

VALE, VALLEYS AND CARDIFF ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE (VVC)

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 APRIL 2017 TO 31 MARCH 2018

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC) is the largest of the five regional collaboratives which form part of the National Adoption Service in Wales (NAS). It provides a regional adoption service to the Vale of Glamorgan Council, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, Cardiff Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council. The service is hosted by the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

1.2 This is VVC's third annual report and covers the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018. The Collaborative is required to review the service it provides by regulation and as part of the reporting requirements set out in the legal agreement underpinning the operation of the Collaborative. This report seeks to combine the various reporting requirements in one report.

Appendix A to the report sets out key performance data by quarter and local authority.

2. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

2.1 There has been no changes to the managerial structure of the service during the period and the service continues to be managed by a Regional Adoption Manager and three service specific managers for Family Finding, Adoption Support, and Recruitment and Assessment. The Family Finding Manager went on maternity leave in January 2018 and the post has been covered by an interim 'acting up' arrangement within the service. The Adoption Support Manager's post has been made a permanent full time position as a result of the Best Value Review.

2.2 There have been some changes to the staff team during the year due to a part time Business Support Officer leaving the service to obtain a full-time position, two part-time Social Workers retiring, one Social Worker, who was employed for 30

hours, moving out of the area and two Social Workers going on maternity leave. The loss of these part-time posts has enabled some reconfiguration of these posts to full time positions. The service has continued to receive a high number of applicants for the vacancies which have arisen and also has had success in filling temporary positions. Some short term agency cover has also been put in place to cover gaps.

2.3 As outlined in the last report and due to the increased demands being placed upon the Collaborative, the Directors of the partner authorities commissioned a Best Value Review of the service in December 2016. The review was undertaken by an Officer from the Vale of Glamorgan Business Improvement Team and Finance Officer from Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council. The analysis for the review was undertaken between January and September 2017. A draft report was presented to members of the Management Board during the autumn of 2017, prior to the report being agreed by the Directors and Joint Committee in December 2017.

2.4 The review was comprehensive and sought engagement from a range of staff both within VVC and also from our local authority partners. Consultation also took place with key stakeholders, members of the Management Board and representatives from the NAS central team. The review considered a range of aspects from the current service delivery model, the level of demand being placed upon the service, staffing arrangements, the governance of the region and funding.

2.5 The principal recommendations of the review were as follows:

- a) Finalise completion of the digital Adoption Panel process to streamline processes and improve efficiency.
- b) Establish an Operational Group of VVC and local authority managers to progress service improvement and development work within the region.
- c) Increase regional staff resources within Adoption Support by securing the full time permanent appointment of the Adoption Support Manager and also the additional post covering Letterbox and Access to Birth Records.

- d) In order to meet the emerging need to recruit more adopters, the review also recommended the appointment of a Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator on a two year fixed term basis and two Social Workers in Recruitment and Assessment, one to be appointed initially and a further one should adopter applications increase.
- e) Formal review of the Legal Agreement to be undertaken to include twice yearly meetings of the Directors and the Management Board, changes to the frequency of Management Board meetings to quarterly and establishment of an Operational Group as part of the overall governance of the region.
- f) Update and consider revision of the existing funding formula for the service and keep it under review.

2.6 An Action Plan has been developed and agreed to take forward the actions arising from the review.

2.7 VVC continued to operate from Ty Pennant, Pontypridd during this time but due to the licence to occupy the premises expiring in September 2018, a trawl of alternative accommodation options was undertaken in the latter part of 2017 which included partner authorities and commercial options. The available commercial options were financially prohibitive and the partner authorities provided a nil return with the exception of the Vale of Glamorgan. It was therefore agreed that the service would relocate to the Dock Office in Barry during August 2018 prior to the cessation of the licence and following completion of some remedial work to the new premises. It was felt that this would also allow for consultation re any HR issues and for any other matters affecting staff to be considered. The service moved to their new base on 10 September 2018.

2.8 The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored closely by the Management Board and Joint Committee. The end of year position reported a slight overspend in the budget for 2017-18 created by some

additional and unexpected costs for cleaning services at Ty Pennant which were received at year end. The Collaborative receives an annual internal audit undertaken by Bridgend and Vale Audit Shared Service. The audit undertaken for 2017-18 found 'substantial assurance' in respect of the management of risks within the service. The Best Value recommendation to review the funding formula has been taken forward by the Finance Technical Group comprised of Finance Officers from the four authorities. It was agreed that funding arrangements would remain unchanged for 2017-18 but further work would be undertaken in 2018-19 to consider options for future funding of the Collaborative.

2.9. The Management Board has continued to meet bi-monthly during this period. Board meetings have continued to be well represented and supported by Heads of Service from the partner authorities and wider membership. The representative from the Voluntary Adoption Agency, St David's has changed to their Director of Operations and the Chair of the Management Board transferred to the Director of Social Services for RCT in July 2017.

2.10 The Management Board has played a key role in monitoring the progress of the Best Value Review to address improvements in service delivery. It has also continued to regularly monitor the overall performance of the region highlighting areas for improvement and potential solutions. To support the Management Board in monitoring the key elements of the performance framework, it has agreed the key performance data it wishes to receive on a regular basis which is attached at Appendix A.

2.11 The performance of the regional service has continued to be monitored via the NAS Performance Framework. The range of measures has increased each year which has required more comprehensive recording mechanisms to be put in place to capture this data. VVC has fully complied with all reporting requirements.

2.12 The Director of Operations for NAS attended the VVC Management Board in May 2018 to present the NAS End of Year Report for 2017-18 in respect of VVC's performance. Some of the headlines from this report are covered later.

2.13 The Joint Committee met in June and December 2017. The Joint Committee is comprised of elected Members from each of the authorities although the individual Members changed in May 2017 following the local elections. The Joint Committee approved the annual accounts for the Collaborative, the annual budget and plan and the Best Value Review.

3. SERVICE FUNCTIONS

3.1 VVC's Annual Work Plan has focused actions around the ongoing priorities set by NAS to improve adoption support and to place children and recruit adopters more effectively. Progress in meeting these priorities and developments to enhance service delivery are outlined under each of the service areas.

4. FAMILY FINDING

4.1 As previously indicated VVC is the largest of the regional collaboratives with the largest children looked after population. This context was acknowledged in the NAS End of Year Report for 2017-18 which states 'one of the implications of the size of VVC is that it represents a correspondingly large proportion of the overall demand across the spectrum of adoption services that local government and partners are required to provide'. In terms of family finding activity this represents a large area of work for the region and one that has increased since VVC's inception. The NAS report indicates that regionally VVC worked with about 15% of the children looked after within the region during this period.

4.2 The number of children referred for adoption totalled **244** which has fallen slightly on the previous year, although this represents the highest in Wales. **86** children were placed for adoption during the year, a 6% increase on the previous year. A new measure introduced in 2017-18 requires regions to report on the location of placements. During the reporting period, **51** children out of the 86 were placed within the region. **23%** of the placements made were for children in sibling groups which represents an increasing trend.

4.3 At the end of the year there were **138** children who had a 'should be placed' for adoption decision but had not been placed for adoption which is significant

increase on previous returns. **117** of these children were subject of a Placement Order. This figure has been used to project the number of adoptive placements required by the region to meet its' needs. However out of this total, 16 children were on hold pending a change of Care Plan, 34 children had active links, 10 of which were proceeding to matching, and the region was at year end actively recruiting for 67 children.

4.4 The region has recorded **102** Placement Orders being made during the year which also represents a slight decrease although the number of Adoption Orders has increased to **70**.

4.5 The measure in relation to the timeliness of the process from becoming looked after to being placed for adoption indicates that on average children were placed within **13.6 months** which the NAS report indicates is 'close to the benchmark of 13 months or less and one of the better averages amongst the NAS regions'. The NAS report also highlights that the VVC average of **7.7 months** from Placement Order 'is a significant improvement from last year; it is better than the national average although the benchmark is 6 months or less'. Regrettably of all the placements made during the year, **68** children had waited longer than six months to be placed which is higher than the previous year but is indicative of the challenges faced in placing children with complex and additional needs.

4.6 The level of placement breakdown remains relatively low with **3** placement disruptions during the year, one of these was a sibling group where one of the children had complex emotional needs and the other was a little boy with complex needs who had also experienced a previous breakdown.

4.7 The number of birth parents referred to the service for counselling fell during the year to **297** in line with the national picture and slight reduction in children being referred. Overall take up in this area continues to pose significant challenges for the service as only **112** parents took up the service, although this represents one of the higher proportions across Wales.

4.8 The provision of Life Journey Material for children at their second adoption review remains an area of national and regional focus. Further improvement has been noted during the period with **68%** of children placed having life journey work materials in place by the second review. NAS has provided a Welsh Government grant to regions to improve performance in this area. VVC has purchased various resources of direct work materials which have been distributed to childcare teams in the region to assist and improve practice. AFA Cymru has been commissioned by NAS to develop a toolkit and to work with regions to develop improvement plans. AFA Cymru facilitated a day for VVC staff and local authority practitioners in November 2017 and more development days are planned.

4.9 The region utilises several different methods to assist Family Finding. If there are no internal links within the Collaborative external funding agreement is sought. The Welsh Adoption Register generates suggested links based on children's referrals and adopters approved by regional collaboratives and Welsh Voluntary Adoption Agencies. Last year VVC purchased a licence for Link Maker, a national database of children waiting. This has proved to be the most successful avenue for external links although sometimes this has been supplemented by an external mailshot which is sent securely to adoption agencies within the UK. The use of Link Maker has also reduced the need to advertise nationally in family finding publications for children waiting.

4.10 VVC accessed the Welsh Adoption Register Exchange Day in North Wales September 2017 where 29 children were profiled. Unfortunately there were fewer adopters in attendance and many children did not have any potential links from the event. A lot of interest was generated for one of the children but unfortunately none of these links were suitable. One link is still being explored however it has taken some time as therapeutic involvement was required for the transition.

4.11 The service has also used Activity Days organised through Coram BAAF to promote children that were harder to place. Three were accessed across the UK, one child attended in May 2017, another attended in June 2017 and a third child attended in September 2017. Unfortunately no appropriate links progressed from these days. The first Welsh Adoption Activity Day took place in March 2018. This

was extremely successful and resulted in links progressing to a match for four children, a toddler with additional needs, an older child and a sibling group of two.

4.12 As members of Adoption UK, VVC is able to access 'Children Who Wait', a magazine which profiles children seeking adoptive families. A sibling group of two were profiled in September 2017 and two single children were profiled in March – May 2018 for three sequential editions. The sibling group were not linked using this method however we are exploring links for the two single children. As part of the membership VVC is able to access 10 free advertising spaces from April 2018 which will hopefully be utilised productively.

4.13 An application to join 'New Families Social' Adoption Group from April 2018 has been made which will hopefully offer another avenue of profiling children to approved same sex adopters across the UK.

5. RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF ADOPTERS

5.1 The Performance Management Framework records key activity around enquiries, response times to enquiries, applications and timeliness in respect of approval of adopters. The returns in respect of adopter activity have been mixed, with improvements in some areas but not in other areas.

5.2 The region received **242** enquiries from prospective adopters in total for the year 2017/18 which represents an impressive 61% increase on the previous year and is the highest it has been for three years. This is encouraging and provides a sound basis for planning recruitment activity going forward. It remains however difficult to accurately identify the geographical location for all the enquiries received, although the local authority area is now a standard question on the enquiry form linked to the VVC website. Whilst this question has been added, VVC continues to receive a significant number of electronic enquiries where the local authority area is not completed and this information is not specified on the enquiries that come via the NAS website. Of the 242 enquiries received, VVC was only able to identify the local authority area for 152.

5.3 VVC's response rate to enquiries within five working days has returned to 100% following a slight drop in performance during the previous year. It is anticipated that the employment of a Marketing Officer will address any further deficits in this area and enhance our initial response to ensure that enquiries are followed up promptly.

5.4 The region approved **46** adopter households in the year 2017/18 compared with **47** in the previous year. The region was on target to approve over 50 households but there were **5** assessments that did not progress to Panel. This is a high number but the reasons given assist in understanding the complexities which can occur in assessing adopters. In two of the assessments, the couple's birth children were not supporting adoption. In one of the assessments the couple had come to a realisation that adoption was not right for their family situation and in another a realisation that they had come too late to adoption. In the fifth assessment that did not proceed a complex family issue had emerged which the couple found too intrusive to continue. There were two further assessments that were due to be completed in the final quarter of the year but were put on hold. The first couple suffered the loss of a family member and wished to take some time to grieve. The second couple had a complex family issue which arose during the assessment which needed further investigation.

5.5 In relation to VVC's overall performance in relation to the timeliness of assessments the picture is mixed. The timescales from initially enquiry to approval has increased from **12.2 months** to **13.5 months** but the timescale from application to approval has improved with an average of **7.1 months** overall. These figures clearly highlight that the greatest gap is between initial enquiry and application, arguably something that has been out of the control of the Collaborative as this is very much related to individual choice. The region continues to be able to account for the delays in assessment and has continued to supply an explanatory narrative to NAS to accompany the return in respect of these measures.

5.6 As mentioned in the previous report, VVC revamped the initial information provided to adopters, believing that those interested in adoption should be provided with more information on the needs of children at a far earlier stage in the process in order for them to make a more informed decision around whether adoption is the

right choice for them. This continues to be the case, and those attending the information evenings have frequently provided very positive feedback to VVC on how much better informed they have felt. It is clear that the trend noted previously with enquirers taking a longer time to come forward for an initial visit has continued. The recruitment of families for siblings and children with additional needs continues to remain a challenge.

5.7 The shortfall in adopter recruitment and the number of children waiting at year end has become an emerging and very pressing need. VVC was required, along with other regions, to submit a Recruitment Plan and target for approvals at year end. For the reasons indicated above VVC fell short of this target but the need to increase adopter resource was considered closely by the Best Value Review and the additional resources recommended in Recruitment & Assessment was in response to as the emerging need.

5.8 The decision to employ a Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator is seen as crucial in being able to track and harness the enquiries to increase the number of enquiries which can be converted into applications. Due to the number of children waiting and the number of Placement Orders projected to be made in the coming year, NAS project that the number of adoptive placements required will be 145. This is likely to pose significant challenges upon the service. The Marketing and Recruitment Officer has recently been appointed.

5.9 As of 31st March 2018 there were 26 assessments being completed by the region with a further 11 assessments generated from the adopter training in March 2018 which were all allocated within the first quarter of 2018/19.

5.10 Five of the adopter assessments undertaken during the year were from foster carers wishing to adopt the child in placement. Of the five that were completed in 2017/18, four of them had the child placed with them for more than one year at the point of their application.

5.11 During the past year the majority of the assessments completed have been allocated within the Recruitment and Assessment function. Agreement to extend hours for a couple of part time staff in the Family Finding Team was sought to complete assessments that could not be allocated and by utilising staff slippage monies. Assessment plans and mid-point reviews have continued to be used to improve practice and timeliness.

5.12 VVC continues to receive high numbers of non-agency adoption referrals, the majority of which are from step-parents wishing to adopt their step-child. It is planned that this area of work will be collated by NAS in the coming year. Again this is an area which poses significant challenges for the service. The need to prioritise the recruitment of adopters for children waiting to be adopted has resulted in a waiting list for allocation. On occasion, applicants have submitted their application to adopt directly into Court which resulted in an urgent assessment being required.

5.13 During the year, there has also been a slight increase in inter-country related enquiries, which have posed some issues for the team due to their complexity. Quite a few of the enquiries received are from couples wishing to adopt a child who is known to them, who resides in a different country. This area has also identified a knowledge gap in the service which we hope to address via training.

5.14 Towards the end of the reporting period, NAS was able to secure some additional funding to assist with recruitment. VVC utilised their grant to provide leaflets to assist with marketing the service and along with two other regions to employ a marketing company, COWSHED to develop a regional Marketing Plan. Further funding has been provided by NAS to provide mentoring by the company to the regions. This plan will therefore be further developed by the Marketing Co-ordinator in conjunction with COWSHED.

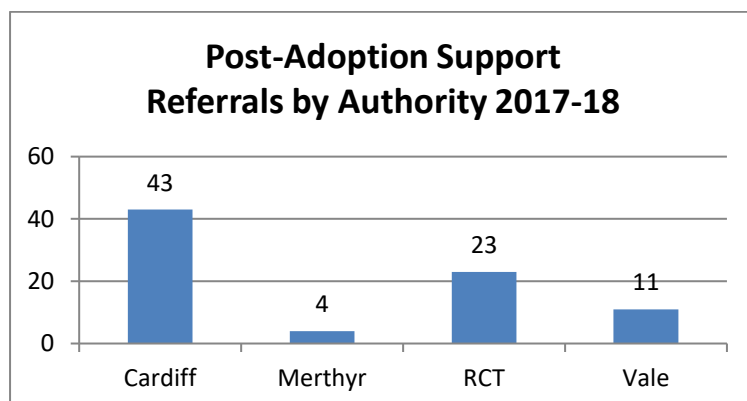
5.15 VVC has recognised that further training is beneficial for adopters to help prepare them for the matching process following approval as adopters. A couple of staff within Recruitment and Assessment have therefore devised a four day course for adopters which now runs every two months. The course provides guidance to help prospective adopters prepare for a visit from a childcare Social Worker to discuss a proposed match providing an overview of the process required to match a

child and explain the legal process of adoption. Information about how introductions are planned is also provided. The second part of the course encourages adopters to think about the grief and loss a child will experience following a placement move. Activities are undertaken to help adopters think about their support network and highlight the importance of seeking help if they experience difficulties post placement. Techniques to promote positive parenting are discussed and materials shared to help adopters think about ways they can introduce themselves to children prior to placement.

5.16 Three training sessions were held between November 2017 and March 2018 and a total of 37 people attended the course during this period. A lot of positive feedback was received from participants including comments such as adopters felt 'better prepared' and found the course 'informative and enjoyable'. A Welcome Booklet for new adopters has also been developed which provides information and guidance pre-matching on a range of issues.

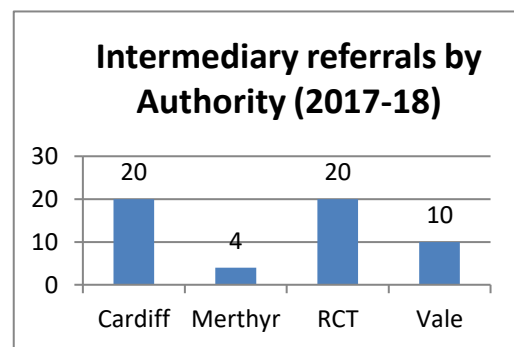
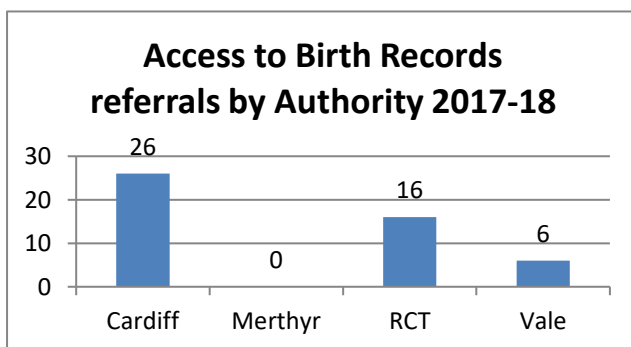
6. ADOPTION SUPPORT

6.1 Demand for adoption support services has remained steady through 2017-18. With **81** requests for adoption support received VVC is showing a consistent referral rate with the previous year's figure (83). This averages around 20 referrals per quarter requiring allocation for assessment. This trend has also continued in Quarter 1 of 2018-19 when 25 referrals were received.



Although referral rates overall remain similar, Cardiff's proportion of referrals rose by 54% from 2016-17 whilst RCT and the Vale of Glamorgan saw a drop of around 35%. Merthyr's referral rate dropped by over 50% however this represents a drop from 9 referrals in 2016-17 to just 4 in 2017-18. Q1 figures for 2018-2019 show referrals for Cardiff, RCT and the Vale of Glamorgan on a par with each other; in fact the Vale of Glamorgan has had 8 referrals in Q1 this year when there were only 11 in the whole of 2017-18.

6.2 In relation to Access to Birth Records cases, VVC has observed a drop of around 28% in referrals with **48** in 2017-18, however in contrast intermediary referrals have increased by 59% to **54** (from 34 last year). Comparing the referral rates when VVC became operational in 2015-16 to the year-end figures for 2017-18, intermediary referrals have increased by 184%. This is largely due to the increase in VVC's capacity to allocate Access to Birth Records cases resulting in an increase in these adopted adults seeking a follow-on intermediary service. VVC remains one of few regions in Wales that has been able to continue to provide this service albeit with a lengthy waiting list.



There has been no marked difference in the referral rates by local authority from the previous year in relation to Access to Birth Records. There is a notable increase in intermediary referrals for RCT from 7 to 20 in 2017-18 (185% increase).

6.3 As at 31st March 2018 there were **812** open letterbox cases, an increase of 6% from 767 on 31 March 2017. This reflects the ongoing gradual increase observed in letterbox contact as new referrals exceed the number of existing arrangements closing when a child reaches 18.

6.4 The permanent staffing to enhance the Adoption Support Team 2016 as a result of the pilot exercise in 2016 and the outcome of the Best Value Review has been of significant benefit in reducing pressures within the team and gaps in service delivery. The Letterbox Co-ordinator role in particular has improved the quality of support being provided to adoptive families and birth parents.

6.5 Other monies secured as part of the 2016 pilot were used to access specialist training, the majority of this being used in 2016-17 although additional training has been accessed for some staff in the Adoption Support Team to complete DDP Level 1 training during the year. Staff within the Adoption Support Team are experienced and committed to service improvement. The team has facilitated adoption support groups for adoptive parents with topics including Sensory Processing Difficulties, Social Media and Contact in the last year. In addition, a monthly toddler groups has been maintained which provides opportunities for early intervention as well as bi-annual fun days which have high attendances.

6.6 Family fun days were held in July and November 2017 which were both well attended and numbers of those attending remain consistently high at around 90-100 children. VVC issued a newsletter in the spring of 2018 which was produced by the Adoption Support Manager. The region also contributed to the Adopter Voice project with Adoption UK which included attendance at one of VVC's support groups to consult with adopters. A report of this consultation has been presented to VVC Management Board.

6.7 The Regional Adoption Manager and Adoption Support Manager have continued to be involved in the IPC project commissioned by NAS to develop a National Framework for Adoption Support, the National Adoption Support sub group meetings to take forward the Framework as well as the focused project on Life Journey Work through 2017-18. The Adoption Support Manager has been involved in securing resources to utilise the grant monies referred to earlier in the report to support improvements in Life Journey work. Further funding is anticipated for 2018-19 and plans for how to make the best use of these resources are being considered.

6.8 The Adoption Support Team has continued to develop an understanding of the demand for targeted and therapeutic services with families needing support across the region and the cost of these to the local authorities. At present the adoption support budget is not held centrally in the region and is retained by the individual local authorities. This continues to pose some challenge in terms of equity of service and timeliness of decision making, but generally local authority partners concur with the assessment undertaken by VVC and packages of support are being put in place as needed. The Adoption Support Manager is currently developing an adoption support improvement plan which places a greater focus on social work input and intervention with families prior to progression to therapeutic support services with a view to avoiding the need for such interventions.

6.9 The Regional Adoption Manager and Adoption Support Manager have, in conjunction with colleagues from Western Bay met with the CAMHS Clinical Lead with a view to developing a consultancy service for Social Workers and a clear referral pathway for adopted children who may require a CAMHS service. A plan to progress these initial discussions is being developed.

7. ADOPTION PANEL

7.1 The Collaborative has continued to operate a joint regional Panel from two sittings, a north sitting covering cases from RCT and Merthyr Tydfil CBC and a south sitting covering cases from Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. Where adopter approvals involve no medical issues, there is provision to transfer the case for consideration to the Panel sitting with availability.

7.2 Panel business has remained at a high level during the year with 42 Panel meetings being held, with three scheduled meetings being cancelled due to delays in cases being ready for presentation.

7.3 As outlined in the previous report and highlighted as an improvement action in the Best Value Review, a significant area of development for the Panel has been to move to digitalising the Panel process and business. This work was completed by

the end of March 2018 with the result that Panel business is now conducted via the use of tablets and sending Panel information to Panel members via a secure portal. This has improved security and reduced administrative time and printing costs.

7.4 Maintenance of the central list of Panel members continues to pose challenges in terms of maintaining a sufficient number of independent members and Social Work members. Some new members have been recruited during the year. An induction session for new members was held in June 2017 and a training day for all Panel members was also held in June 2017 facilitated by an independent trainer.

7.5 The other priority set in respect of completing the annual reviews of Panel members remains outstanding but a timetable is being developed to meet this requirement.

8. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

8.1 VVC has received the following complaints during the period:

- Complaint from prospective adopters regarding the process of linking and matching a child and lack of transparency on the part of the local authority Social Worker and staff within the Collaborative in respect of a link they were being considered for.
- Complaint from non-agency adopters regarding the initial advice provided by VVC regarding the process and requirements.
- Complaint from a step-parent regarding the step-parent adoption process, the delay in the Social Worker concluding the report and not responding to queries raised by the applicant.
- Complaint to the Managing Director from an adopted person regarding the service provided in respect of his access to birth records enquiry.
- Complaint from adoptive parents regarding their attendance at Adoption Panel in 2015 following a review of their approval. Complaint received as part of a stage 2 complaint to Cardiff Council concerning the breakdown in introductions to a child.
- Complaint from adoptive parent in respect of the post adoption support received from the allocated Social Worker.

- Complaint from an adoptive parent regarding the delay in securing a post adoption therapeutic support package.
- Complaint from adopters alleging that they had been discriminated against and treated less favourably by VVC staff in terms of their assessment and the subsequent linking process.

8.2 All the complaints have been resolved at stage 1 of the Vale of Glamorgan Complaint Process.

8.3 Two of the complaints have highlighted issues in respect of the linking process. VVC has, as outlined earlier in the report, introduced a fourth day of training to address some of the issues raised. Two of the complaints have highlighted issues in respect of the non-agency adoption process. VVC's website now contains information in respect of this process. Two have highlighted concerns in respect of adoption support which were addressed.

8.4 Regional staff have also received a number of compliments during the year. A record of these is maintained. The compliments include positive feedback from the fun-days, the toddler group, information evening and support provided for letterbox contact and access to birth records enquiries.

9. CONCLUSION AND 2018-19 PRIORITIES

9.1 During the period for this report, a Best Value Review was undertaken, commissioned by the Directors of the four local authorities. This provided a real opportunity to look at the strengths and weaknesses of the service and to look at potential remedies to address some of the presenting difficulties. The findings of the Review validated the earlier work undertaken by VVC detailing capacity and resourcing issues and options to address the shortfalls in the service.

9.2 In respect of regional performance, the increased the number of children being placed for adoption during the period, the number being adopted and the reduced time taken to place a child for adoption from Placement Order are positive improvements. Some improvement has also been noted in the provision of Life Journey materials for children placed and in respect of the take up of birth parent

counselling. These improvements must however be considered against the increase in the number of children waiting for placements and the number waiting over six months to be placed. This set against the decrease in approvals of adopters and delays in timely recruitment of adopters makes recruitment an ongoing and clear priority for the service.

9.3 The service has also been proactive in developing some new initiatives during the year to more effectively support adopters and prepare them for placement. There is also evidence that the increased permanent resource in Adoption Support is having a positive effect in improving performance and reducing pressures on the service. The priorities set for the 2017-18 have been met in part but some are ongoing due to the need to continue to remain focused on our core business.

9.4 The priorities we have set for 2018-19 focus upon completing the actions arising from the Best Value Review which have been endorsed by the Management Board. Particular emphasis for the remainder of the year will focus upon driving up the conversion rate of adopter enquiry to application with the intention of increasing the rate of adopter approvals. Some systems have already been put in place to improve our initial response following the recent appointment of the Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator and so it is hoped that these can be developed further once the additional resources in Recruitment and Assessment are in place.

9.10 The other focus of activity and priority for VVC during this current year has been managing the recent relocation of the service to Barry. In order to achieve as smooth a transition as possible and to minimise service disruption, this has required careful planning and preparation by VVC staff and the development of some new systems of working to meet the needs of the whole region. The permanent location will have benefits longer term but the service is still in a settling in period so it is important that our priorities remain delivering our core business and service improvements.

Angela Harris

Regional Adoption Manager

September 2018