

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **18th November 2021**
Report Subject: **National Adoption Service Annual Report 2020/21**
Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member Social Services**
Report Submitted by: **Tanya Evans, Head of Children's Services**

Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
26/10/2021	28/10/2021	04.11.21			18/11/2021	15.12.21		

1. **Purpose of the Report**

To report on the performance of the South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) and the National Adoption Service (NAS) for 2020/21

2. **Scope and Background**

2.1 This report is required in line with the Regulations as set out in The Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2005.

2.2 The national and regional performance report under **Appendix 1** and some performance graphs under **Appendix 2** have been produced by the National Adoption Service, both focus on key areas which include:

- Children placed and waiting for adoption;
- Demand for adoptive placements and adopter recruitment;
- Life journey materials; and
- Adoption Support.

2.3 The National Adoption Service (NAS) was launched in November 2014 with a remit of expectations to:

- Eradicate drift for children in care;
- Eliminate waiting lists for training and assessment of adopters;
- Improve the matching process for children;
- Allay adoption breakdowns by improving adoption support;
- Streamline the process to ensure better linking for children;
- Provide a wide choice of placements
- Ensuring consistent delivery of adoption services across Wales.

National Adoption Service

2.4 There is a small central team headed by the Director of Operations. The national team provides national direction, development and coordination to all the regions.

The regions include:

- South East Wales Adoption Team (**SEWAS**) (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Torfaen, Newport, Monmouthshire)
- Western Bay (**WB**) (Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot, Swansea).
- Vale, Valley's Cardiff (**VVC**) (Cardiff, Vale, Merthyr Tydfil, RCT, Vale of Glamorgan).
- North Wales (**NW**) (Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd)
- Mid and West Wales (**MWW**) (Carmarthen, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Powys).

2.5

Blaenau Gwent host the South East Wales Adoption Service region.

Every region is responsible for:

- Placing children for adoption (Local Authority);
- Recruitment and assessment of adopters;
- Offering counselling to birth parents;
- Offering advice to adopted adults;
- Providing post adoption support;
- Matching children with adopters;
- Creating links with voluntary adoption agencies, health and education

3. **Options for Recommendation**

Option 1 - Provide comment or any amendment to, or inclusion of, information on the content of the report to assist executive in its function.

Option 2 - Accept the information as reported

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

The work of the South East Wales Adoption Service supports the following priorities for social services under the corporate plan:

- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater;
- To work with our partners including Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and neighbouring authorities to deliver integrated responsive care and support;
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities

SEWAS also supports the Blaenau Gwent Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020 -2025.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget***

SEWAS is a collaborative arrangement funded by the 5 local authorities within this region

The Management Committee (required under regulation) is responsible for ensuring arrangements are in place to deliver the regional service and this includes financial arrangements.

There have been no concerns regarding the budget for this reporting year. The budget has been managed effectively resulting in no overspend at the end of the financial year 20/21

5.2 **Risk**

5.2.1 **Shortage of adopters**

The risk implication for this reporting period mirrors that of previous years in respect of the shortage of adopters available to meet the needs of the children referred to the service. Adding to the pressure for this year was the outbreak of the pandemic and although there was an increase in enquiries for our region they did not progress to applications. In addition, we also have adopters who were in the process of being assessed who withdrew due to Covid related issues, for example being furloughed, being made redundant and losing close family members.

5.2.2 **Mitigation**

To improve performance in this area SEWAS continued to invest in recruitment. The SEWAS Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) used social media, google analytics and twitter to reach out to those interested in adoption. Although visits to the website increased we didn't see a huge increase in enquiries translating to application which is likely to be linked to the pandemic. However, recruitment activity is bearing fruit this year and we are on target to meet our end of year goal. The SEWAS core offer remains strong and is advertised on our website; this includes;

- Direct work pre and post approval which prepares children and adopters for placement, including Understanding the Child Days
- Additional post approval adoption training before placement using therapeutic models;
- Adoption support post order for adopters, children and birth parents
- Assessment being completed in a timely manner;
- Connected, which is a young person's support group
- TESSA (Therapeutic Education Support Service in Adoption)
- Family and Friends training and support
- Dad's group
- In house psychology provision for adopter and children
- Advertising our core offer including our psychology service input which is a 'big sell'.

Most of these services were provided remotely during the peak of the pandemic with some now moving to a blended way of working. The service also completed a number of webinars which supported the preparation for pre adoption approval and when children were placed

5.3 **Legal**

This report is required in line with the Regulations as set out in The Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2005

5.4 **Human Resources**

Staffing issues were problematic at times linked with Covid illness, self-isolation and staff losing close family members. However, there are no significant staff vacancies in this service area.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

6.1.1 **National Adoption Service Annual Report 2021**

The full report can be found under **Appendix 1**. The Highlights will be captured here.

6.1.2 **ADOPTERS – TRENDS IN APPROVALS, ENQUIRIES AND NEW ASSESSMENTS (National)**

Nationally the number of initial enquiries and assessments commenced continued to increase but overall the number approvals reduced by 8% which wasn't a surprise given the challenge of number of changes required to work remotely and the delay in adoption medicals being completed because of the pandemic.

Despite the challenges experienced in this reporting year 65% of adopters were approved within the 6-month benchmark

The number of adopters waiting increased of these 72% we approved within the previous 6 months

6.1.3 **ADOPTERS – TRENDS IN APPROVALS, ENQUIRIES AND NEW ASSESSMENTS (SEWAS)**

The full report can be found under **Appendix 1 and graphs for SEWAS in 2**. The highlights will be captured here.

Enquiries increased for SEWAS this reporting year but there is was a slight decrease in assessments starting and a disappointing end of year approval figure (30). We know that we lost 10 potential adopters in the early days of the pandemic who cited Covid related issues for withdrawing and whilst there was an increase of visits to the website it is likely that applications were not pursued due to uncertainty with regards to the pandemic and the possible social and economic climate in the future.

70% of SEWAS approvals were completed in timescale (benchmark 6 months) with an average of 6.6% overall. This is pleasing given there were

inevitable delays switching to remote platforms and waiting for adoption medicals

SEWAS had 18 adopters waiting at the end of this period so 17% of the national number. Some of these are on hold for personal reasons but very few as a result of a limited matching criteria.

6.1.4

OVERALL IMPACT ON PLACING CHILDREN IN 20/21 (National)

Referrals to regions increased by 3% from 550 to 566.

Placement Orders granted have reduced by 6% from 275 in the previous year to 259.

The number of children matched decreased by 2% from 285 to 280. The reduction linked with one region (VVC).

The number of children placed for adoption nationally reduced from 309 in the previous year to 263 a reduction of 15%. With the 3 larger regions, the Vale Valleys and Cardiff (VVC) Western Bay(WB) and SEWAS seeing the biggest decrease.

Overall the number of children waiting for an adoption placement is falling from 270 in the previous year to 241. This doesn't include children with a strong link so for this reporting period another 60 children had a strong link.

The number of children placed within timescales from placement order to placement decreased by 34%.

6.1.5

OVERALL IMPACT ON PLACING CHILDREN IN 20/21 (SEWAS)

The number of placement orders reduced in the SEWAS region by 10% from 73 to 66.

SEWAS placed 50 Children in this reporting year.

The number of children matched was 62 equal to the previous year which is pleasing given the additional pressures on the service because of Covid related staffing issues.

The average time to place children from placement order to placement increased to 12.5%. We know that is attributed in some part to the pandemic but also to the number of birth parents making applications to the court to prevent placements once they have been notified that a match has been found. Legally parents are permitted to make these applications but it is resulting in delays for some children and seems to be on the increase.

6.1.6

Children – waiting

6.1.7 SEWAS children subject to a placement order but not yet matched stood at 30 as of 31.03.21. This figure does not include children with tentative links.

Life Journey Work (LJW)

Nationally there has been an improvement in the availability of life journey work with 82% of children having this in place at the point of matching meeting and 68% at the point of the second adoption review.

6.1.8 SEWAS improved the performance for LJW material being available at the point of matching meeting to 79% but unfortunately dipped to 53% by the second adoption review . There has been a rolling programme of training in place over the past year reaching a wider audience, including social workers, fostering teams, foster carers and independent reviewing officers, with a plan to include partner agencies this year, therefore , we are hopeful that we can build on performance in this area.

OVERVIEW OF ADOPTION SUPPORT PROVISION DURING 20/21 (National / SEWAS)

The number of adoption support assessments decreased slightly nationally from 314 to 312. SEWAS reported a 24% decrease although the work completed during the pandemic became gradually more complex for some adoptive families who began to feel the impact of the restrictions on their everyday lives.

Support services for adoption are improving with national initiatives like TESSA which is a programme aimed at supporting adoptive parents who are raising traumatised children and Connected which is an information and advice service for young people receiving very positive feedback. The SEWAS area have more than doubled the number parents and children accessing these service which support our core offer for adoption support and builds on an adoption community that supports each other.

Good practice guides and training have been rolled out to improve outcomes for children and families involved in adoption including;

- Transitions and early placement support;
- Contact arrangements for adopted children;
- Work with birth parents;
- An updated good practice framework and approach to adoption support assessment, planning and review.

6.1.9 These guides aim to ensure that the care planning for adopted children is more robust so that children have more support, adopters are better informed and contact with birth family is promoted where possible.

Summary

All the key elements of adoption services have been maintained during a very difficult period where changes to working practices were challenging at times but also highlighted some areas of our work that could be delivered more effectively using remote platforms.

We know the reasons behind poor recruitment for this reporting year but on a positive note we are on target to meet the goals for this year

There has been a reduction in the number of placement orders and I anticipate this trend continuing due to local authority investment in preventative services and special guardianship teams which means children are able to remain with their birth families.

We are beginning to see the benefits of investment in adoption support, although we are seeing the more complex cases, so those at possible risk of breakdown partly because of the pandemic but also because of historical lack of investment in life journey work, direct work preparing children and adopters and therapeutic support.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

SEWAS consults with all adopters following their attendance at training, adoption panel for approval and when they are matched with children.

The Adoption Support Team in SEWAS facilitates a number of support groups including; birth parent support, adopter support, therapeutic parenting support, and grandparent/ family and friend of adopters.

A quarterly newsletter is distributed to all adopters which advises them on where they can access support and training.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

SEWAS uses the performance information to plan for the longer term and changing the way in which services are delivered. The region is also working to a NAS strategic long term plan.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

The focus is on avoiding drift for children in care by providing adoption placements that meet the needs of children who are referred to the service. A good standard of adoption support is also essential to avoid adoption breakdown and prevent children coming back into care.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The regions continue to work collaboratively by sharing information and good practice. There are a number of work streams in process to improve collaboration with partner agencies including improving CAMHS services to adopted children and working with education so they have a better understanding of the issues for adopted children.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

SEWAS continues to form relationships with other councils in the region to improve outcomes for children who are placed for adoption. An example of this is working with communication teams to promote adoption within the region to attract adopters. We also provide training for local authority social workers on a quarterly basis.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

This is a national report and does not relate specifically to decarbonisation or reducing emissions.

6.9 ***Socio Economic Duty Impact Assessment***

Local adopters are important to boost the local economy so the more we can support local adopters the more impact it has on both our community, children and local economy.

6.9b ***Equality Impact Assessment***

The work of the SEWAS is a key part of the Blaenau Gwent safe children looked after reduction strategy. The strategy aims to reduce the inequalities children would face if they remained in the looked after system.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 The performance of the National Adoption Service/ Regions is monitored by a National Governance Board and regional Management Committee.

SEWAS have a business plan which is reported on Quarterly to the Children's management team.

Background Papers

- Appendix 1 – National Adoption Service Performance Report – Quarter Four / Year End 2020/21
- Appendix 2 – Performance Graphs

APPENDIX 1

National Adoption Service Performance Report Quarter Four / Year End 2020/21

Reporting for the National Adoption Service (NAS) Performance Measurement System (PMS) was temporarily reduced to key indicators due to the Covid-19 situation.

This shortened report focuses on:

- Adopter recruitment;
- Children placed and waiting;
- Adoption Support

Overall adoption services across Wales did remarkably well to maintain key elements of service and performance by in adapting their working methods.

This enabled the service to maximise its ability to continue to recruit prospective adopters, place children and support adoptive families in a way that is compliant with Covid 'safe' practice and arrangements.

Inevitably however, Covid had an impact on the performance of adoption services. In looking at comparative data for this year, it should be noted that the pandemic impacted regions and services at different times and at differing levels.

Children

There was a small reduction in numbers of children matched and placed during the year. 280 children were matched, a reduction of 2% compared to last year, and 263 children placed, a reduction of 15% compared to last year. The reduction was in the three larger regions only, with MW and NW showing significant increases compared to 2019/20.

At 34%, fewer children were placed for adoption within 6 months of their placement order reflecting the additional time needed to place children through Covid secure

practices. At the end of the year there were 159 children for whom services were actively family finding (0.8 sufficiency reduces the number of families needed to 127).

Adopters

The number of initial enquiries and adopter assessments commenced continued to increase, by 23% and 20% respectively, compared to last year. The number of adopters approved reduced but only by 8%.

Adoption Support

Demand for new formal adoption support assessments reduced slightly although this masks significant change at regional level which may be linked to availability as well as the changing pattern of services being accessed without an assessment.

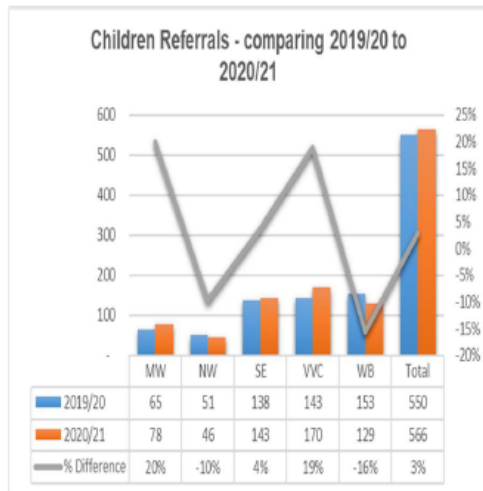
There was an overall improvement in life journey materials with 82% of children having this in place by matching panel and 68% by the 2nd adoption review. MW achieved 100% for materials available at 2nd adoption review.

Abbreviations

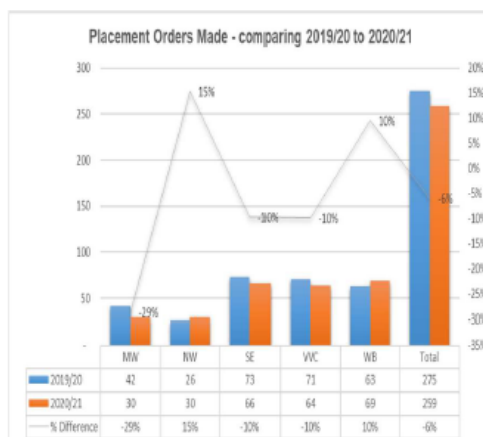
MW	Mid and West Wales Adoption Service
NW	North Wales Adoption Service
SE	South East Wales Adoption Service
VVC	Vale Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Service
WB	Western Bay Adoption Service
B	Barnardo's
St D	St David's Children Society

Children

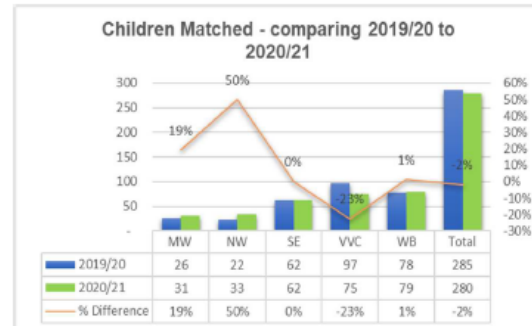
Referrals to regions increased by 3% to 566 compared to last year with some variation across the regions. All regions apart from NW and WB experienced an increase.



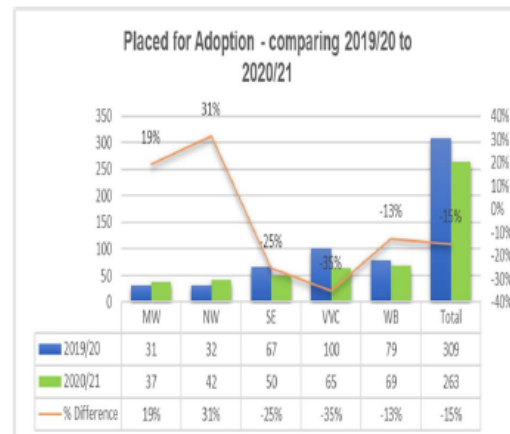
Placement orders granted reduced by 6% to 259 compared to last year. There had been a general downward trend, except for NW and WB, but this is likely to have been accelerated by the impact of Covid on court activity earlier in the year. All regions except NW and WB experienced a reduction.



Children matched reduced by 2% to 280. This reduction was in one region only, VVC. MW and NW increased by 19% and 50% respectively. SE and WB maintained a similar number to 2019/20.



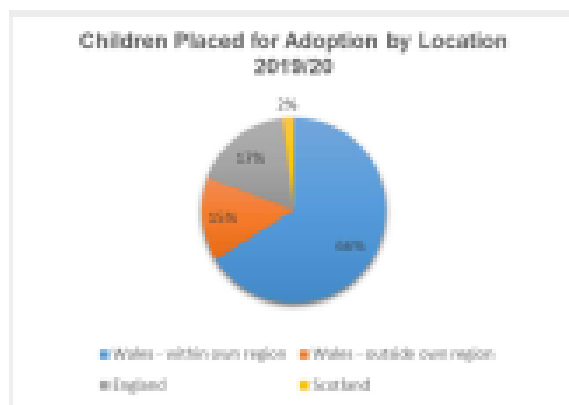
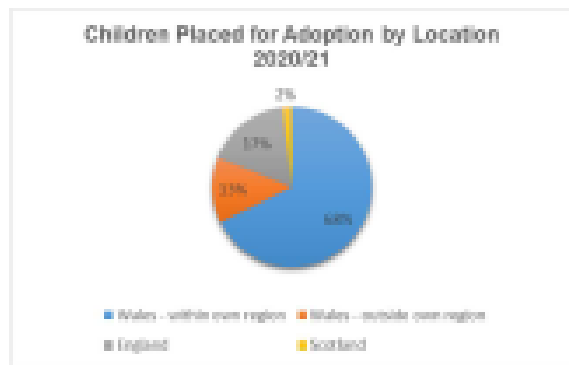
Children placed for adoption reduced by 15% to 263. The reduction was concentrated in the three larger regions with MW and NW seeing an increase.



34% of children were placed within 6 months of their placement order, 23 less children than in 2019/20.

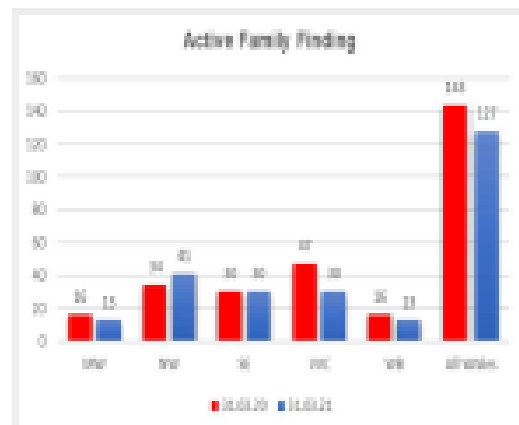
% of Children placed within 6 months of their PO					
MW	NW	SE	VVC	WB	Wales
27%	8%	20%	45%	52%	34%

The geographic distribution of placements remained similar to 2019/20.



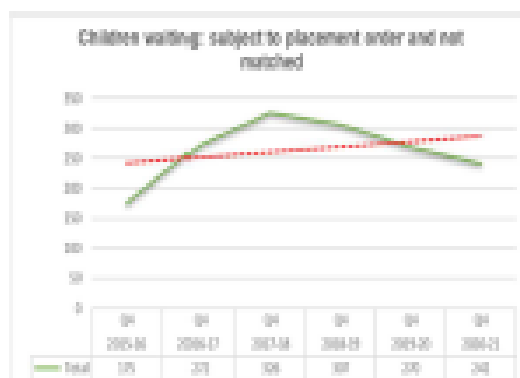
Of these children waiting a further 60 or 25% had a link in place that was waiting to be formally confirmed.

As at 31.03.21 the regions were actively family finding for 150 children, fewer than the previous year. Using the 0.8 sufficiency factor for siblings, reduces the number of families needed even further.



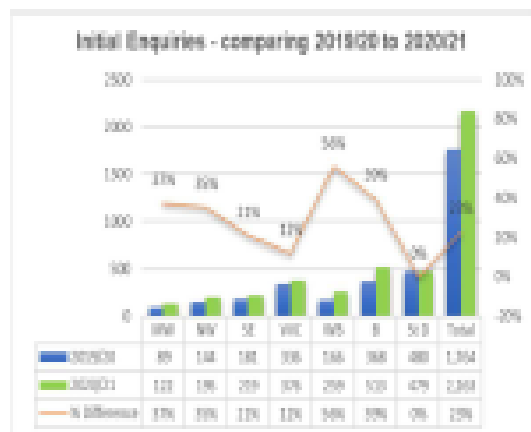
Single children made up the biggest proportion of children placed, 80%. A further 19% were sibling groups of 2, and 1% sibling groups of 3.

Overall the level of children waiting for an adoptive placement in Wales is falling.

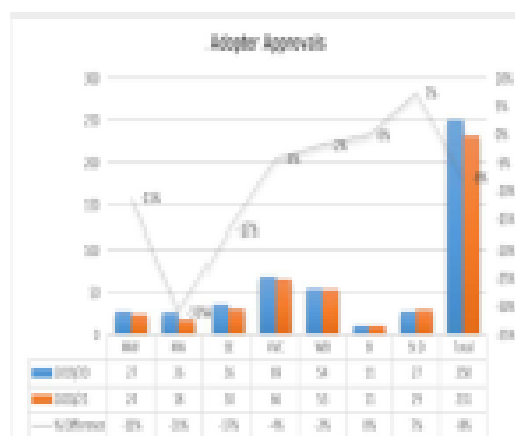


Adopters

Initial enquiries continued to rise with 2,163 received, a 23% increase compared to last year. All agencies experienced an increase in enquiries apart from St David's.



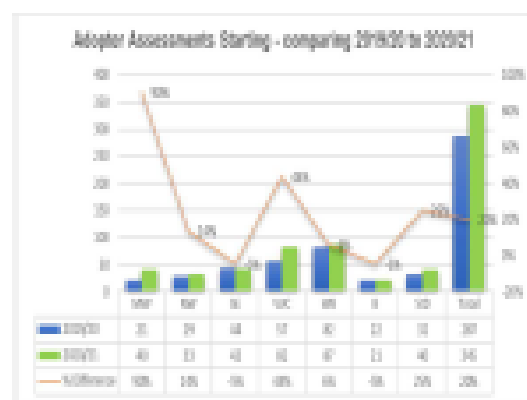
Each agency set goals for Adopter Approvals in 2020/21; the regional targets were ambitious in their aims to increase approvals which was felt achievable in the pre Covid context. In the event, Adopter approvals reduced by 8% compared to 2019/20 with 231 families approved. This is mainly reflective of the more challenging context in which assessments, particularly visits and medicals have been conducted.



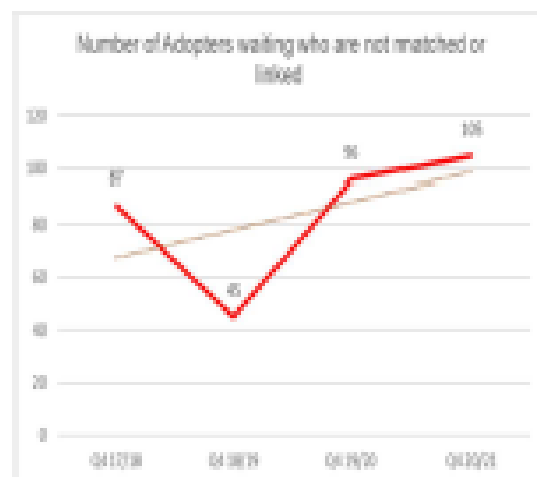
Despite the challenging conditions, 65% of adopters were approved within the 6 month benchmark.

Agency	MM	MN	SE	WVC	WB	BS	SD	Total
Value	50%	50%	70%	70%	70%	6%	50%	65%

Adopter assessments starting continued to increase with 345 commenced an increase of 20%. All except two agencies are showing an increase.



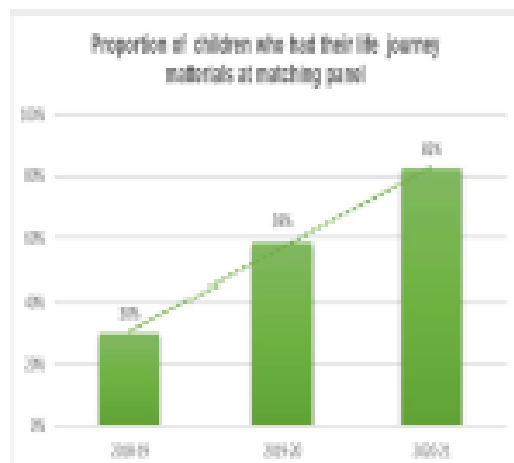
The number of adopters waiting also increased. Of these 72% were approved within the previous 12 months.



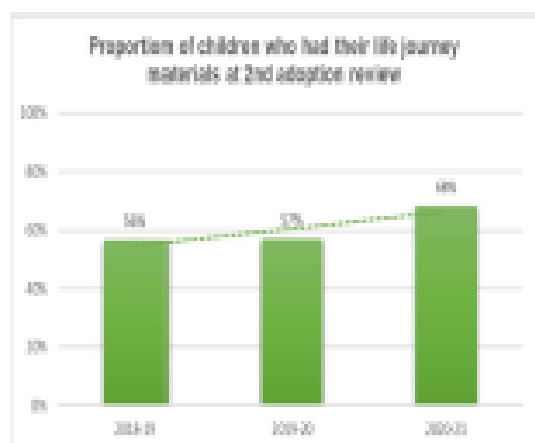
This is something that NAS will interrogate this year to identify any implications for recruitment as well as starting to collect qualitative data on this.

Adoption Support

Life Journey materials available at the matching panel continues to improve with this in place for 230, or 82% of the children matched. Two regions, NW and SE, improved their performance significantly.



Life Journey materials available by the time of the child's 2nd adoption review is also improving in all but one region with this in place for 151, or 68% of the children placed. The benchmark is 100% which has been achieved by MW.

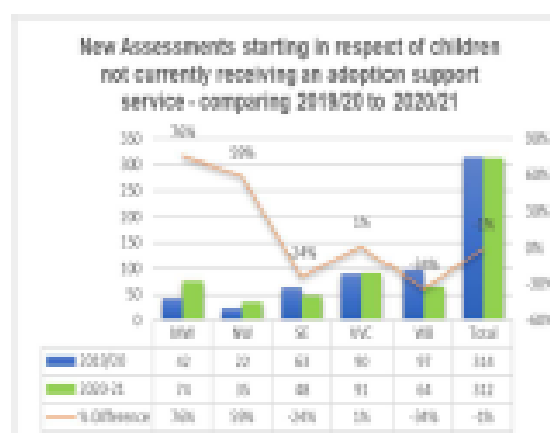


These two life journey measures differ so in order for improvements at matching to also be seen at 2nd review more activity is required.

This is an area where the investment in capacity to undertake this work appears

to be having the desired impact. There are now good indicators of overall improvement which regions can build upon including to interrogate further e.g. monitoring where materials are not in place at 2nd review.

New adoption support assessments starting stayed at a similar level overall. There is significant variance between regions, however, with MW showing a 76% increase to WB showing a 34% decrease.



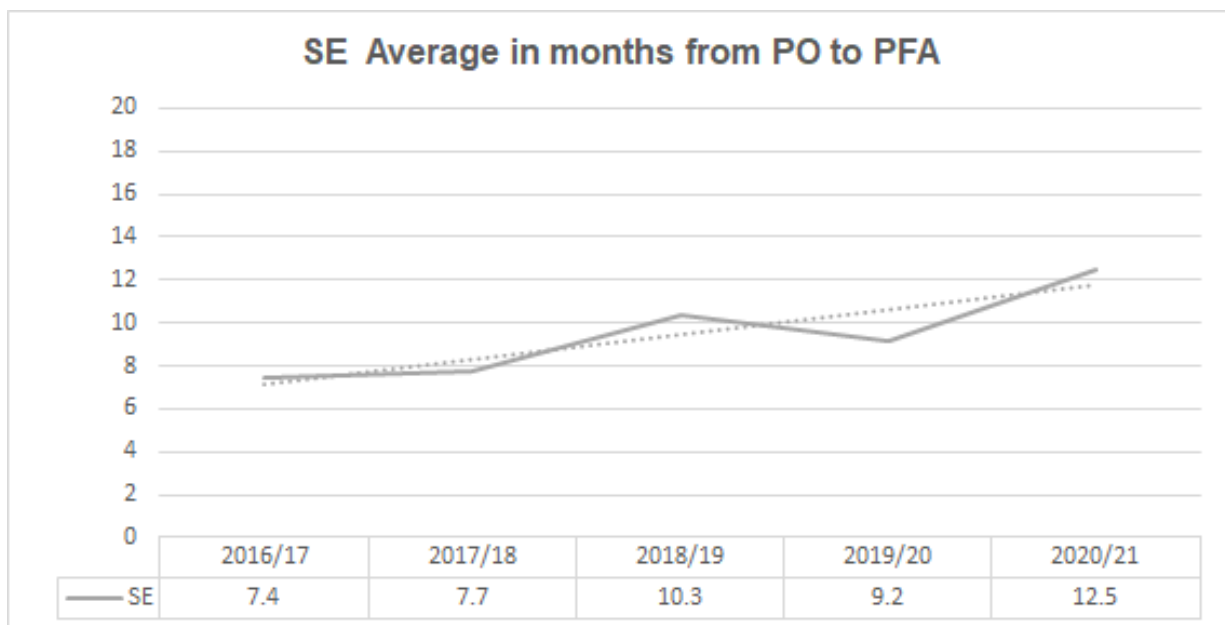
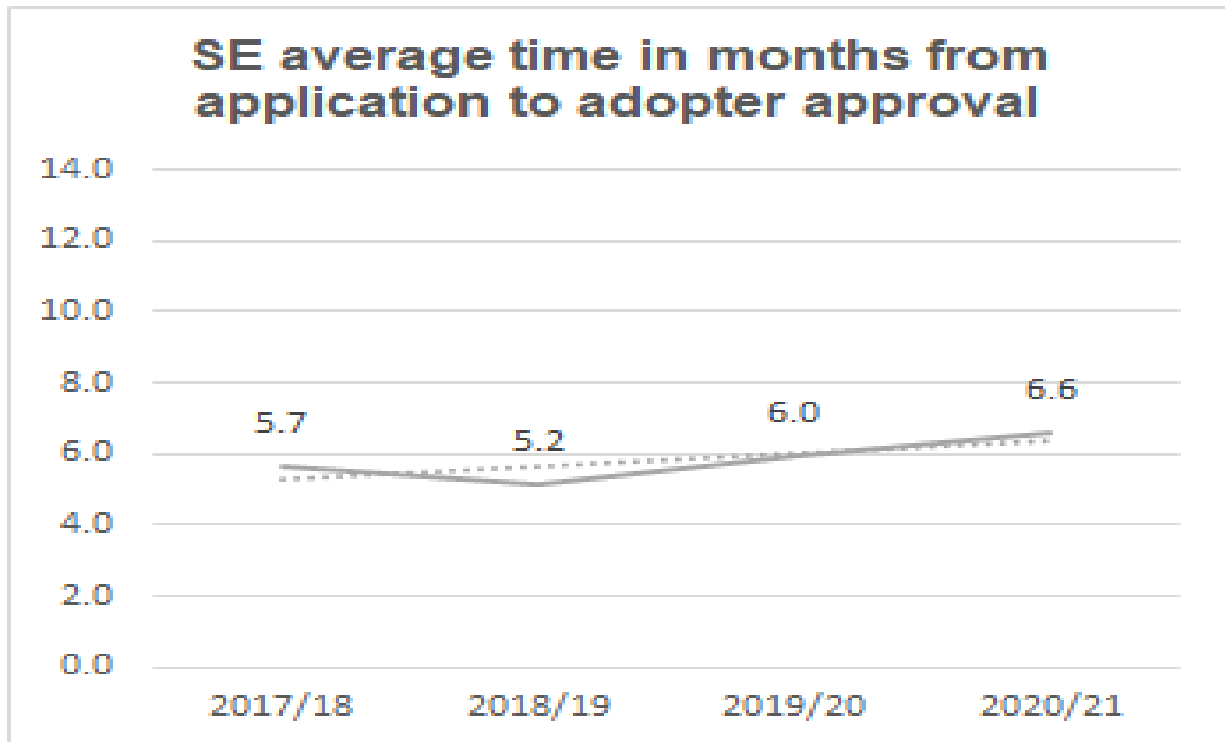
Many of the enquiries are for longer term support so the impact of this will be longer term. Services reported greater stress in families as the year progressed and further episodes of lockdown proved more difficult to cope with. Conversely, the pattern of services is changing with some of new services such as TESSA and Connected being available according to need and without a formal assessment as well as improved levels of support being generally available. This has led to improved satisfaction and ability to manage reported by some families.

NAS Central Team June 2021

APPENDIX 2

Adopter Assessment Timeframes - 70% of approvals met the 6-month benchmark from application to approval during 2020/21, compared to 65% for all of Wales.

The average time for SEWAS was 6.6 months compared to 6.9 months for the whole of Wales.



Life Journey Work

