

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

Date: Monday 22nd March, 2021
Time: 4.00 pm
Venue: Virtual Meeting

AGENDA

Please note: this is a virtual meeting.

The meeting will be live-streamed via the Council's [Youtube channel](#) at 4.00 pm on Monday 22nd March, 2021

1. Apologies for Absence
2. Declarations of Interest
3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting of the Children & Young People's Social Care & Services Scrutiny Panel held on 15 February 2021 3 - 12
4. Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care) - Further Information - 'Perceptions and Stigma', Become Charity 13 - 22

The Policy and Participation Manager from Become Charity will be in attendance to provide a presentation in relation to the stigma and perceptions faced by care experienced children and young people.
5. Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care) - Further Information - Adoption Tees Valley 23 - 36

The Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley, will be in attendance to provide further information in relation to sufficiency and permanency from an adoption perspective.
6. Covid Recovery - Children's Services

The Executive Director of Children's Services will be in attendance to provide a verbal update on Covid recovery in

Children's Services.

7. Overview and Scrutiny Board Update

The Chair will provide a verbal update in relation to business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 11 March 2021.

8. Date and Time of Next Meeting - 19 April 2021 at 4.00pm

9. Any other urgent items which in the opinion of the Chair, may be considered.

Charlotte Benjamin
Director of Legal and Governance Services

Town Hall
Middlesbrough
Friday 12 March 2021

MEMBERSHIP

Councillors L Garvey (Chair), C Dodds (Vice-Chair), C Cooke, B Cooper, T Higgins, S Hill, Z Uddin, J Walker and G Wilson

Assistance in accessing information

Should you have any queries on accessing the Agenda and associated information please contact Joanne Dixon, 01642 729713, joanne_dixon@middlesbrough.gov.uk

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was held on 15 February 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor Garvey (Chair), Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair); Councillors: Bell (substitute for Councillor Hill), Cooke, Cooper, Higgins, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

OFFICERS: S Bonner, C Breheny, S Butcher, J Dixon and R Farnham.

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor Hellaoui – Chair of Corporate Parenting Board.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillor Hill and Councillor High (invited Member in the role of Lead Member for Children's Services).

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 18 January 2021 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

UPDATE – SIX MONTH REVIEW INTO CHILDREN'S SERVICES BY THE COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN MIDDLESBROUGH

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, accompanied by R Farnham, Director of Children's Care, was in attendance to update the Panel with an overview of the Commissioner's six-month review report in relation to Children's Services in Middlesbrough.

By way of background, the Panel was reminded that, following the Ofsted inspection findings published in January 2020, the Secretary of State appointed a Commissioner – Peter Dwyer OBE – in February 2020 who began to work with Middlesbrough's Children's Services in early March 2020.

The Commissioner submitted his first report in April 2020 and, having seen the potential for the service to improve, concluded: "This is not a Local Authority where we should move quickly to consider alternative delivery mechanisms." This recommendation was accepted by the Secretary of State and the Commissioner continued to work with Children's Services two to three days per month up until November 2020.

The Commissioner produced and submitted his second report in December 2020, reiterating the recommendation from his first report, "not to move quickly to consider alternative delivery mechanisms". This was again accepted by the Secretary of State, however, concerns were raised in relation to the authority's caseloads.

The Commissioner's report also recognised that Children's Services in Middlesbrough continued to work with, and through, Covid and was written broadly against the seven enablers of improvement.

The six-month review of the Service was undertaken 9 - 11 November 2020. Over the course of the three days, the Commissioner met with various stakeholders, including:-

- Executive Members
- Chief Executive, Executive Director of Children's Services and other members of the Senior Leadership Team
- Independent Chair of Improvement Board and Director of Children's Services at Redcar and Cleveland (as some of Middlesbrough's services, such as Safeguarding, were shared with

Redcar)

- Senior Leaders from key partners, including CAMHS, Police, Health.
- Staff focus groups – front line and middle managers.
- Focus groups on relevant key themes.
- Engagement through direct communication with front line staff.
- Considered performance data and improvement against the plan.

In terms of leadership, the report acknowledged:-

- Positive new branding 'Middlesbrough Children Matter' – This was important as it was instantly recognisable.
- Political leadership and accountability was significantly strengthened.
- Greater stability in leadership arrangements.
- The local authority operated more effectively corporately on the children's agenda.
- Restructured senior leadership portfolios brought greater coherence to the organisation.
- The Local Authority knows itself – enhanced approach to quality assurance and performance management.
- Invested and prioritised resourcing – appropriate use of Covid funding to drive 'invest to save' initiatives and national improvement resources.

The Director of Children's Care referred to the Commissioner's finding that 'the Local Authority knows itself'. This had improved through enhanced quality assurance and performance management processes. Performance management tools had been developed to ensure: good quality data; services were compliant; and that visits and assessments were taking place within timescales.

The Panel heard that Middlesbrough had worked hard to develop the audit to excellence programme which had been rolled out across the whole Service. This looked at individual cases, teams and Social Workers, examining themes that arose from teams enabling targeted improvement activity to be undertaken. For example, the quality of direct work was improving and management oversight was improving which helped keep children safe. The programme was effective in identifying where the issues were.

In relation to invested and prioritised resourcing, the Panel was informed that soon after the poor Ofsted inspection, a significant amount of money (£3.3 million) was made available and had been used wisely, and included the development of the audit programme. There were invest to save initiatives such as the managed Innovate Team tasked with bringing children back to Middlesbrough placements from expensive out of area placements, where it was appropriate to do so, and good progress was being made. National improvement resources included the Futures for Families programme.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel made reference to the strengthening of political leadership and felt that scrutiny played a big part in this and should possibly be acknowledged in some way. It was queried whether the Commissioner was aware of the scrutiny process and issues being scrutinised in relation to Children's Services within the two children's Scrutiny Panels. The Executive Director responded that during conversations with the Commissioner he was aware of how scrutiny was developing and becoming more robust. It was highlighted that the Chair of Corporate Parenting Board had been interviewed by the Commissioner as part of the inspection.
- Reference was made to quality assurance and it was queried whether children's assessments were being completed in a timely way or whether delays were still being experienced. It was acknowledged that there had been an exponential rise in demand in the system, with children who had not previously been receiving services at the right time now receiving the help they needed in a more timely way. This had created greater demand in the system and an increase in Social Worker caseloads. Timeliness of assessments was still an issue in certain areas of the Service. In December 2020, two additional managed teams were put into the assessment

service and this had resulted in the number of overdue assessments reducing and further assessments being completed within timescales. This was a work in progress but was improving.

- A Panel Member sought clarification and feedback on the use of three new children's homes. The Executive Director responded that the Futures for Families hub comprised a four-bed residential building and this had been delayed by Covid but came on-stream in August 2020. This service was already having a significant impact both with children living in the hub and children on the edge of care and was currently supporting around 40 children to remain with their families. Daniel Court was a supported lodgings accommodation which experienced some delays in opening due to Covid, however, it had opened in November 2020 and was looking towards being fully occupied by April 2021. There was capacity to house nine young people and introductions into the accommodation would be staggered, alongside careful matching. The Director was unsure of the third accommodation to which the Member referred but highlighted that Firtree Lodge had always been in operation whilst Rose Tree was currently closed for refurbishment. The Member responded that he was referring to three applications within the planning process. The Executive Director clarified that these may be in relation to residential homes that were not operated by the Local Authority and that she would be happy to meet outside of the meeting to discuss.
- It was queried whether invested resourcing and prioritised resources referred to Futures for Families and the Innovate Team. The Executive Director stated that Futures for Families was funded by the DfE and there was some intervention around Family Group Conferencing and various initiatives whereby Middlesbrough was being sponsored or supported. The invest to save initiative was around the Innovate Team bringing children back to Middlesbrough where it was appropriate to do so.

In terms of Partnership Approach, the Commissioner found that:-

- The Improvement Board had good oversight of delivering the improvement plan. It held the service to account on the delivery of the plan with overarching progress reports against the plan and spotlight reports at each meeting. The Board was independently chaired by an experienced DCS.
- Reports and analysis had developed over time. Sophisticated levels of thematic analysis particularly around sufficiency planning and locality working. Sufficiency was about making sure that the right children were in the right placements in the right place. Locality working was under development and would comprise focussed resources focussed initially in two specific areas – Newport and North Ormesby. Some services were already working in these areas and Social Care was in the process of planning how this would operate from a social care perspective.
- The Improvement Board operated with existing partnership arrangements. For example, the Children's Trust Board operated with three key wider priorities and was not confused with the activity of the Improvement Board.
- Better communications with schools. Communications with schools had actually been enhanced through Covid with sharing of information and the Local Authority supporting schools around work on vaccinations and supporting Head Teachers who were running a physical and virtual school.
- Joint working opportunities were being taken. For example, Futures for Families and the Multi Agency Children's Hub.
- Frontline staff described improvements in partner engagement in safeguarding activities.
- Keen to pilot locality based approach within some key communities.

The Chair asked whether an example could be provided in relation to 'frontline staff described improvements in partner engagement ...'. The Executive Director considered this to mean better engagement in strategy discussions so that meetings were informed from several perspectives and not just Social Care. The Director of Children's Care added that another example would be the Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH). The MACH went live in July 2020 and included Middlesbrough's Social Care staff, Police, Health and Education. Staff described the partnership as being very strong and that was seen during the monitoring inspection visit in September.

The Panel was advised that in relation to workforce, the DfE looked at key enablers and workforce development in terms of improvement and the Service had created a workforce development programme that looked at key work streams, recruitment and retention, demand and reducing agency staff whilst increasing permanent staff. In addition, the following was highlighted:-

- Frontline practitioners were positive about targeted training opportunities and better placed to deliver improved practice, for example 16-17 year old homelessness.
- Consistently expressed balanced confidence in the improvement journey.
- Visibility of senior leaders. It was highlighted that the Director of Children's Care was launching a Social Care newsletter and that the Executive Director held weekly virtual meetings with staff – attended by 170 staff at the last meeting. An invitation to attend to observe these meetings was extended to Members.
- Whilst there was an increase in the use of agency Social Workers, this was less than in other authorities and there was successful use of managed teams to assist with capacity and to provide expertise.
- The workforce had embraced opportunities to enhance routes into social work, such as the Frontline programme.
- Sickness absence levels were good. It was noted that it equalled other directorates.
- There had been some progress on the practice model although it had not yet been rolled out.

The Director of Children's Care highlighted that since this finding was made by the Commissioner in November, a great deal of progress had taken place. The practice model was based on 'children and relationships first' and this was the approach taken to working with children and families in Middlesbrough and about 'doing with' and not 'doing to'. It provided staff with the toolkit they needed to deliver good quality social work and early help practice. The Practice Model was heavily linked to the Strengthening Practice Training Programme and practice standards were currently being developed in conjunction with staff and would set expectations from the workforce in working with children and families in Middlesbrough. It was hoped that the standards would be launched during Practice Week commencing 8 March. Members were invited to attend any of the sessions should they wish to do so.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member raised a query in relation to the wellbeing of the workforce, Frontline teams and agency staff, some of whom had previously been self-isolating due to Covid. The Director replied that the Frontline staff (the Social Work programme through which graduates entered Social Care in Middlesbrough) had all become newly qualified Social Workers and that sickness absence in those teams was no higher than in other areas of the workforce. Agency Social Workers carried the risk of moving on and this was regrettable when it resulted in changes of social workers for children, however, the workforce was currently stable. The Director stated that she planned to hold a meeting with the agency staff to find out what their experiences of working for Middlesbrough were and how things could be improved. There were examples of some agency staff that had applied to become permanent members of staff.

- A query was raised in relation to delivering better practice in relation to homeless 16-17 year olds and it was queried whether Members should be concerned around the numbers of young people in that group and whether the numbers had increased due to Covid. The Executive Director clarified that the service had not previously been working with the 16-17 year olds in the correct way. In accordance with the Southwark judgement, Children's Services should offer those young people the opportunity to become looked after and to explain the benefits of this to them, for example through supported lodgings. Training had now been undertaken by the workforce relating to this practice. The Director of Children's Care added that there had not been an increase in the number of homeless 16-17 year olds due to Covid and, over the last few months, during lockdown, the numbers of older children coming into care had reduced. 16-17 year olds usually presented as homeless following a family breakdown and they had previously not been offered their right to become looked after.
- Clarification was sought in relation to the local authority's responsibility for care leavers and what help and support was provided for those young people who were vulnerable to exploitation. The Executive Director confirmed that the local authority had a responsibility for care leavers between the ages of 18 – 25. The Service currently supported or kept in touch with 154 care leavers. Personal Advisers worked with care leavers and each young person had a Pathway Plan. This was a multi-agency plan looking at the best way to support them. The Service had particularly kept in touch with care leavers during Covid and additional resources had recently been secured to help support care leavers through this difficult time. The Director added that, as a child, up until the age of 18 the safeguarding responsibilities were very clear around children vulnerable to exploitation. From the ages 18-25 there would be responsibilities around safeguarding them as a vulnerable adult. Each young person had a named personal adviser that would signpost them to the correct support.

The Panel was advised that in relation to practice improvement, the Commissioner found:-

- Too many interventions remained inadequate or in need of improvement.

These were now fully recognised and understood and a range of targeted activity had been developed to support improvement, including:-

- Additional investments being made.
- Disaggregation of the MACH. Although this was not universally supported it had delivered improvements.
- Development of the Sufficiency Strategy.
- Bespoke Innovate Team. There was an option to extend this contract for up to two years on a three-month rolling contract.
- Success of Futures for Families.
- Transferring of work with children to other teams had improved.
- External engagement of others supporting the innovation. North Yorkshire were supporting Middlesbrough with Future for Families and were currently supporting through a review of the Fostering Service.

It was acknowledged that, whilst there was still a long way to go, the Service was in a much better position to continue improving.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- A Member made reference to locality working in Newport and North Ormesby and queried whether those areas had been identified due to significant problems and hoped that targeting resources in those areas would help to make significant improvements to the way in which Social Care practice was delivered. The Executive Director responded that work had been undertaken to analyse various demands in certain wards, such as children in need, child protection and children looked after. Around 1 in 17 of children in North Ormesby came into the local authority's care. The locality teams would be made up from different areas of practice such as early help, street wardens, social care, etc. and resources needed to be targeted in the

best way possible. Those wards had been chosen because of the analysed demand. If successful it may be rolled out to other areas.

- Further explanation was sought in relation to the disaggregation of the MACH not being universally supported. The Executive Director stated that the Police had concerns around the disaggregation. It was a big decision to make as Middlesbrough was in partnership with Redcar and Cleveland, however, the right decision needed to be made for Middlesbrough and its children. The Police would not have chosen for the disaggregation to happen, however, they had continued to work positively with Middlesbrough.

The Panel was provided with a selection of staff feedback comments gathered by the Commissioner. These included positive comments regarding the leadership team; communication and audit systems and also concerns regarding high caseloads. The Panel was advised that caseloads were beginning to stabilise and the average caseload as of today's date was 22.

The Chair commented that caseloads had always been a concern expressed by the Scrutiny Panel and felt that reducing caseloads was critical to the improvement journey. It was acknowledged that the Minister had also expressed concerns regarding high caseloads following the Commissioner's latest report.

In relation to key performance information, the Panel was informed that:-

- There was clearer evidence of improved screening, management oversight and timely decision making at the 'front door' (MACH). This supported the decision to disaggregate the MACH.
- Higher proportion of assessments now resulted in ongoing social care input (88%). This was due to having better thresholds.
- The numbers of children on Child Protection plans was at an all-time high, however, more recently the number of new plans was more relatively stable (as at November).
- The numbers of children in the care system had stabilised over recent months although still at an extremely high comparative rate. The Panel was advised that since the Commissioner's report in November, the numbers had reduced from an all-time high of 702 in August 2020 to 609 as of today's date. Whilst the numbers of children coming into care had slowed slightly, the impact of the edge of care support from Futures for Families was considerable and also more children were being moved on to their permanent forever homes.
- Completion rates of audits needed consistent improvement.
- August 2020 saw less cases being assessed as inadequate but still at a significant level of 40%. In relation to inadequate case audits it was highlighted that whilst there was still a long way to go, improvements were being made and less work was now being assessed as inadequate. The percentage of inadequate case audits was closely monitored by the DfE and this was reported monthly to the Improvement Board. Audits of inadequate cases was required to be at around 5% or less in order to exit intervention. It was highlighted that for the current month within the MACH there were 0% inadequate case audits. 50% required improvement and 50% were good. This was the first area of the service to have 0% inadequate case audits and this provided some assurance that audits were being closely monitored to improve practice in those areas identified as inadequate and also that numbers of inadequate audits were reducing. It was acknowledged that it did become more difficult moving through the system as children's cases became more complex. This would be a long journey but improvements were happening.

A Member of the Panel complimented the Service on the improvements that were being made and queried what the reasons were for the number of Child Protection plans being at an all-time high and whether it related to lowering of thresholds. The Executive Director responded that it was partly about ensuring thresholds were set in the right place and sometimes plans were not put into

place in a timely way. For the first time, Children's Services had less children in care than on child protection plans and less child protection plans than children in need. Better planning was needed and to practice needed to be strengthened but this was all part of the improvement journey.

Finally, in relation to the impact of Covid, the Commissioner found:-

- Covid was never used as an excuse.
- Assessing the impact of Covid was particularly complex.
- Increased demand for assessments and interventions.
- Throughput of work with children was affected with challenges for delivery and availability of Court time. The average time for taking children through the Court process should normally be around 26 weeks, however, it was currently around 32.5 weeks.
- Local Authority and partners were highly visible and impressively proactive.
- Students had enthusiastically returned to school without a tidal wave of additional concerns but heightened concerns around young people already known to the Service.
- Increase in domestic violence and impact on children.

The next steps were:-

- April 2021 - Ofsted focussed visit.
- May 2021 – Commissioner's final report. Following this time the Commissioner would no longer be working with Children's Services, however, an Improvement Adviser – an experienced ex-DCS, would work with the Service on a monthly basis.
- Covid, working through into recovery.
- Practice – this was where thinking and resources needed to be.
- Managing expectations. The next Ofsted visit would focus on practice and as the Service was focusing on practice the report may not read as well. The total focus was on children and individual work. The Service was continuing to improve several weeks on from the Commissioner's report but the hardest part was to come and there was no quick fix.

During discussion the following issues were raised:-

- The Panel acknowledged that it had been a very difficult year for everyone and complimented Children's Services on the way in which it had communicated honestly and transparently with Members throughout this time and ensuring that they were part of the improvement journey. The Executive Director responded that Members were an integral part of the improvement journey and their local knowledge was critical in informing what was happening at a ward level.
- Reference was made to Court proceedings taking around 32.5 and in response to a query it was confirmed that this was a national issue.
- A Panel Member considered it to be a frightening time for young people leaving care and moving to independence and wondered whether Ward Councillors could help with this process in some way. Following some discussion, it was considered that Ward Councillors may have a role to play in terms of signposting young people to appropriate help and that it was something to think about.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and the presentation provided.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

UPDATE - COVID RECOVERY - CHILDREN'S SERVICES

S Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services, provided the Panel with a verbal update in relation to Covid recovery in Children's Services.

The Panel was informed that Social Workers continued to work from home, however, it was an expectation that visits to children were face to face, with appropriate PPE, and that virtual 'visits'

should only be by exception and signed off by a manager.

Social Workers were expected to visit children at the same frequency, depending on the child's needs.

The expectation was very clear that all vulnerable children (ie a child with an assigned Social Worker) should be in school and Social Workers were asked to strongly encourage this. There were reasons why a child may not be in school such as illness, self-isolating or a carer/other child in the house with health reasons.

When a vulnerable child was not in school, schools were expected to call a dedicated telephone number to inform the local authority. A risk assessment would then be undertaken and, where appropriate, a safety plan would be completed for the most at risk children. This was integrated into the LCS system and data could be collated and cross-referenced with Public Health data in terms of children and school staff that were self-isolating. In addition, the Virtual School monitored children looked after who were not in school on a daily basis.

The Executive Director stated that in general the school attendance figures for vulnerable children in Middlesbrough were not where they should be ideally and it had been decided that resources should be focussed on children on Child Protection plans. The rationale behind this was that children looked after should be safe as they were in a foster placement, however, children on Child Protection plans were likely to be most at risk as they remained at home with parents and the fact that they had a Child Protection plan meant that the local authority has concerns.

As previously mentioned there were some delays with Court proceedings – now an average of 32.5 weeks instead of 26 weeks.

It was queried whether Children's Services had a post covid plan and whether the Service was prepared for lockdown ending. The Panel was informed that there was a recovery plan which existed from the first lockdown and that this was being updated as recovery drew closer. The Council-wide response to Covid recovery was very positive.

The Director of Children's Care commented that she was very proud of the workforce and foster carers who had continued to look after vulnerable children during this difficult time.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

A verbal update was provided in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 27 and 29 January and 11 February 2021, namely:-

27 January 2021

Budget Consultation

29 January 2021

Call-In – Nunthorpe Grange Farm Disposal

11 February 2021

- Executive Forward Work Programme.
- Middlesbrough Council's Response to Covid-19 Response – Chief Executive & Director of Public Health.
- Executive Member update – Executive Member for Regeneration (Councillor Waters).
- Final Report – Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel – Social Cohesion and Integration.
- Scrutiny Panel Chairs' Updates.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 22 March 2021 at 4.00pm.

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR MAY BE CONSIDERED

With prior agreement the Chair allowed the Chair of Corporate Parenting Board to raise an item relating to the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

Councillor Hellaoui referred to the seven guiding principles within the Corporate Parenting Strategy and advised that each of the principles would form the basis of a spotlight report to be submitted to Corporate Parenting Board. Alongside this, the Chair wished to invite interested Members to attend and work in small groups with each group focussing on one of the principles in detail.

For ease of reference, the seven guiding principles were as follows:-

- Our Home
- Our Friends and Family
- Our Education and Employment
- Our Health and Wellbeing
- Our Adult Life
- Our Voice and Influence
- Our Needs and Wishes

Any Members wishing to be involved were asked to please contact Councillor Hellaoui direct.

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Stigma and perceptions

Sam Turner, Policy and Participation Manager

March 2021

About Become

Advice, support and training

Care Advice Line | 1:1 support and life coaching

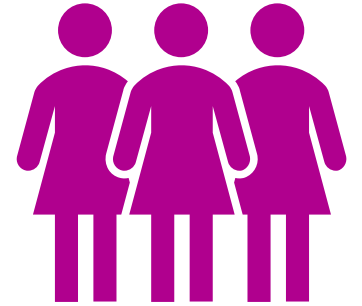
Weekly link-ups | Propel website

Training for professionals

Policy and campaigns, communications and participation

Research | Media | Policy and campaigns

Alongside care-experienced young people



BECOME.
THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Stigma and perceptions

"I ran away one time to get away, and the police came to find me. They picked me up at a service station. When they found out I was in care, they immediately started checking me for drugs. It had nothing to do with the situation. They heard 'care' and thought 'criminal'."

"People are friendly to you just because you're in care like, I don't want anyone to do that for me. Like be my friend or don't be my friend. Don't be my friend because I'm in care, it's not, you know, like it's the end of the world."

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"I can't say go on Google, go and research it if I don't want to talk about it, because it's all bad statistics, and that's not going to help, is it?"

"Police were around quite a lot when I went to my first foster placement. They asked me if I was taking drugs – I'd never touched a drug in my life. They treated me like a criminal."

"Her mate found out I was in care and she was like, you're in care, your family must be well bad then!"

Perceptions of Care (2017)

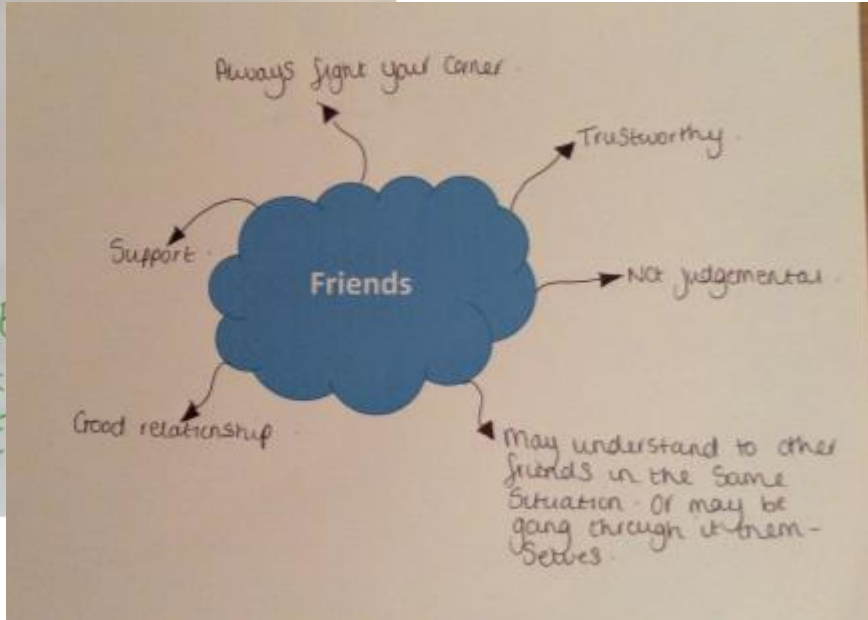
you dont get how
what is going on and
what social workers
are doing to us!!
you have to be around!!
are bad for
your family
No one loves you.

YOUR SEUPID THERE IS SOMETHING
(I KNOW) STILL SMARTER WRONG WITH
THEM

I'M A PROBLEM CHILD

Awwwwwwww
BLESS THEM

WELL THERE
F***
FOR LIE



"We are expected to fail and it is a stigma. I hated telling people I was in care because it feels like people judge you."



BECOME.
THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

50 per cent of children in care and 51 per cent of care leavers agreed that 'People think that it is children's fault that they are in care.'

39 per cent of children in care and 43 per cent of care leavers disagreed with the statement 'Other children's parents do not treat children in care differently to other children.'

30 per cent of children in care and 42 per cent of care leavers agreed with the statement that 'Where I live, people would not like it if someone opened a children's home.'

Teachers Who Care (2018)

I wish you knew...

#CareDay19

Six things children in care want their teachers to know.

Knowledge, Attitudes and Stigma

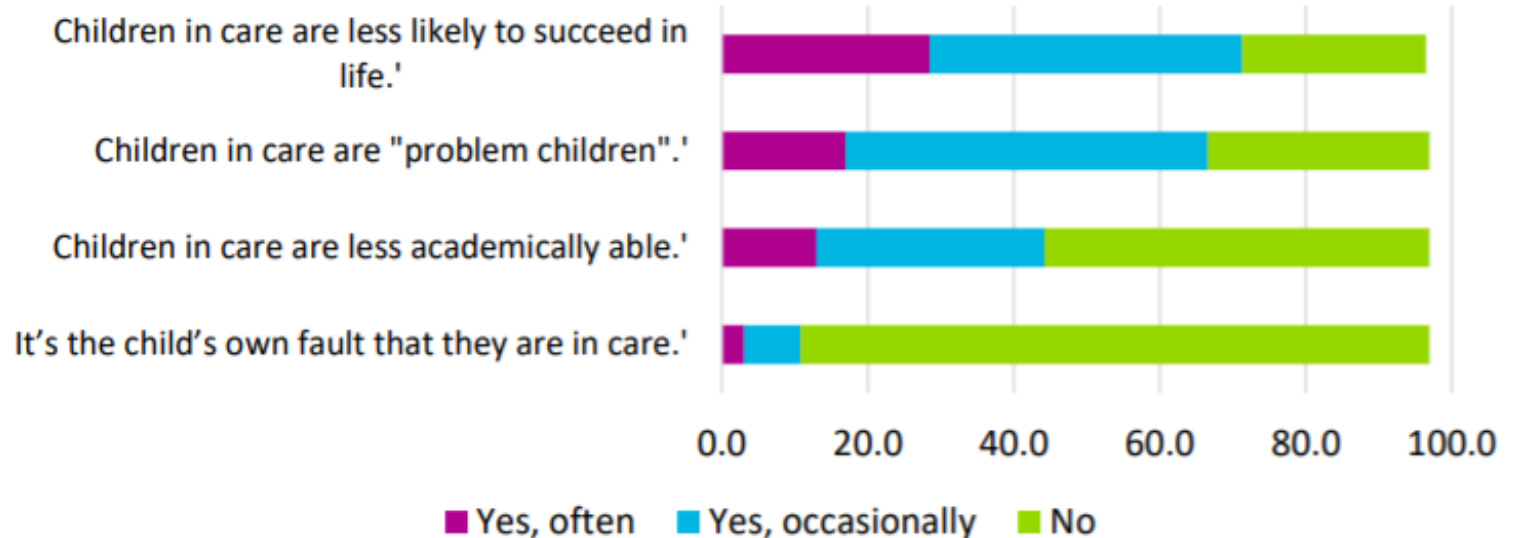
- 87% of respondents had heard at least one colleague express a negative generalisation about children in care, and 31% of respondents had heard such views often.

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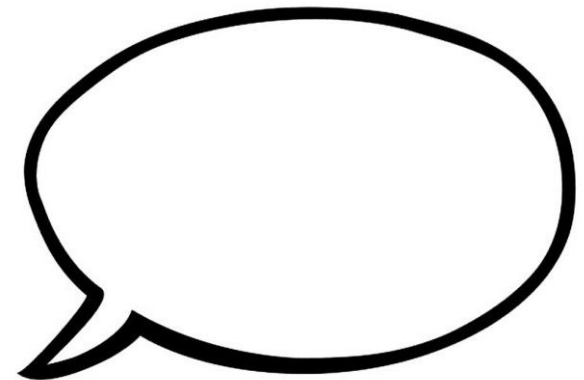
BECOME.
THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Have you heard these views from colleagues?



Challenging perceptions

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BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Questions?

sam.turner@becomecharity.org.uk

 [@samtrner](https://twitter.com/samtrner)

 [@Become1992](https://twitter.com/Become1992)

 [/BecomeCharity](https://www.facebook.com/BecomeCharity)

 [@BecomeCharity](https://www.instagram.com/BecomeCharity)

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THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS



Links

- [Perceptions of Care](#) (Become, 2017)
- [Teachers Who Care](#) (Become, 2018)
- [I Wish You Knew](#) (Become, 2019)
- [Care-experienced young people's interactions with the police](#) (Become on Criminal Care? Blog, 2019)
- [Public attitudes to children in care Results from a national survey](#) (Coram, 2018)
- [Public attitudes to care experienced young people](#) (ScotCen/Life Changes Trust, 2018)
- [Each and Every Child: How to Talk About Care Experience in Scotland](#) (FrameWorks, 2020)
- [Who We Are – Who Cares? Scotland](#)

Middlesbrough Council Children & Young People's Social Care & Services
Scrutiny Panel

22 March 2021

Sufficiency and Permanency

Report Author: Vicky Davidson Boyd- Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley

1. Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) is the Regional Adoption Agency and is the Local Council Adoption Service for the 5 LA's of Tees Valley, which includes Middlesbrough, Stockton, Hartlepool, Darlington and Redcar and Cleveland. ATV is responsible for recruitment, assessment and approval of adoptive families; for receiving referrals of children for adoption, and for family finding; for matching and placing the children; adoption support; letterbox contact between families and children; life story books; step parent adoptions.
2. The latest Bi-Annual report is provided for overview of the work of the RAA and of the areas of practice and operation which come under the RAA. Impact of covid and how the service has dealt with this is addressed in the report.
3. Areas of best practice, and new initiatives

The Bi- Annual report summarises key aspects of the initiatives, service development priorities, and best practice over the last year. To highlight within this report they include:

- Strategic "whole system" improvement work in Early Permanence for adoption. This has included multi agency working; workforce development across multiple stakeholder agencies; work through LFJB to develop and agree an Information Sharing Protocol.
- Working with the National RAA system to develop practice guidance and tools for working under covid.
- Development of a 3 tier Adoption Support Service, which includes early help, and a "universal" adoption support offer; maintaining adoption support for all families for 1 year post Adoption Order; delivery of therapeutic parenting programmes; specialist Adoption Support Assessments, and access to therapeutic interventions, where needed to support children and families.
- Procurement and commissioning of a Therapeutic Providers list for provision to children- ensuring quality and practice standards in therapeutic support.
- Development of a group for adopted children.
- Rapid development of an additional support offer under covid funding, from the Adoption Support Fund, to provide access to the Adopter Hub; a psychologist; group work to support parents experiencing violence from their adopted child.

- Joint funded post to provide Education Support to adopted children, families and to schools, to help direct better supports to children. The post is funded through the LA DfE grants to Virtual Schools for duties to previously looked after children.

Current/new initiatives:

- Re-focus on the group for adopted children, to help them to re-engage with the Adoption Service, and with other adopted children.
- Exploration of digital life story platforms, to modernise and improve long term life story work.
- Collaborative partner with a PhD researcher focussing on life story work, currently actively working with Junior Researchers, to help shape the research focus.
- Further development of the “assessment, placement and support pathway”, to ensure every family has access to a bespoke adoption support plan, tailored to their needs. This is also more strategically aimed at creating confidence in the service offer to adopters, with planned support, with an aim of securing more internal adopters for harder to place children.
- A new activities programme for adopted children and their families is in progress- for return to office base. E.g baby yoga; baby massage.

4. Specific Areas of work with Middlesbrough Children’s Services:

- Joint work at strategic level on the permanence and improvement strategy
- Continued working together through Permanence Monitoring Group (PMG) to ensure timely progress for children with an adoption plan.
- Delivery of Early permanence training to MBC workforce
- Shared development work on the digital life story platform
- Contribution by ATV to Middlesbrough Practice week- co-delivering 3 workshop sessions, and ATV staff attended Practice Week sessions.
- Permanence Champion is attending Legal Gateway panel to promote and support more direct working together on early referrals.

5. Summary: Adoption processes undertaken within Adoption Tees Valley

Recruitment of Adoptive Parents

- Enquiry
- Information Event (optional)
- Initial Visit
- Registration of Interest (ROI) by applicants – formal notification of the wish to be assessed as adopters
- Stage 1- Checks and references are undertaken
- Decision as to whether to invite to start stage 2
- Stage 2

- Presentation to panel – recommendation on suitability to adopt
- Approval by ATV Agency Decision Maker

Timescales: Stage 1 – 2 months (60 days)

Stage 2 – 4 months, to ADM decision (121 days)

For people who have previously adopted, or people who are already approved foster carers, they enter a fast track process which is stage 1 and 2 together, utilising some previous checks

Timescale: Fast track- ROI to approval – 4 months (121 days)

Referral, Matching and Placement of Children

- Child in care of LA
- Assessments to determine the LA care plan
- As early as adoption may be the plan, referral to ATV via Early Notification
- Refer to the LA Agency Decision Maker for a formal plan of adoption (sometimes called Best Interests Decision- BID, or ADM)
- ATV commences family finding internally – does ATV have approved adopters for this child?
- If none, commence early stages external family finding
- Court grant Placement Order. Authorises the LA to place the child for adoption.
- Identify and select the family who can meet the child's needs
- Create the Adoption Support Plan, to support the child and adopters
- Child matched at Matching Panel
- Placed for adoption
- Adoption Order Granted

Adoption Support

- All families access to one year post adoption support, from the assessing/placing social worker
- Regular newsletter
- Access to engagement events- e.g. summer activities, art days, and Christmas parties in ATV
- Access to therapeutic parenting sessions – 3 day workshops
- Access to the Adopter Hub- on line supports, webinars, and resources
- Children's group, for adopted children
- Therapeutic support where assessed as being required.
- Direct social work support, where required to help families who have higher level needs.
- ATV manages all post box arrangements between adoptive families and birth families. This is usually in the region of 2 sets of contacts per

year, for each child, until age 18, and may be with up to 5 family members.

6. Data

Adopter Approvals

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21 to end Q3
Adopter Approvals	19	50	45
In assessment – end Q3		31	39

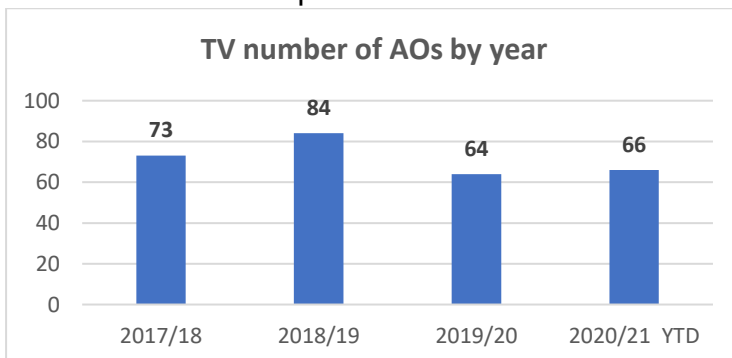
From ATV Balanced Scorecard, 2018-2021

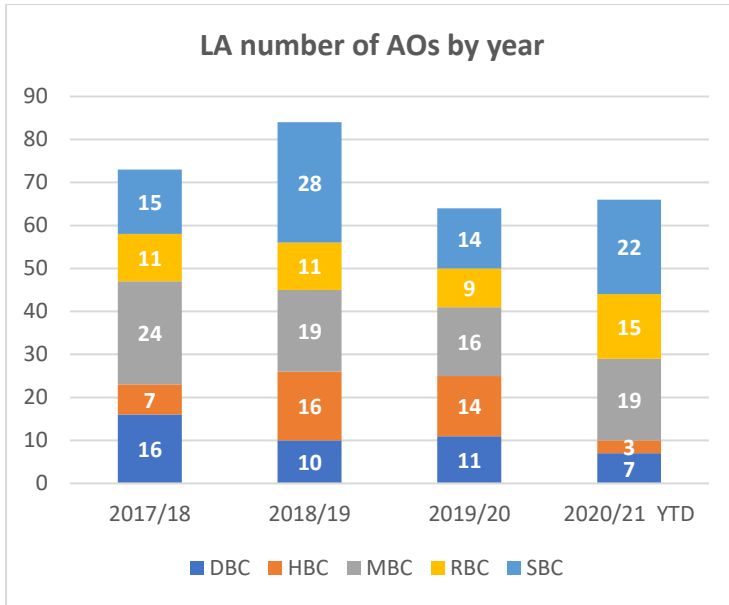
Timescales- days	Stage 1	Stage 2
ATV	101	129
England	112	140
Target	60	121

From: ASGLB data 2020-21 Q2, Rolling 12 months

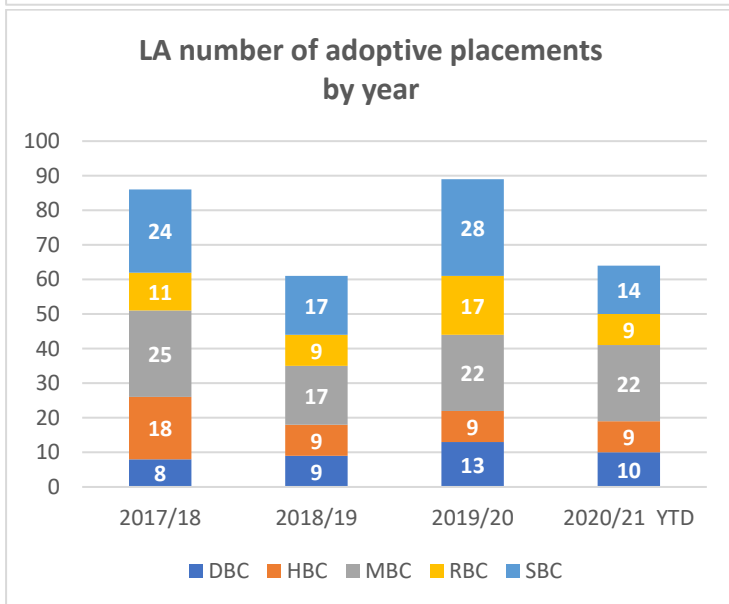
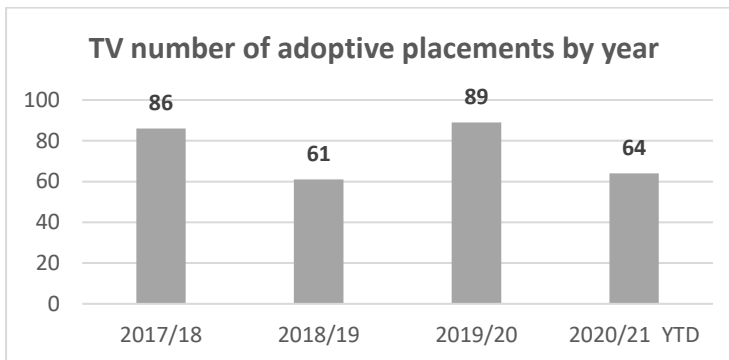
Children

Information is provided from the new ATV Scorecard for Children’s Data, which is drawn from published ASGLB data.

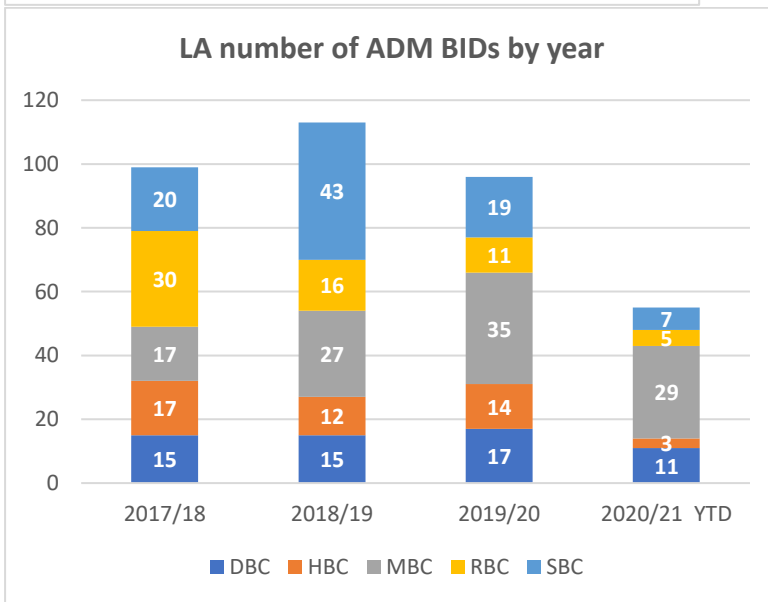
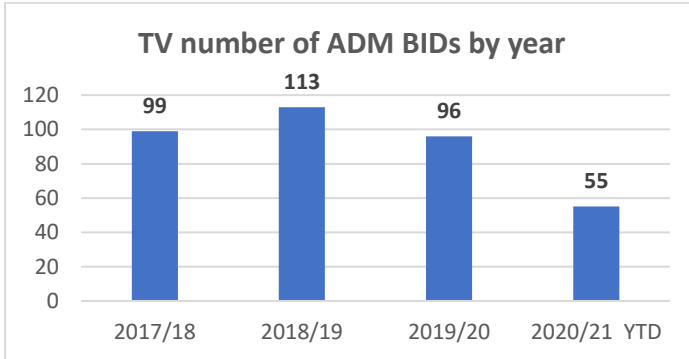




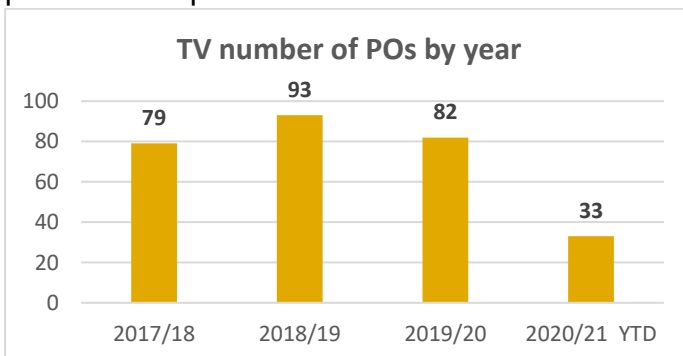
MBC Adoption orders are increasing within this year, and data presented is to end Q3, which will rise for the current full year. This is reflective of increased focus within MBC on progressing permanency plans for children.

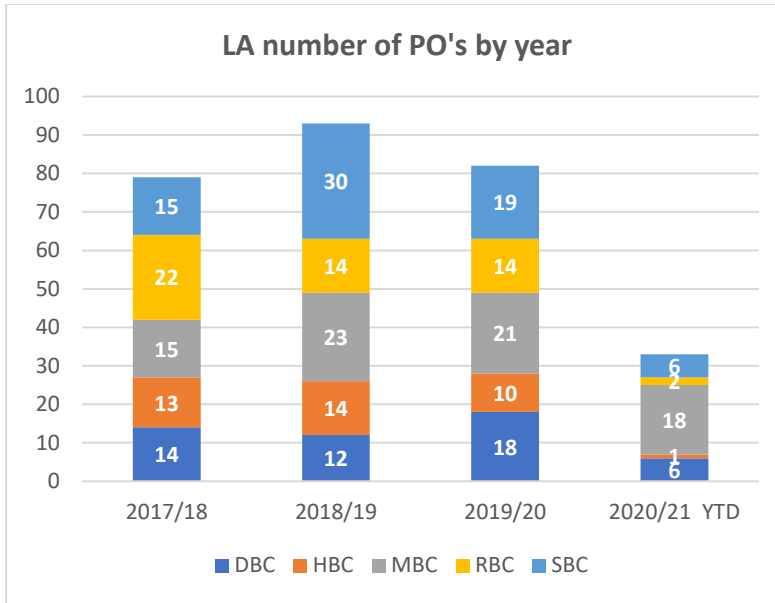


The numbers of children placed by MBC is rising, from lowest number in 2018-19. Year to date figures are currently at the same level as year end figures for last year, showing improvement on the numbers of children being placed for adoption, and improved focus on permanency planning.



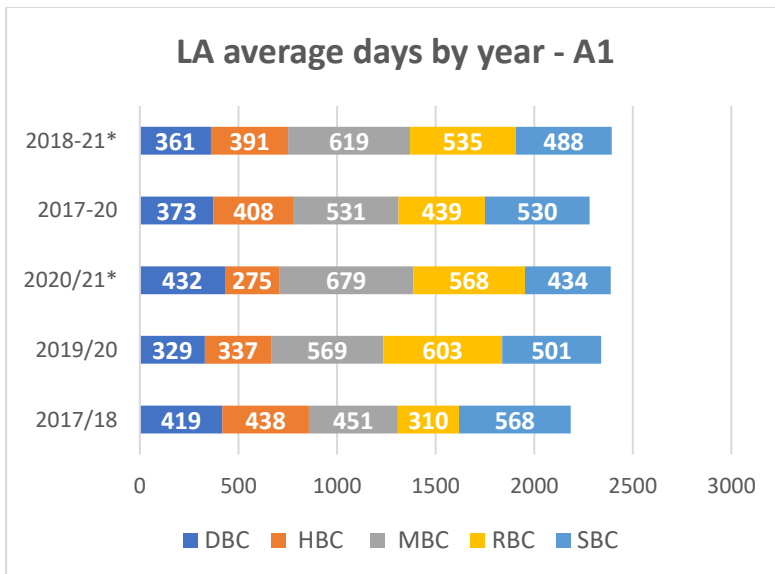
The data shows that while BID's are reducing overall in Tees valley, number of children with an adoption plan are remaining at a higher level/rising in MBC. This year's data should be treated with caution, as we do not yet fully understand the impact of covid on care plans across the region, and UK as a whole. However, MBC has maintained and improved a focus on permanency planning for children, reflecting safeguarding from harm, and progressing plans for adoption.





A similar picture emerges for PO's granted. The overall picture is reduced within this year, and this trend is seen nationally. For MBC the numbers of PO's granted within this year to date is reflective of improvements in care planning and permanency planning, resulting in more children achieving Court authorisation to place for adoption.

Timescales for Placement



A1 is the time between a child entering care and being placed for adoption. The data shows a year by year comparison, and then a rolling for average for two 3 year periods.

For MBC this timescale shows a higher figure than other TV LA's, and is reflective of children's who have had longer timescales and are now adopted. The positive news is that there are a number of sibling groups, and harder to place children, who have achieved adoption orders, and are now securely placed and living within permanent adoptive families.

Current published national data shows this figure is 455 days.

Current published data shows ATV have a timescale of 498 days, which is influenced by MBC overall higher timescale.

Currently, there are 6 MBC children who have a PO, and for whom ATV is actively family finding, and does not yet have a link family. All 6 children have harder to match characteristics. 5 children have had PO for between 6 and 9 months, and 1 has had PO for less than 3 months.

7. National and Regional Adoption trends

Within this region 2019-20 saw a significant number of children placed for adoption (91) , with rising numbers, which was not the picture nationally. Across the UK numbers were beginning to drop, with a reduction in numbers of children at each stage of care planning for adoption- ADM/BID; PO; Placements, and AO's.

ATV regional picture is perhaps reflective of a significantly higher rate of looked after children per 10,000 population, with a regional average of 150.5, MBC having a figure of 189 in 2020, and England average is 67 for that period.

The current year shows a significant drop in Tees Valley numbers of children with ADM/BID, and with PO. However, current year placement numbers are slightly lower than previous year, and Adoption Orders are comparable.

Active tracking of children progressing through care planning indicates that there continue to be a higher number of children for whom the LA is planning adoption.

8. Needs Analysis

From published data (ASGLB) of 69 children adopted over a 12 month period (rolling average) 51 are identified as being in the harder to place category.

This includes:

Being part of a sibling group

Being age 5+

Being a child with a disability

BAME

73% of children placed via ATV and adopted in this period are "hard to place"

9. Recruitment and Sufficiency

ATV has a part time marketing officer to support recruitment of adoptive parents.

There is an ongoing social media presence, with an open facebook account, which is used to profile ATV, and the needs of children.

Previous radio campaigns have not yielded significant increases in numbers of people coming through to enquire about adoption.

Social media, and anonymised profiling of children has been identified as a very successful mechanism for recruitment, and is a campaign method undertaken by ATV, with periodic active periods of profiling. ATV has a significant social media reach, with over 7,000 facebook followers.

ATV has worked closely with the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group, and national campaigns. This group is centrally funded by DfE to impact on the numbers of children waiting. In 2020 the campaign specifically focussed on BAME children, who are identified as waiting the longest, and ATV undertook regional work to promote national messaging, with profiles of our BAME adopters, and also a black social worker, who presented as “the face of ATV”. During this period the agency recruited 2 further BAME families, who are in assessment.

The NARSG has successfully generated national media publicity and “assets” – films and audio of adopters talking, including a number of high profile adopters. ATV has utilised these assets, to promote regional needs, many being promoted via our social media.

There is a planned focus on siblings coming forward, with National Sibling Day being 10th April.

ATV have contributed families willing to be interviewed for this campaign, and is also undertaking work to promote the needs for sibling adopters in this region. This is undoubtedly one of the biggest needs for the adoption service in this region.

To support sufficiency, ATV has engaged in regional collaborative work with VAA's. There is now a Regional protocol which is supported and signed up to by regional VAA's and RAA's, and is aiming for regionally approved adopters to be available to regional RAA's. In this year, ATV has placed 15 children with regional VAA's, where external placement has been required.

The benefits to children are long term, as better adoption support, and more direct contact plans are enabled through regionally, and locally placed children.

10. Challenges

- Sufficiency of adopters for more complex children, which includes older children, siblings, and children in BAME ethnic minority groups. The needs of this region for hard to place children, as evident from published data, and the internal work on needs analysis, demonstrates challenges in this area. This creates financial pressures, on the external placement budget, and on support allowances for harder to place children. ATV is continuing to work to recruit, prepare, and support adoptive parents to care for children with more complex needs. The increased focus on adoption support, and on the assessment, placement and support pathway is geared towards a service objective

of placing more children with internal adopters, and reducing external placement fees.

- Volume of life story work and achieving the information to produce life story book.

There is collaborative work underway to address the practice model, and approach to life story work. This area remains a challenge.

- Post adoption support waiting times are a challenge, with adoptive parents now receiving a focussed one hour “triage” assessment call. However, waiting times for allocation to PAS for full assessment are up to 6 months.
- Volume of Post Box, and management of the system and service.
There is a review of ATV being undertaken, which will include staffing resources. The volume of post box is high and presents challenge to the service. there has been significant work to move all post box records into the electronic system, ensuring that records are digital, and copies of sensitive and personal information are retained.
- Step parent adoptions are a challenge, and these assessments and applications come within the remit of ATV. One full time social worker has been allocated to undertake step parent work, however, it is identified that this takes resource away from the wider adoption service.

Additional information Requested for 16.4.21

1. With regards to the completion of an assessment, making a successful placement and obtaining an adoption order, I believe there is a timescale set by the Government. Are we meeting the Government’s time scale ? If not, why not?
2. What are the obstacles and barriers we face in meeting the timescale and what are we doing to overcome those obstacles or barriers?
3. What is the average length of time that Middlesbrough children wait to be placed with adopters (from the point their plan for adoption is agreed to actually being placed with an adoptive family), and what would the average time be if those children deemed ‘hard to place’ were taken out of the equation?

Responses from ATV:

The following timescales are set out as government targeted timescales for the adoption of children.

These are rolling averages for the previous 12 month period, dated 30.12.20 unless stated otherwise for the time period.

All figures are in days.

Activity	Government target, where applicable	England actual performance Source: ASGLB (RAA) data return, Q3 – 12 month rolling average	RAA performance Source: ASGLB (RAA) data return, Q3 – 12 month rolling average	Middlesbrough BC performance Source: MBC ASGLB return Q3 2021 – 12 month rolling average
Became looked after (BLA) to ADM	182	245	231	217
ADM to PO	91	108	70	91
PO to Match	121	216	217	192
Match to Placement	31	27	20	Not provided
Placement to Adoption Order	274	283	269	252
BLA to placement	426	455 (rolling 3 year average)	498 (rolling 3 year average)	520
BLA to placement (adjusted for children adopted by former foster carer, to date entered that placement)	426	409 (rolling 3 year average)	418 (rolling 3 year average)	374

Regarding the adoption data, for children entering care to the point of decision of an ADM, the government sets a target of 183 days, which is not being met nationally. Both MBC and the RAA LA's as a whole are performing better than national average, based on the data provided, which is drawn from ASGLB returns.

The MBC data is Middlesbrough's own data returns, and ASGLB data is now always based on a 12 month rolling average (or 3 year rolling average for some measures).

This data would indicate that many LA's are taking longer than Government expects to create an adoption plan, once assessments are completed that indicate a child cannot return home. The LA Service may wish to offer a more detailed analysis of this, in relation to care planning.

Once a PO is achieved, the government sets a target timescale of 121 days to achieve the match for a child. This timescale is a challenging one, and is influenced by the characteristics of children, whereby children who are harder to place by virtue of age, siblings placed together, ethnicity, or disability/developmental delay, will generally wait longer, especially where numbers of children requiring adoption exceed the numbers of available adopters.

In MBC the PO to match timescale is 192 days, based on data provided. This has come down in recent months, and is better than the RAA average, and the England average, particularly with reference to the numbers of harder to place children in Middlesbrough. To improve this, the LA has established a much tighter performance monitoring system for social workers, whereby a monthly Permanence Monitoring meeting is held, chaired by a senior manager. Decisions are made to reduce delay,

and SW's are asked to bring cases back the following month where any delay may occur. Practice is improving in providing information to the RAA on which to family find for children. However, if there are delays in this, it is inevitable that there will be longer period to find a family, as good information sharing is critical to timely achievement of a placement. Early permanence has been promoted through strategic work between the RAA and the LA. Better and more timely information sharing enables ATV to potentially have a family already linked, pre PO, in order that the match can be scheduled, and progressed quickly following the Court granting PO.

Once the child is placed for adoption, the Placement to adoption order (AO) granted date is better than government target, and is better than the England average, and RAA average, based on the current data return.

Barriers and Obstacles:

1. Delays in decision making have in the past been significant barriers for MBC children. There have been repeated efforts to achieve resolution to decisions and agreement to a course of action, which has led to delay for children. This has now been improved significantly through good leadership, and management, and improved PMG. The results are evident in improved data.
2. Information sharing and timely notification to ATV of a likely adoption plan, or where ADM has been made have been obstacles in some cases. ATV has a designated officer, a Permanence Champion, who tracks and monitors all cases from early notification onwards. Where social workers delay, or don't respond to requests for information, this will lead to delay. This is now improving, due to responses from senior managers when escalated. However, there remain some cases where response time is poor, and senior managers, team managers, and the RAA act on these.
3. Workforce development has taken place in relation to developing better understanding of how to create an adoption plan. ATV supported this through a dedicated early permanence training workshop to MBC social workers, and through further workshops at the recent MBC Practice Week.
4. Children's timeliness in permanence via adoption is best serviced where assessments are robust, consider all options in a twin track approach, and decisions are made, and information shared in a timely way.
5. Some children, especially those who are older will require more time to be prepared for adoption, and to ensure that family finding selects the right family, and that the family are well prepared for taking that child/ren. MBC has had 5 children aged 5 + and 5 sibling groups adopted within the last year, including two sibling group of 3 adopted together. 15 out of 25 children adopted in the last 12 months have been in the hard to place category.

Average waiting times to be adopted

The current data on average waiting times is based on the Draft MBC ASGLB return, for the year 2020-21 and which was provided to ATV on 14.4.21.

The cohort is 25 adopted children.

The request is for the timescale ADM to placed for adoption.

	Government target Generated by A1 target- BLA to ADM target	England average	MBC Average Data source: Draft MBC ASGLB returns for 2020-21, adopted children (25) provided on 14.4.21
All children	243	Not provided as data is from rolling 12 month, and rolling 3 year averages	381
Cohort with hard to place children removed from this data	243	Not provided as data is from rolling 12 month, and rolling 3 year averages	240

The data generated shows MBC to have an average timescale higher than government target by 138 days, for children waiting to be placed with their adoptive family, from the point at which the LA made a decision that adoption would be their plan.

This is based on national targets, and timelines.

An England average is not able to be generated, as the data sets from which this would be calculated would be over 2 different time periods.

The waiting time for children in Middlesbrough, when hard to place children are taken out of the data cohort is 240 days which is just under the national average.

Hard to place children are: siblings; BAME children; aged 5+; disabled children.

Vicky Davidson Boyd

15.4.21

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