

11 January 2021

Councillor G Hinchey
Cabinet Office
Rom 512
County Hall
Atlantic Wharf
Cardiff
CF10 4UW



Dear Councillor Hinchey

I refer to the letter from Councillor Bridgeman dated 21 December 2020 following the presentation of VVC's Annual Report 2019-20 to Scrutiny Committee on 15 December 2020. I will endeavour to address the points raised as follows:

Children Looked After

It is difficult for VVC to fully comment upon the reasons why the numbers of children looked after have risen during the reporting period whilst referrals for children requiring adoption had decreased. VVC collates data on each child referred into the service. VVC processes each referral through the different stages of the twin tracking process i.e. where the local authority considers whether a permanency plan of adoption or an alternative permanency plan is in the best interests of the child. These stages are detailed in the chart under point 1 later in the letter. The decrease in referrals noted during the reporting period was not a feature confined to VVC but formed part of a national trend which highlighted a 30% decrease in Placement Orders. During the current reporting year an increase in the number of referrals into the service during quarter 2 is noted as outlined in the Quarter 2 Performance Report appended to the letter.

Diversity issues

VVC's marketing materials either digital or in print clearly highlights that enquiries from all persons; regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender or marital status are welcomed.

We use a range of imagery to capture the different make-ups of family life including; cultural and ethnic diversity, a mix of ages, sibling groups, older children, LGBT+ and single parenting.

VVC's website features a curated mix of resources such as podcasts, books and shows that encourage people from across the spectrum of humanity to consider adopting. This is an ever growing and expanding resource which is updated on a regular basis.

During 2020 we updated our initial information packs in terms of design and content to use more inclusive language and imagery.

The Marketing and Recruitment Officer analysed which languages our enquirers spoke aside from Welsh and English. This led to VVC also producing the packs in Arabic, Spanish and Italian. There is also provision via our translation service to translate information packs in other languages of choice. It is hoped that by providing information in someone's first language or language of preference that they will be able to gain a better understanding of adoption in a language that they feel most comfortable in.

During the start of the pandemic our Marketing Officer contacted a number of organisations across the region including businesses, places of worship and local organisations. We provided them with shareable content about adoption and our support services which we encouraged them to share with staff / attendees who may require such information. Within this information we also provided shareable content which they could use if they knew anyone who was considering adoption within their organisation or through their HR department. We had some positive engagement with organisations including Cardiff University who are in the process of making their parental leave policies more inclusive to include adoption.

Raising the profile

During 2019 much work was undertaken to raise the profile of VVC. The Marketing and Recruitment Officer was established as a permanent role within the Collaborative. This position was critical in helping to identify suitable marketing opportunities and developing branded materials to advertise the service. As a region we worked closely with COWSHED, the marketing company commissioned by the National Adoption Service (NAS) to develop a national marketing campaign and to support regional marketing initiatives. We attended a number of local events throughout the year. These included Barry Pride, Pride Cymru, VOG Family Information Service Summer and Winter Fun Days, Barry 10K with Run4Wales, The Vale Agricultural Show, Vegan WinterFest and St Donat's Christmas Fayre. Vegan WinterFest proved to be the highest performing event as twenty-seven information packs were distributed resulting in over thirty conversations with interested parties.

During 2019 VVC staff were invited to speak about adoption at two churches; one in Cardiff and one in Barry. These led to three assessments of prospective adopters. VVC also attended the National Eisteddfod with NAS to support the national campaign. We also trialled stalls at a wedding fayre and IKEA to provide opportunities to reach a wider audience.

VVC's marketing strategy during 2020 was to build on this presence. The National Adoption Service had booked stands at the National Eisteddfod and Pride Cymru, but both of these events were cancelled due to the unfolding pandemic. Attendance at other local events was planned but these were also cancelled.

Since April 2020, VVC has therefore focused its' marketing strategy upon ways of reaching a potential audience through online events and the use of social media channels, Facebook and Instagram. The National Adoption Service linked up with

Pride Cymru during National Adoption Week to create a webinar for prospective adopters. The four adoptive parents who participated came from VVC. The National Adoption Service also created a podcast during 2020 and there were two webinars associated with these, one for the English podcast and one for the Welsh podcast. These were promoted online as events prior to National Adoption Week and three adopters from VVC took part in this.

During the past year and the move to virtual working, there has been a focus upon how adopters can best be supported remotely and kept up to date. Measures such as WhatsApp support groups for adopters, a secure email system to keep adopters up to date and a monthly quiz night have all been developed. All of these avenues provide further opportunities to encourage people to encourage their friends and acquaintances who are considering adoption to approach us. Word of mouth still remains one of the most highly effective recruitment strategies within adoption.

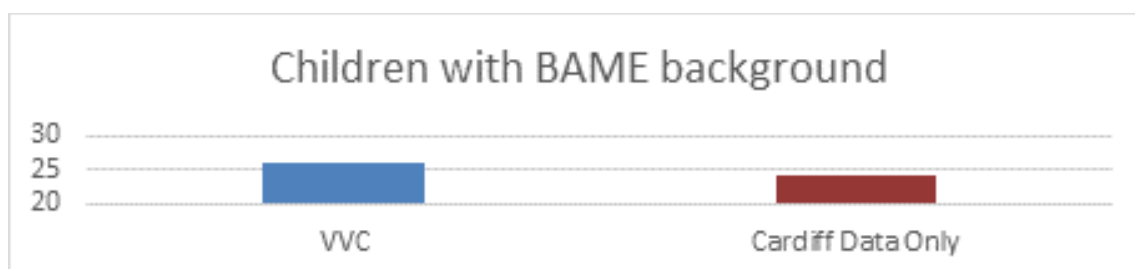
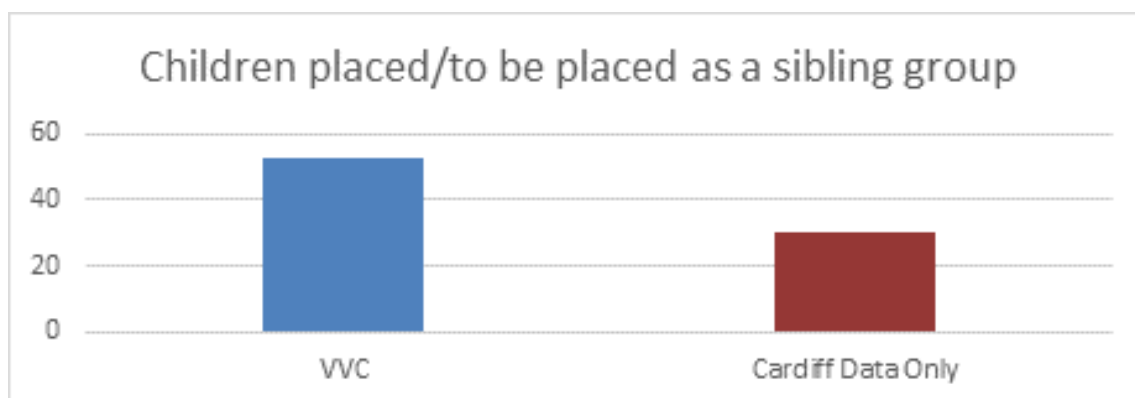
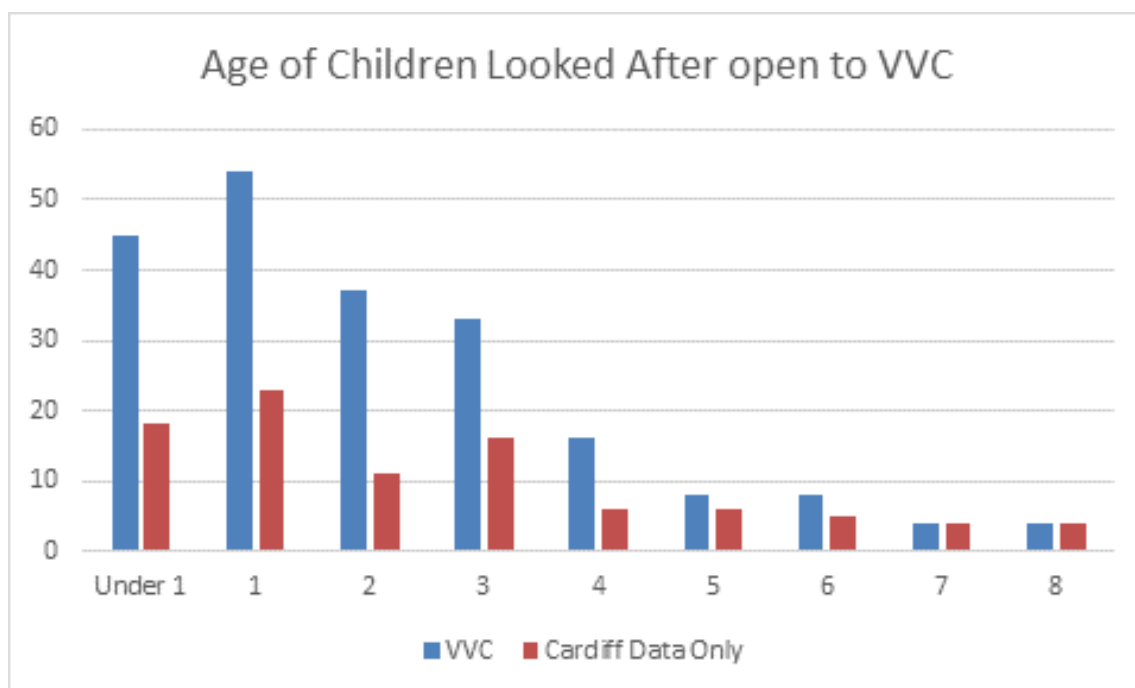
Moving into 2021 VVC will continue to monitor which face to face events are planned once lockdown restrictions are eased and the marketing opportunities these may provide. However, due to the increased opportunities provided via social media channels, it is likely that these aspects will be retained and form part of our strategy going forward.

Data / Information

1. Overview profile of adopters and children looked after currently in the system, including ethnicity of current approved adopters.

These charts provide information in respect of the status of children VVC were working with as at 31 December 2020.

STAGE IN ADOPTION PROCESS - CHILDREN	VVC Total	Cardiff Data Only
Placed for Adoption	77	29
Matched/Linked with Adopters	27	14
Waiting (Not matched or linked with adopters)	38	17
Has a 'Should be Adopted' Decision but awaiting Placement Order	19	9
Referred to Adoption – Final Care Plan not decided	44	21
Care Plan changed or changing from adoption	4	3
TOTAL	209	93



These charts below provide information in respect of the profile of VVC adopters as at 31 March 2020.

ADOPTERS	VVC Total	Cardiff Data Only
Ratified approvals 2019/20	69	29
BAME households 2019/20	6	5
LGBTQ+ households	10	6

Distribution of BAME ethnicity

British Pakistani 1
 British Indian 1
 British African 2
 British Sri Lankan 1

The charts below provide information in respect of the profile of VVC adopters as at 31 December 2020.

ADOPTERS	VVC Total	Cardiff Data Only
Ratified approvals 2020/21 (Q1, 2 & 3)	49	21
BAME households 2020/21 (Q1, 2 & 3)	5	3
LGBTQ+ households	10	7

Distribution of BAME ethnicity

British Pakistani 3

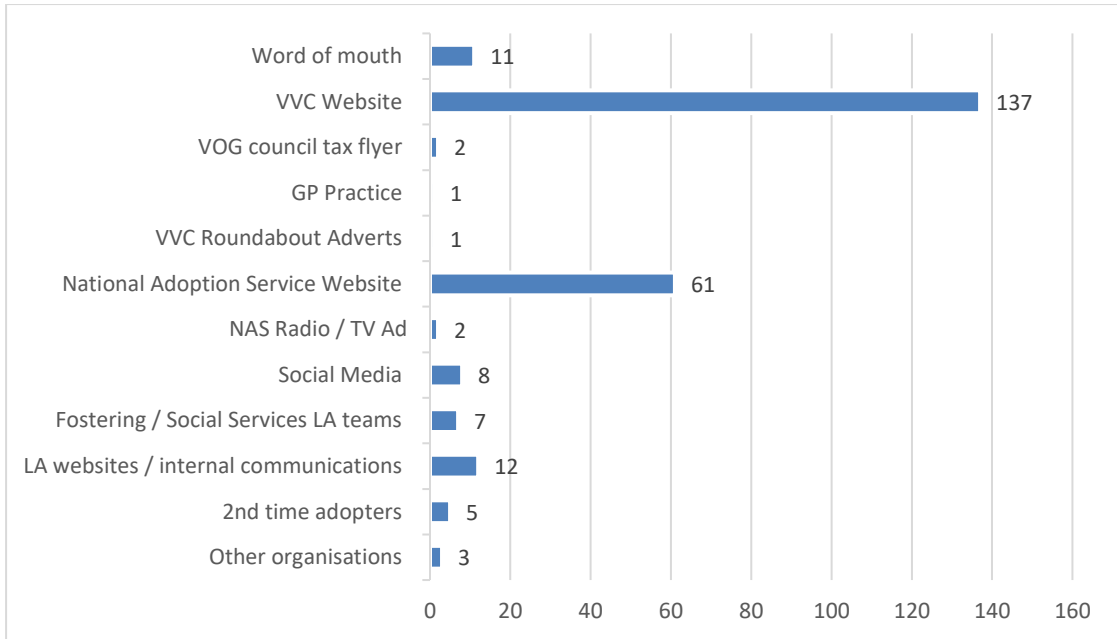
2. Q2 Performance for 2020/21.

Please see Quarter 2 report appended to the letter..

3 & 4. Where prospective adopters are coming from – through what events/medium etc.

How potential adopters had heard about the service.

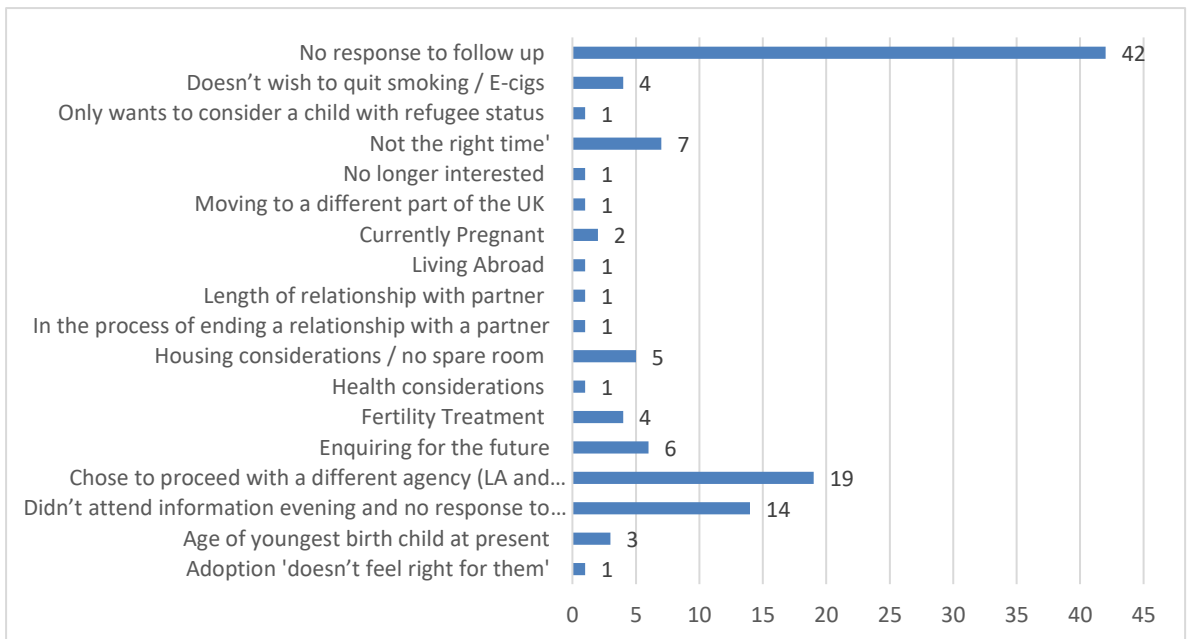
This chart covers the period up to 31 December 2020



5. Why people reached out to the service.

The vast majority of our enquiries come from within the region as prospective applicants are encouraged to approach their local area in the first instance. The exceptions to this are usually those applicants who specifically want to be considered by VVC (often as a result of a positive recommendation from a friend etc) or if they are in a work situation or other circumstances where it would not be appropriate for them to be considered by their local region.

6. Why people choose not to continue in the process.



**7 & 8. How the service will increase numbers of BAME adopters;
How the service will increase numbers of LGBTQ+ adopters;**

As indicated previously, VVC encourages interest from all aspects of our community. In terms of promoting adoption within these groups our strategy would include contact with organisations which cater for people who identify as BAME and / or LGBTQ+ and engage with places of worship, community support and action groups and umbrella organisations such as Pride Cymru, Stonewall and the Muslim Council of Wales VVC is a long standing member of New Family Social, a UK charity led by LGBTQ+ adopters and foster carers.

The Marketing and Recruitment Officer has started to follow a number of such organisations on social media with the hope of engaging with them and hopefully them engaging with us through a follow or a message.

VVC's marketing materials have been adapted to highlight and celebrate all types of family and to ensure that we reflect all aspects of the community.

VVC has supported adopters in becoming champions for adoption via national campaigns and in providing opportunities for them to share their experience with others through our platforms.

VVC has also participated in discussions at a national level via the NAS Marketing Subgroup exploring the development of a recruitment campaign to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

The current profile of VVC adopters from a BAME background or identifying as LGBTQ+ is detailed under point 1.

9. How the service will increase numbers of adopters in the 20-29 and 50-59 age groups.

It is apparent from the data we are now able to produce that take up from these age groups is lower than in the 30 -50's age group. The reasons for this appear to vary and in the most part relate to the individual circumstances of each potential applicant. The marketing strategy we have developed aims to reach as wide an audience as possible but does not focus upon targeting certain age groups. We do not discriminate on the basis of age, although by law all applicants have to be aged 21 & over. There is no upper age limit in terms of being able to adopt, although the age of the prospective adopters can be a factor in matching a very young child.

10. Further information on how the service is capturing feedback from young people and outputs from any consultation with young people, outlining their views of the service and their experiences.

Part of developing VVC's marketing strategy during 2021 is to explore opportunities to connect more with people who are adopted and facilitate them sharing their experiences with prospective adopters and their peers.

VVC's Children and Young Persons Co-ordinator works closely with Adoption UK in delivering the Connected service for adopted children and young people aged 7 up. This service is well used by children and young people from VVC and provides an avenue for feedback on the service and opportunities for consultation. This also allows VVC the opportunity to identify young people who could become advocates for adoption at a local level.

11. Provide further information on the process for adopters including typical timescales.

Most initial enquiries are received via the VVC website or NAS website. Enquirers are sent a welcome letter and information pack and they are encouraged to contact re booking onto an information evening. If we do not hear back from them, enquirers are then followed up to ascertain if they wish to continue with their enquiry.

Monthly Information evenings have been held virtually since April 2020. Following attendance at the Information evening, enquirers are provided with further written information and encouraged to consider proceeding to an initial visit. Again initial visits are currently being undertaken remotely by the Marketing Officer and /or a member of the Recruitment Team. Following this prospective applicants are invited to attend a three day training programme; statutory checks are commenced, and a decision is made to move to the full assessment stage of the process.

In April 2020, the Adoption Agency Regulations were amended to introduce the two stage model of assessment which has been operational in England for some time. This allows two months for the initial part of the process and four months for the full assessment to be undertaken. Due however to the restrictions imposed by Covid-19, Welsh Government have allowed an easement to the Regulations to allow Stage 1 to run as part of the Stage 2 process until 31 March 2021 when the position will be reviewed.

The benchmark developed by NAS from application to approval is six months. During 2019-20 54% of the 69 approvals were achieved in this timeframe. Although comparable with the performance of other regions, this was seen as an area for regional improvement especially as the new Regulations prescribe a much tighter timeframe. The average timescale has not as yet been calculated for this year and it is more than likely that average timescales will have been impacted at year end by the pandemic. Completion of adopter medicals and the restrictions imposed in undertaking face to face assessment visits has made the assessment process more protracted. Progress in completing assessments is however kept under regular review and is reported to NAS on a quarterly basis. There was pleasing evidence at the end of Quarter 2 that completion of assessments was beginning to increase with 20 having been completed and a further 20 plus projected for completion by the end of Quarter 3.

I trust the information provided addresses the matters raised by Committee but please advise if any more information or clarification is required.

Yours Sincerely

Angela Harris

Angela Harris
Regional Adoption Manager

cc Deborah Driffield, Assistant Director Children's Services, Cardiff Council