

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

22 March 2021

Sufficiency and Permanency

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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

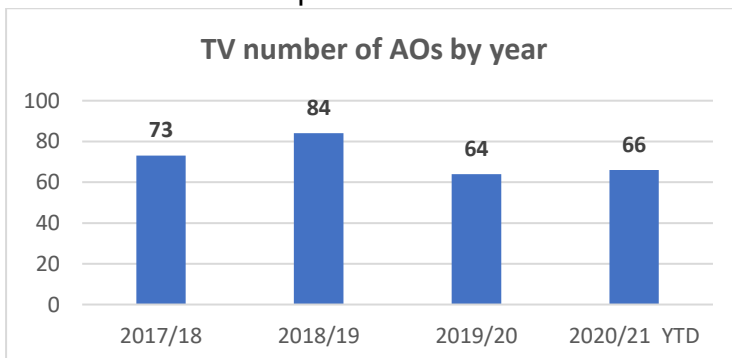
From ATV Balanced Scorecard, 2018-2021

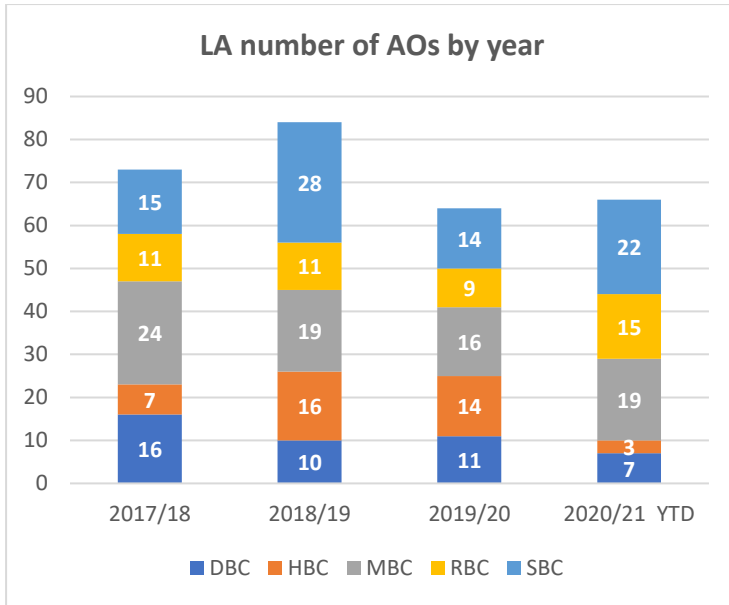
Timescales- days	Stage 1	Stage 2
ATV	101	129
England	112	140
Target	60	121

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

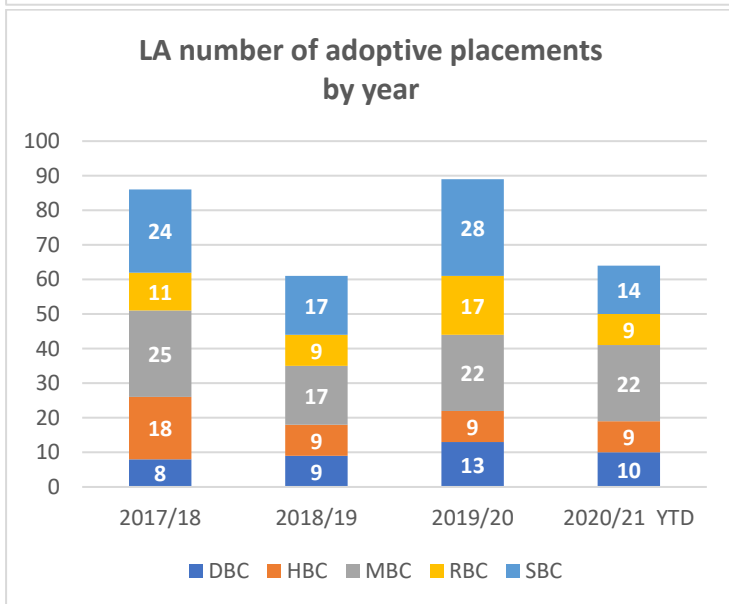
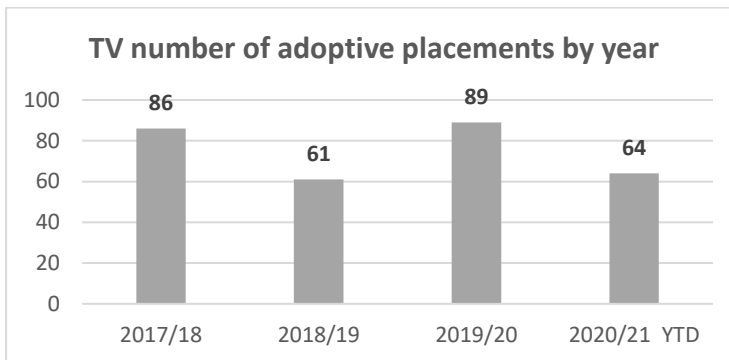
Children

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

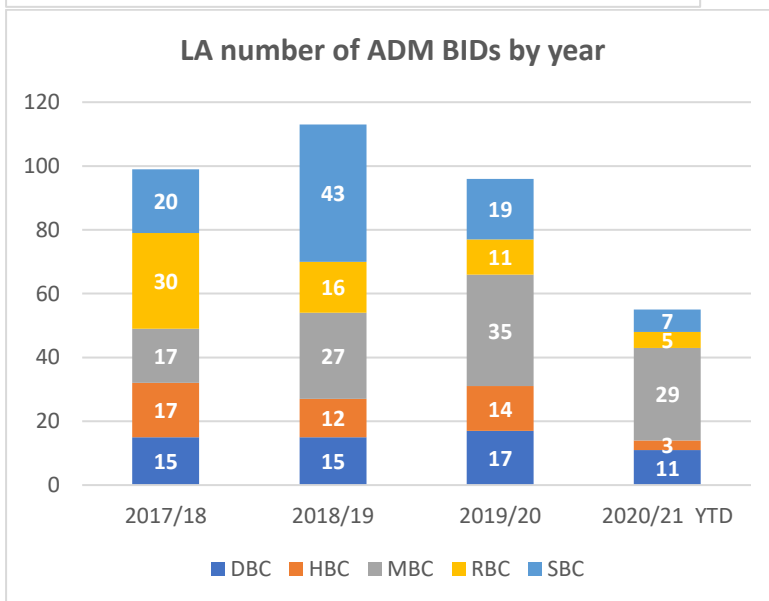
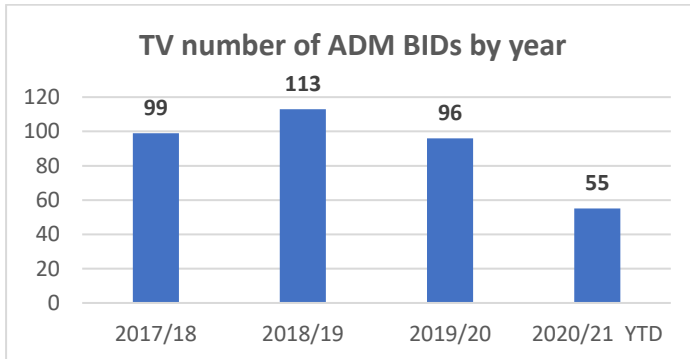




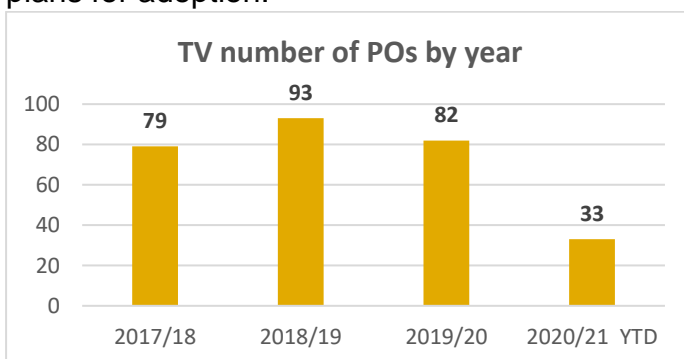
MBC Adoption orders are increasing within this year, and data presented is to end Q3, which will rise for the current full year. This is reflective of increased focus within MBC on progressing permanency plans for children.

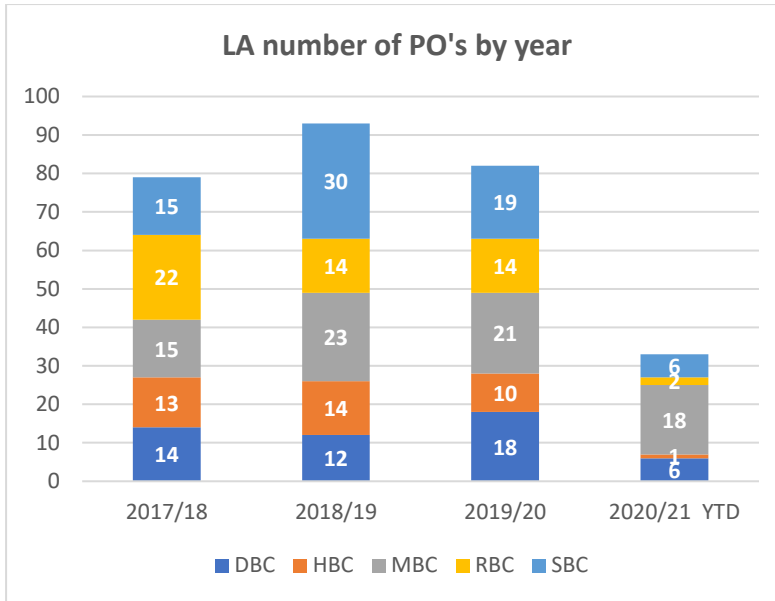


The numbers of children placed by MBC is rising, from lowest number in 2018-19. Year to date figures are currently at the same level as year end figures for last year, showing improvement on the numbers of children being placed for adoption, and improved focus on permanency planning.



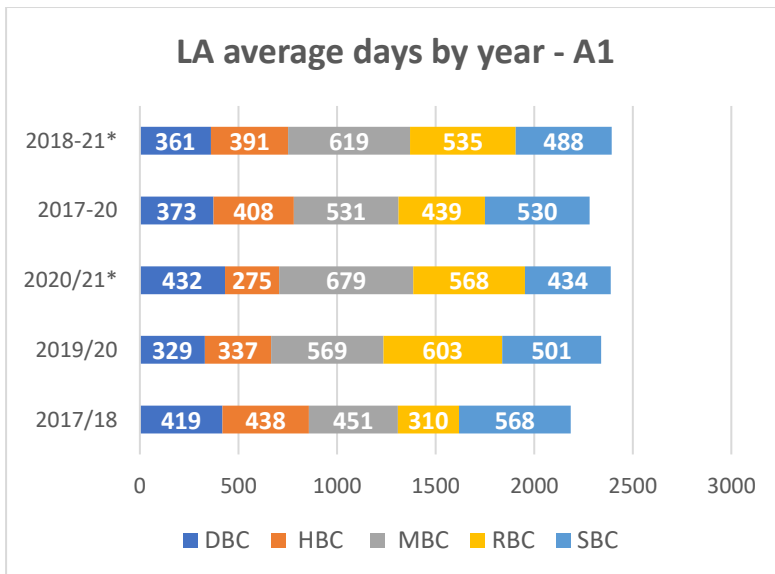
The data shows that while BID's are reducing overall in Tees valley, number of children with an adoption plan are remaining at a higher level/rising in MBC. This year's data should be treated with caution, as we do not yet fully understand the impact of covid on care plans across the region, and UK as 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