



Adoption Service

Recruitment Strategy

2017/18

Introduction

The Adoption Service contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people in Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council in line with priorities outlined in other council plans.

A child's welfare is of paramount consideration and the adoption activity is part of the critical pathway of work with vulnerable families. A key priority of the work within Children & Families is to ensure children can be brought up safely with their birth parents or within their wider family network if at all possible. If that is not possible then children are entitled to grow up within a family that can provide a legally secure and stable family placement through adoption or another legal order that secures permanence such as special guardianship.

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's Adoption Service strives to recruit a range of prospective adopters to meet the diverse needs of children to be placed for adoption locally, regionally and nationally.

This Recruitment Strategy provides analysis of recruitment activity in relation to prospective adopters and children placed for adoption as well as identifying plans for future activity. It considers the local, regional and national picture.

Background

Many children and young people, for whatever reason, are unable to live with their birth parents. Just like any other youngsters they come from a broad mix of backgrounds, cultures, religions and some may also have learning difficulties or physical disabilities.

One thing they all have in common is the need for security, permanence, love and attention, something that permanent families can give them.

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Adoption Service provides and makes arrangements for all statutory adoption services required under current legislation.

The service recruits, prepares and assesses people who apply to be adoptive parents and makes arrangements for children to be placed with approved adopters.

The service also provides and makes arrangements for support to people affected by adoption. This includes birth parents, adopted adults and families facing challenges.

The adoption service is a key part of the Council's strategy to ensure that children who are unable to live with their birth family are well cared for and have the security of legal permanence in stable placements.

Due to the geography and population make-up of the authority we often place children with adopters approved by other agencies as well as placing children with adopters approved by the service itself.

Whilst there is currently a national surplus of adopters, children with disabilities, older children, large sibling groups and older children from the BME community continue to wait

highlighting that there is an urgent need for families able to meet their needs. In addition, after a surge of adopters approved, the number applying now has significantly reduced with the potential of a shortage of adopters again in the future if recruitment activity is not maintained.

Consortium working.

Blackburn with Darwen Council continues to work closely with the other 22 local authorities in the North West in terms of developing best practise around adoption and sharing services and resources. There are also close links with the voluntary sector adoption agencies. Much of this is now done through the Adoption Leadership Board, as well as through existing professional relationships between managers. In addition Blackburn with Darwen is in the process of joining with Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside to form a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) called Adoption NoW (North West). The launch date for Adoption NoW is October, and whilst the agencies involved are developing closer ways of working together in the interim, recruitment is still currently the responsibility of each individual agency. Blackburn with Darwen therefore continues to press forward with its own recruitment strategies for the present, whilst making prospective adopters aware of the move towards the Regional Adoption Agency.

Preparation training groups are now shared across the RAA with at least one group each month, giving adopters a choice of where and when to attend. In addition, whilst Blackburn with Darwen continues to operate its own adoption panel once a month, there is agreement between the six local authorities that cases can be heard at any of the panels across the region to avoid delay. Both the preparation training and panel arrangements are still fairly new, however so far both have been working well, offering adopters more choice and avoiding delay both for adopters and children.

The Council continues to be part of the Adopt Northwest regional recruitment campaign which has recently run a series of television adverts to promote the ongoing need for adopters. This was complimented by posters and an online campaign.

The Aims of the Adoption Service

The Recruitment Strategy is produced annually to advise what Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Adoption Team need to do, why, how, when and how often.

The purpose of the recruitment strategy is to help the Adoption team continue to achieve legal permanence for children with adoptive families by focussing on the important principles which underpin the National Minimum Standards.

Values – children

- The child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process.
- Adopted children should have an enjoyable childhood, and benefit from excellent parenting and education, enjoying a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills leading to a successful adult life.
- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family that can meet their developmental needs during childhood and beyond.
- Children's wishes and feelings are important and will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages of the adoption process.
- Delays should be avoided as they can have a severe impact on the health and development of the children waiting to be adopted.
- A sense of identity is important to a child's well-being. To help children develop this, their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language and sexuality need to be properly recognised and positively valued and promoted.
- The particular needs of disabled children and children with complex needs will be fully recognised and taken into account.
- Where a child cannot be cared for in a suitable manner in their own country, inter country adoption may be considered as an alternative means of providing a permanent family.
- Children, birth parents/guardians and families and adoptive parents and families will be valued and respected.
- A genuine partnership between all those involved in adoption is essential for the NMS to deliver the best outcomes for children; this includes the Government, local government, other statutory agencies, Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Support Agencies.

The aim of the adoption service is to continue to identify sufficient adoptive families to meet the needs of children whose care plan is adoption and to provide a pool of adopters, which will meet the unique needs of the children both locally, within the consortium and within a wider geographical area.

The adoption team also aims to support adoptive families and birth relatives before, during and after adoption in line with the National Minimum Standards.

Values - adopted adults and birth relatives

- Adoption is an evolving life-long process for all those involved - adopted adults, and birth and adoptive relatives. The fundamental issues raised by adoption may reverberate and resurface at different times and stages throughout an individual's life.
- Adopted people should have access to information and services to enable them to address adoption related matters throughout their life.
- Agencies have a duty to provide services that considers the welfare of all parties involved and should consider the implications of decisions and actions for everyone involved.
- Agencies should seek to work in partnership with all parties involved, taking account of their views and wishes in decision-making.
- Agencies should acknowledge differences in people's circumstances and establish policies that provide non-discriminatory services.
- Adopted adults have their adoptive identity safeguarded and the right to decide whether to be involved in contact or communication with birth family members.

The quality of the 'in house' provision was rated as 'outstanding' in the last Ofsted inspection. An inspection of Children's Services as a whole is well overdue.

We aim to continue:

- To provide a high quality adoption service for the residents of Blackburn with Darwen
- To provide a suitable adoptive placement for every child with a plan for adoption
- To ensure that recruitment of adopters is targeted to meet the needs of children in Blackburn with Darwen with a plan for adoption
- To recruit a range of prospective adopters to meet the diverse needs of children locally and nationally
- To ensure safe, stable and consistent care for every child placed for adoption
- To ensure that ethnic origin, cultural background, religious heritage and language of children are fully recognised and valued and held in tandem with the broader needs of each child.
- To provide support services that ensure successful outcomes for children placed for adoption and for adopted children

- To ensure that adoptive families are enabled to meet the health and education needs of children placed with them.
- To provide a range of support services for adopted adults
- To offer timely information to members of the public enquiring about adoption.
- To ensure support is provided for the birth relatives of the children placed for adoption by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.
- To ensure at all times the adoption service complies with legislation and policy requirements.

To provide professional support, advice and guidance to Adopters:

- To promote children's sense of identity including their racial identity
- To promote contact between the adopted child and his/her family
- To promote the physical and mental health of children placed for adoption and adopted children.
- To provide children placed for adoption and adopted children with opportunities
- To encourage children to pursue their talents, interests, hobbies and to promote their educational needs.
- To ensure that each child with a disability receives the services and support to help him/her to maximise her/his potential and to lead as full a life as possible.

Staffing

The Adoption Service is managed by the Service Leader for Placement Services. Adoption remains a priority area for the Council and considerable efforts have been made to maintain staffing at the required level.

The Team comprises 1 Adoption Team Manager and 1 Deputy Team Manager. The remainder of the team comprises 6 Adoption Social Workers and equivalent to 2 Post Adoption Social Workers. 3 of these work primarily in recruitment and assessment and 3 in family finding, however this is flexible dependent upon need. The Fast Track team draws management and social work resources from this team, and in addition has 1 Child Support Officer and 1 Clinical Child Psychologist (commissioned by the local authority from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).

Diversity

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's adoption service is committed to providing a service which values and supports people's differences.

The service recruits a diverse range of adopters to meet children's needs and works proactively to promote adoption within all sections of the local community including same sex couples, single people and the BME community.

In order to work together to actively promote adoption within the Muslim community, very strong links have been maintained with the Muslim Welfare Institute (MWI) and the Lancashire Council of Mosques (LCM).

The LCM and MWI now have a working group to promote adoption and work with the authority to promote key messages to the local community. Both organisations run articles on adoption in their newsletters which are distributed to all mosques within Lancashire, and support services wherever possible.

The service has made efforts to replicate this with other religious and cultural groups such as local churches and the Black History Group in Preston, however so far these attempts have not been as successful as within the Muslim community.

The adoption service provides excellent support to birth parents with learning disabilities.

The adoption service has a clear understanding and consideration of religious and cultural issues which is helpful when assessing prospective adopters.

Developments

The 'Recruitment Plan' forms part of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's development plan to achieve best practice.

The number of adopters recruited both locally and nationally over the past year has significantly decreased, and the number of approved adopters available is also significantly diminished. As Blackburn with Darwen Adoption Agencies looks forward to the formation of Adoption NoW, the needs of all of the agencies involved is being taken into account to help inform recruitment needs. As a result, whilst the focus of recruitment activity remains on adoptive families who can specifically meet the needs of older children, larger sibling and older sibling groups, children with disabilities and older children from BME backgrounds, efforts are also being made to ensure that there are a good number of adopters with the Regional Adoption Agency available to consider younger children, more straight forward children also.

Blackburn with Darwen Adoption Team continues to maintain the links it has forged with the Disabilities team and Muslim community. In addition links are being made with some local schools, especially a local private school, to encourage those with parenting experience to consider parenting again through adoption.

Blackburn with Darwen Adoption Agency continues to seek recruitment of families who live outside of its borders. Many aspects of adoption support are now carried out collaboratively across Adoption Now and 'in-house' placements are now, to a large extent, seen as any made within the RAA as these provide a more seamless and comprehensive support. Currently Interagency fees still exist between agencies within the RAA, and whilst placing Blackburn with Darwen children with Blackburn with Darwen adopters does provide a financial saving, this is not being seen as a barrier to placing within the wider RAA.

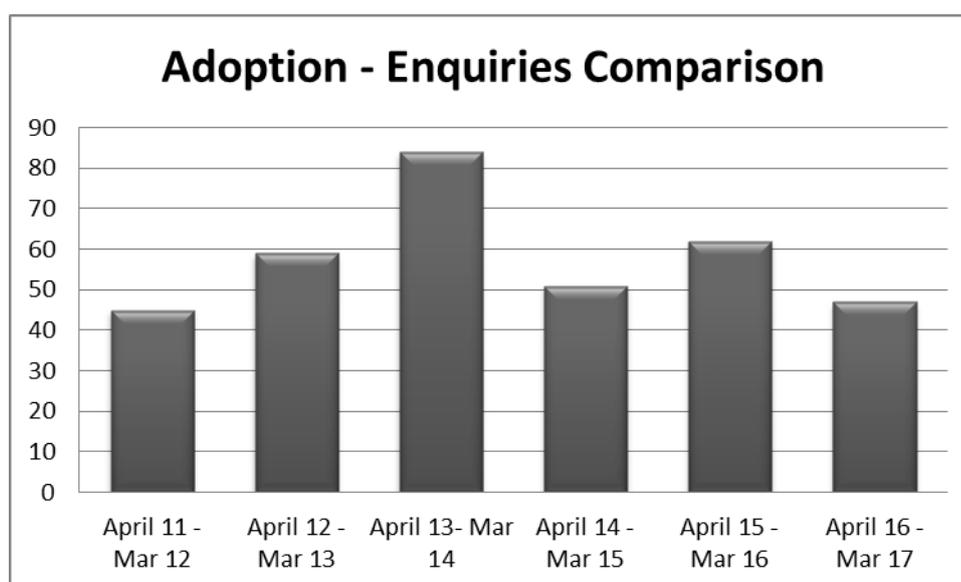
Involving children and young people

Children of an appropriate age are encouraged to contribute to the family finding process as well as planning introductions. Some children have the opportunity to attend Adoption Activity Days and have voiced their opinions on those they have met. Some have made their own short films to profile themselves and their siblings. Others have created introduction booklets to give to prospective adopters so that they are aware of their likes and dislikes, personalities and preferences. Wherever possible creative methods are used to involve children.

Young adopted people have also been involved in recruitment activities, contributing to the training of prospective adopters and mentoring other young adopted people who require support. Most recently children's voices expressing what they need in adopters have been used as part of a recruitment campaign. Blackburn with Darwen Adoption Agency has very recently been awarded the Investors in Children award.

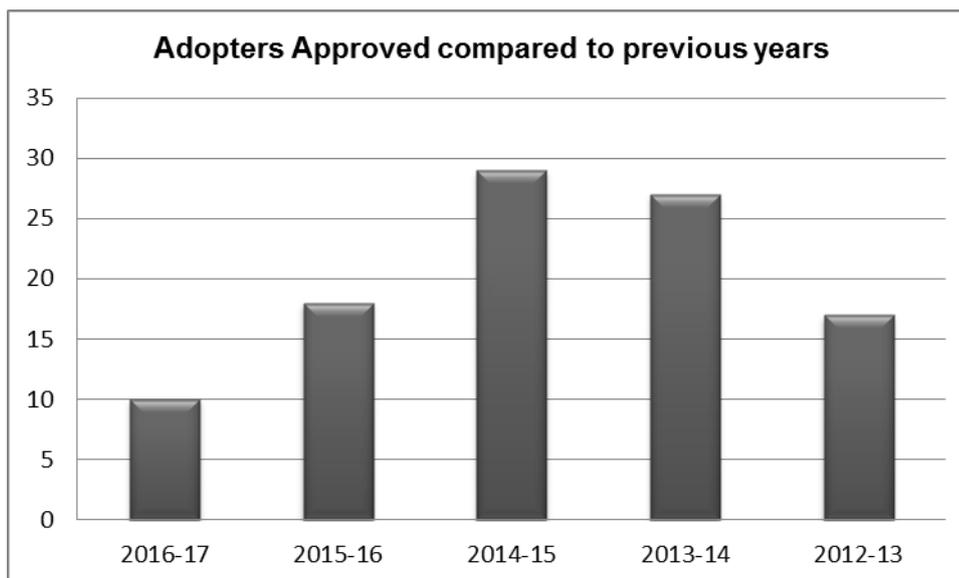
Recruitment Enquiries 2016/17

The number of enquiries received has dropped again over the past 12 months despite recruitment activity continuing. Whilst the number of enquiries locally and regionally is not known, this does appear to reflect the regional and national picture of a reduction in adopters being approved.



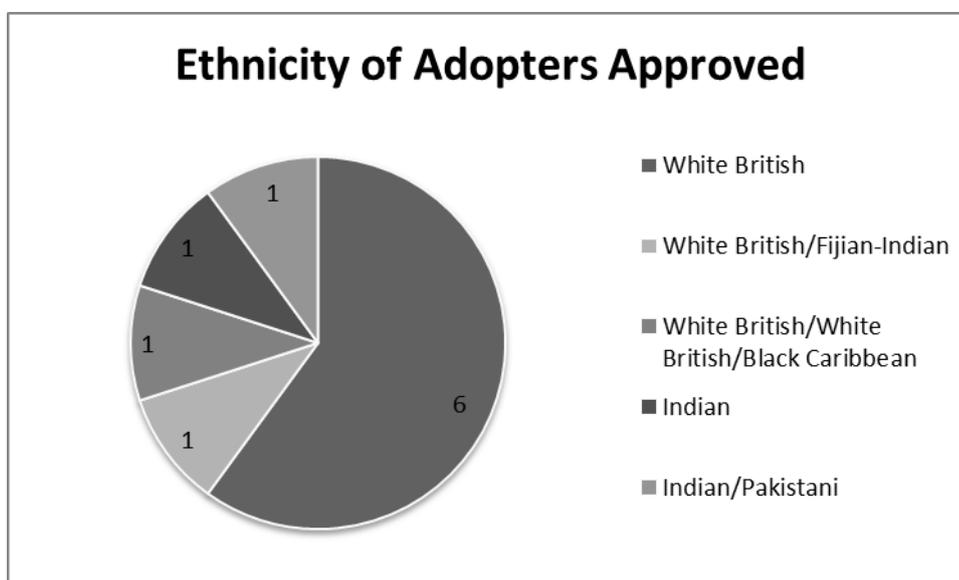
Adopter Recruitment 2016/17

The number of adopters approved has continued to decrease. This is largely due to the decrease in people enquiring, however Blackburn with Darwen continues to take a sensible approach to the use of resources, ensuring where possible that there is confidence about the ability to match prospective adopters in a timely way rather than taking those through the process for whom achieving a match is very unlikely.



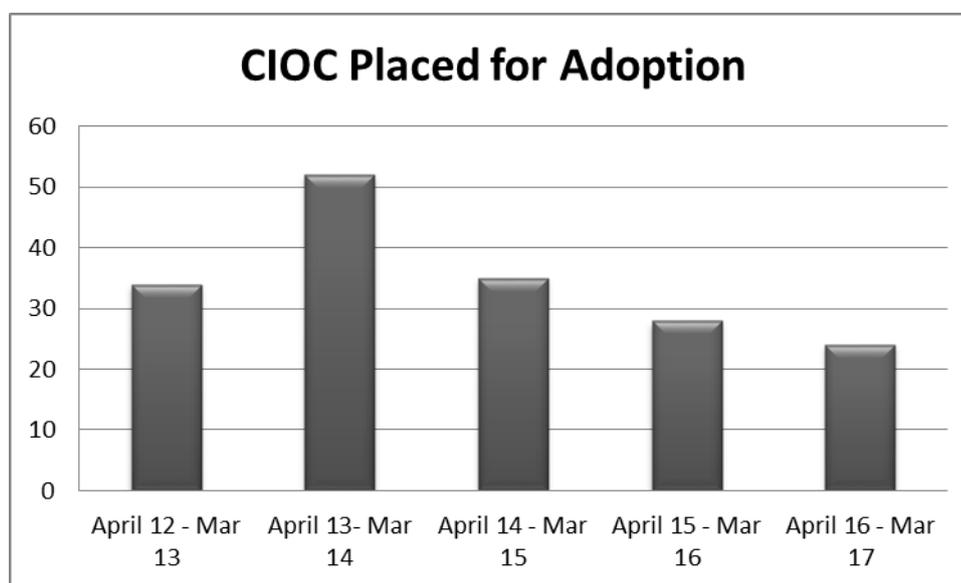
Just over half of those recruited lived outside of Blackburn with Darwen borders although two families live close enough to make in-house placements less likely.

The families approved are from a range of ethnic groups highlighting the agency's continued strength in recruiting families from all sections of the community. Just under a third were same sex couples. Blackburn with Darwen has previously been complimented for being particularly supportive of and accessible to same sex couples. No single adopters were approved in 2016/17.



Children placed for Adoption 2016/17

The service has continued to repeatedly rank 1st nationally over the past twelve months in relation to the percentage of children leaving care through adoption. The number of Children in our Care (CIOC) placed with adoptive families have dropped very slightly but remained roughly in line with last year's figures.

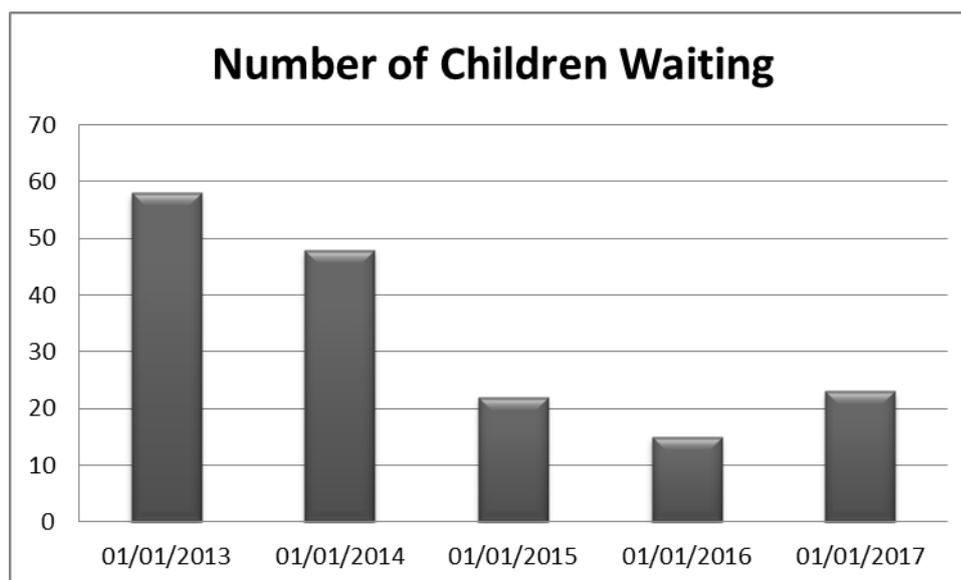


The ethnicity of children placed has been predominantly White British with approximately a fifth of children being of Pakistani or dual heritage.

Children awaiting a match

On 31st March 2017 there were 23 children waiting to be matched with adopters. Four were still awaiting Placement Orders including a sibling group of two who were awaiting a reversal of decision due to a family member being positively assessed to care for them, a little boy whose foster carers have been positively assessed to adopt him and another young boy already in a concurrent placement.

Amongst the children waiting with Placement Orders were three older sibling groups of 2, 3 and 4 (one of each) and one slightly younger sibling group of two. It was anticipated that at least five children (including the older sibling group of two) would be going to panel in April or May for matches due to positive links being explored. A number of the younger children waiting have additional health and/or developmental needs.



Length of time waiting

Whilst the Scorecard results continue to indicate that Blackburn with Darwen children are waiting much longer than the target of 121 between Placement Order and matching decision, the reality is that the length of time a majority of children are waiting is in line with this target. Of those children with a Placement Order waiting, on 31st March only one sibling group of four had been waiting longer than 121 days (171 days). Whilst these children should ideally be placed together, regular reviews are taking place to avoid drift whilst every avenue is being pursued to find a family able to care for them altogether. The remainder of the children had been waiting for two months or less.

Strengths

The adoption service has very well developed, clear policies and procedures which are implemented effectively in practice.

There is a very strong strategic and operational approach to the delivery of services supported by staff and the managers to children and their welfare.

The service does not shy away from agreeing plans of adoption for harder to place children including larger and older siblings groups and those with additional needs or disabilities, whilst ensuring that all plans are carefully tracked and reviewed to avoid unacceptable delay.

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's adoption service has a specialist Fast Track service providing specialist support to children and social workers to achieve permanence for children. Fast track which is a partnership between the local authority and East Lancashire Child and Adolescent Service (mental health) is both innovative and creative and has become an outstanding feature of an already strong service.

Dedicated and creative staff team who seek out opportunities to promote the service and recruit adopters using economic means.

Increased Post Adoption Support Service available pre and post Adoption Order with a number of staff trained and experienced in delivering therapeutic support.

Excellent regional relationships including formation of the Regional Adoption Agency.

Recruitment Strategies

Recruitment strategies to be used

- Continue to target both the local community and the wider area.
- Continue to build and strengthen relationships with local community groups.
- Maintain links with both internal and external teams, including disability services.
- Continue to link in with Faith sector organisations within the community to help with the promotion of Adoption from within minority groups.
- Continue to promote applicant adopters with other local authorities.
- Continue to encourage potential adopters to consider Fostering For Adoption and offer additional training and support in this area.
- Continue to work closely with Adopt North West considering applicants from within and outside the Local Authority borders
- Hold occasional information evenings linked to specific recruitment drives/advertising
- Develop a joint recruitment strategy through Adoption NoW Regional Adoption Agency

What works in Adoption?

We know from campaigns over the last year that the following methods have been successful.

- ✓ Word of mouth
- ✓ Radio
- ✓ Website / Online
- ✓ Local Press
- ✓ Linking in with national campaigns and themes

High profile events raise the profile of Let's Adopt and the reputation of the council's adoption service, but do not appear to correlate directly to an increase in enquiries.

Needs Analysis

What is the immediate need?

A total of twenty four children were placed in 2016/17 in 20 placements. Blackburn with Darwen Adoption Service currently has very few adopters awaiting the placement of children, and this picture is mirrored amongst the other five local authorities in the Adoption NoW, therefore the service aims to recruit a minimum of 20 Adoptive families in 2017/18.

Whilst nationally there remain slightly more adopters than children with Placement Orders, the number is falling and the number of adopters able to consider sibling placements including older sibling groups, children with more complex health and development needs and children from Black and Ethnic Minority heritage remains low.

The service will review its progress against these targets on a regular basis, although it is anticipated that during this financial year there will be significant changes in the launching of Adoption NoW.

How will the aims be achieved?

Blackburn with Darwen's Communications Team have been commissioned for a six month period to ensure regular updates on social media and the agency's website

Media coverage will be sought around key stories and special events eg. National Adoption Week including newspaper and radio advertising

Potential adoptive families usually need to hear or see the message many times prior to making contact so the advertising will take this into account.

Where parental permission is granted consider national media advertising for specific children who are harder to place, or create anonymous adverts to encourage applications

To support the marketing activity, continue to ensure that the adoption process from start to finish remains both consistent and professional and hits the timescale targets of approval of adopters.

The recruitment plan will be

- **Strategically timed** to have maximum impact
- **Consistent** to the needs at that particular time/location
- **Wider area** campaign
- **Targeted recruitment**

Getting the message out

The service will continue to **raise awareness** and recruitment of adopters amongst Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council staff.

It will continue to ensure all steps in the Adoption **process** from enquiry to approval are **consistent, professional and timely** to support the marketing activity.

It will **Target Specific Groups** in line with the needs of the children.

In order to do this a variety of media will be used including :-

Locality Based Events

Locally based information evenings advertised through council media, on the website, social media and newspaper advertising

Lancashire Evening Telegraph

Online and paper advertising running over a period of eight weeks.

Newsquest

Consideration will be given to further use of this in August/September depending on the timing of joint recruitment campaigns starting with Adoption NoW

Website

We will continue to develop the Lets Adopt website to keep it fresh, appealing and relevant. All technicalities will be looked at on a regular basis to improve service accessibility.

Facebook

Similarly Facebook will be updated regularly with new stories, features and events.

Radio

Opportunities will be sought to promote adoption through local radio stations which also provide promotional opportunities. Paid ads will be used around these where possible.

Enquiries

All Enquiries will be responded to promptly. Where initial enquiries appear positive but there is not further response, these will be followed up after three months.

Local Media

Internal and external publications will be used.

The Shuttle is a good medium to keep the message constant within the local community.

Portable

The Gazebo will be utilised at events including the portable pop up stand.

Faith Groups

An event specifically targeting potential adopters from the Muslim community will be held later in the year through the mosque network and/or Taheedul School if the number of enquiries from this community falls/the specific need is identified.

Disability Links

Feature articles will appear in the disability newsletters throughout the year. In addition information points will be placed at social and support events where appropriate.

Events Plan 2017/18

28th June 2017	Information evening
15th July 2017	Annual Adoption Fun Day
7th-10th August 2017	Women's Lifestyle event, Mall, Blackburn
October 2017	Official launch of Adoption NoW

A new Recruitment Officer has just been appointed and therefore new promotional events will be planned as soon as they are in place. Where Blackburn with Darwen is represented at family fun days and other events, both fostering and adoption possibilities are promoted.

Monitoring & Evaluation

The process of adoption will continue to be monitored with set timescales in place for each stage of the process.

The recruitment strategy will be monitored and reviewed regularly.

- Keep a record of the number of adoption stories or adverts appearing in various types of media (schools newsletters, telegraph, shuttle, etc).
- Continue to record the number of enquires generated at each stage, advert. The figures will be recorded on a database.
- Continue to analyse the number of enquiries generated each month and adoption packs sent out.
- Follow up via telephone after 3 months following the information pack being sent out where appropriate.
- The purpose for this call will be to ascertain how the individual feels about adoption after having time to consider it further.
- Continue to provide any additional support or advice if required in completing the application form and answer any questions that may be of concern to the applicant.
- Gather information about how people found out about adoption or what motivated them to make contact during all stages of the process so that we can better target recruitment in the future.
- A review meeting will take place with the Communications Team after three months to reflect on the effectiveness of work completed and consider further developments
- Increasingly regional information will be collated to help drive and inform recruitment activity