



Vale, Valleys
and Cardiff
Adoption | Mabwysiadu
yn y Fro, y Cymoedd
a Chaerdydd

VALE, VALLEYS, AND CARDIFF ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE

REVIEW OF SERVICE AND

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

For Period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

NATIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE



Gwasanaeth
Mabwysiadu
Cenedlaethol | National
Adoption
Service

**Achieving More Together /
Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd**

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VALE, VALLEYS, AND CARDIFF ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE (VVC) ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1st APRIL 2022 to 31st March 2023

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Vale, Valleys, and Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC) as part of the National Adoption Service in Wales (NAS), 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.

1.2 This report covers the period **1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023**. The requirement to review the service under Regulation 39 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019 on a six-monthly basis is incorporated into this report. It also includes the reporting requirements set out in the governance arrangements for the region. The report provides a record of the performance, activity and the quality of the service provided during the reporting period.

1.3 The report has the following Appendices:

Appendix 1 sets out key performance data in respect of children by quarter and local authority.

Appendix 2 provides information in respect of adopter enquiries and recruitment of adopters.

Appendix 3 provides information in respect of Adoption Support.

Appendix 4 provides information in respect of Adoption Panel activity.

2. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

- 2.1** There have been no changes to the organisational structure of the service although during the year, VVC managers were regraded to reflect the increase in responsibilities and overall development of the service. The service continues to be delivered via three functional teams, each one managed by a Team Manager and a Business Support Team managed by a Business Support Manager.
- 2.2** Staff have continued to work on a hybrid basis with attendance at the office to carry out specific responsibilities and in person meetings where required. Some members of the Business Support Team have continued to work from the office to carry out core tasks and respond to enquiries. The Vale of Glamorgan are undertaking a review of office space which will assist in determining future office needs.
- 2.3** The membership of the Joint Committee changed in May 2022 following the local elections. This caused a delay in convening the meeting scheduled for May 2022 and so a combined meeting of VVC Management Board and Joint Committee took place in July 2022. The Directors for the partner authorities also attended this meeting. The Joint Committee met in December 2022 and in January 2023 to agree the budget.
- 2.4** Quarterly meetings of VVC's Management Board continued to be held during the period and have been chaired by the Vale of Glamorgan's Director of Social Services. There has been no change to the membership of the Management Board during this period.
- 2.5** The Operational Group has continued to meet on a quarterly basis. Revisions to the Terms of Reference have now been incorporated into the new Collaborative Agreement. A joint Heads of Service and Operational Group meeting was held in June 2022 to look at Adoption Support matters and provide greater consistency of practice.
- 2.6** The agendas for all these levels of regional governance have continued to address a range of matters both at a regional and national level. These include budget approval, performance reporting, setting service priorities and relevant aspects from the national

agenda. A representative from AFA Cymru attended a combined meeting of the Management Board, Directors and Joint Committee in July 2022 to discuss the implementation of the Welsh Early Permanence Framework.

- 2.7** The budget for the Collaborative is managed by the Vale of Glamorgan and is monitored closely by the Management Board and approved by the Joint Committee. Due to the vacancy position and revenue generated by VVC adopters being utilised by external agencies, the end of year position in March 2022 reported a significant underspend in the budget for 2021-22. A proposal to retain the underspend within VVC was agreed by Management Board and Joint Committee in June 2022. These monies were allocated to provide additional Adoption Support services, independent assessments, and the regional contribution to the TESSA programme. The service was able to utilise these monies to appoint a fixed term Social Worker to the Adoption Support team and to extend some part-time contracts within the team to increase capacity and meet increased demands. A number of non-agency assessments were undertaken by an external independent agency to reduce the waiting list for this area of work. However, following discussions regarding the 2023-24 budget during quarter 3 a decision was taken to halt further spend against the underspend in an effort to contribute to the savings required for the forthcoming year. During quarter 4 NAS obtained Welsh Government funding to meet the regional contributions to the TESSA programme across Wales which has ensured the continuation of the programme for the next two years.
- 2.8** In October 2022, as part of the budget planning process for 2023-24, the Management Board began considering potential cost pressures for the coming financial year and recommended seeking the views of the regional Finance Officers in this process. A joint meeting was convened in November 2022 between Heads of Service, the Vale of Glamorgan Accounts Manager and the regional Finance Officers. The meeting considered options to address cost pressures affecting the service and potential savings which may be required. These proposals were put forward to a meeting of the Joint Committee in December 2022 but were not agreed until January 2023 following the Welsh Government settlement. The budget for 2023-24 was agreed with cost savings of 3%. It was also agreed to utilise the reserves in the event of the service not

being able to meet the cost savings. The Management Board recommended that the monitoring of the budget would be assisted on an ongoing basis by quarterly meetings of the Finance Officers, the Vale of Glamorgan Accounts Manager and the Regional Adoption Manager. These meetings have been scheduled to discuss the budget report and potential savings prior to presentation to Management Board.

- 2.9** The service is subject to an annual audit. The audit undertaken for the 2022/23 financial year identified a number of strengths and areas of good practice and the auditor determined that the system of controls in place were felt to provide “Substantial Assurance”.
- 2.10** Three issues of concern were identified, two of which related to compliance with the Collaborative Agreement which ended on 31 May 2023. The auditor highlighted the requirement to meet with Directors of Social Services on a bi-annual basis and noted the change to the billing of the partner agencies from quarterly to six-monthly. A meeting was held between the Management Board and Directors in July 2022, but it was agreed that these meetings were not required on an ongoing basis as internal communications mechanisms were already in place in the respective partner authorities. The six-monthly billing process had already been in place for some time as agreed by all partners. The revised Collaborative Agreement has formally removed the requirement to meet with Directors of Social Services and has formalised the billing process to six monthly.
- 2.11** The other issue of concern identified by the audit related to quoracy of Management Board meetings. There were two instances which occurred and due to short notice, it was not possible to arrange a substitute representative. A Management Action Plan has been developed in response to the findings and the finalised report was presented to VVC Management Board in July 2023.
- 2.12** The 2022/23 Statement of the Accounts will be audited by the Vale of Glamorgan’s External Auditors (Wales Audit Office) and reported to the Joint Committee in accordance with the Collaborative Agreement.

- 2.13** Meetings have been held with Regional information officers with responsibility for data management to review VVC's Information Sharing Protocol (WASPI) and carry out a Data Privacy Impact Assessment (DPIA). This work has been led by the Vale of Glamorgan's Data Protection Officer in conjunction with VVC staff and is ongoing.
- 2.14** On 1st June 2015 all parties formally signed the Collaborative Agreement which provides the governance framework within which the service operates and specifies the areas of responsibility and accountability.
- 2.15** The Collaborative Agreement which has been in place was varied in 2019 and extended to 31 May 2023. A revised Agreement has been prepared and the amendments agreed by the partner authorities. The authority to enter into the new Agreement was presented to the Vale of Glamorgan Cabinet on 6 July 2023 and agreed. It is in the process of being executed and sealed by all parties.
- 2.16** The Collaborative has continued to comply with all required performance monitoring and reporting to the National Adoption Service (NAS) as part of the National Performance Framework. VVC has been fully committed in adapting data collection systems to embed the range of measures required under the Framework and the two-stage model of assessment has fully embedded to ensure compliance with the requirements. In the Autumn of 2022, a range of new adoption support measures were issued to address the new requirements placed upon services in terms of contact, and improving the quality-of-Life Journey work which has necessitated further development of VVC's data systems. It is planned that these will be first reported to NAS during the first quarter of 2023-24.
- 2.17** The Regional Manager has been part of a working group initiated by Western Bay to develop the adoption modules for WCCIS. These have now been completed and work is underway to build them into the national system. A meeting has been held locally to begin discussion regarding the process of VVC transferring their record system onto WCCIS once the new system has been built.

2.18 The Regional Manager and Team Managers remain active participants in national forums and subgroups. The Regional Adoption Manager has taken on the Chair of the NAS Performance subgroup which is attended by representatives from the central team of NAS as well as representatives from the regional collaboratives and voluntary adoption agencies. The Recruitment and Assessment Manager was also part of a national group developing NAS' Welsh Early Permanence Strategy. The Regional Manager attends monthly meetings for Regional Adoption Managers facilitated by NAS and monthly meetings which involve representatives from the voluntary adoption agencies. In addition, the Head of Service for the Vale of Glamorgan, as host authority and the Regional Manager attend bi-monthly meetings with other regional and national leads to plan the business delivery of the national service from a regional perspective.

3. Staffing

- 3.1** During the year there have been several changes of staff created by staff leaving the service and long-term sickness. The Adoption Support Team lost two part-time members of staff. One of the vacancies created was filled by a staff member who had been employed on a temporary contract. The other vacancy was covered by an extension of contract for an existing part-time member of staff on a temporary basis until a permanent appointment could be made. The Family Finding Team also lost a part-time member of staff, and this was filled following an internal recruitment process.
- 3.2** In terms of the specialist posts funded from the 2019 Welsh Government investment in adoption services, the service is required to monitor any movement of staff within these posts to ensure that gaps are covered quickly, and performance is maintained. The Regional Adoption Manager has continued to complete six monthly returns to NAS during 2022-23 which report upon the performance of the region in relation to these posts to ensure continuation of the funding.
- 3.3** The investment currently funds five posts within the service which have remained largely stable. However, the TESSA Co-ordinator left the service in July 2022 which meant that the duties were covered by the Family Finding Manager until the post was successfully recruited to in September 2022. The Children and Young Person Co-

ordinator obtained a Social Care Officer post within the Collaborative in August 2022 but he continued to cover the duties associated with the role in conjunction with Adoption UK. A new appointment to the role was made in December 2022.

- 3.4** At the beginning of the year, VVC Management Board agreed to certain proposals to utilise the underspend in the budget remaining from 2021-22. Part of these proposals involved the appointment of a short, fixed term post to address the some of the pressures being experienced by the Adoption Support Team.
- 3.5** As a result of the discussions concerning capacity in 2021-22, the Management Board also agreed as part of cost pressures to some additional investment within the service. Two new full-time Social Care Officer posts were created to support the Adoption Support Team and one part-time Social Care Officer position was created to support the Post Adoption Contact arm of the service. The full-time positions were recruited to in August and September 2022 and the part-time position was filled in December 2022 via an internal appointment.
- 3.6** A review of capacity within the Business Support function resulted in the creation of an additional part-time Business Support Officer post which was filled following an internal recruitment process. The Collaborative also benefited from a Kickstart employee during the year who subsequently went to obtain a permanent position within the service.
- 3.7** The Collaborative experienced some gaps in service delivery created by periods of long-term sickness. The Adoption Support Manager was on an extended period of sick leave in the early part of the year, which required the duties associated with the post to be covered by the other managers in the service. The Letterbox Co-ordinator was absent from her post for a significant period of time due to sickness absence until this was concluded in October 2022. The Letterbox service was covered during this period by extending the contract of a part time Social Worker.

4. SERVICE FUNCTIONS

4.1. Performance against each of the service functions is outlined under the following sections of the report alongside areas of development.

5. FAMILY FINDING (APPENDIX 1)

5.1 Family Finding remains a key area of activity for the region and the ability to place children effectively and promptly underpins all other activities within the service.

5.2 Quarters 1 and 2 saw **73** children referred with a possible care plan of adoption. Referrals increased in the latter half of the year with a further **89** children taking the total to **162**. Referral rates remain very similar for 2022-23 compared with 2021-22. However, the referrals were more heavily weighted to the first half of 2021-22 and the latter half of 2022-23. The reduction in numbers during the 12-month period crossing these two financial years is reflected in the subsequent reduced figures for 'Should Be Adopted' (SBA) decisions, Placement Orders (PO) and resulting placements during 2022-23. However, an increase in referrals for Q3 and Q4 2022-23 has resulted in a rise in SBA and PO activity and it is anticipated there being a subsequent impact with an increased number of children being placed for adoption in 2023-24.

5.3 Around **50%** of children referred in 2022-23 were withdrawn from adoption with an alternative care plan being made possible for them. This is a slight increase from the **48%** in the previous year. As noted in previous years, withdrawn referrals in many instances do not equate to a decrease in workload as a lot of work is undertaken to progress the adoption process prior to it being discontinued, particularly from administrative roles within VVC.

5.4 'Should be Adopted' (SBA) decisions continued at a similar rate through the year with a further **28** in addition to the **34** reported in the first half of 2022-23, totalling **62**. This is a **30%** reduction from the previous year's figure of **90** which itself had been higher than in previous years. As outlined above, the pattern of referrals and withdrawal rates

have affected these figures, although the rate of SBA decisions increased within Quarter 4 which might indicate a growth trend into the next year.

- 5.5** Likewise, the region has recorded **59** Placement Orders (PO) granted during 2022-23 which is in line with the number of 'Should be Adopted' decisions and rate of referrals.
- 5.6** As predicted, placement activity increased during the latter half of the year increasing from **28** in Quarters 1 and 2 to a further **37**, taking the overall number of children placed to **65**. 2021-22 appears to have been a slight anomaly in recent years and the current number of children placed is similar to the pattern in the previous 2-3 years.
- 5.7** There has been a higher proportion of children waiting more than the benchmark of 6 months from the 'Should be Adopted' decision to matching. However, analysis of the reasons why children wait longer indicate that half of those children were placed in sibling groups, and a number of children with more complex backgrounds waited longer before being able to achieve permanence with adopters. Positively, some **75%** of children within the region continue to be placed with VVC adopters, **20%** were placed externally but within Wales and only **5%** of children were placed outside of Wales.
- 5.8** Despite an increase in Placement Orders during October-April, the number of children waiting for adoption at the end of the year reduced from **53** in September to **39** in March 2023. It is positive to see a continued decrease in the number of children waiting for adoptive placements.
- 5.9** There were **69** Adoption Orders granted during 2022-23. One adoptive placement disrupted during the year, this child had been placed with his prospective adopter for two years and intensive support had been put in place via VVC, the local authority and other providers but this could not sustain the placement. This is the first disruption in VVC in almost three years which highlights how rare an occurrence this is.
- 5.10** Performance in relation to the provision of Life Journey Material for children being placed for adoption has been maintained at a similar level having significantly

improved over recent years. It is now consistently **100%** at matching Panel. There remain some challenges regarding the capacity of Social Workers within the local authorities to finalise the later life letters for children by the second adoption review resulting in performance for this measure being approximately **80%**. The specialist funded Life Journey Practitioners in partner authorities are consistently meeting the second review target in respect of the finalised life journey book. Significant efforts are being made by the Life Journey Work Co-ordinators in VVC to support local authority Social Workers to improve the provision of later life letters and meet the target.

- 5.11** The Life Journey Work Co-ordinators have developed resources to address the quality of work being produced as this is part of the new performance framework and guidance to assist in the completion of later life letters. The Life Journey Co-ordinators offer regular support, advice, and guidance to the Life Journey Work Practitioners within our partner authorities and in addition offer workshops/briefings to local authority teams. The Life Journey Work Co-ordinators support the allocation process within each authority and monitor performance across the region. The Life Journey Co-ordinators are developing an Improvement Plan to support both improvement in measurable performance and in qualitative feedback on the materials themselves.
- 5.12** During 2022-23, VVC's Transitions Social Worker has supported **35** children through a combination of direct work, support for foster carers and adopters and completion of Trauma Nurture Timeline reports. Some of these children were referred in 2021-22 and so work has continued into 2022-23. Transitions support is provided for all children aged 3+ and has become integral to the service and has enabled an enhanced level of support to be provided to children moving on to adoption.
- 5.13** The demand on the Transitions Service over the past year has meant that priority has had to be given to direct work needed for children and other aspects of the role have had to wait longer e.g. training and facilitating Understanding the Child Days. VVC has continued to review the impact of the expectations from the NAS Good Practice Guides and consider the capacity implications for the service. VVC held the first Understanding the Child Day in March 2023 and the intention is for these to be held

for all children being matched who are aged 3+ (or within a sibling group where one is aged 3+).

- 5.14** VVC has continued to utilise all available family finding methods over the year. The team liaises closely with the Adoption Register Wales (ARW)/LinkMaker team to ensure information is updated and monitored in a timely manner. VVC has participated in national profiling events and an Activity Day over the past year. During the reporting period, VVC has continued to refer children into the Adopting Together Service and has placed 3 children in 2 placements via this Service.
- 5.15** One child has been placed under the new Welsh Early Permanence framework and this placement has now progressed to an Adoption Order application. VVC continues to be at the forefront of advocating for Welsh Early Permanence and are working with local authority partners to identify children where this might be a suitable option.

6. RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT (APPENDIX 2)

Marketing

- 6.1** Despite the challenging backdrop of a national reduction in the number of enquiries, VVC has maintained a robust and realistic recruitment strategy. The Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator continues to be an invaluable resource and is an essential element of ensuring the service engages with as many members of the public as possible.
- 6.2** VVC has a growing social media presence on Facebook and Instagram. The Collaborative uses pay-per-click advertising on both platforms to promote the service and direct individuals to our website.
- 6.3** With the aim of reaching more households in the region, VVC identified Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan as target areas and council tax inserts were sent out to all residents for those 3 local authorities. Cardiff Council was not able to provide this service, but a significant proportion of applicants come from the Cardiff area without targeting recruitment.

- 6.4** VVC has continued to explore all suitable in-person events providing additional opportunities to engage with the public. VVC were represented at Pride Cymru, the Vale of Glamorgan Agricultural Show and National Eisteddfod for Wales. During the year there were fewer opportunities to attend more localised events, but it is envisaged this picture will improve in the coming year with more events being scheduled. VVC's Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator continues explore which local events are available.
- 6.5** The Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator has continued to update VVC's website and curated a robust 'Read, Watch, Listen' section. This provides those exploring adoption with every opportunity to review a range of different sources, in a medium that best suits them. These includes written testimonies, research articles, podcasts, suggested books, tutorials, and documentaries.
- 6.6** VVC continues to respond to **100%** of enquiries within five working days and the majority of these receive a response within 24 working hours via our Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator or Duty Officer.
- 6.7** Overall VVC's marketing strategy is to maximise exposure of the service to enable those exploring adoption to make an informed choice and to ensure that a consistent and high-quality response to all enquiries is provided.

Recruitment of Adopters

- 6.8** In line with the national experience, VVC has continued to see a reduction in the number of enquiries during this reporting period. During the pandemic, VVC experienced a sustained increase in enquiry numbers, and this continued into 2021-22 when **369** enquires were received. In 2022-23, **210** were received which equated to a **43%** reduction.
- 6.9** The rate of enquiries are similar to the numbers received pre-pandemic but every effort is made when tracking enquiries to understand the individual circumstances of the enquirer which might impact on their willingness or ability to continue further with the

process. Every enquiry is followed up by the Marketing Officer on three occasions (within the first week, followed by 1 month and 6 months).

- 6.10** 9 virtual Information Evenings were held with a total of **77** households attending these events and feedback received has continued to be positive. This represents a small decrease in the number of households that attended an Information Evening when compared to the same period the year before (**83** households). These events were delivered by VVC's Recruitment and Assessment Manager and Marketing and Recruitment Co-ordinator. Feedback received from participants continues to be positive and despite the Collaborative receiving fewer enquiries, the individuals in attendance are more informed and ready to engage in the process.
- 6.11** **Appendix 2** outlines the number of Registrations of Interest (ROI) received following attendance at Information Evenings and the progress against the two-stage model of recruitment and assessment.
- 6.12** The Collaborative continues to deliver its' 3-day Preparation to Adopt training course in conjunction with our neighbouring Collaborative, Western Bay Adoption Service (WBAS). This partnership arose out of a necessity to increase the frequency of training for prospective adopters enabling VVC to facilitate **10** training courses a year with **42** households attending. In addition, one 'second time adopter' training course was held and this had six households attend. Again, this is against a backdrop of fewer enquiries being received although the fact that VVC has been able to maintain a similar number of participants on the training is positive. On a practical basis VVC and WBAS provide a facilitator who jointly deliver the course. Consistently, positive feedback is received from participants.
- 6.13** From April 2022 to March 2023, a total of **47** adopter approvals were recommended by VVCs Adoption Panel. This represents a decrease when compared to the performance for the same period a year earlier where **59** approvals were ratified. Despite the reduction, this remains a significant number of approvals and is a pleasing outcome in light of the challenges already outlined above.

- 6.14** These approvals are broken down as follows, **17** RCT, **21** Cardiff, **8** Vale of Glamorgan, **0** Merthyr Tydfil and **1** other (**1** Swansea). Of those approved **36** were first time adopters, **7** were second time adopters, **1** were third time adopters, and **3** foster carers were assessed for children already residing in their care.
- 6.15** The applicants approved during this period who have secured links have predominantly been matched with children from within the region. Four have been linked with children from other Collaboratives (2 from Welsh Collaboratives and 2 children from English authorities). Three household withdrew after their approval due to a change of personal circumstances (1 couple unexpectedly conceived a child and two other households experienced relationship breakdowns or disruptions).
- 6.16** As indicated under the Family Finding section, a significant number of VVC children have been placed with in-house adopters. However, due to the reduction in the number of children waiting, VVC has accrued a significant number of approved adopters who are waiting for a suitable match. This trend has been noted across Wales and is being closely monitored.

Welsh Early Permanency

- 6.17** In June 2022, the All-Wales Framework for Welsh Early Permanency was launched. Much awareness raising work with colleagues has taken place since its launch and the Collaborative has been proactive in ensuring quality information is available to the public who wish to explore early permanence as an option.
- 6.18** The Collaborative was the first service to successfully assess, approve, link and place a child using this Framework. A Cardiff household was approved as early permanency carers and provided a placement for an RCT child. That child went on to have a care plan of adoption and has since had an Adoption Order granted.
- 6.19** Eager to provide learning from the experience, the early permanency carers have been filmed being interviewed by the Recruitment and Assessment Manager in order for a resource to be made available to others considering early permanency.

7. ADOPTION SUPPORT (APPENDIX 3)

- 7.1** Referrals for Post Adoption Support services and requests for assessment of post adoption support needs have remained stable during the period. **70** new referrals in the year have been received compared to **69** in the previous year. The nature of these referrals however remain complex and require intensive support from the team.
- 7.2** Referrals for Access to Birth Records and Intermediary services for adopted adults are consistent with the level of referrals received in the previous year. A total of **49** referrals have been received and broken down as **26** Access to Birth Records referrals and **23** Intermediary requests. There has also been a continuation in requests for information under the Post Commencement Regulations 2005 as a number of those enquirers have reached 18 years of age.
- 7.3** Due to the demands placed upon the service, there continues to be a waiting list for all aspects of the post adoption support service. At year end there were a number of families awaiting allocation which needed to be prioritised to ensure that the most critical matters were dealt with in a timely manner. The newly appointed Social Care Officers have been utilised to support initial assessments to reduce delay.
- 7.4** The team has continued to be proactive in seeking alternative means of supporting families with the formation of a weekly hub meeting. In addition, a sports group has been running weekly since December 2022 and provides a small group of young people with intense support. The Children and Young People Co-ordinator (CYPC) provides one-to-one sessions for young people to enable them to transition into community groups and facilities.
- 7.5** VVC has established strong links with ENFYS covering Cardiff and the Vale and also Multi Agency Permanence Support Service (MAPSS) which covers Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil. Referrals in respect of post adoption support are screened by both these services and therapeutic interventions are either provided or are recommended to the local authority who have responsibility for funding.

- 7.6** In conjunction with ENFYS, VVC has started running courses for adopters on “Nurturing Attachments”, “Rhythm and Regulation” and “Food for Thought” which is followed up with case specific consultation. Training on the “Introduction to BUSS Model” and “SHADES” Training has also been provided for adoptive families.
- 7.7** VVC was also able to facilitate a Summer Fun Day for adoptive families. **69** families attended with **91** children. A Christmas Funday was also organised which reached **62** families and **84** children. Both events had been suspended during the pandemic and their re-introduction was well received by the families in attendance.
- 7.8** The grant funded posts are continuing to be embedded into the region and to enhance the overall service provision maintaining positive links with national counterparts. The Birth Parent Adviser has been proactive in developing a range of support mechanisms for birth parents. The Birth Parent Adviser has received **48** new referrals this year and continued to support ongoing service users. Additionally, the role has an element of awareness raising and VVC continues work closely with a large range of services within our region which exceeds the part time hours allocated to this element of the service.
- 7.9** The TESSA project was rebranded during 2022-23 and is now known as PATHways. VVC’s PATHways Co-ordinator has continued to have a positive impact in assessing and supporting lower priority needs. The Co-ordinator undertakes assessments of need and processes referrals of families who may be eligible for the service. **56** referrals have been made to TESSA / PATHways by VVC during this period. The role has also been important in sign-posting families to other relevant services.
- 7.10** The Children and Young People Co-ordinator has continued to be directly involved in supporting Adoption UK Connected groups on a monthly basis with staff from the Connected service. These groups have returned to face-to-face meetings. The service caters for adopted children and young people aged 7 upwards, **106** children and young people from VVC are registered with the service. In addition, VVC provides direct support sessions to children within the region, and involvement in the sports group can

result in progression to the Connected service and community groups. The post also supervises direct contact sessions for adopted children with birth family or siblings.

7.11 The NAS Good Practice Guides continue to place a number of expectations upon the service to continue to improve Adoption Support services. One aspect is the requirement to undertake check-ins with adopters and birth parents post Adoption Order. It is hoped that this service will commence during the coming year and will be provided a year after the Adoption Order and at the three-year point. It is envisaged that the newly appointed Post Adoption Contact Social Care Officer will assist with this process. In addition, NAS has developed a strategic plan, Adopt Cymru 2025 which details several objectives to improve adoption support services. This plan will form the basis of the regional business plan going forward but will require additional resource to enable the full objectives of the Adopt Cymru 2025 plan to be met.

7.12 As outlined in previous reports, VVC does not manage a budget for the provision of adoption support services although is responsible for undertaking assessments of post adoption support needs. These assessments may recommend an adoption support package to the respective authority where the adoptive family resides, and which holds a budget to support such requests. The total expenditure on adoption support services for the reporting year was **£214,906.24** supporting **66 Children** compared to the previous year which was **£186,484.95** which supported **90** children. The in-house services including MAPSS and ENFYS have managed to reduce the reliance on external therapeutic provision but the costs per package have increased. This expenditure is monitored closely via the Management Board.

8. ADOPTION PANEL (APPENDIX 4)

8.1 VVC has continued to maintain a joint Panel which covers the four partner areas. Panel sittings are scheduled four times per month and are held virtually. Discussion has taken place regarding the resumption of face-to-face Panels but the current arrangements have worked well and enabled full participation particularly from participants who live outside the region.

- 8.2** The workload of the Panel has been consistent during the period and has reflected the level of regional performance as outlined in **Appendix 4**.
- 8.3** Membership of the Panel has remained fairly stable during the past twelve months, with the loss of 3 independent members and the recruitment of 2 new members. There remains an ongoing need to increase Social Worker membership from partner authorities to support the Social Worker membership from within VVC.
- 8.4** Reviews of Adoption Panel Chairs has been undertaken and a schedule of annual reviews of Panel members is underway. DBS checks for Panel members have continued to be updated.

9. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

- 9.1** VVC received two complaints during the reporting period. One complaint was from an adoptive parent concerned about the availability of services to support her adopted son. The second complaint was from a birth mother requesting an adoption application for her husband in respect of her birth son. The complainant was concerned about the advice provided by the Collaborative in terms of the process. Both complaints were investigated and resolved at Stage 1.
- 9.2** VVC staff continue to receive a range of compliments and positive feedback on the services they provide, and these are collated and reported upon as required.

10. CONSULTATION, ENGAGEMENT AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

- 10.1** VVC managers have continued to work with the Vale of Glamorgan's Quality Assurance Officer in developing a robust evaluation of services from the service user perspective. VVC has mechanisms to gain the views of service users at various stages of the process, from initial enquiry through to approval, matching and placement of children and post-adoption. The feedback is collated by the Quality Assurance Officer and reports are shared with the service.

10.2 In terms of Adoption Support, the TESSA/PATHways Co-ordinator has developed a questionnaire for all families in receipt of TESSA/PATHways which compliments the evaluation undertaken by the project. Again, the outcome of those questionnaires are collated by the Quality Assurance Officer. Feedback from service users is also gathered at other points and following receipt of various types of service. Advice has been provided by the Quality Assurance Officer in developing the questionnaires for the check-ins with birth parents and adopters.

10.3 The Regional Adoption Manager has participated in discussions at a national level and has contributed to the development the new All Wales Quality Assurance Framework. This framework provides a system of file audit and peer review by managers in the service.

11. POLICY AND PROCEDURE

11.1 The Regional Adoption Manager has participated in the review of the NAS draft All Wales Policies and Procedures which are due to be finalised in the coming year. These policies will be available for all staff working within adoption and childcare colleagues within the partner agencies.

11.2 The Family Finding Manager has developed a contact risk assessment tool to assist decision making in respect of facilitating direct contact between birth parents and adopters. This tool is now being considered at a national level.

11.3 As outlined earlier in the report, the service has begun to utilise some of the new processes contained in the Good Practice guides such as the Trauma Nurture Timeline.

12. CONCLUSION, FUTURE PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES

12.1 Despite the reduction in the number of children referred for adoption and the number placed, the reduction in the number of children waiting for placement at year end demonstrates the continued commitment of the service to prioritise this area of work.

The number of children placed with VVC adopters has been maintained during the year enabling more children to remain within the region. During quarter 3 and 4, VVC experienced an increase in referrals of children into the service which will increase activity in following year.

- 12.2** In terms of the recruitment of adopters, the region experienced a significant reduction in the number of enquiries received which has brought VVC in line with other regions in Wales. Inevitably this has produced a reduction in the number of registrations of interest received and the number of adopters approved. The region has continued to have a significant number of approved adopters waiting which has enabled children to be placed locally within our regional resource. The challenge going forward is to continue to monitor the level enquiries and to better understand the reasons for the reduction to better inform our marketing strategy. NAS has already highlighted this issue at a national level and is planning to commission some research into the reduction in enquiries via their marketing company, COWSHED.
- 12.3** The ongoing challenge for VVC is to continue to explore all placement options for children waiting and also to manage those adopters waiting for suitable matches. One placement option which has been developed during the year has been the launch of the Welsh Early Permanence Framework. VVC has taken the lead in promoting this service both from the child and adopter perspective and secured the first placement in Wales. This approach needs to be further developed and embedded within the region.
- 12.4** As highlighted in previous reports, the provision of a robust Adoption Support service continues to present a significant challenge for the service. The increased emphasis upon adoption support at a national level has resulted in expectations at a delivery level which are impacted by the resources available. Considerable work has been undertaken by the team in reducing the waiting list for adoption support services and the injection of the additional Social Care Officers into the service has enabled improvements to be made. The service has been able to develop some new ways of working via the sports group and the family hubs as a result of these new appointments.

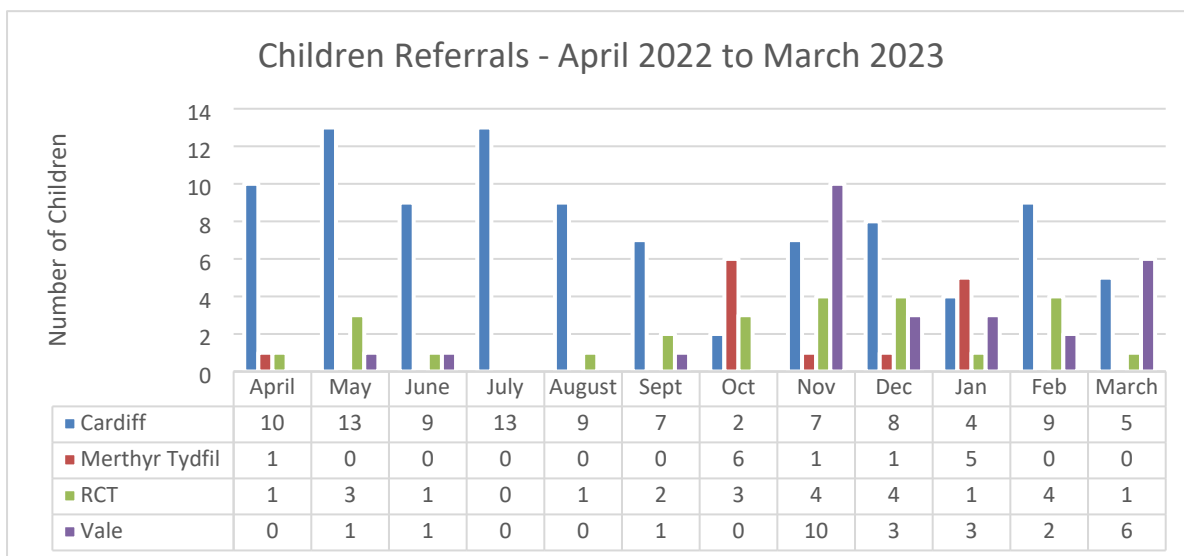
- 12.5** The full implementation of the Good Practice Guides for Adoption Support needs to be kept under review going forward but it is anticipated that the development of the check-in process will go some way to meet the requirements.
- 12.6** A range of matters concerning Adoption Support have been key agenda items for discussion via Management Board and the Operational Group in an effort to standardise practice across the region. The increased demand for funding therapeutic support packages has remained a focus for discussion and will remain a challenge for VVC both in respect of internal cross regional placements and those from external placing agencies.
- 12.7** It is anticipated that the cost savings required for 2023-24 will need to be monitored carefully in the coming year to reduce the impact on service delivery.

Angela Harris

Regional Adoption Manager

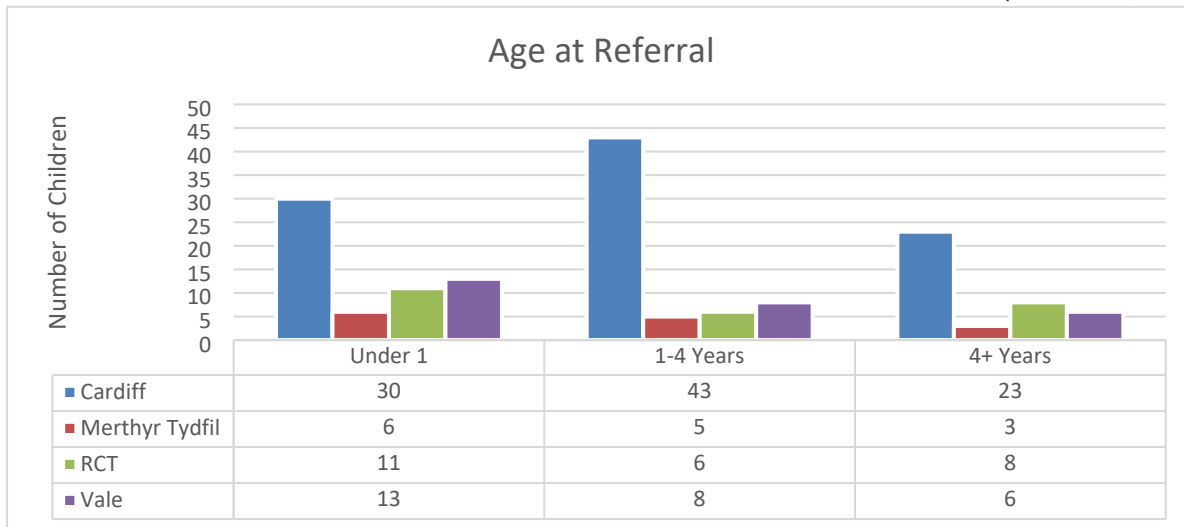
Referrals

162 children were referred to the service during the period April 2022 to March 2023. **54.3%** of children were withdrawn before an SBA decision could be made. This is a **6.8%** increase when compared to previous year. In all cases, the reasons for withdrawal were ‘placed with parents’, ‘positive parenting assessment’, kinship, or change of plan to long-term fostering. **17** children withdrawn before an SBA decision could be made were over the age of 4.

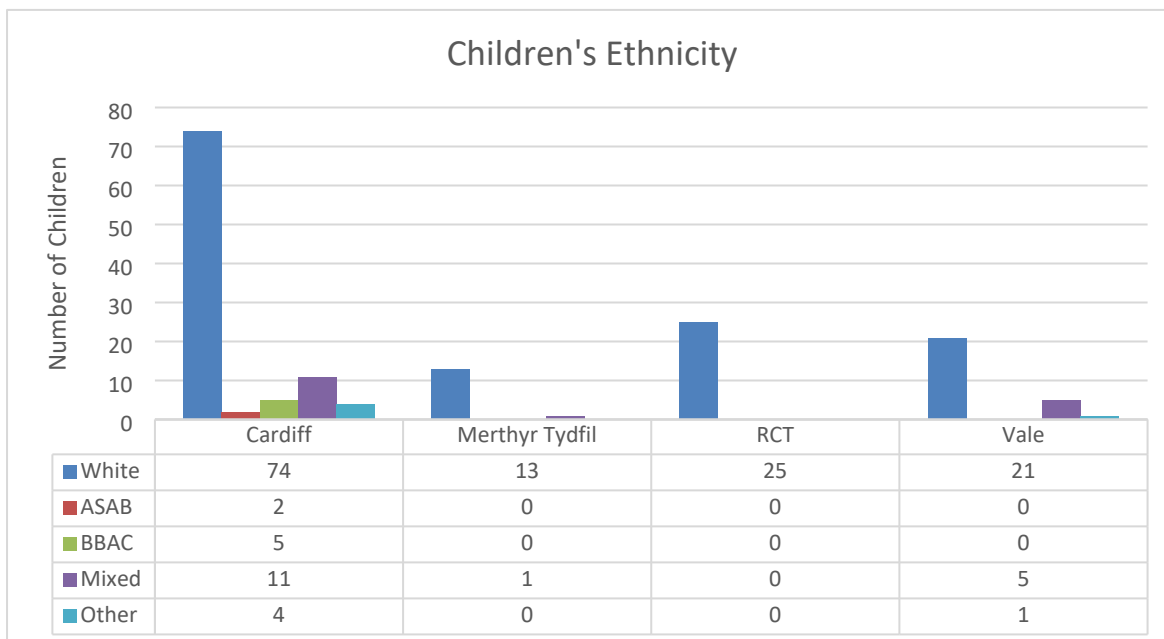


Demographics

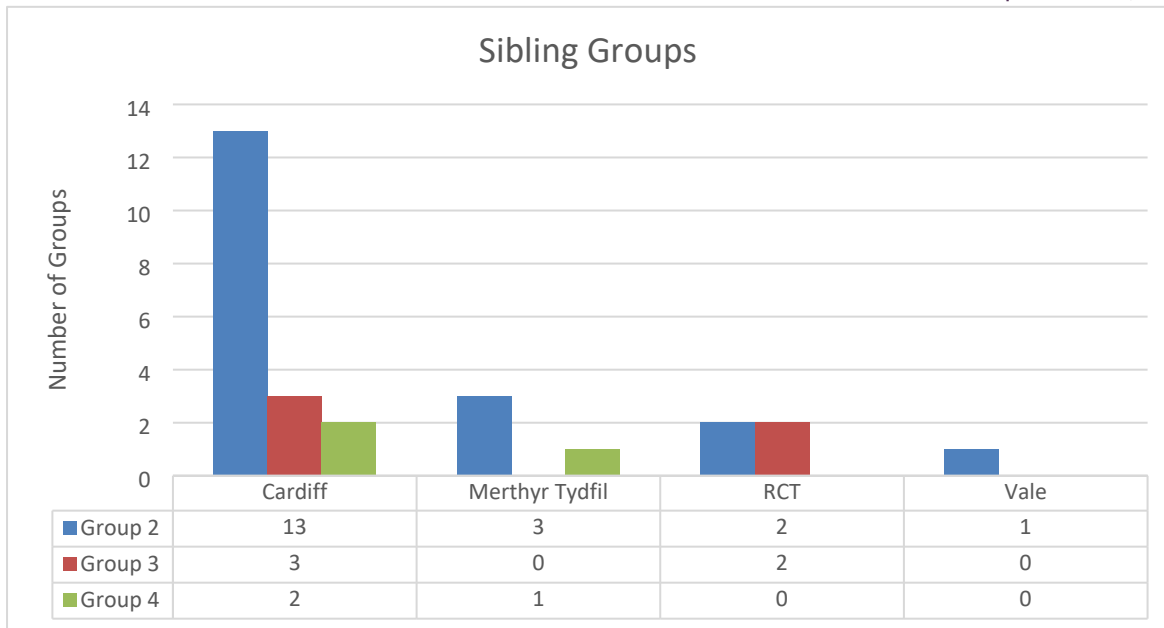
At the point of referral **38.3%** of children are aged between 1 and 4, **37%** are under the age of 1 and **24.7%** are above the age of 4.



Of the children referred to service between April 2022 and March 2023, **82%** of identify as White, **10.5%** as Mixed, **3%** as either BBAC or Other, and **1%** as ASAB.

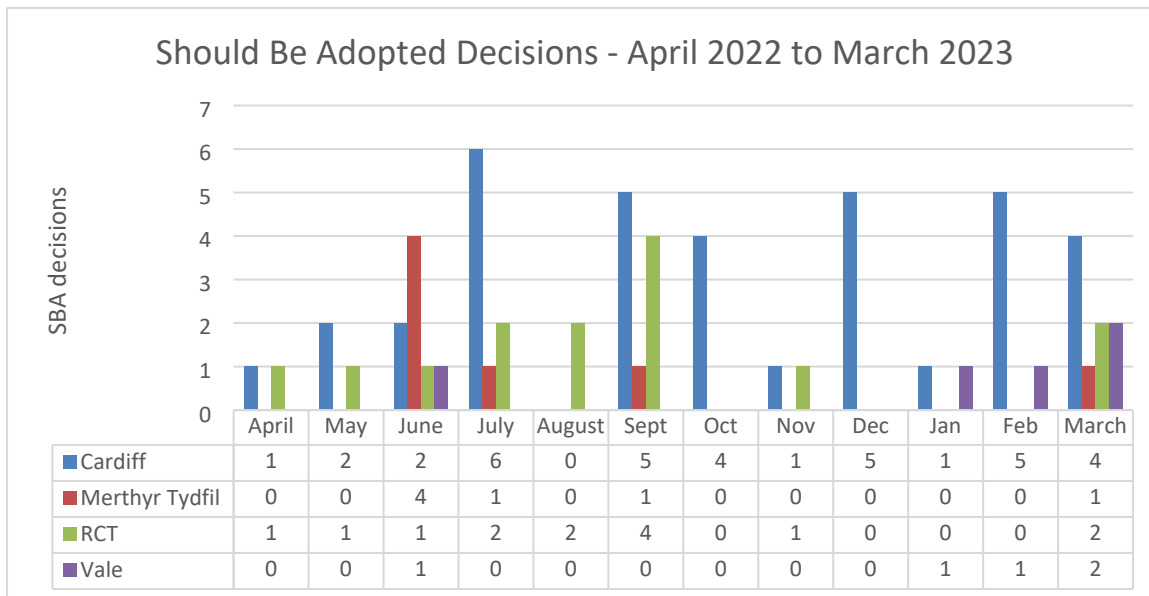


65 (40%) children were referred to the service as a sibling group.



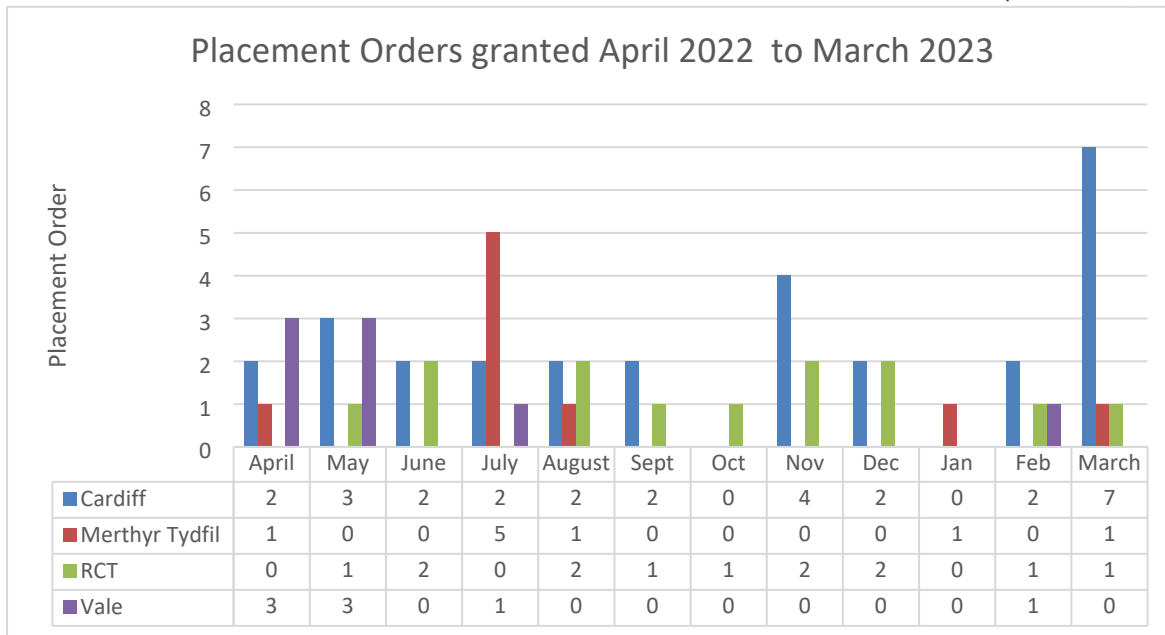
Should be Adopted Decisions

62 SBA decisions were made throughout the year, which is a **31.1%** decrease when compared to previous year data.



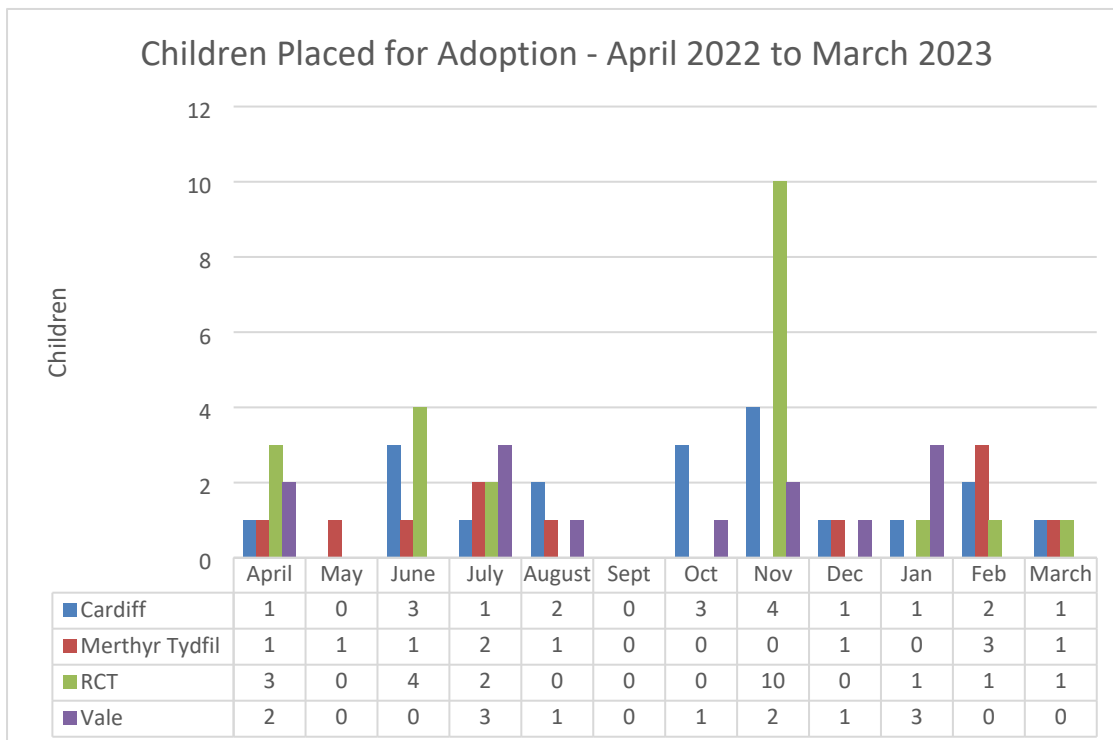
Placement Orders

58 Placement Orders were granted throughout the year. This demonstrates a **25.6%** decrease when compared to previous year and is consistent with the decrease in referrals and should be adopted decisions.



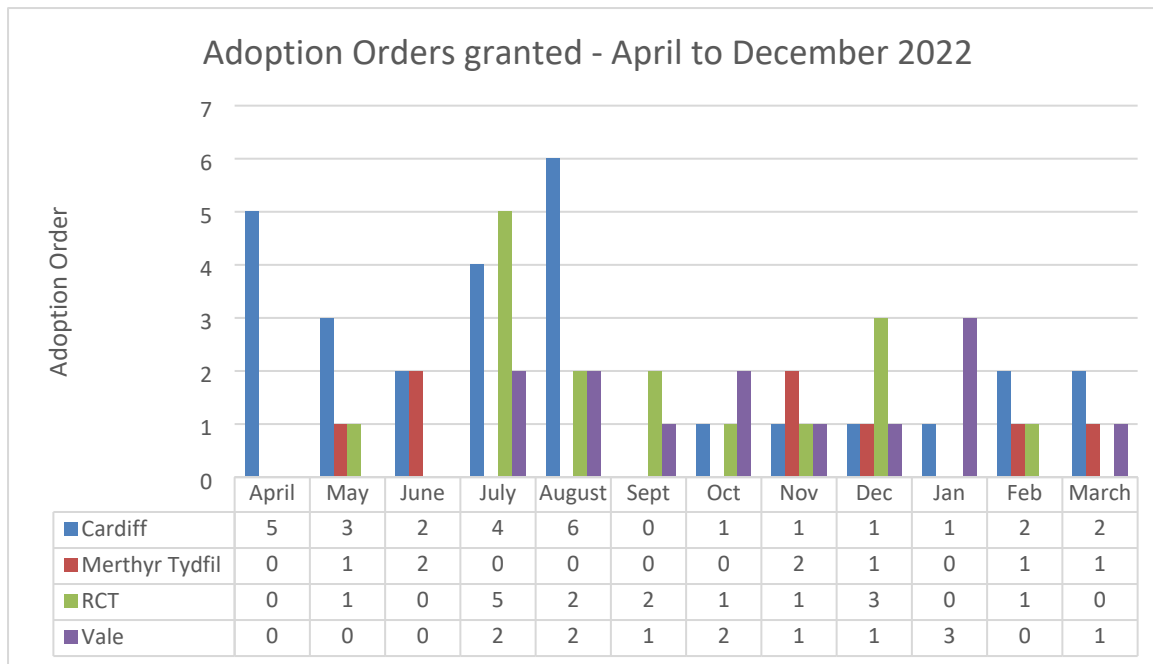
Children Placed

65 children were placed with their adoptive families demonstrating a **23.5%** decrease when compared to 2021-22 and is consistent with data from 2020-21.



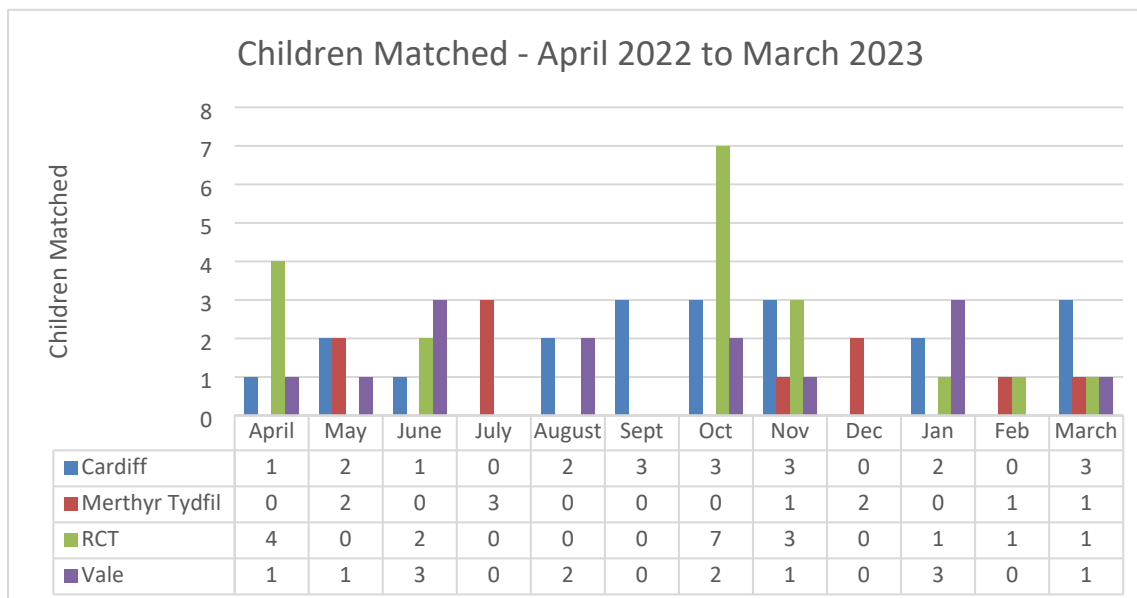
Adoption Orders

65 Adoption Orders have been granted since April 2022.



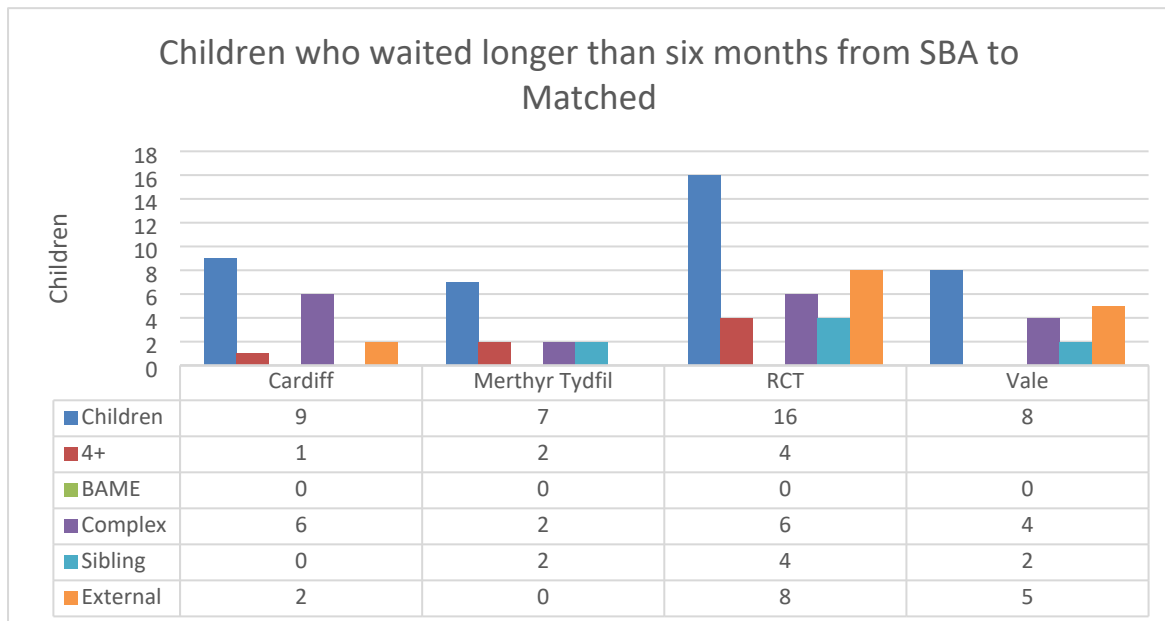
Children matched

63 children were matched during the period April to December 2022.



Number of children Matched since April 2022 who have waited longer than 6 months (or 3 months for a relinquished child under 6 months of age) to progress from “Should be placed for Adoption” decision to approve to “Match”.

Of the **40** children who waited longer than six months from date of SBA to date of Match; **7** children were aged 4+, **8** children were matched as sibling groups, **18** children were reported with complex needs and **15** children were going to be placed externally.

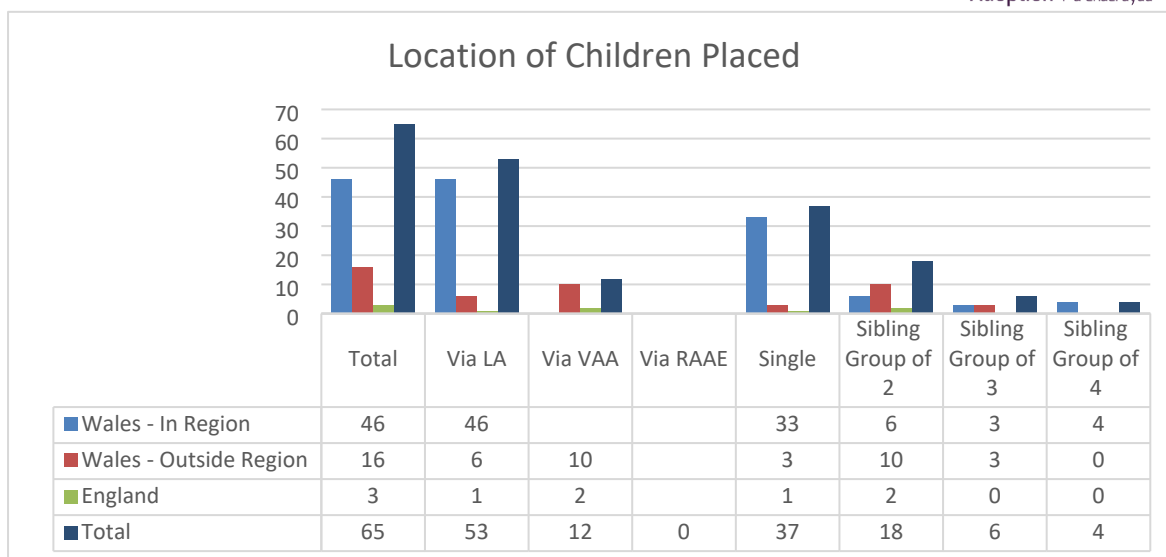


Children waiting as of 31 March 2023

39 children have a Placement Order and have not been matched or placed. Of these **4** children have a strong link, **8** foster carers are currently being assessed for approval to adopt the child, **6** children are part of a sibling group, **7** children have complex needs, **13** children active family finding, and **2** children have been matched but not ratified.

Type of placement

70.8% of children were placed with VVC adopters. **24.6%** of children were placed in Wales and **4.6%** of children were placed in England.



Life Journey

In the reporting period, **100%** of life journey material in draft format is made available at the time of panel. A notable decrease in life journey material available at 2nd Review is observed in Quarter 1, 3 and 4.

Life Journey by Local Authority						
	Matches	LJ Materials	2nd Review	LJ Materials	Panel %	2nd Review %
Cardiff	20	20	24	16	100	66.7
Merthyr Tydfil	10	10	2	1	100	50
RCT	19	19	24	24	100	100
Vale	14	14	9	6	100	66.7
Total	63	63	59	47	100	79.7

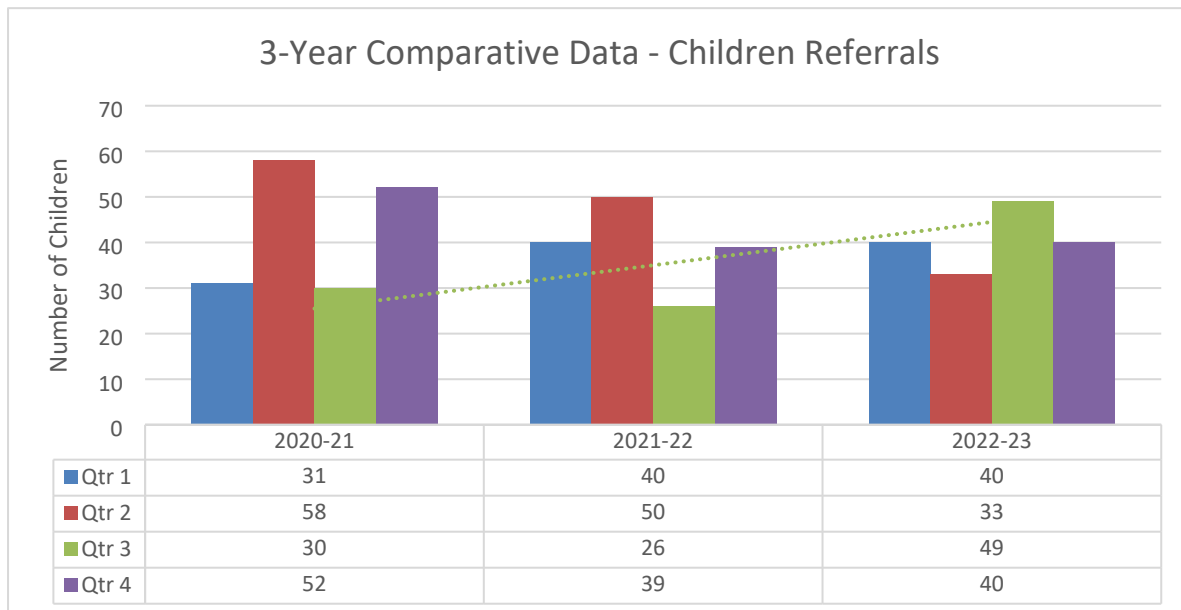
3-Year Comparative Data

Referrals

Over the past three years, referrals to VVC have remained stable. A notable dip in referrals is observed in the period **October 2021** and **July 2022**, and while this spans two financial years, it explains why there has been a decrease in the number of SBA decisions and PO's granted in this year. With the increase in referrals in the later part of the reporting year

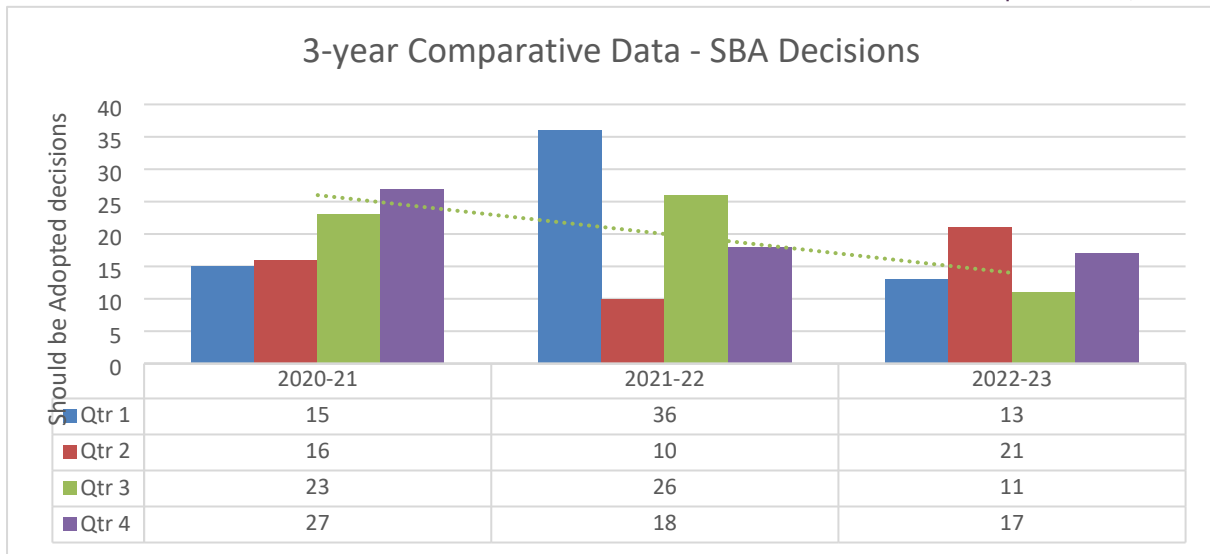
(October to March), it is anticipated an increase in the number of SBA's and PO's granted will be seen in 2023-24.

Nationally, a **15%** decrease in referrals was seen in the first half year of this year which coincides with the **18.8%** decrease in referrals observed within the service. Projected national figures anticipate there will be a **5%** decrease in referrals when compared to national data for 2021-22.



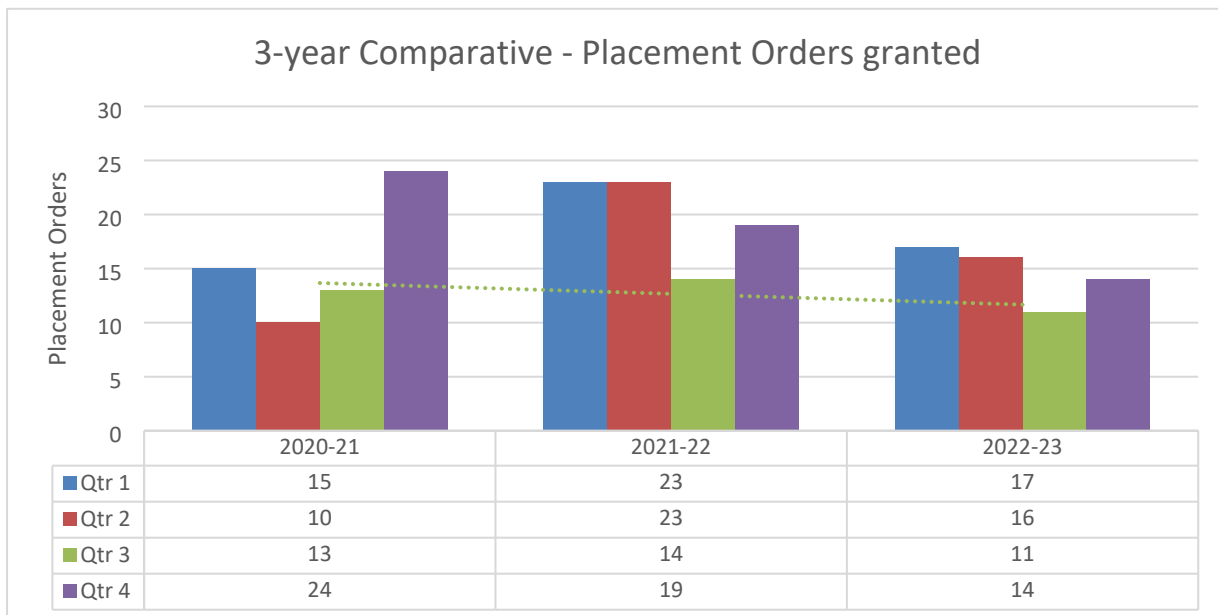
Should be Adopted

SBA decisions for the year April 2022 to March 2023 demonstrate a **31%** decrease when compared to 2021-22 data and a **23%** decrease when compared to 2020-21 data. This mirrors the reduction in referrals over the same periods. As already noted, referrals to the service have increased in the last six months and as such, although data indicates a downward trend, it is anticipated SBA decisions will increase in the coming year.



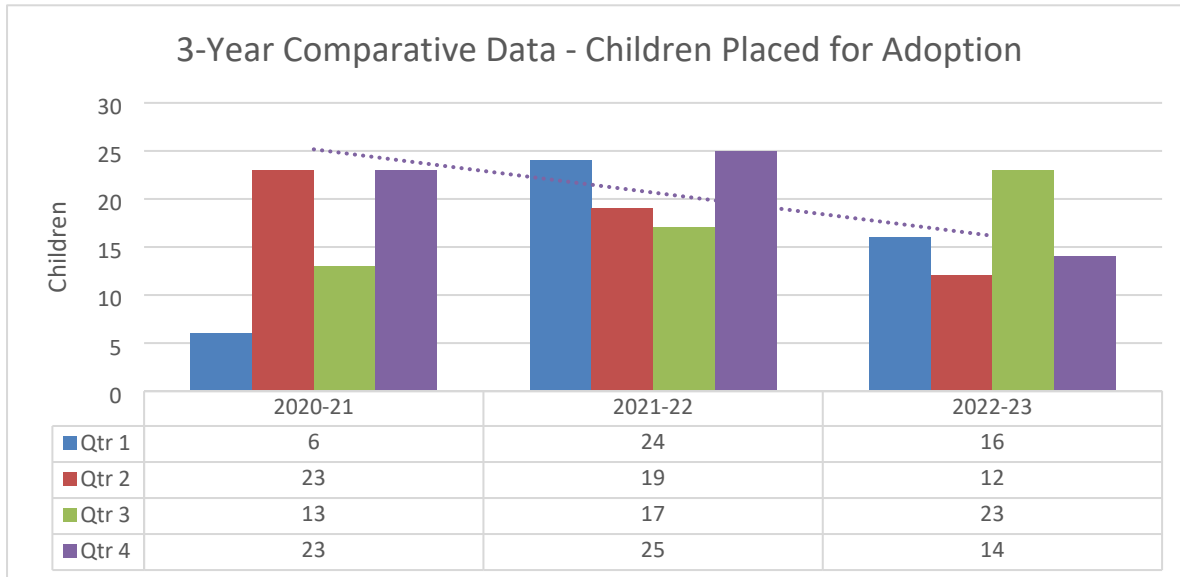
Placement Orders

Placement Orders granted between April 2022 and March 2023 show a **26.5%** decrease when compared to 2021-22 and **6%** decrease when compared to 2020-21. Whilst there has been a reduction in Placement Orders in recent years, the President of the Family Division recently re-launched the PLO and was critical of the drift away from compliance with the 26-week timetable. It will be interesting to observe whether there is a shift in trend towards more Placement Orders being granted if alternative care plans cannot successfully be pursued during the 26-week timetable.



Children Placed

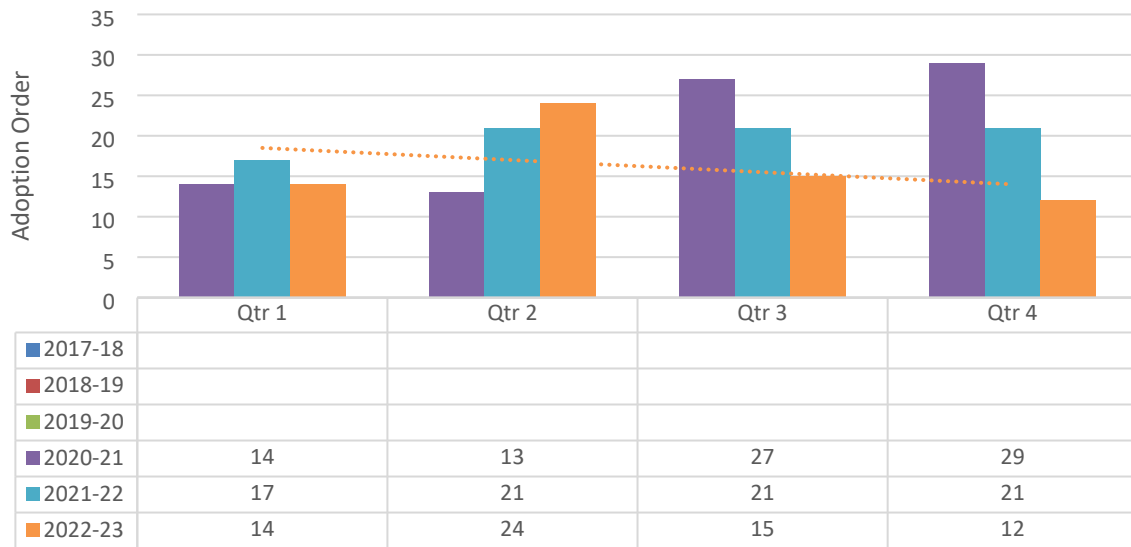
Children placed shows a downward trend when compared at end of year for three years. This is consistent with the decrease in referrals, SBA, PO, and children matched.



Adoption Orders

Over the three-year period 2020 to 2023, Adoption Orders granted show a decrease which is consistent with data for SBA, PO, and children placed. When compared to previous year an **18.75%** decrease is noted. However, when compared to 2020-21 data, Adoption Orders show a **22%** decrease.

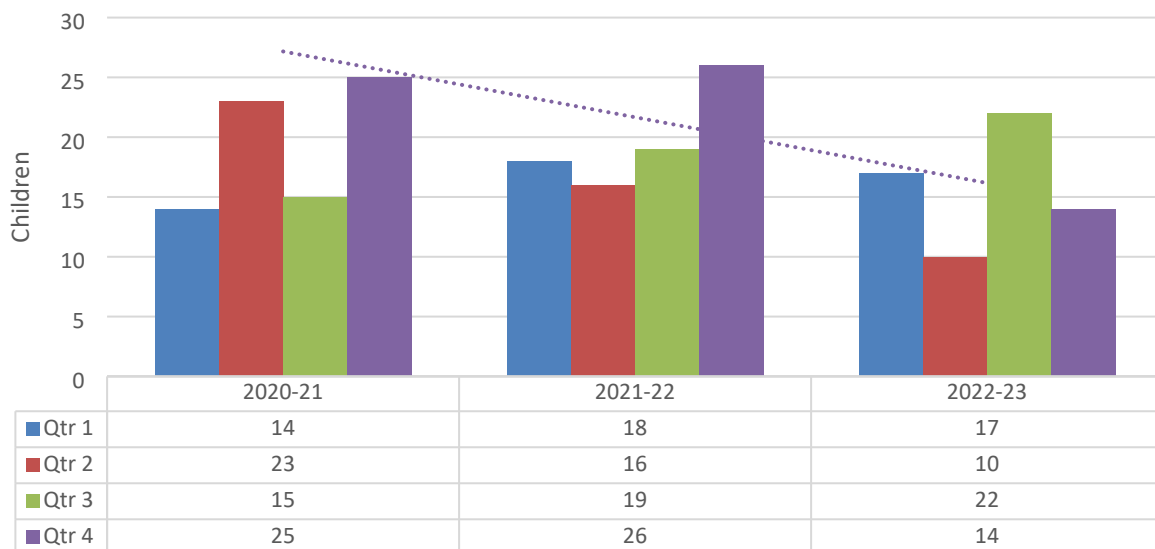
3 Year Comparative Data - Adoption Orders granted



Children matched

A downward trend is noted in the number of children matched when compared at the same point in previous years. This is however consistent with the decrease in referrals, SBA's and PO's granted in the year.

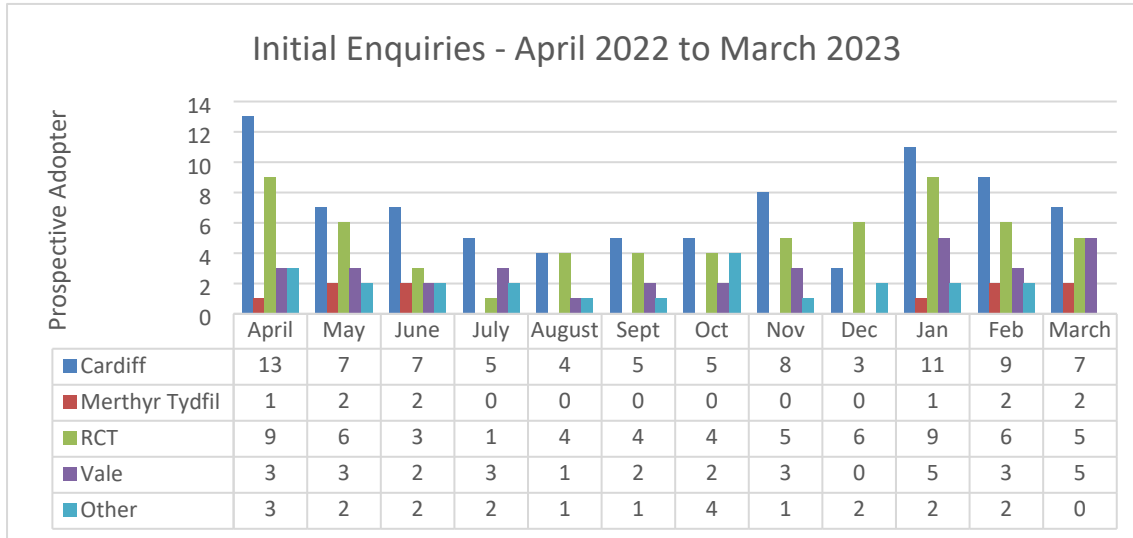
3 Year Comparative Data - Children Matched



Appendix 2 – Recruitment & Assessment

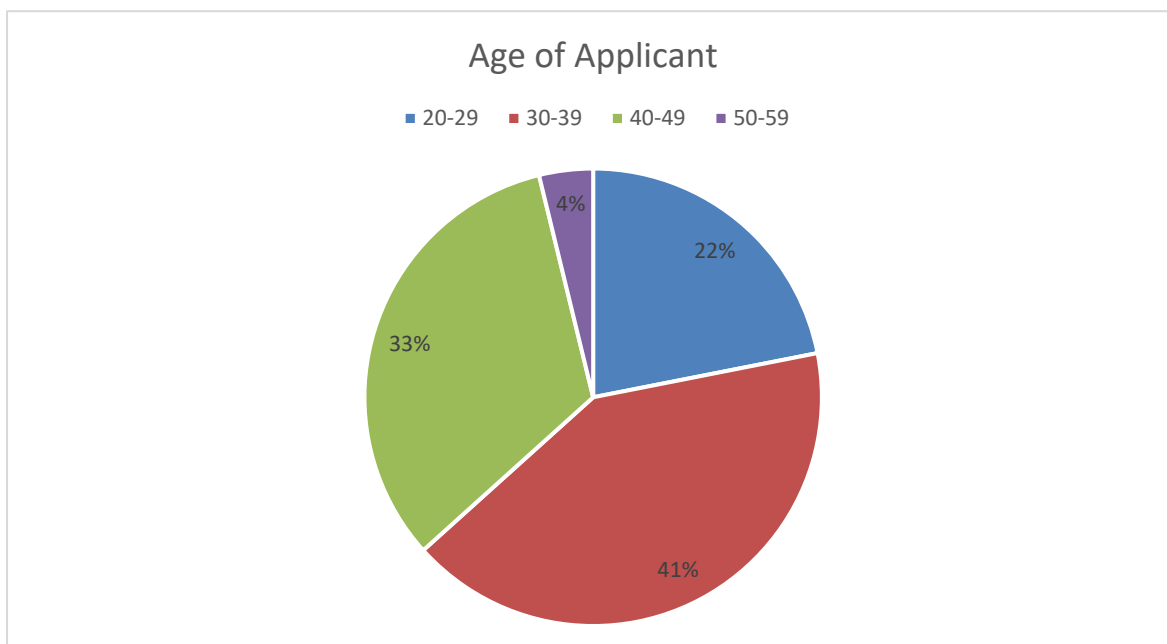
Initial Enquiries

210 enquiries during the period April 2022 to March 2023 indicating a **43%** decrease in enquiries when compared to previous year. A notable decrease in enquiries was observed in Quarter 2 and 3 and is consistent with national data for the same period. Enquiries in Quarter 4 (**69**) demonstrate an increase when compared to **43** in Quarter 3.



Age

Of the 210 enquiries, **87** enquirers were aged between 30-39, **69** were aged between 40-49, **46** were between 20-29 and **8** were aged 50-59.



Ethnicity

88% of all applicants identify as WHITE. **12%** of applicants identify as BBAC, ASAB or MIXD.

Definitions are taken from Children looked after census 2021-22, Office for Statistics, Welsh Government as follows:

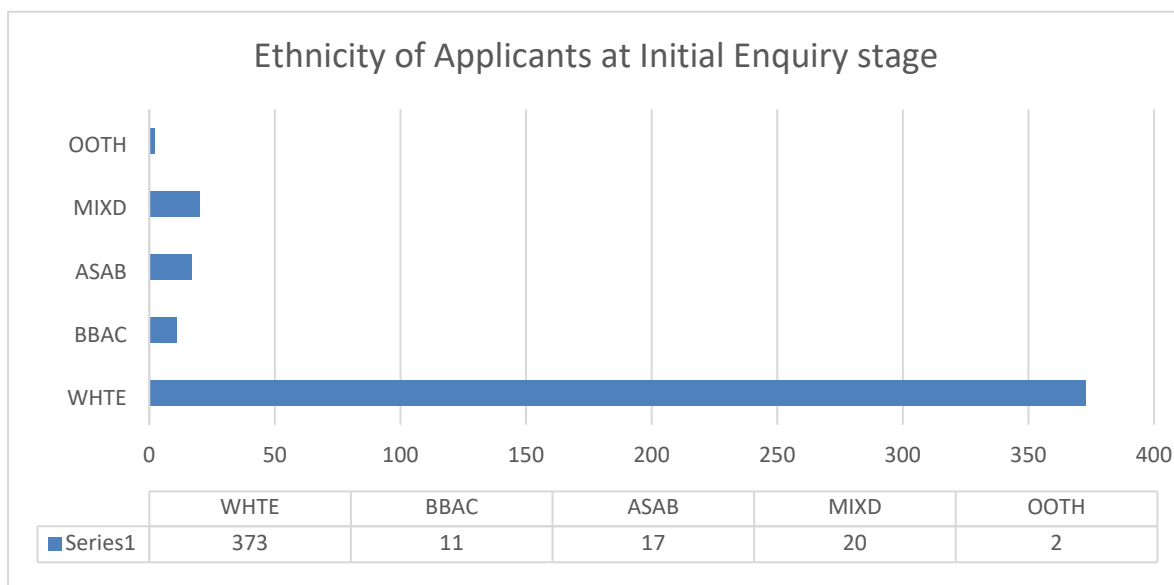
WHITE - White

MIXD - Mixed ethnic groups

ASAB – Asian or Asian British

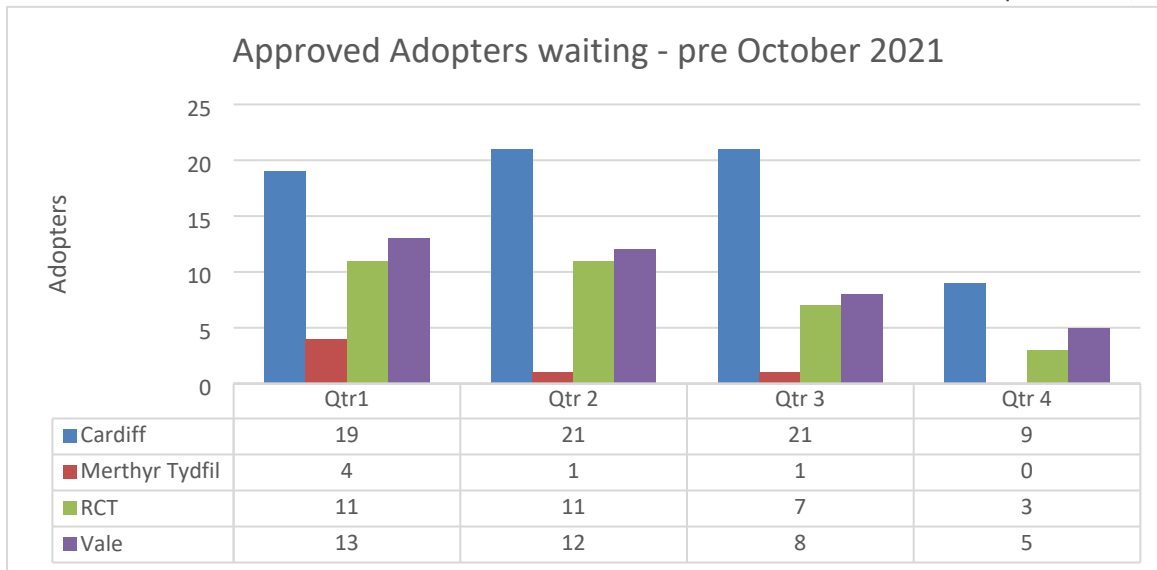
BBAC – Black, African, Caribbean or Black British

OOH - Other ethnic group



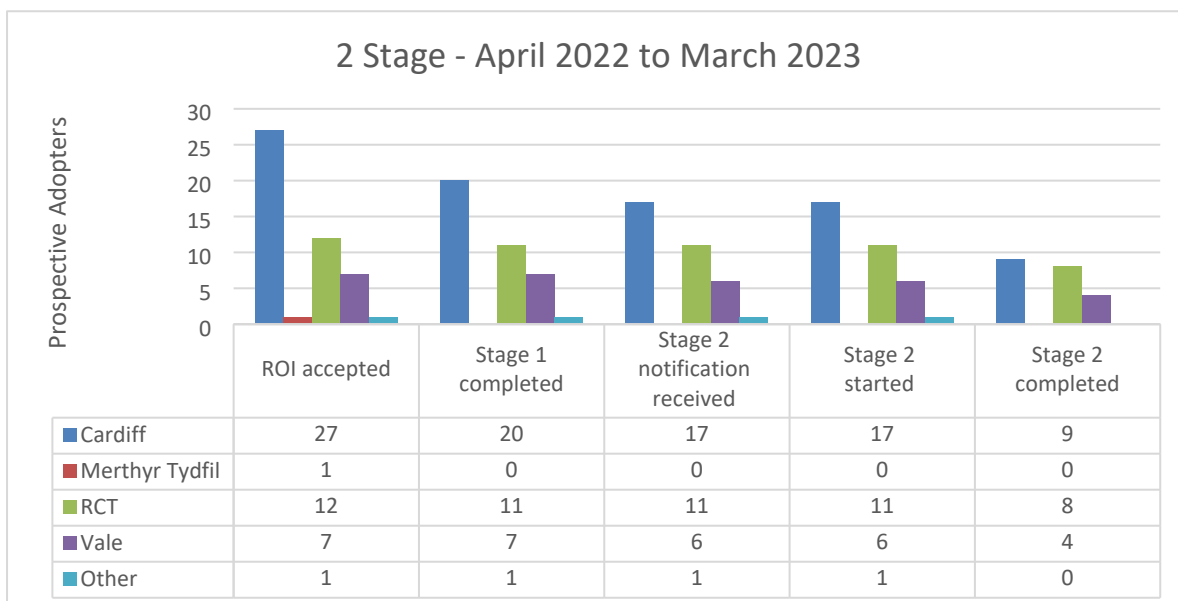
Adopters waiting

For reporting purposes to the National Adoption Service, adopters waiting are split into two separate groups; those who were approved before the 1st of October 2021 and those approved through the two-stage model for recruitment and assessment. Of the **17** adopters still awaiting a strong link or match, delays can be attributed to health, and lifestyle issues.



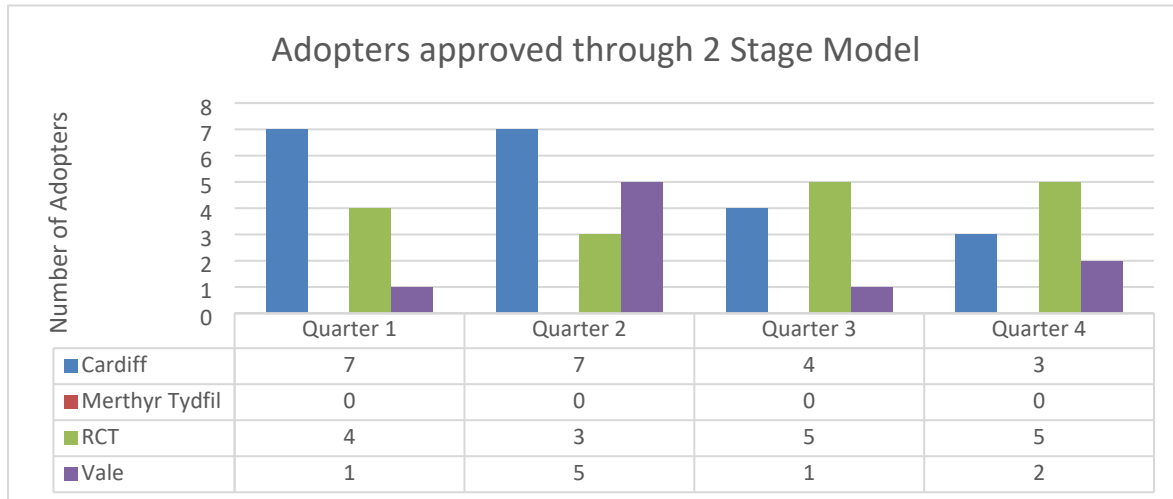
2 stage model

48 Registrations of Interest were received during the reporting period. **39** prospective adopters completed Stage 1 of the process. **35** prospective adopters started Stage 2 of the process and **21** prospective adopters completed the Stage 2 process. Over the reporting year, the service has met 100% compliance timescales for Stage 1 and Stage 2 completion. When calculating the percentage of adoptive families approved after six months of Registration of Interest, this figure decreases to **85%**. Reasons for delay can be attributed to four adoptive households where delays were because of positive DBS, Social Worker absence and/or family illness.



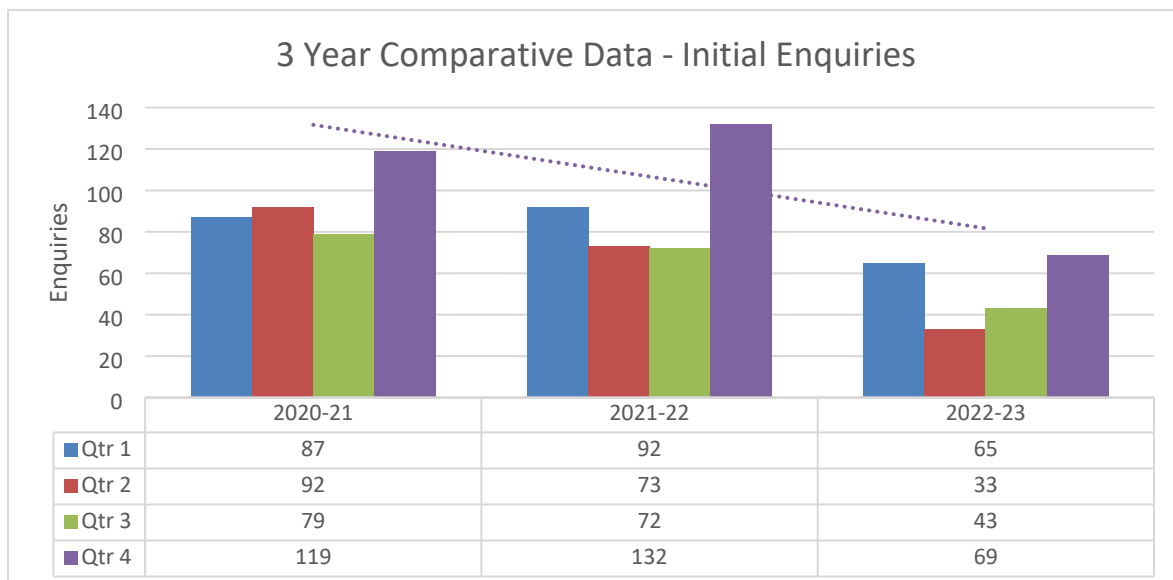
Appendix 3 - Adopter Approvals

47 adopters have been approved during the reporting period showing a **21.6%** decrease when compared to previous year. This is clearly related to the reduction in enquiries.



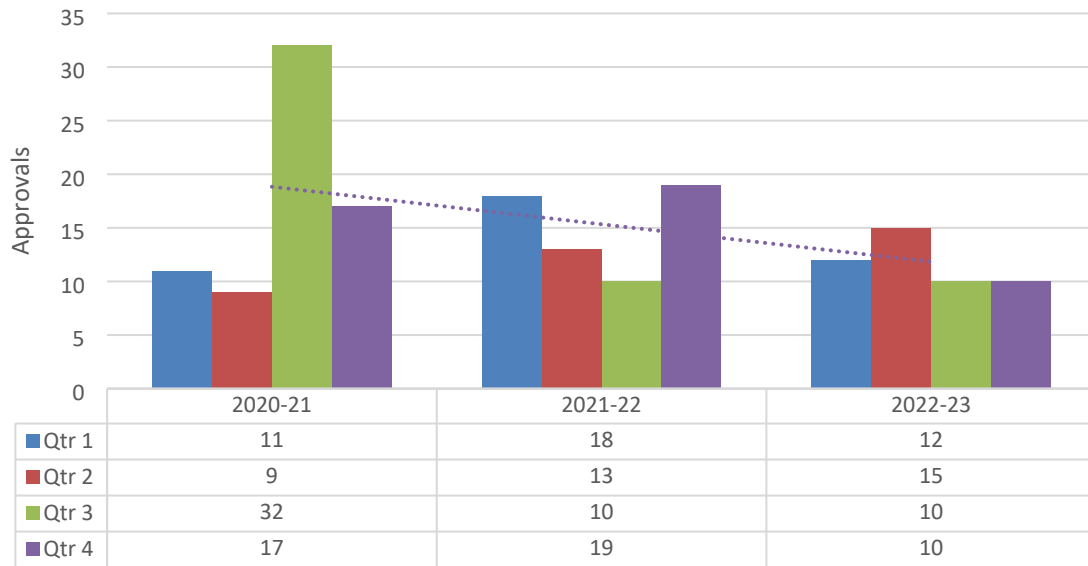
Comparative Data

When compared to initial enquiries in 2020-21 and 2021-22, the service has seen a **44.3%** and **43.9%** decrease in the number of enquiries from prospective adopters. The service will continue to monitor this closely.



Over the past three years, a decline in the number of adopters being approved has been observed. This can be attributed to the decline in the conversions from initial enquiry to approved adopter. The service will continue to monitor initial enquiries closely.

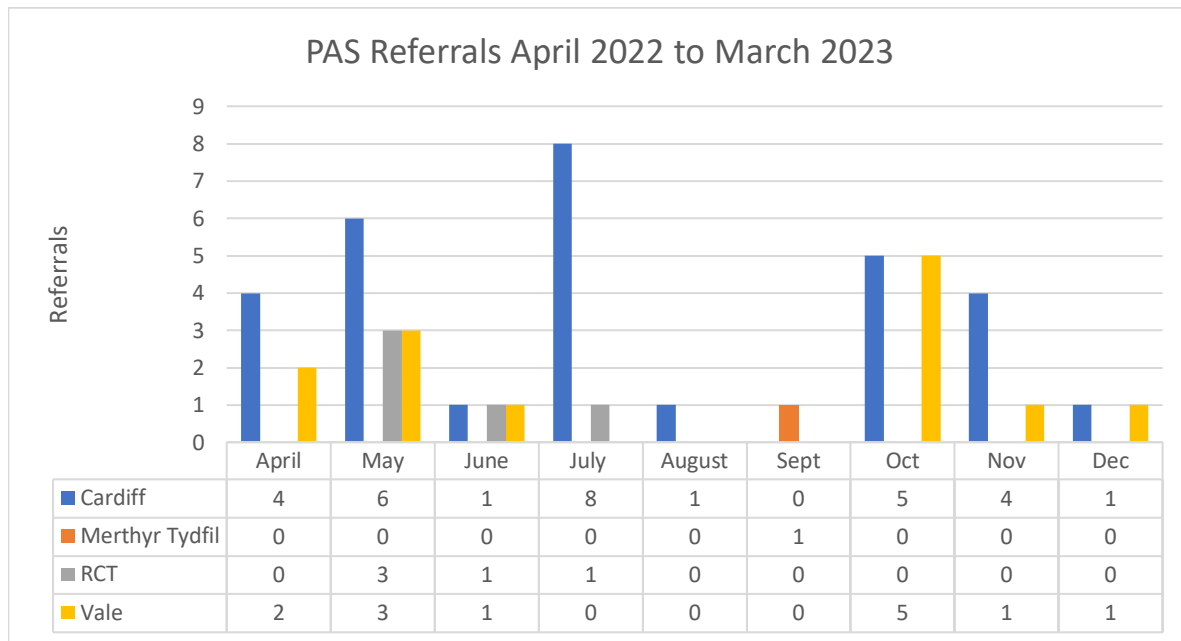
3 Year Comparative Data - Adopter approvals



Adoption Support

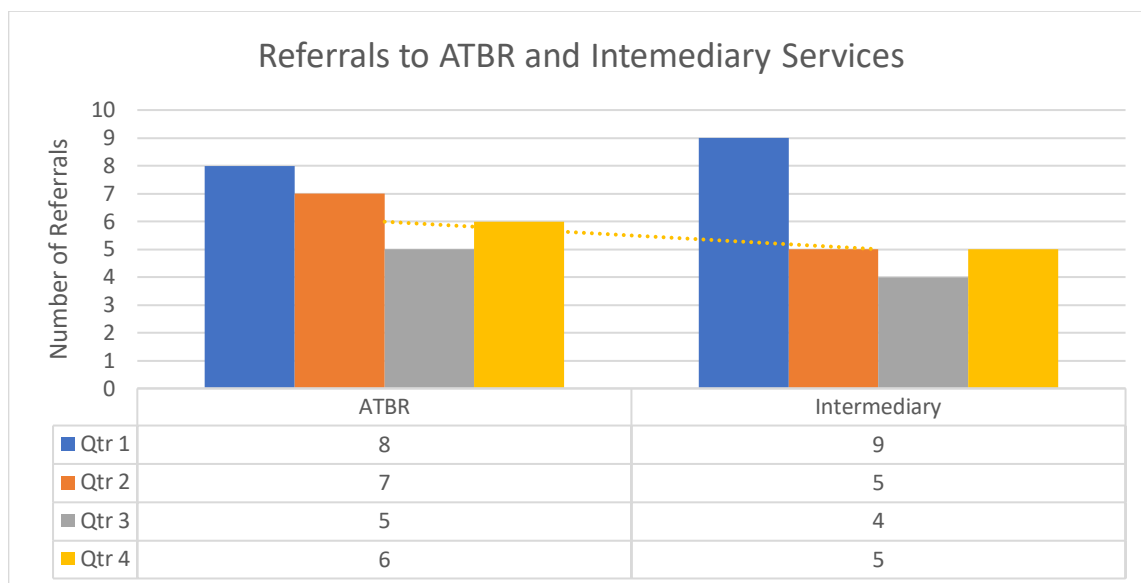
Referrals

70 new referrals for Post Adoption Support were received during the reporting period (April 2022 to March 2023) which is consistent with the number of referrals received in the previous year.



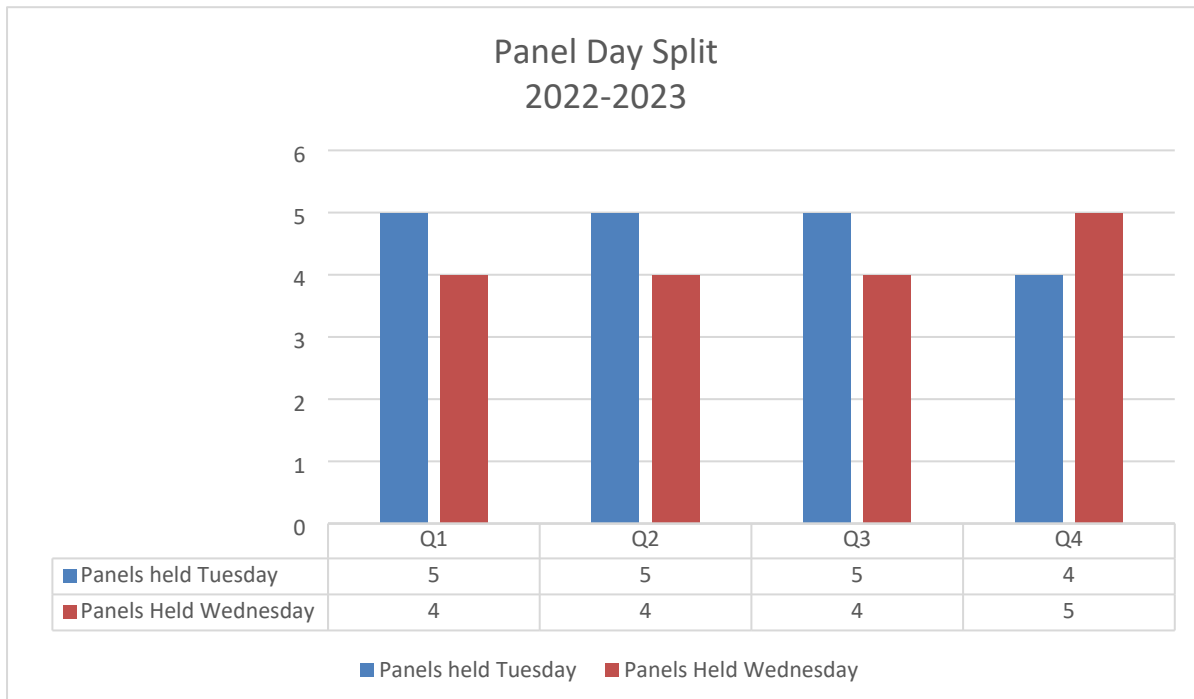
Access to Birth Records and Intermediary Services

49 referrals were received for Access to Birth Records and Intermediary Services and are consistent with previous year.

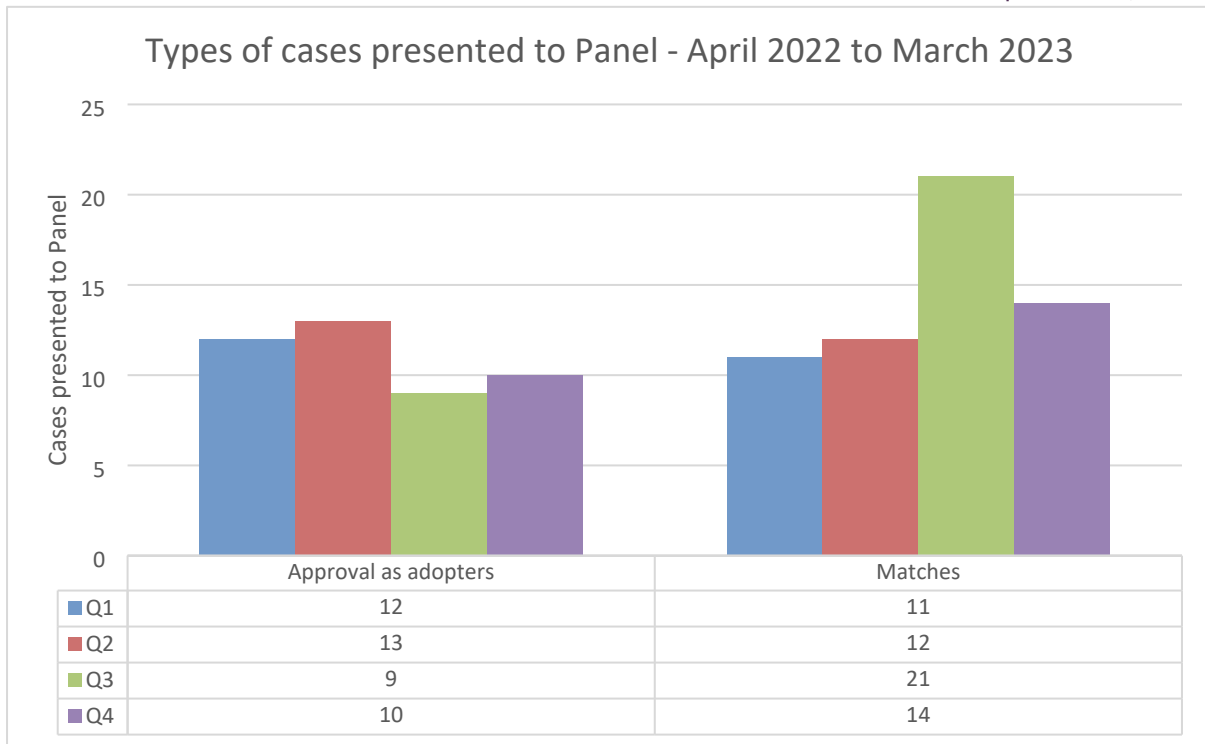


Appendix 4 - Panel

48 Panel were scheduled for the period April 2022 to March 2023. As a result of the decline in both adopter enquiries and children referred to the service, **36** panels were convened.

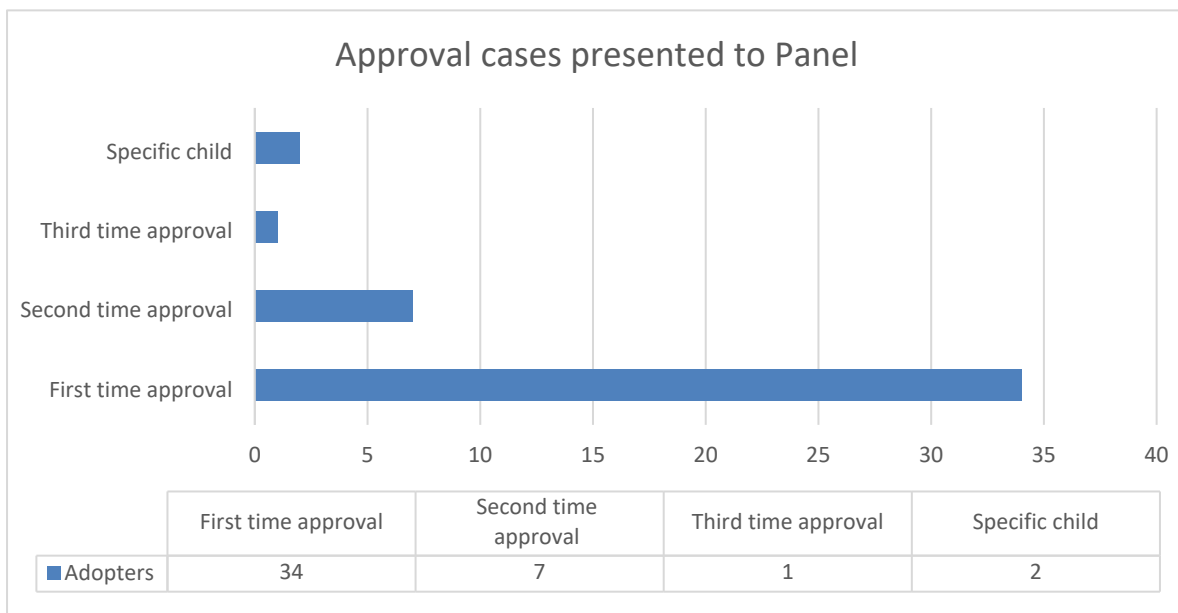


102 cases were presented to panel, **44** cases were for adopter approvals and **58** cases were for the matching of children with prospective adopters.



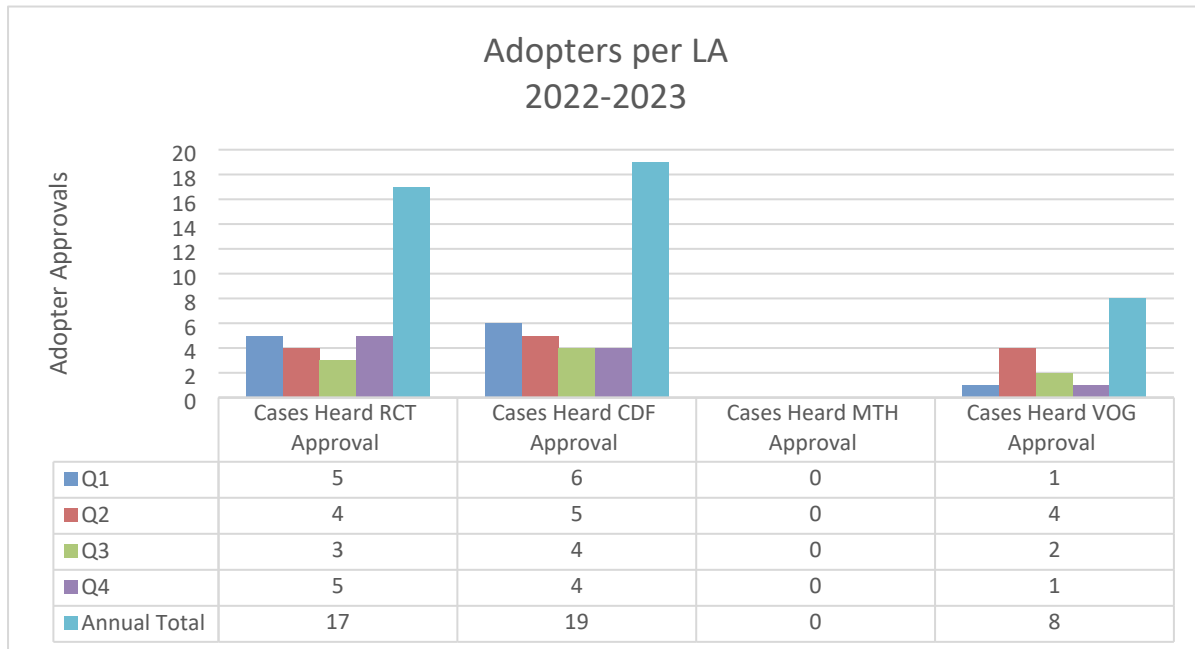
Adopters

Of the **44** households which were presented to panel for adopter approval, **7** adoptive households were presented to Panel for a second time approval, **1** adoptive household was presented to Panel for a third time approval and **2** adoptive households were presented to Panel for a specific child.



Approvals by Local Authority

43.2% of approvals were ratified by Cardiff Council, **38.6%** of approvals were ratified by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and **18.2%** of approvals were ratified by the Vale of Glamorgan Council.



Matches by Local Authority

58 matches were presented to the Panel during the reporting period broken down as follows: **41.4%** Cardiff, **27.6%** Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC, **17.3%** Vale of Glamorgan and **13.7%** Merthyr Tydfil CBC.

Matches per LA 2022-2023

