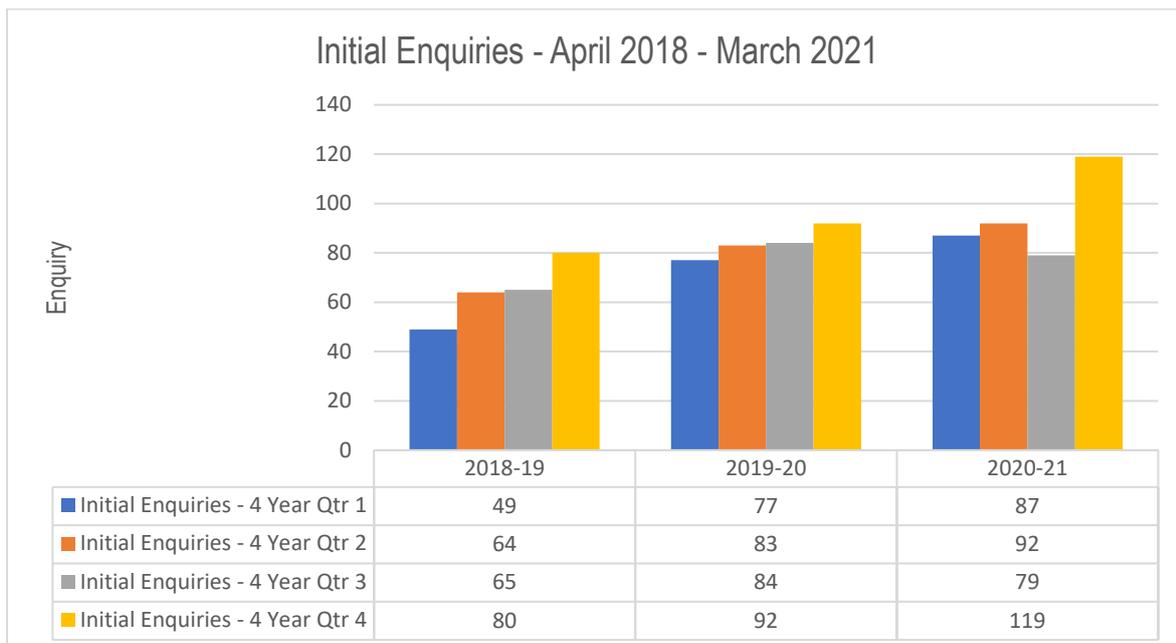
Initial Enquiries

374 (households) enquiries were received during the period April 2020 – March 2021. Of this, 36% and 28% of enquiries were received from Cardiff and RCT respectively, 17% and 7% of enquiries were received from the Vale of Glamorgan and Merthyr Tydfil respectively and 44 (12%) enquiries were received from outside our region.



Comparative Data

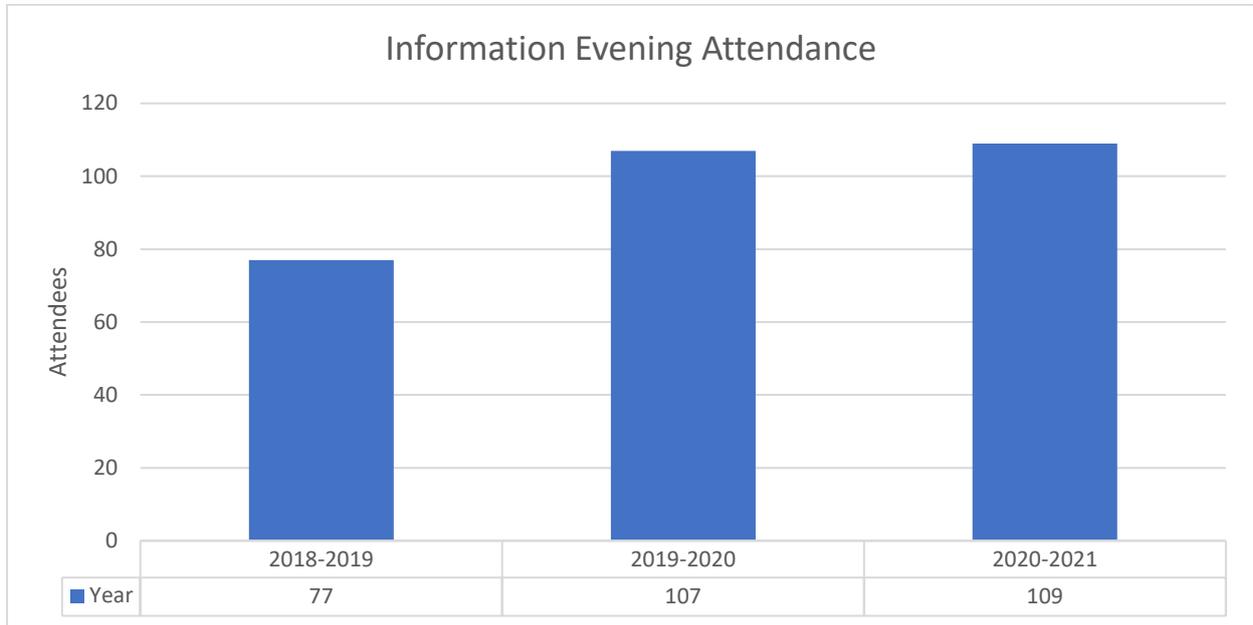
Over the past three years, the service has seen a 46% increase in the number of enquiries.



Information Evenings

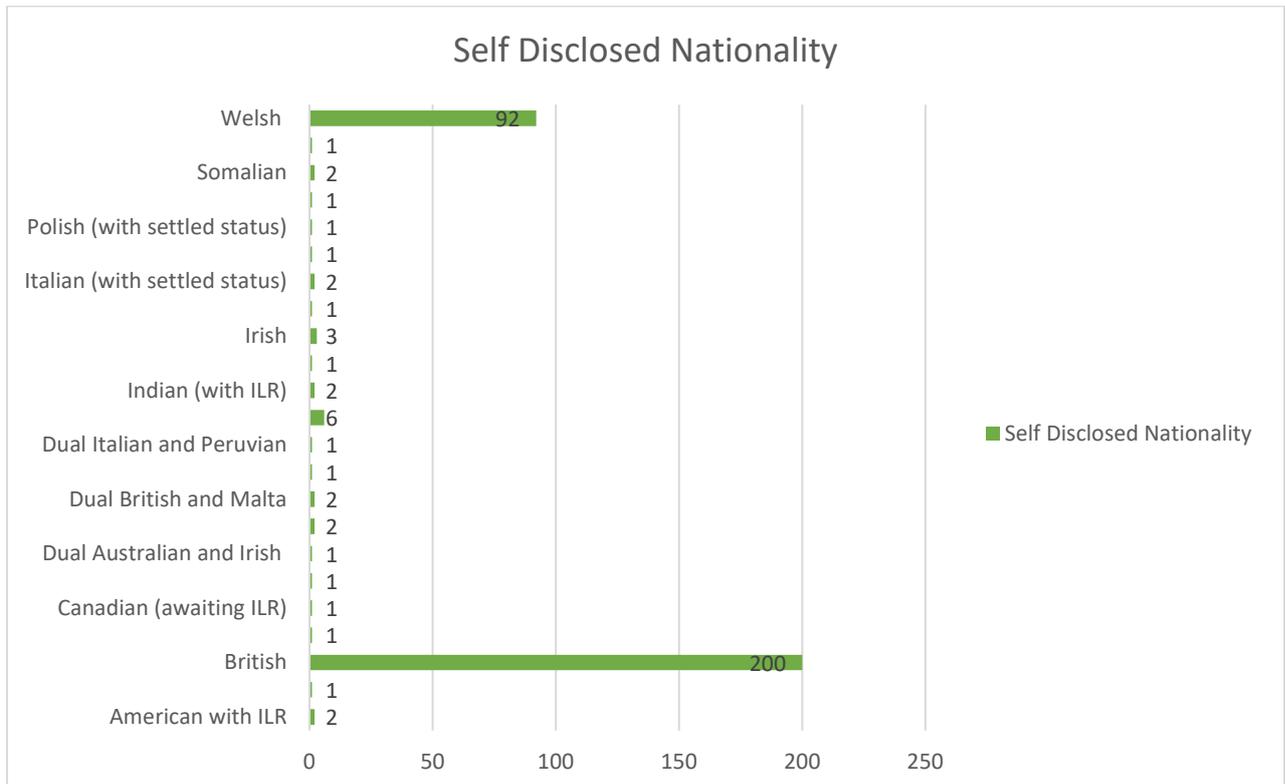
Comparative Data

Year on year, the service continues to see an increase in attendance at Information Evenings.

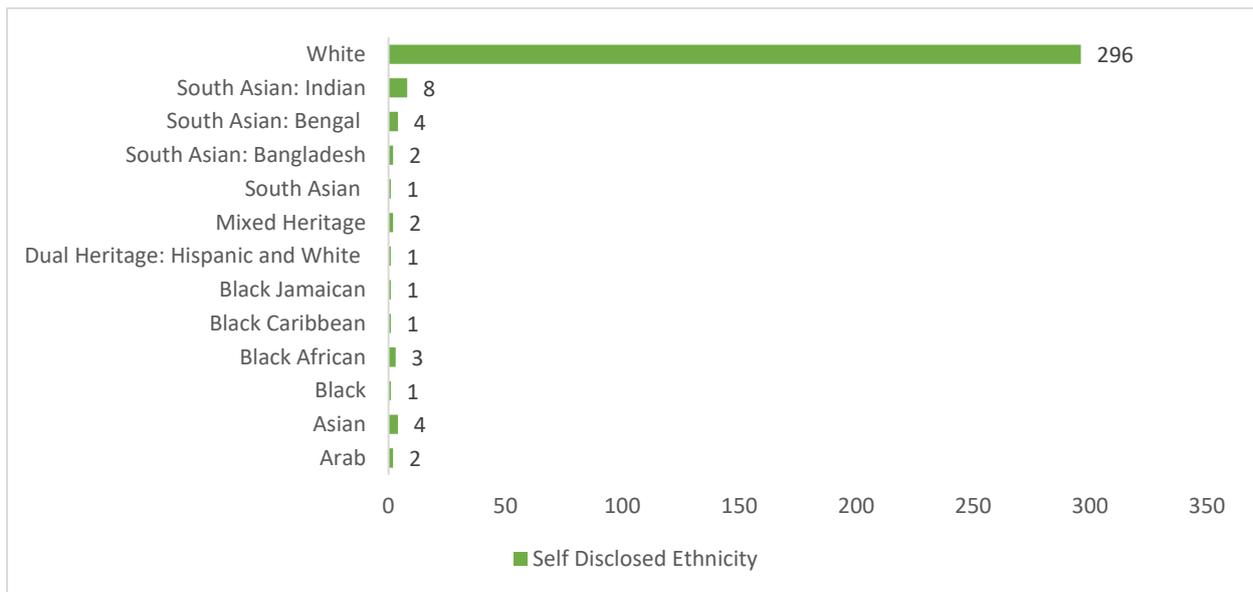


Demographics of Initial Enquiries

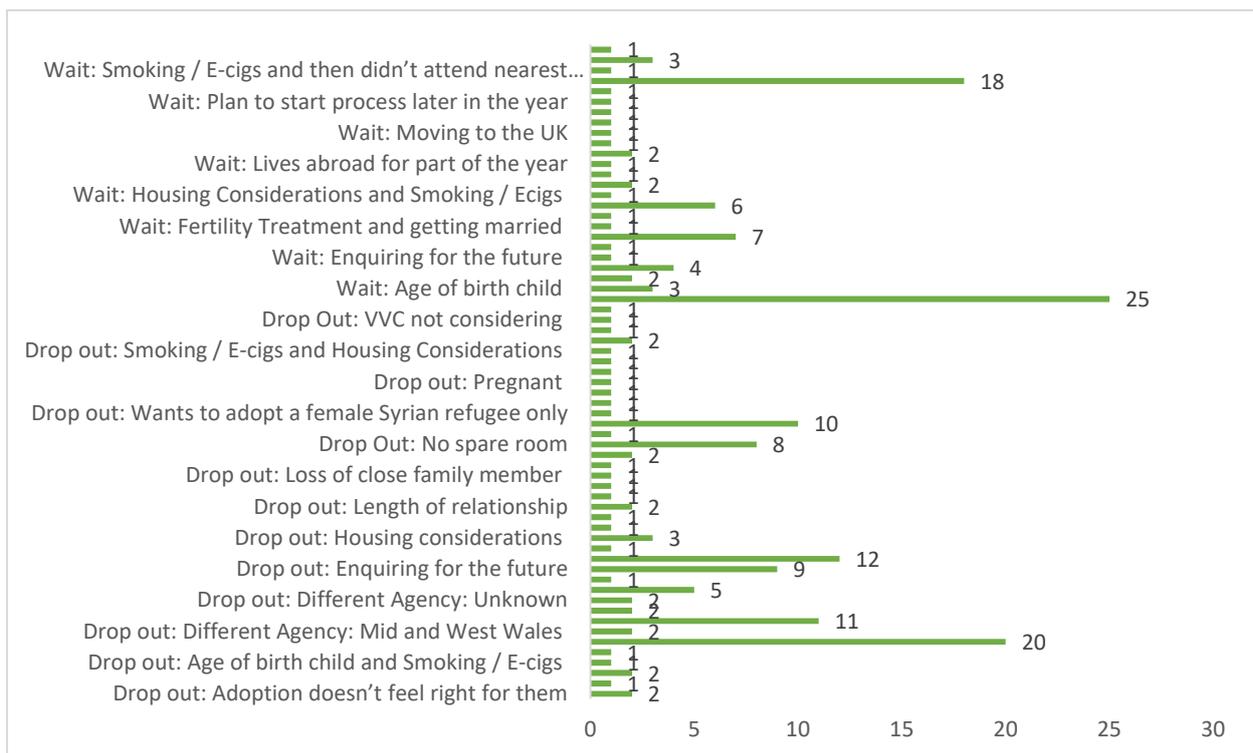
Self-disclosed Nationality (individuals)



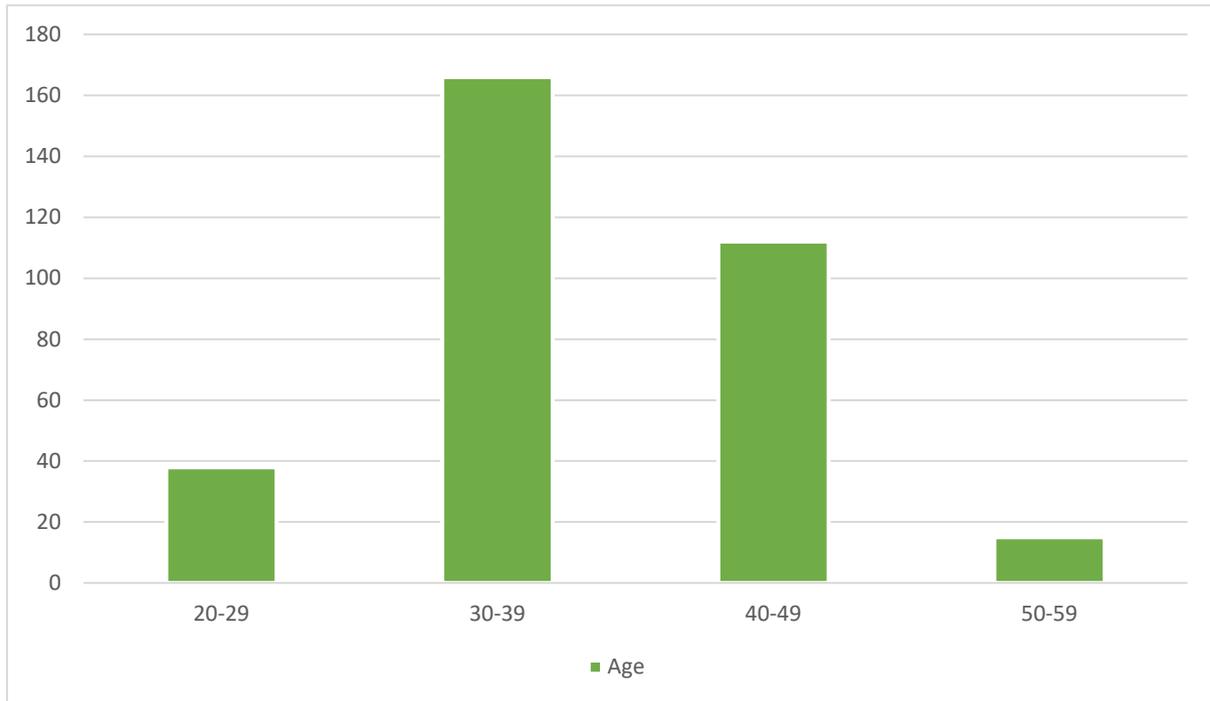
Self-disclosed ethnicity (individuals)



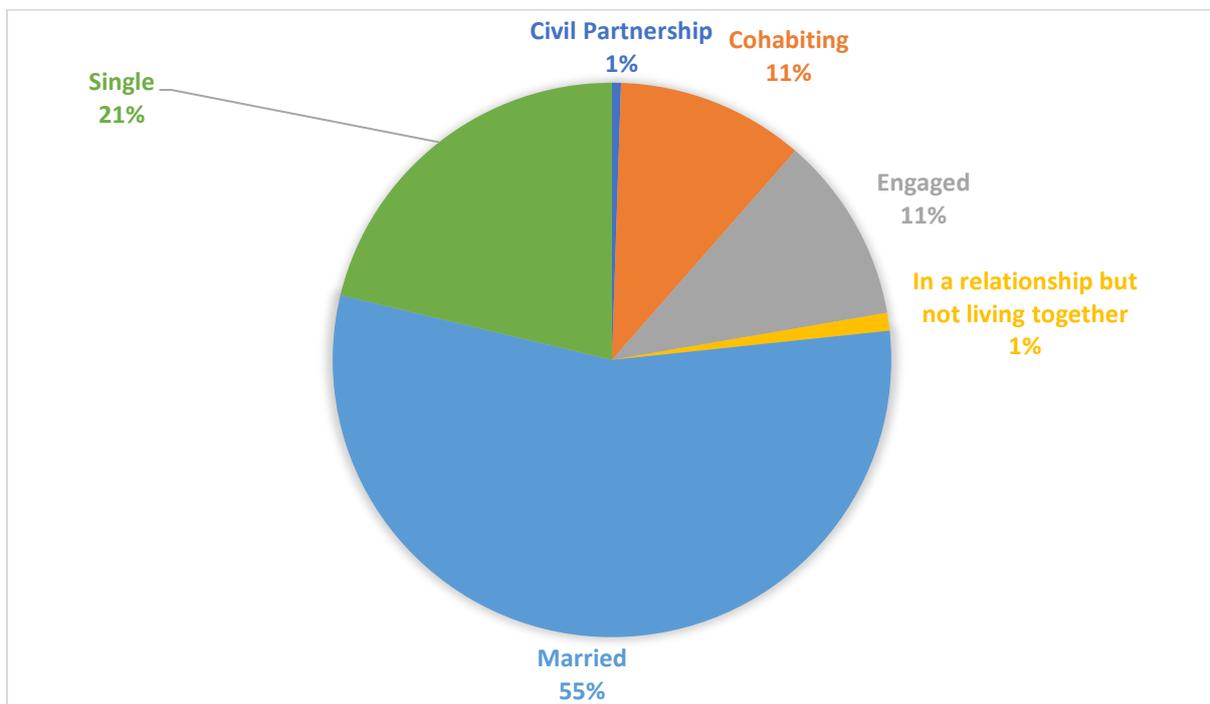
Self-disclosed Follow up - reasons for delay or withdrawal from adoption process before Information Evening April 2020 – March 2021:



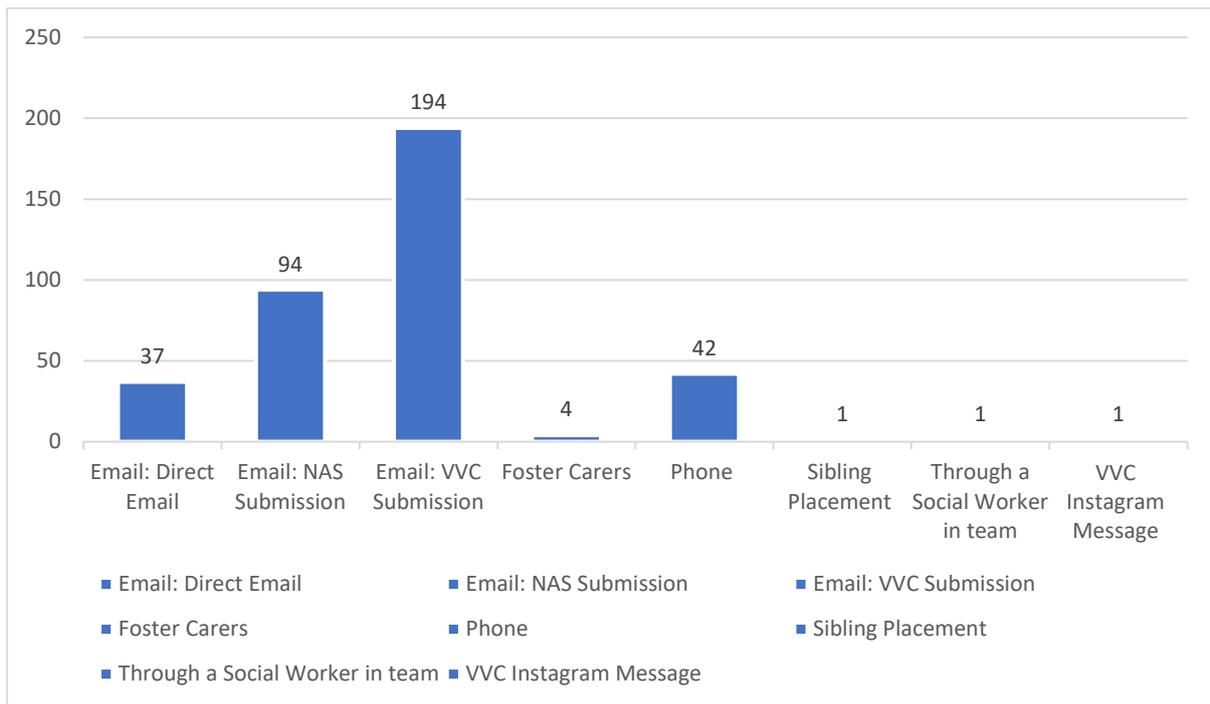
Age of Applicants



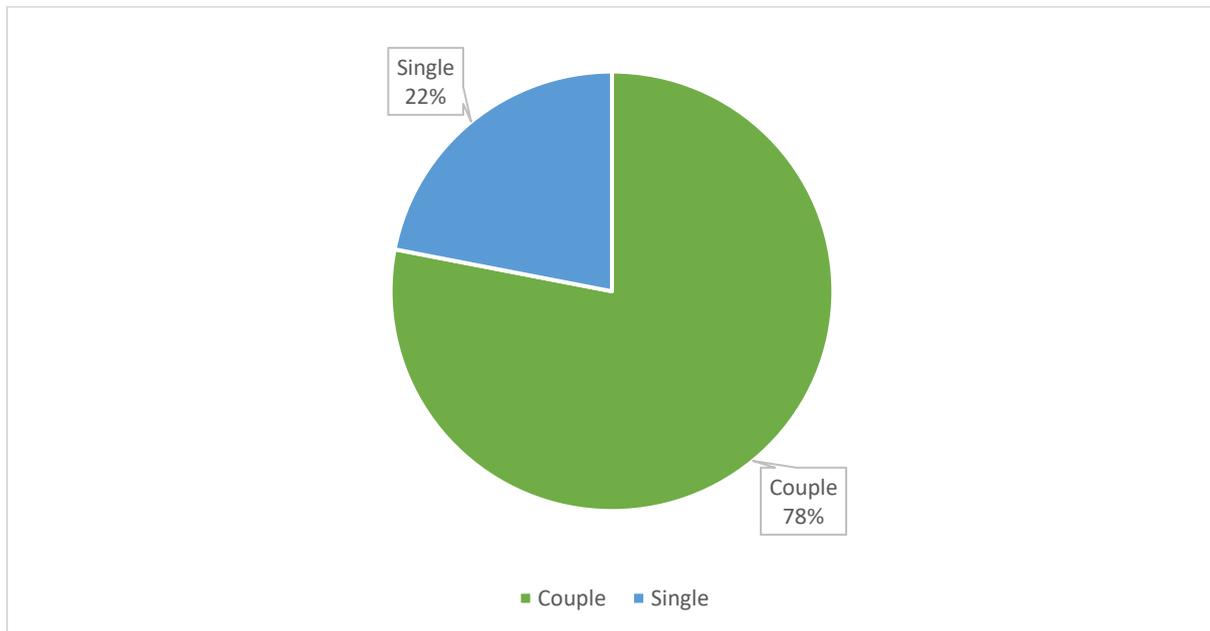
Relationship Status



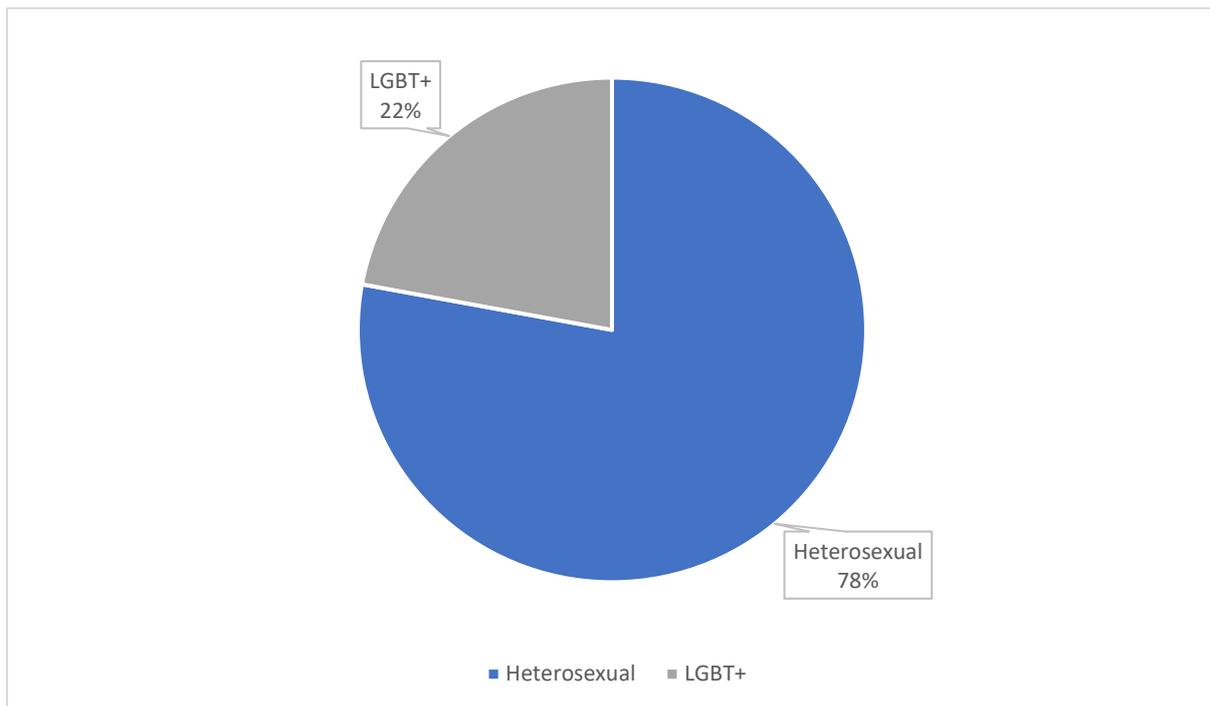
How they contacted us



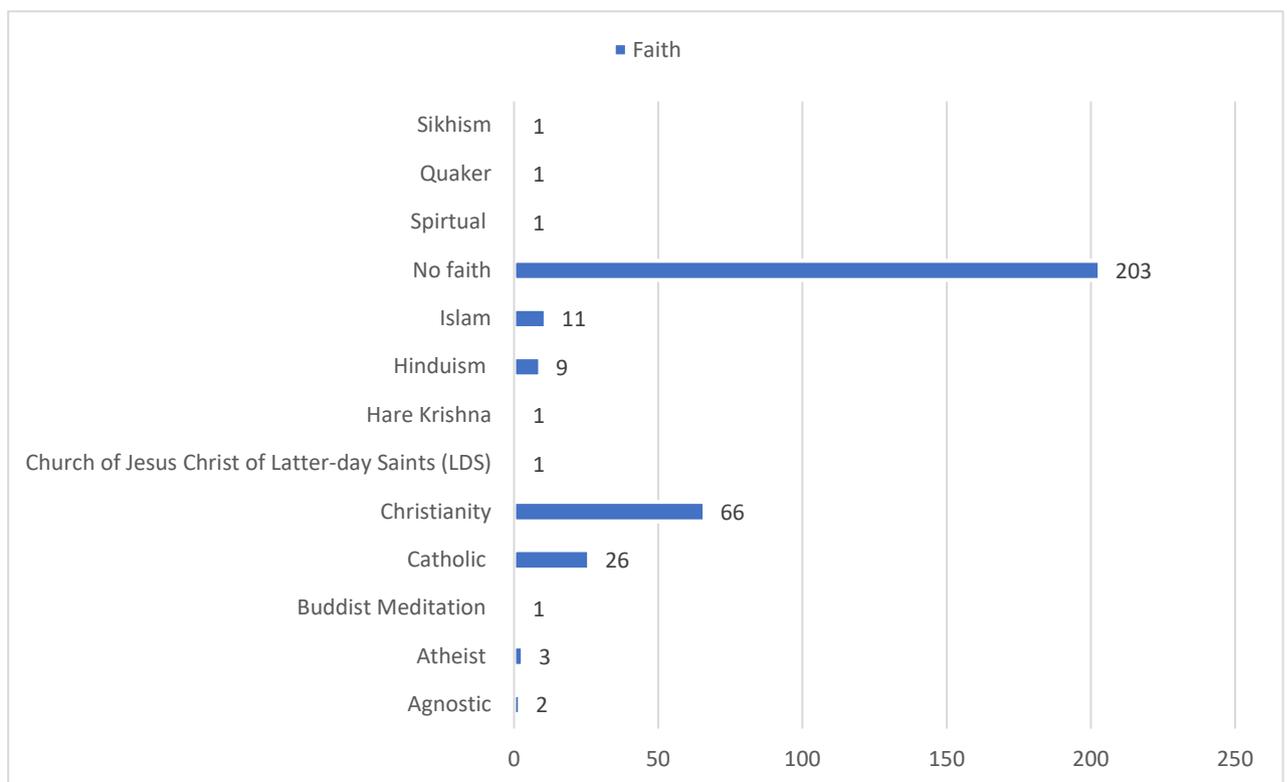
Couples and Singles



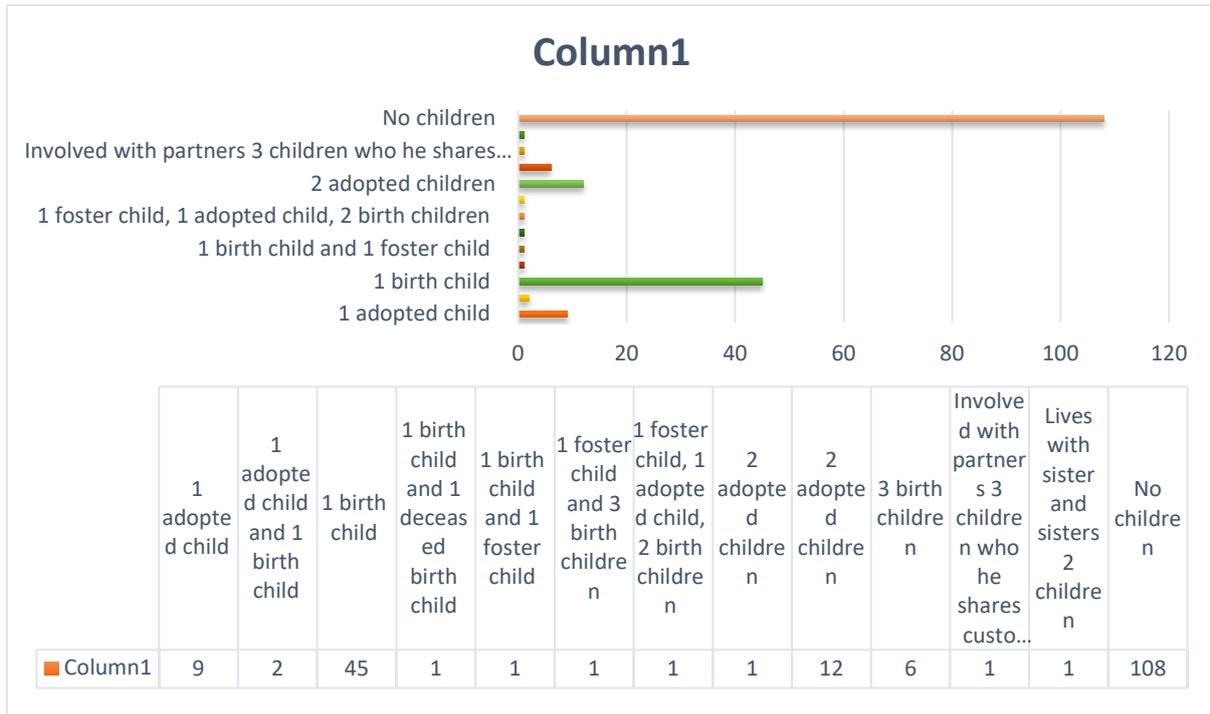
Couples – self-reported LGBT+ and Heterosexual



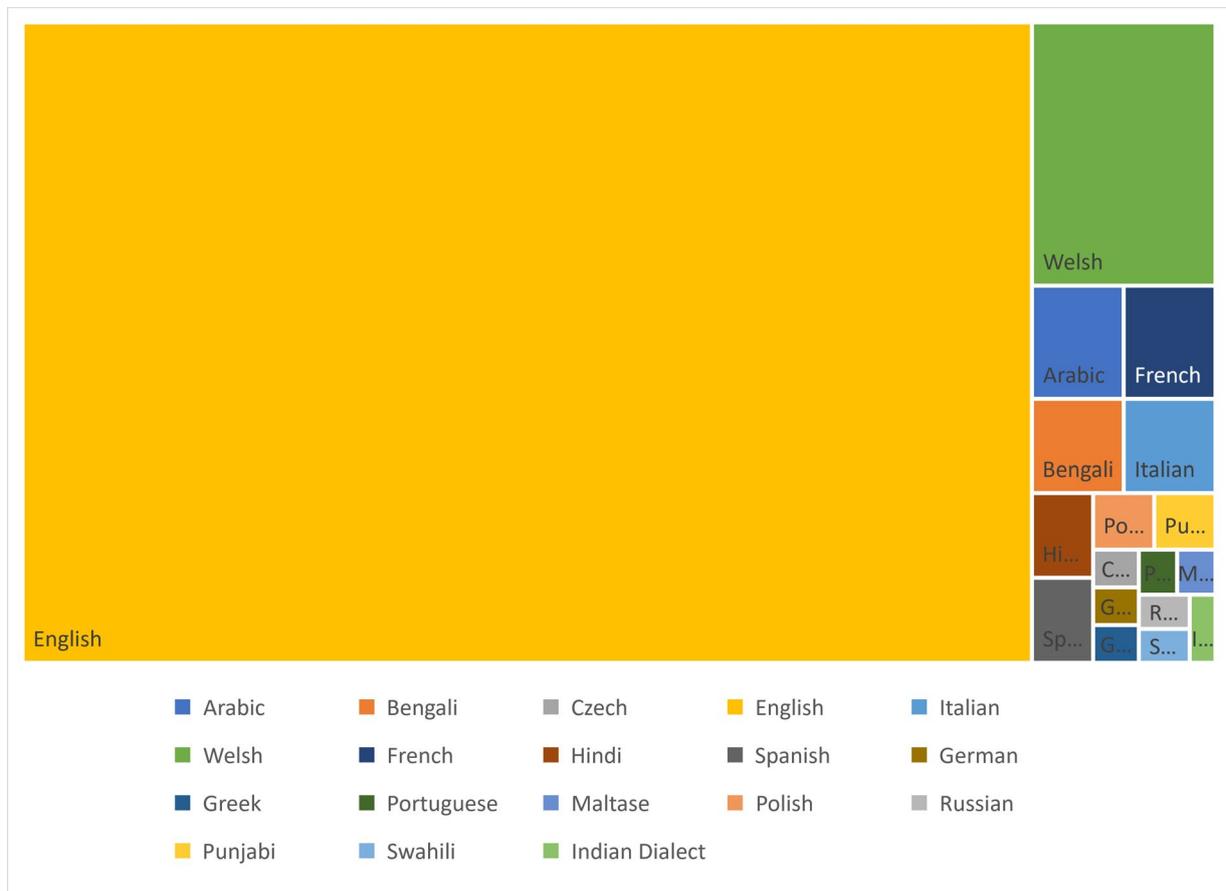
Self-reported faith (individuals)



Adopting with children already in the household

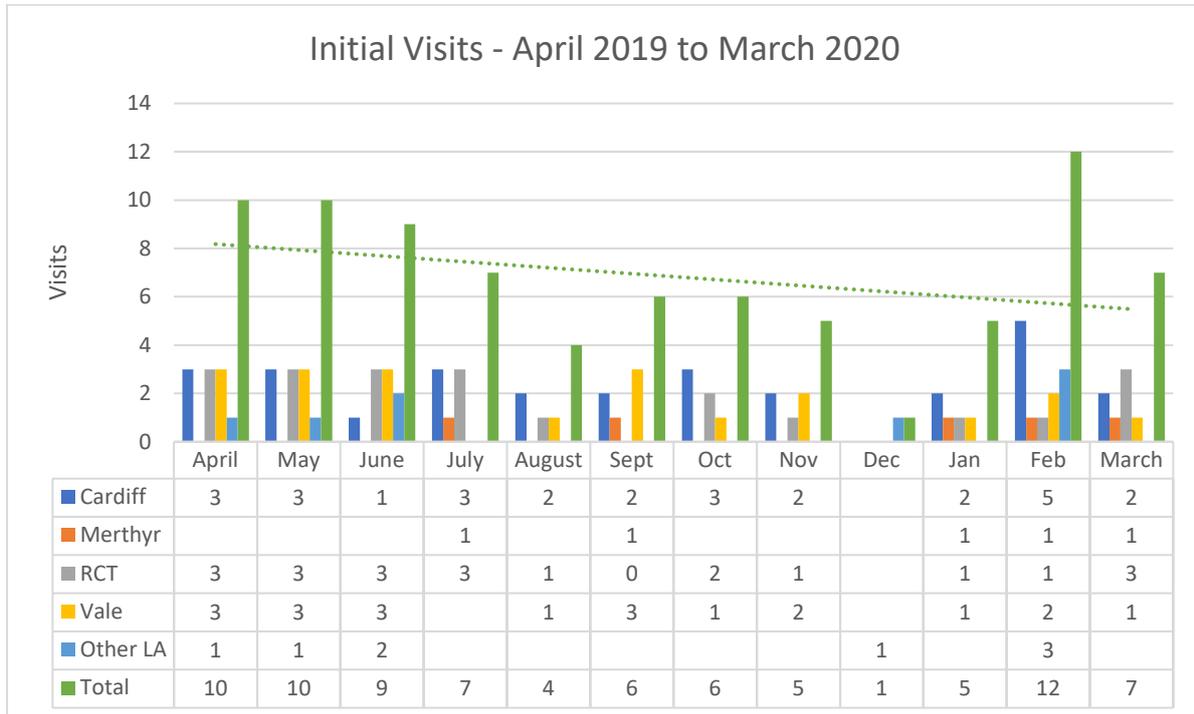


Languages spoken in the household (individuals)



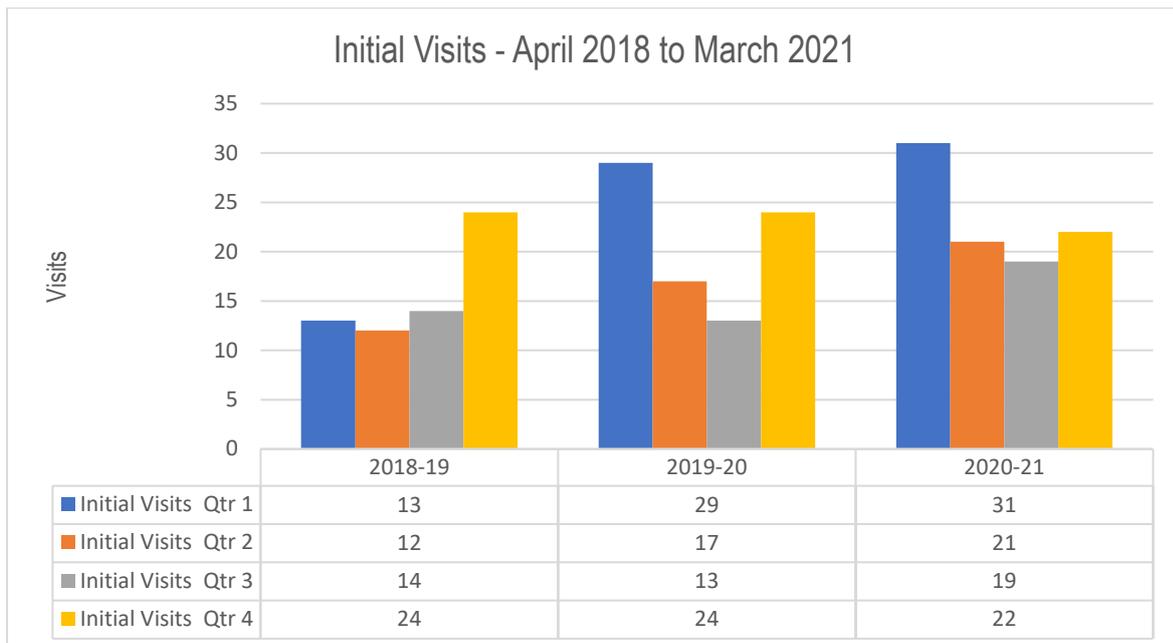
Initial Visits

82 initial visits took place during the reporting period.



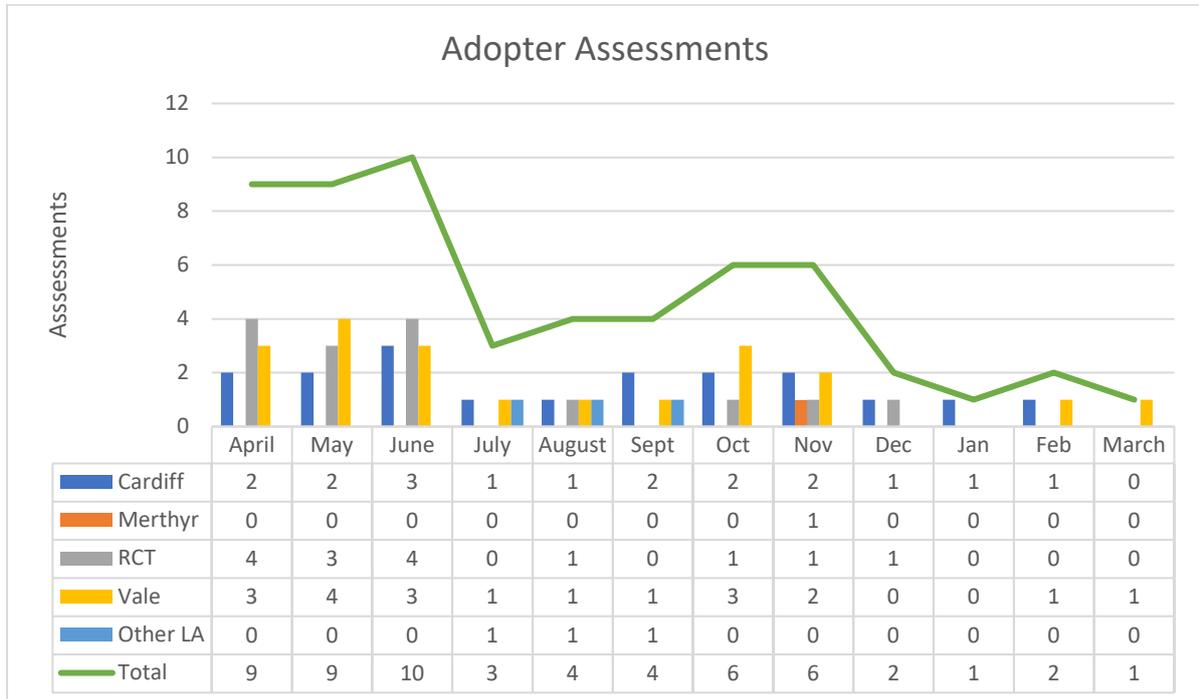
Comparative Data

Over the past three years, the service has noted a 48% increase in the number of initial visits being carried out.



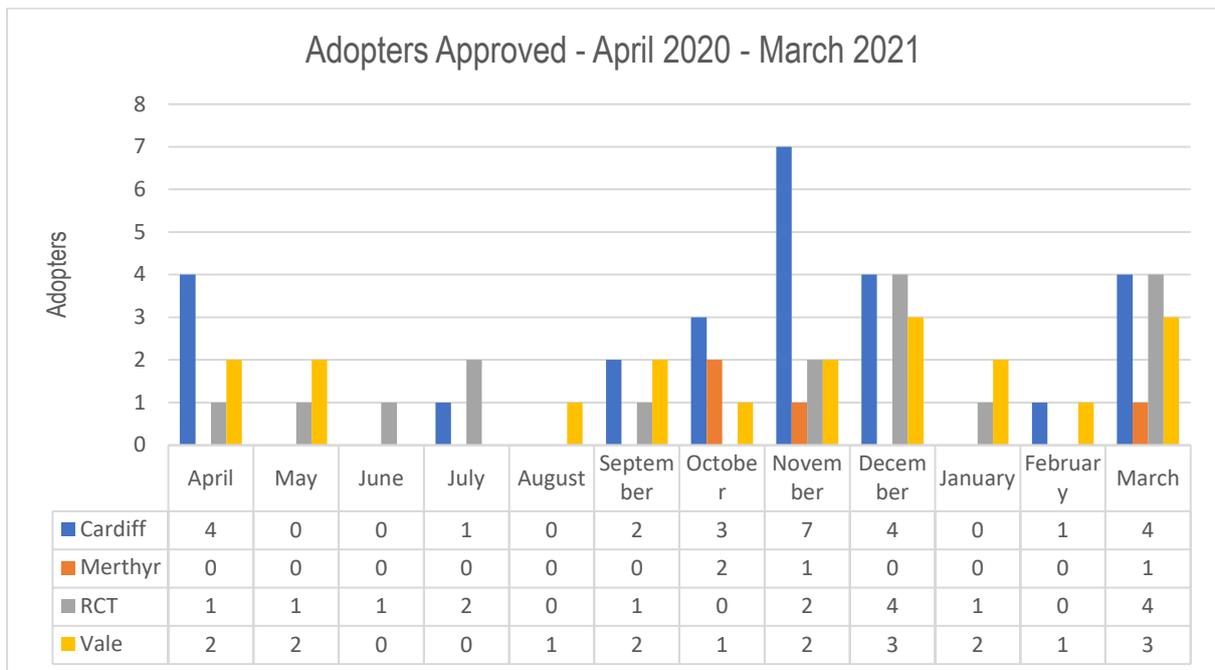
Adopter Assessments

57 adopter assessments were carried out during the reporting period.



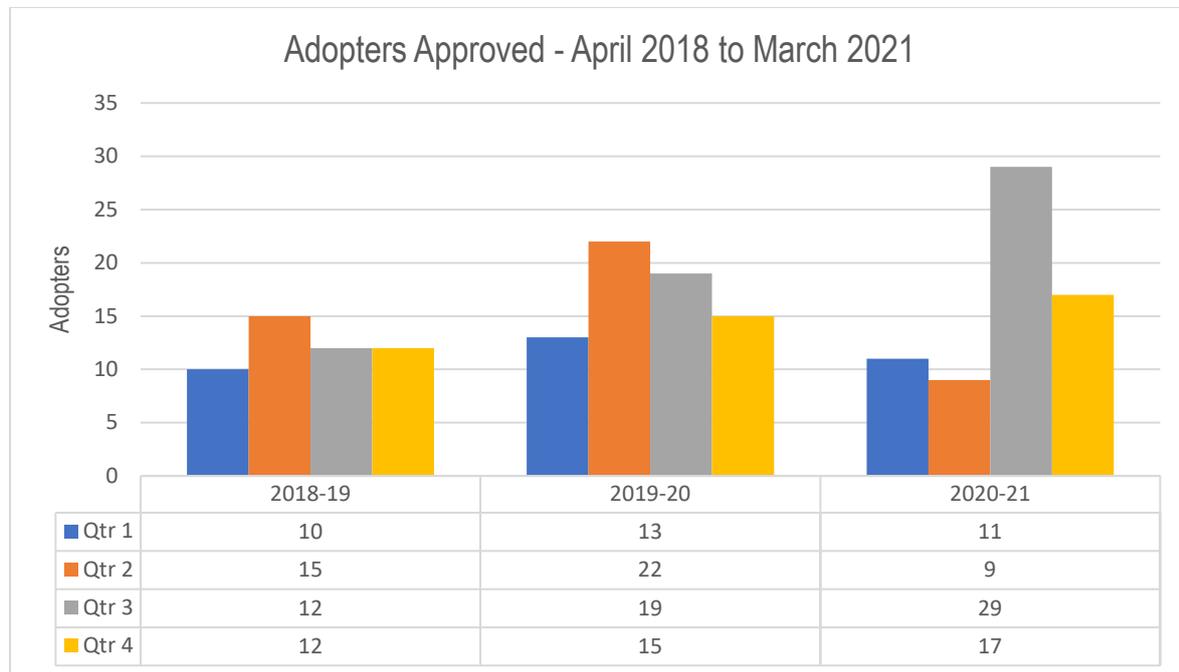
Adopter Approvals

67 adopter approvals were presented to the adoption panel, of these 66 adopter approvals were ratified during the reporting period.



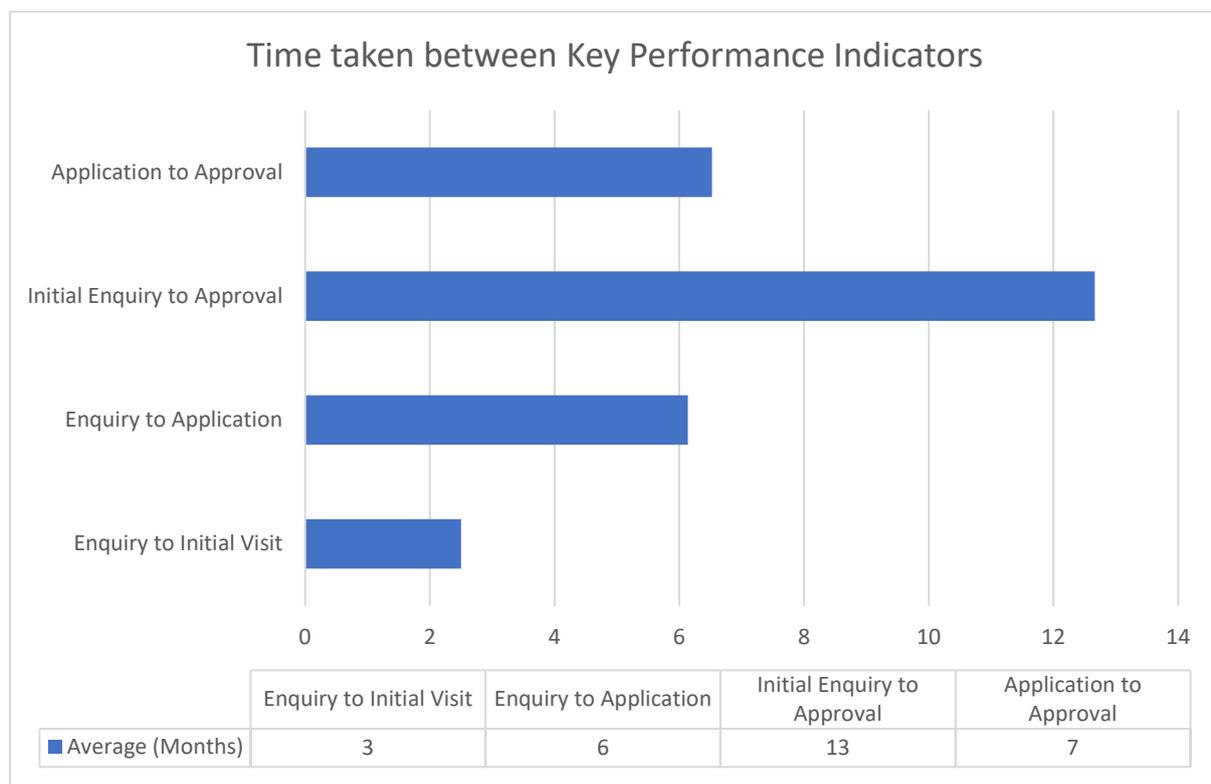
Comparative Data

A 35% increase in the number of adopters approved has been observed during the three-year period.

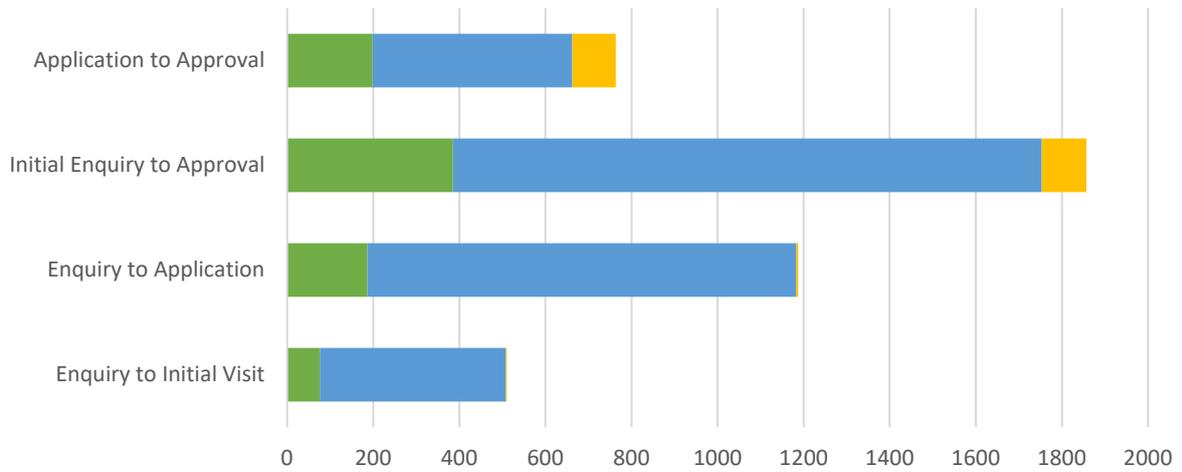


Conversions

The Service continues to demonstrate its commitment to process applications within NAS guidelines. In respect of initial enquiry to approval (see graph below), the time scale was extended because 6 adopters' assessments were protracted due to a variety of reasons.



Conversion Rates April 2020 - March 2021

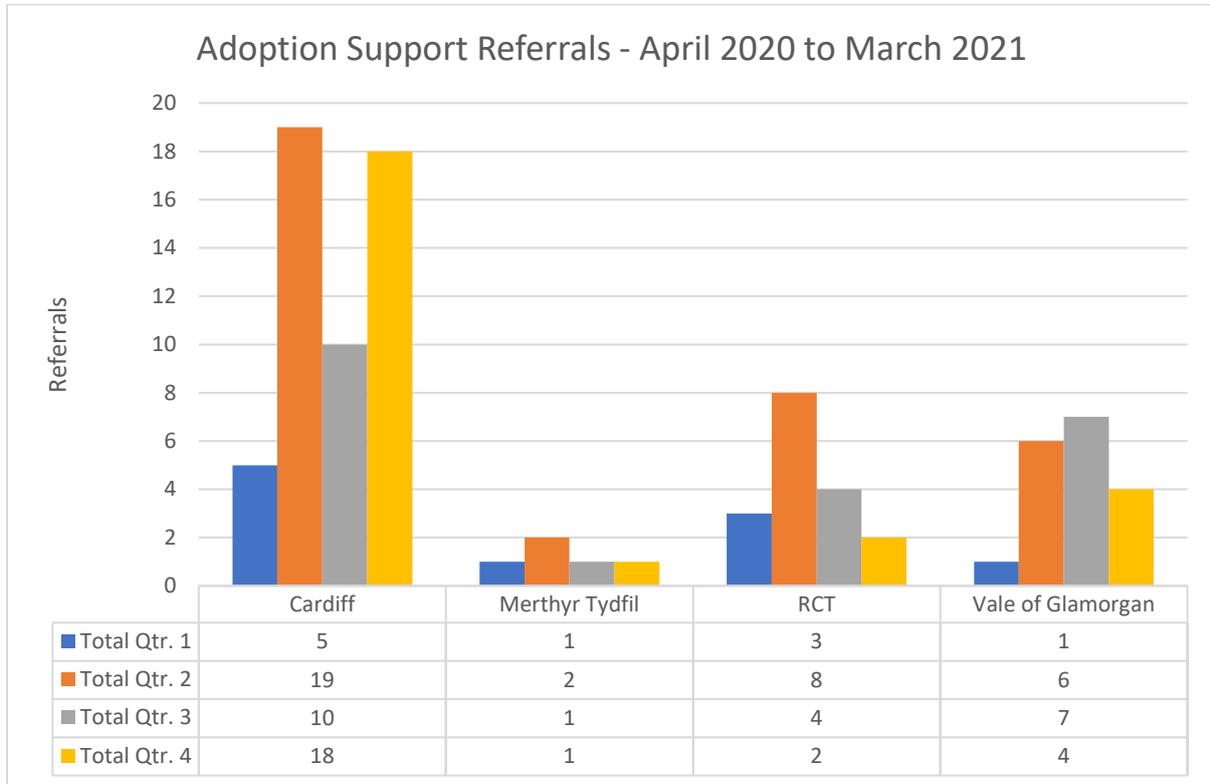


	Enquiry to Initial Visit	Enquiry to Application	Initial Enquiry to Approval	Application to Approval
■ Average	76.05	186.65	385.13	198.47
■ Longest	432	996	1368	464
■ Shortest	2	5	104	101

Appendix 3 – Adoption Support

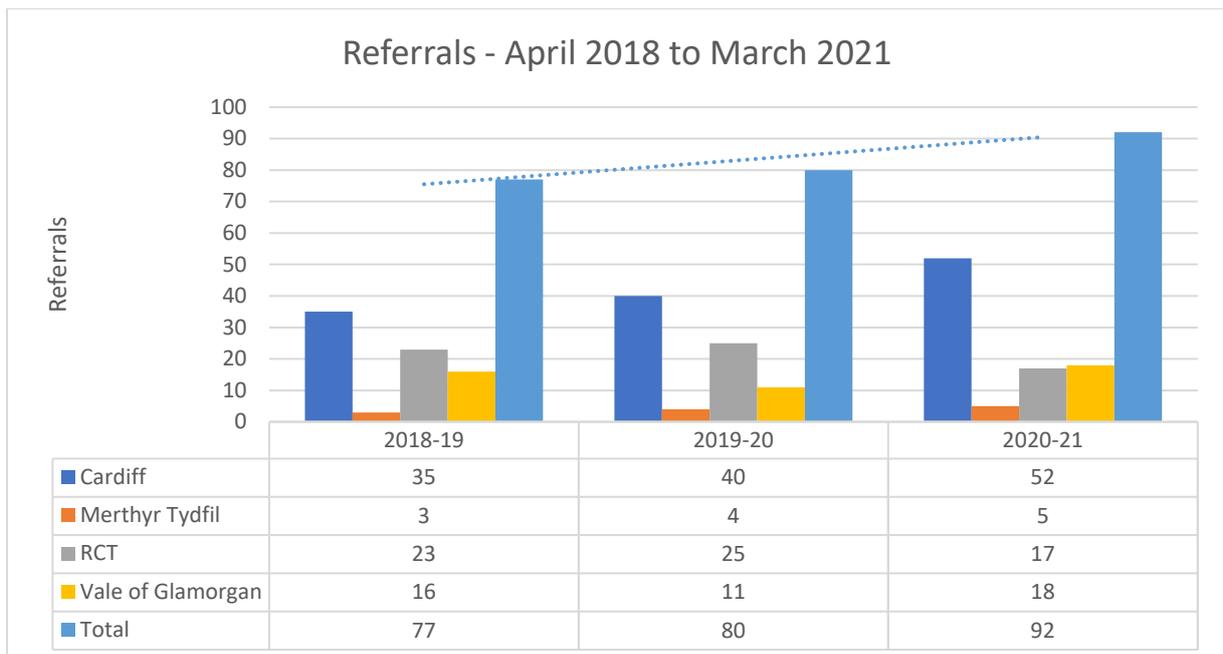
Referrals

92 referrals for post adoption support were received during the reporting period.



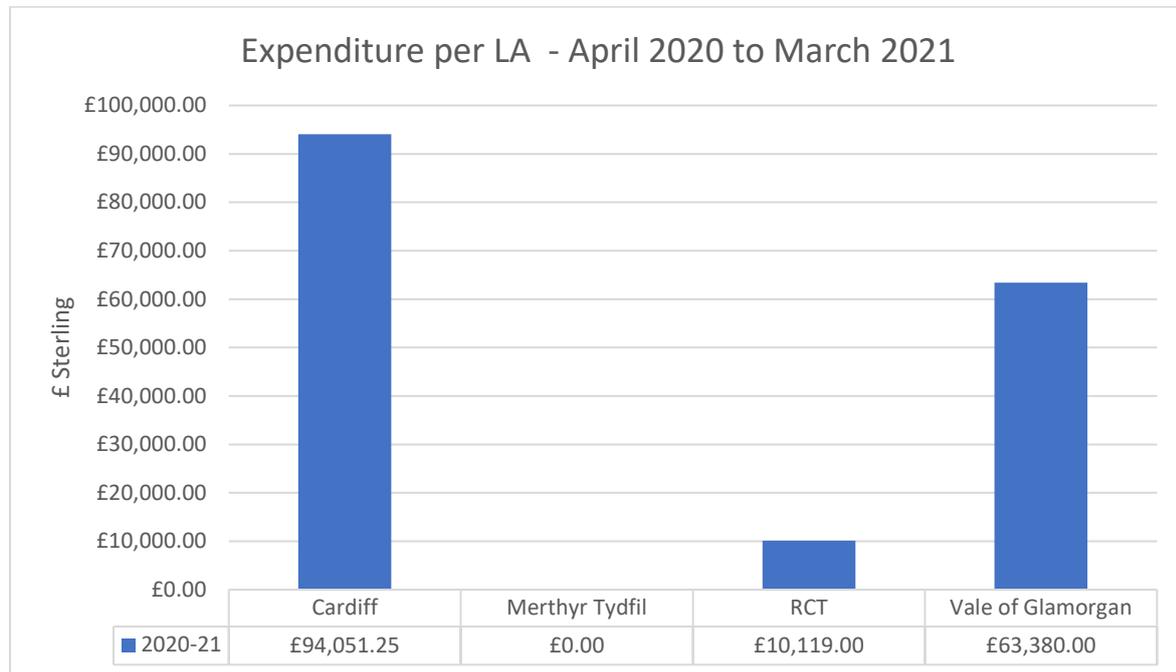
Comparative Data

Over the past three years, referrals for post adoption support have increased by 19.4%



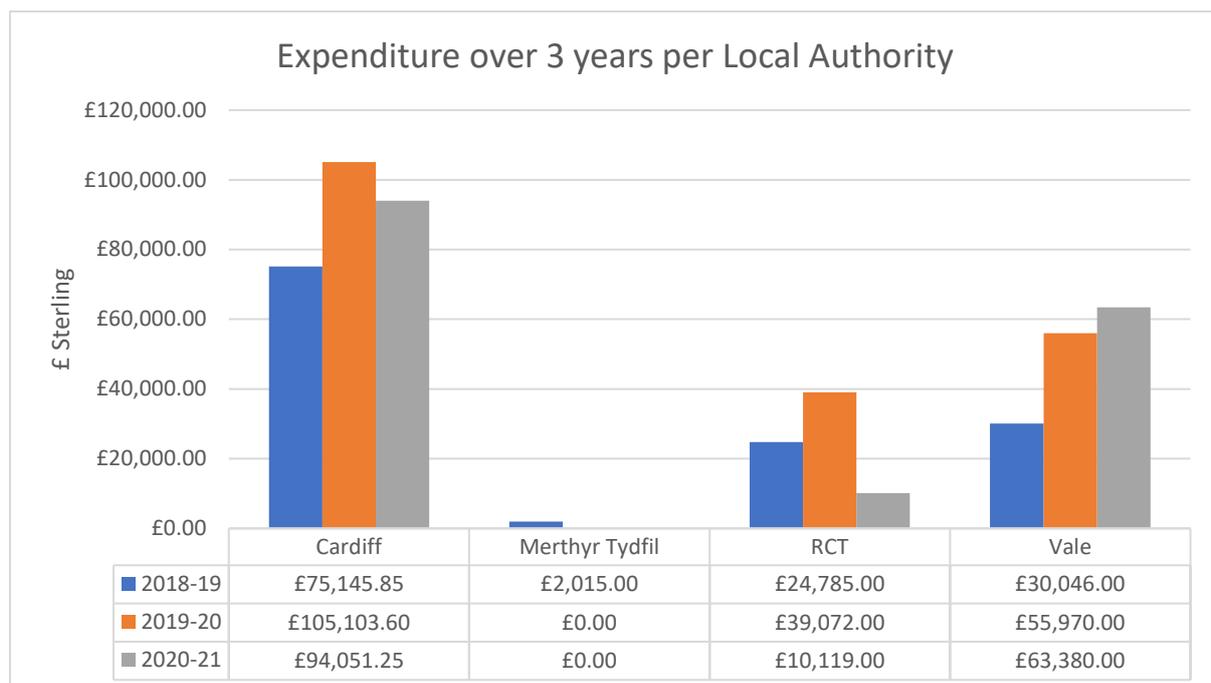
Expenditure per Local Authority

64 children have received local authority funding during the year.



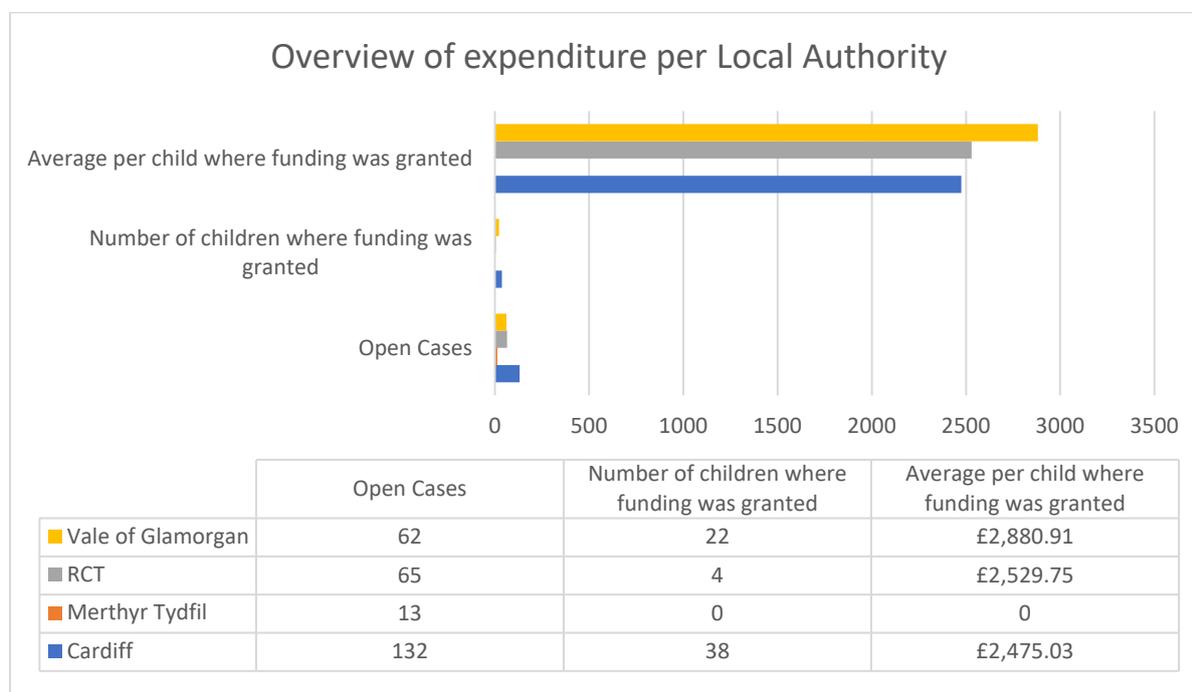
3-year comparative data - Expenditure per Local Authority

Over the 3-year period (2018-19), a **27%** increase in expenditure is observed and can be attributed to the inflated costs of therapeutic support packages. In 2018, **66** children received local authority funding for therapeutic packages with an average cost of **£1999.88**. In comparison, **62** children received local authority funding for therapeutic packages with an average cost per child of **£2617.97**.



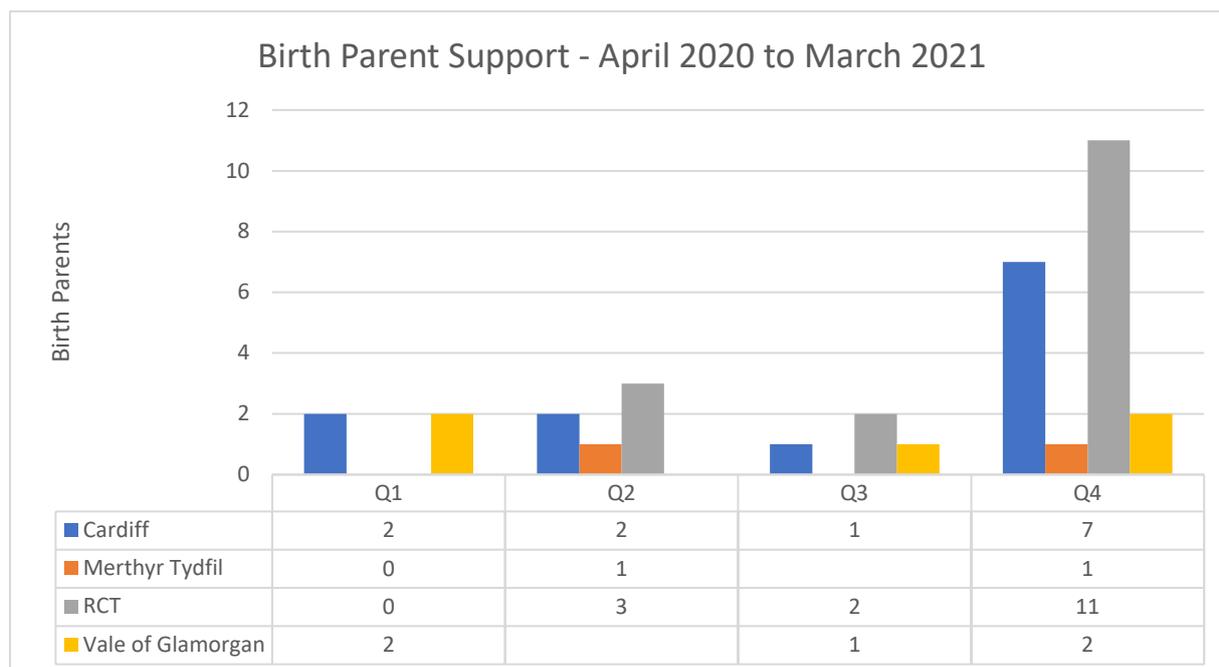
Overview of average expenditure per Local Authority

The service has 272 open cases for adoption support. 49% are for Cardiff families, 24% and 23% are for RCT and Vale of Glamorgan families respectively and 4% for Merthyr Tydfil CBC.



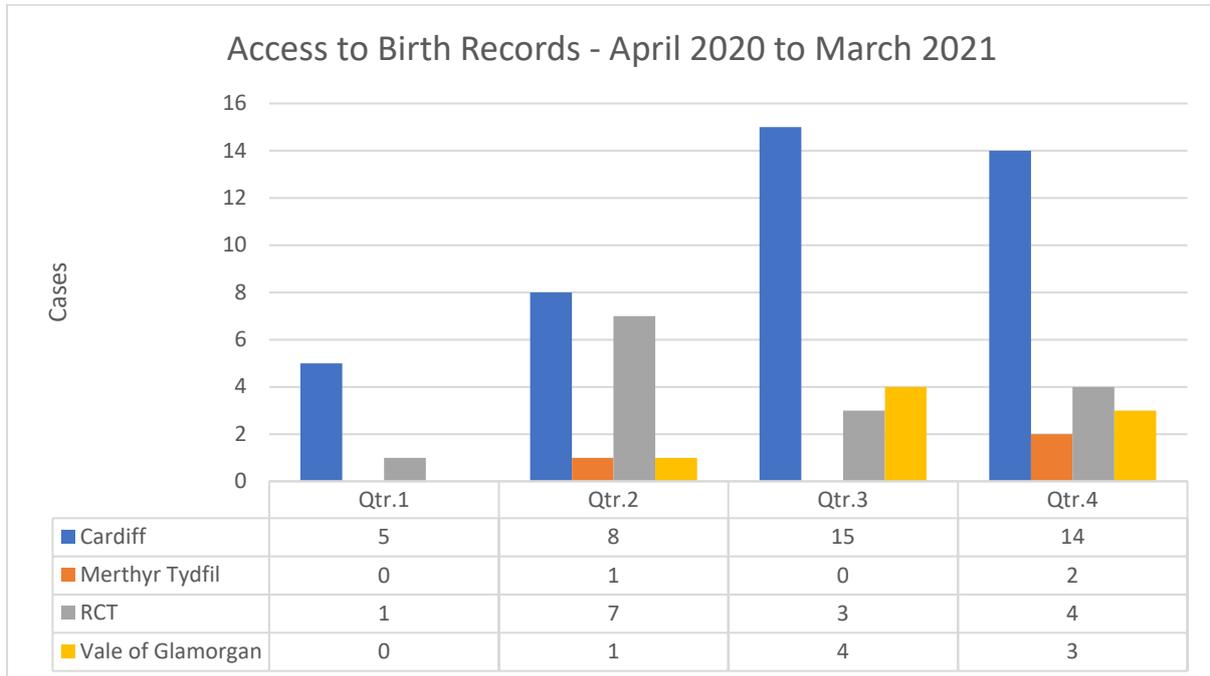
Birth Parent Services

A significant increase (**60%**) in services offered to birth parents is observed in Quarter 4. This follows the recruitment of a permanent birth parent adviser and reduction in lockdown restrictions.



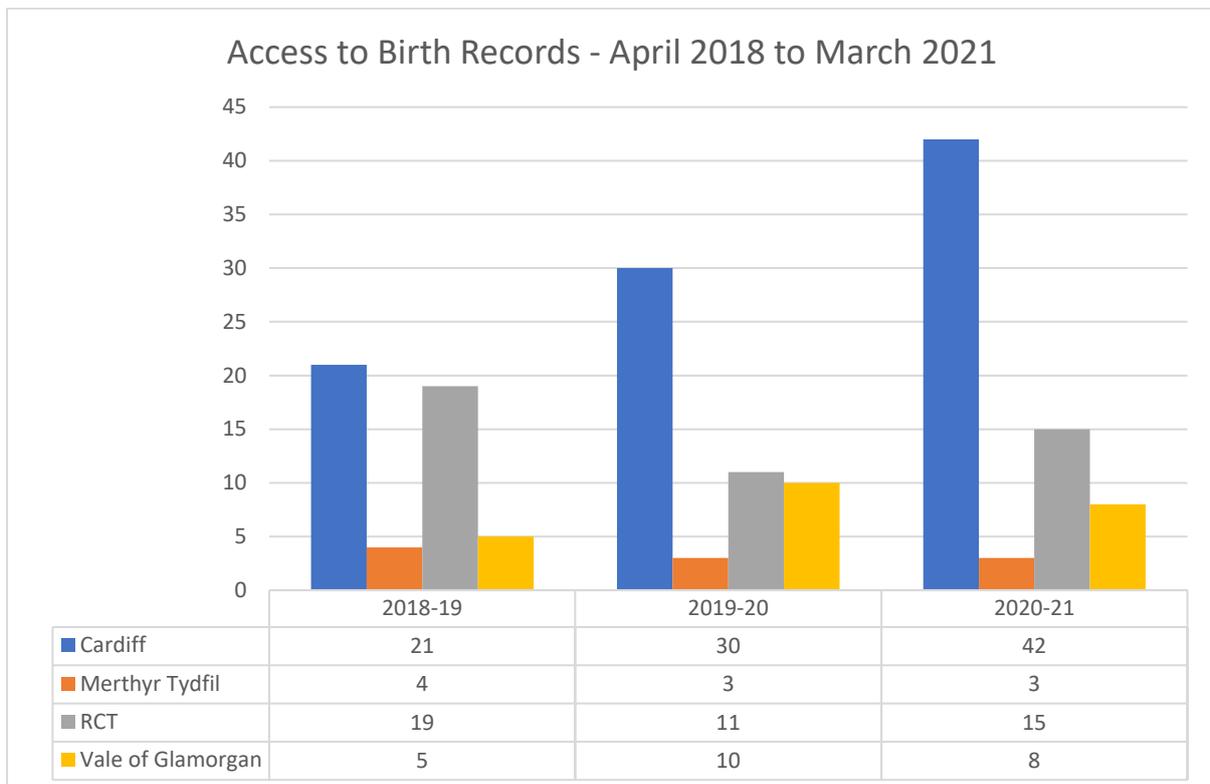
Access to Birth Records

68 requests for access to birth records were received during the reporting period.



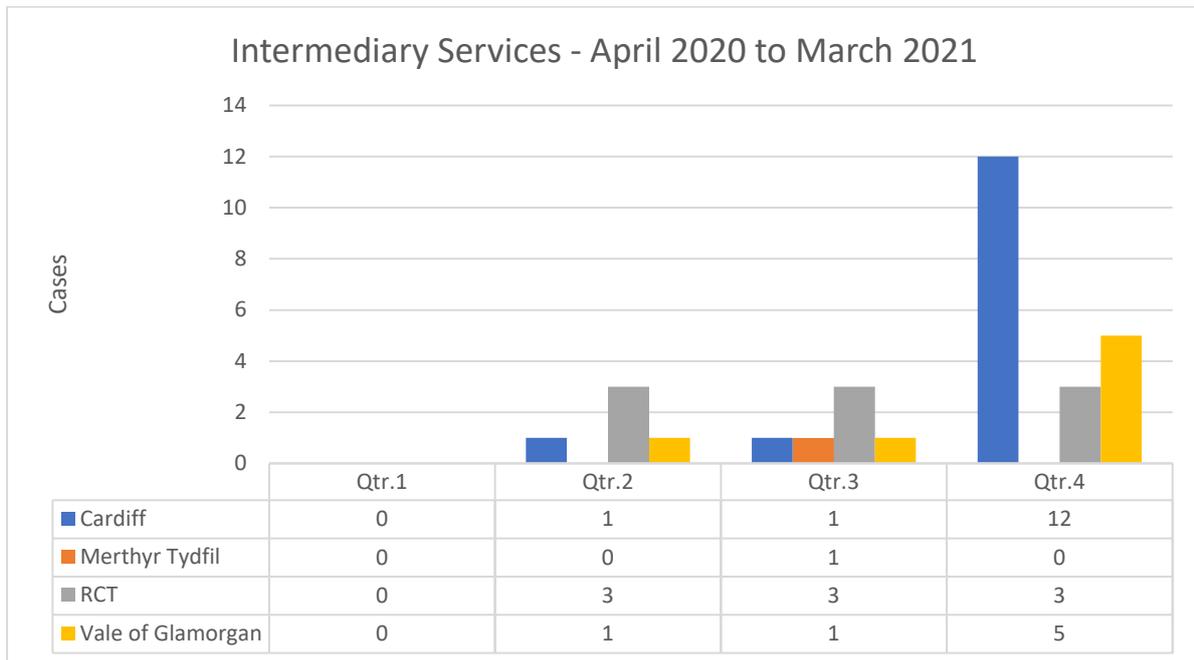
3-year comparative data – Access to Birth Records

Over the 3-year period (2018-19), a **39%** increase in requests for access to birth records is observed.



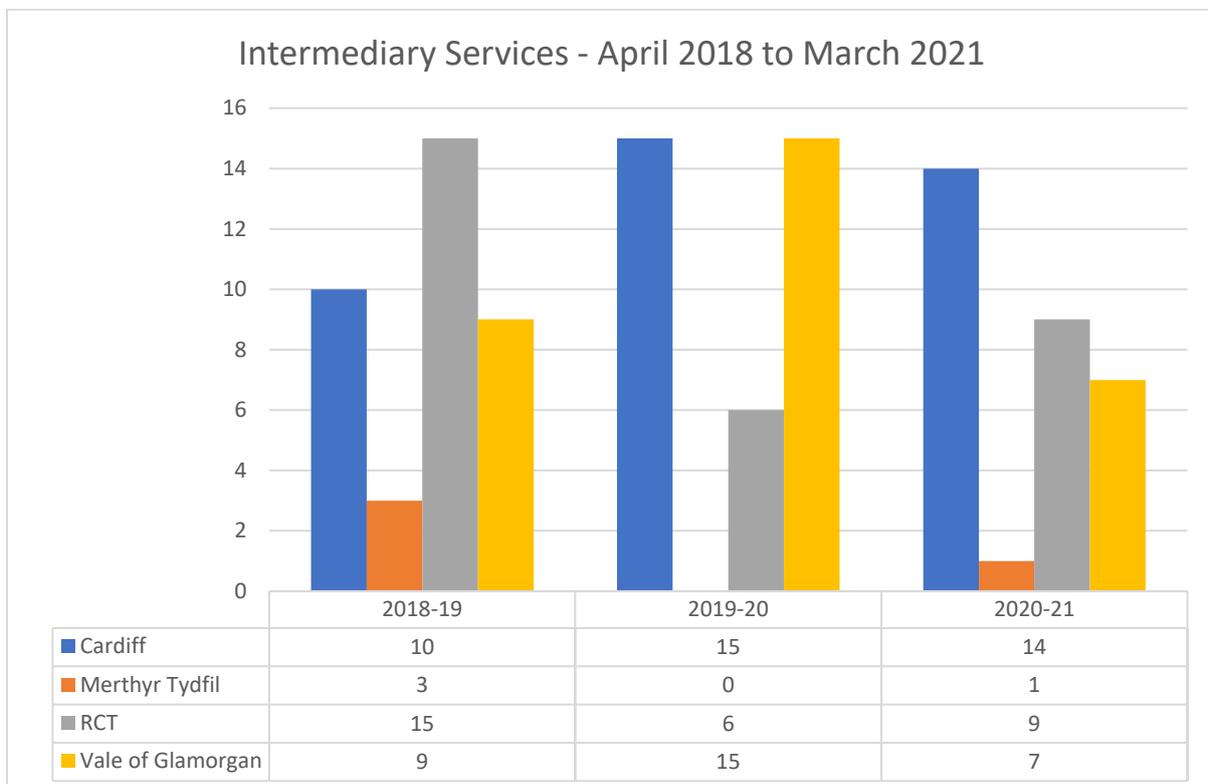
Intermediary Services

31 requests for intermediary services were received during the reporting period.



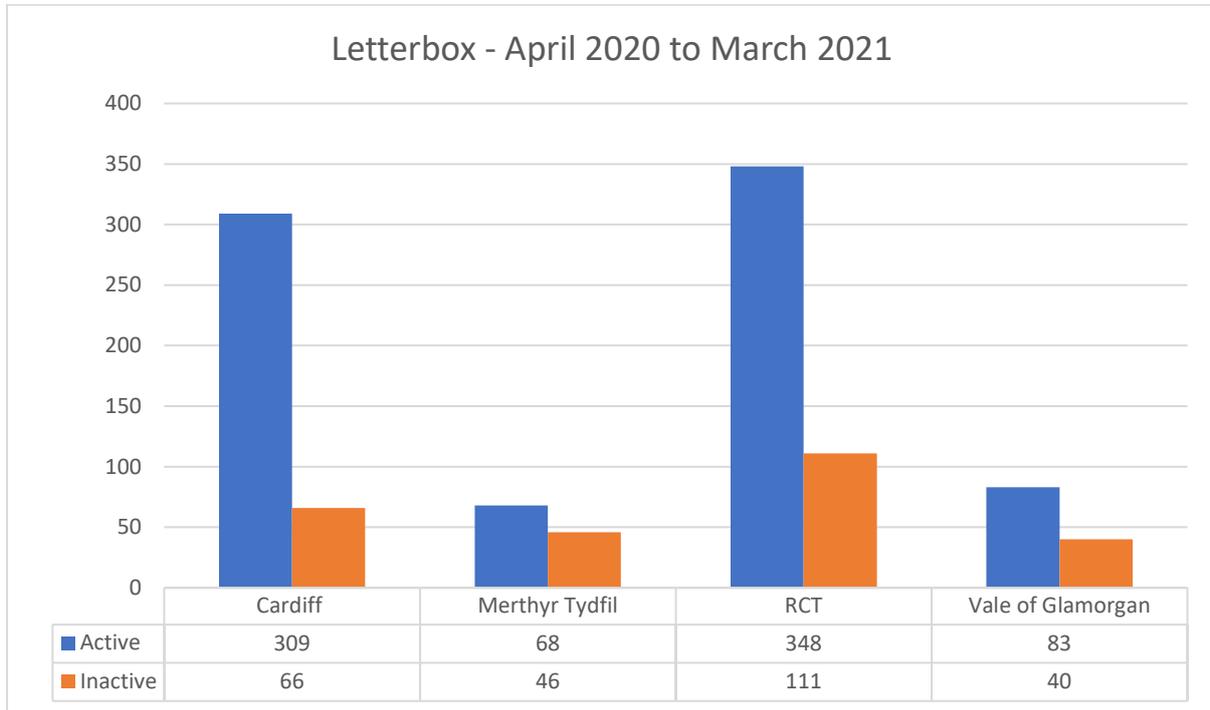
3-year comparative data – Intermediary Services

A slight decrease (18%) in the number of requests received for intermediary services is observed over the past three years.



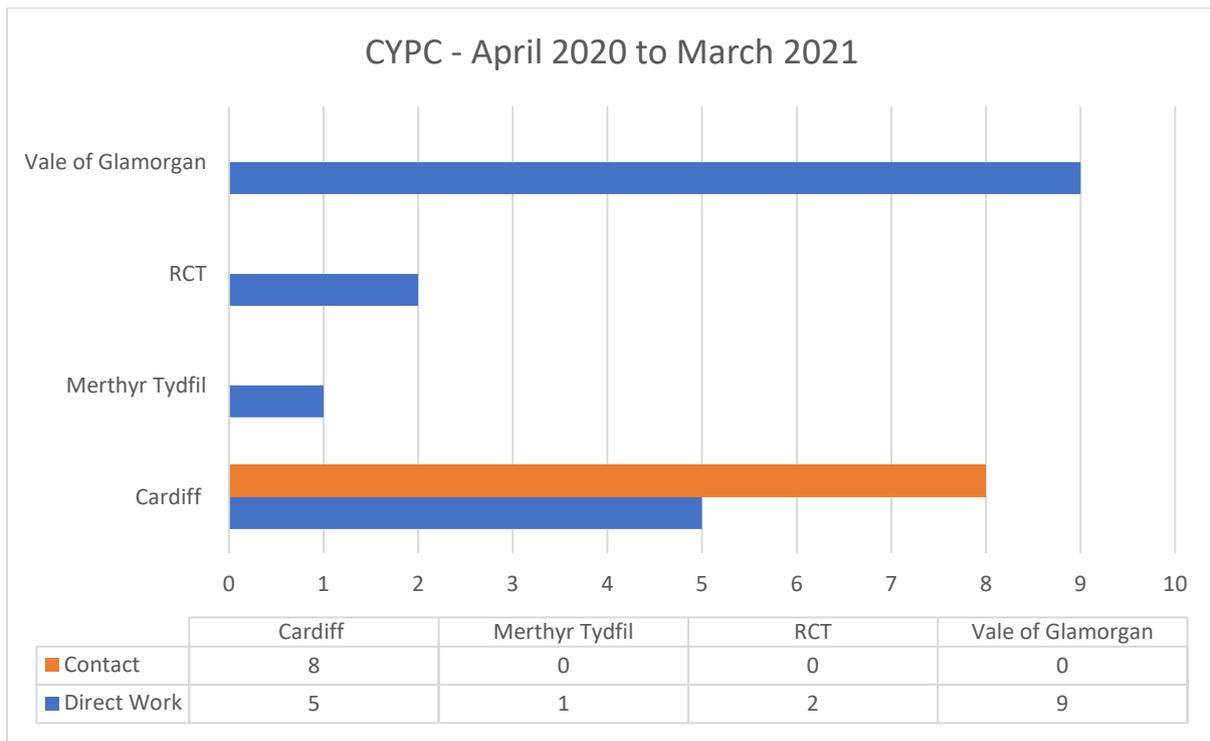
Letterbox

At the time of reporting the service manages **1071** letterbox cases.



Children and Young People's Service

The CYPC co-ordinator role is now fully embedded in the service and benefits in direct work and contact are being observed. The graph below does not include activity with the Connected Service.



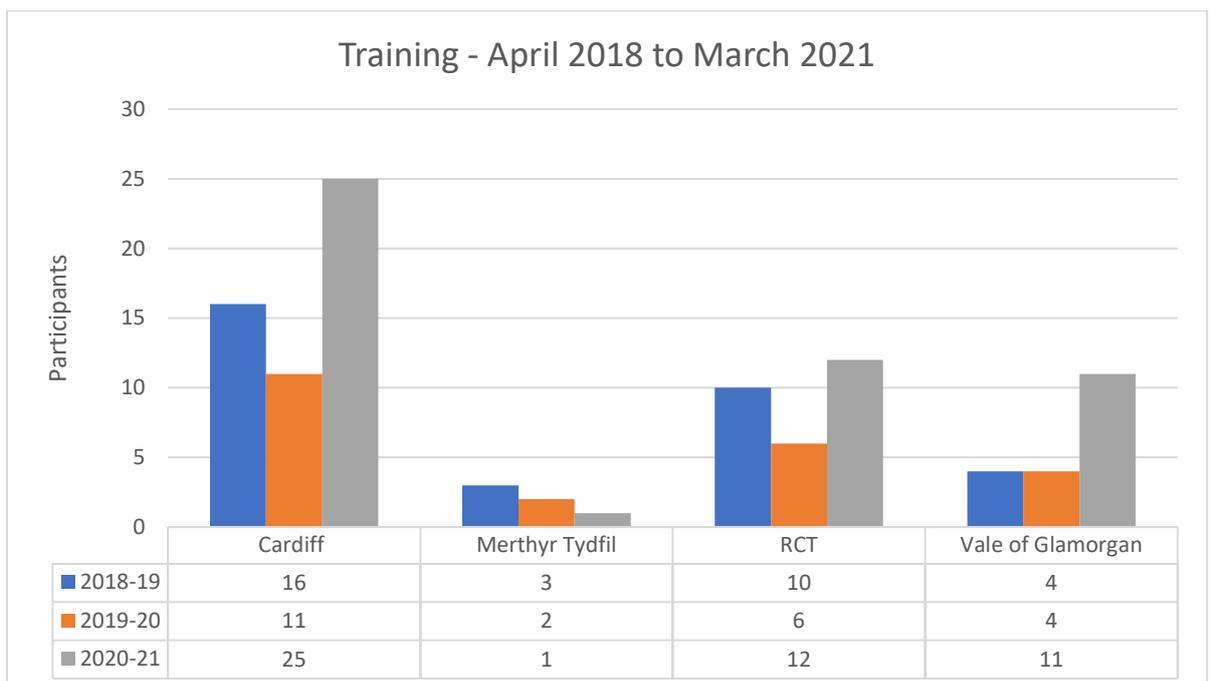
TESSA

41 referrals were received during the reporting period.



Training

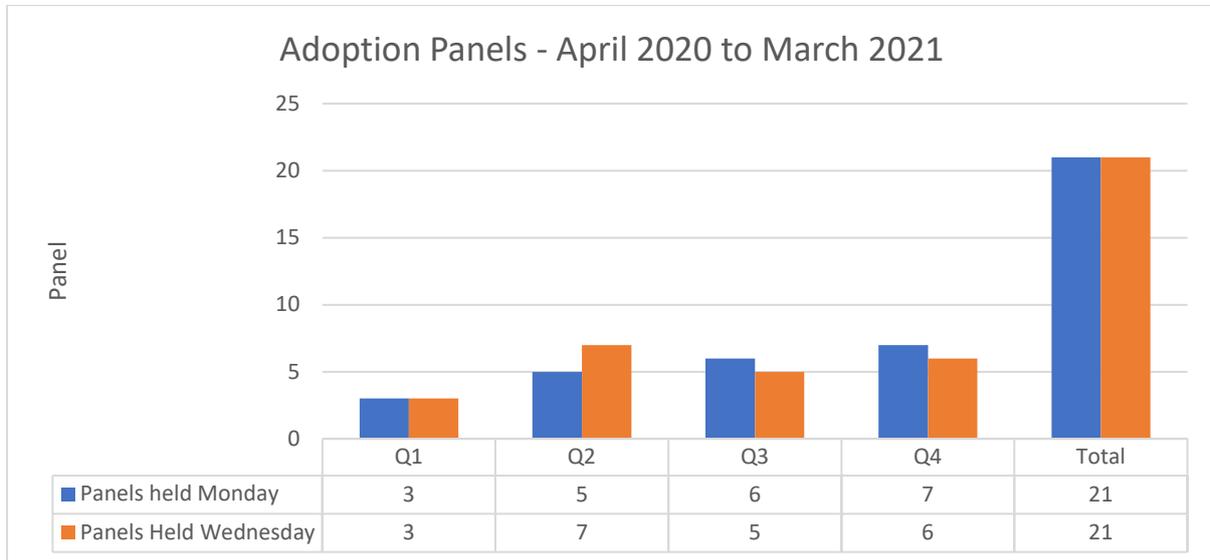
The service offers Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) and Nurturing Attachment (NA) courses. Over the previous three years, a 48% increase in the number of participants attending is observed.



Appendix 4 – Adoption Panel

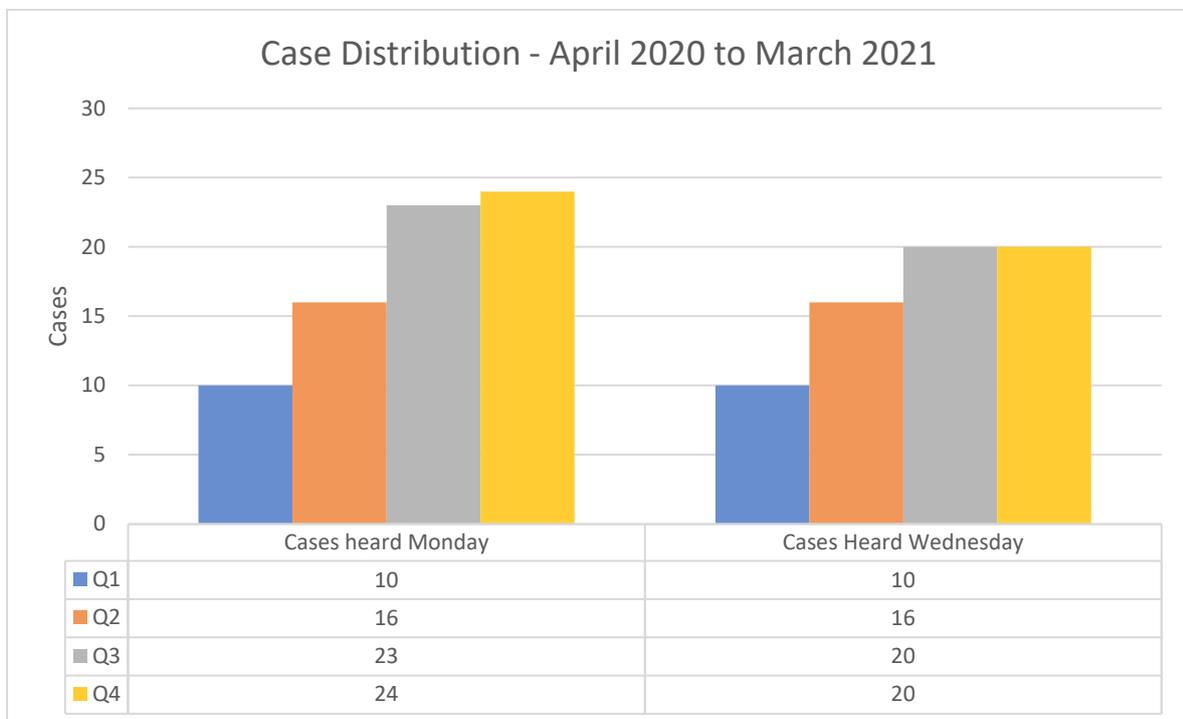
Panels convened

42 adoption panels were convened during the reporting period and is consistent with previous years. As a result of COVID-19 lockdown, adoption panels were moved from face-to-face meetings to virtual meetings held using video conferencing software.



Case Distribution

Cases are evenly distributed across the two panel days.



Cases per Local Authority

Over the course of the year, panel activity increased.

