

Appendix A

Walsall Children's Services- Adoption Service Six Month Report

April 2015 – September 2015

Introduction

This report will outline the activity of Walsall Children's Adoption Service for the six month period from April, to September, 2015. The report will cover the following areas:

1. The Adoption Team and the re-structure of the Family Placement Service and Specialist Children's Services
2. The Adoption Panel
3. Agency Decision Maker
4. Analysis of the work undertaken
5. The role of Adoption in the Black Country, impact of the Adoption Leadership Board and the plans for Regionalising Adoption Agencies
6. Walsall's Performance and the Adoption Scorecard

1. The Adoption Team

During the six month period covered in this report, the Adoption Team moved from Pinfold Health Centre in Bloxwich to Essington Lodge to be co-located with the fostering service and the safeguarding and family support teams. The purpose of the move was to engender a more effective and streamlined family placement service. The move of the team also coincided with the re-structure of specialist children's services. This re-structure saw the deletion of Senior Practitioner posts, the introduction of Practice Manager post and the deletion of the dedicated family and friends fostering team.

From the 1st April 2015, the Adoption Team comprised of the following: one team manager, one practice manager, eight qualified social workers, three non qualified workers and 2 ½ dedicated business support members of staff. Howard Parker, Adoption Team Manager left the service in February 2015 to join Adoption Focus as their Operational Manager, Myrtle Kennedy, senior practitioner retired from the service in August 2015 and Penny Nicola, senior practitioner left the service in September 2015 to undertake a social work role in another authority. Sandra Alleyne, interim Adoption Team Manager commenced her role on the 1st April 2015 and Erika Ower was seconded into the role of Practice Manager.

The Adoption Team's work involves initial visits to applicants, staffing of information evenings as part of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC), hosting adoption

preparation courses, conducting assessments of adopters, family finding for children with an adoption plan, provision of post adoption support and completion of step parent adoption and inter-agency adoption applications. Specialist workers assist children in preparation to move on to their adoptive placements and also in the provision of Life Story Work. From the 1st April 2015, the team also incorporated the support provision to Special Guardians.

The team continues to work collaboratively with the Consortium and regular meetings take place between the Adoption in the Black Country management team and sub groups, such as training sub group and adoption support sub group.

In October 2014, Adoption Focus joined Adoption in the Black Country as a fifth member. The purpose of this was so that Adoption Focus could assist the consortium in the provision of adoptive families for harder to place children. The joining of Adoption Focus offers ABC considerable growth opportunities as there is now additional funding available and Black Country children will be offered a wider choice of placement through an established and successful voluntary adoption agency.

Assessments: The Adoption Agency (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations in 2013 brought in a two stage assessment process. The Adoption Team has risen to this challenge and the Panel has commended the team on the improving quality of reports. Applicants attending panel remain positive about the preparation and assessment process.

Enquiries: There were 30 enquiries during the 6 month period which ranged from 3 enquiries in May up to 6 in June. There were a total of 25 enquiries wishing to progress to the next stage and of these 25 referrals made. Most enquiries originate from the ABC Consortium.

Of note there were fewer enquiries in this 6 month period to the previous year from the internet however overall the increased market presence of ABC and the accessibility of the ABC website is extremely positive.

2. The Adoption Panel

During this period 17 panel members were on the central list .Councillor Tine Jukes commenced her attendance at panel in September 2015. Members who have left are Julie McBride, Alan Velvet, and Penny Nicola. James Hodgetts joined panel as a social worker from Walsall council.

Six panel meetings occurred during this period. All matters expert one were dealt with at panel with one item being deferred as insufficient information was available on second time adopters. The areas identified were parenting the first child, outstanding checks and little information on the child for a match.

Applicants are encouraged to attend panel meetings for approval and matching with children. Panel members welcome their attendance as this assists them to ask questions to them directly and it also adds another dimension to the written assessment.

Panel members are asked to fill in feedback forms regarding panel functioning but are not fulfilling the quality assurance role of panel in a formalised manner. This is an area for development in the coming months.

Panel is well supported by the Adoption Panel administrator, Gillian Hateley and in her absence Cheryl Harper.

Panel members were invited to a training event on the 20 March 2015, presented from BAAF on 'Effective Panels' and internal training on the 18 December 2015 'Fostering for Adoption and Concurrent Planning'.

There will be a change in Panel Function which will commence in the New Year. A new panel will now operate as an ADOPTION and PERMANENCE PANEL; this will enable the panel to consider long-term matches of children requiring long term fostering. This will be in addition to the Adoption Panel.

Recommendation: It will be beneficial for the Panel and ADM to meet on a six monthly basis to share views and receive feedback on how the changes both in legislation and practice are impacting on the decision maker and panel's recommendations in order for continued improvement on practice. (Note: This will be incorporated into the Training /development days for panel members)

3. Agency Decision Maker

Tony Griffin (Interim Assistant Director, Children's Services) acted as the Agency Decision Maker during this period.

ADM decisions are made within recommended timescales following panel meetings. The decision maker generally meets with the Panel Adviser when making decisions in order to seek clarification or gain further information pertaining to the items presented at panels.

4. Analysis of the Work undertaken from April 1st 2015 – September 30th 2015

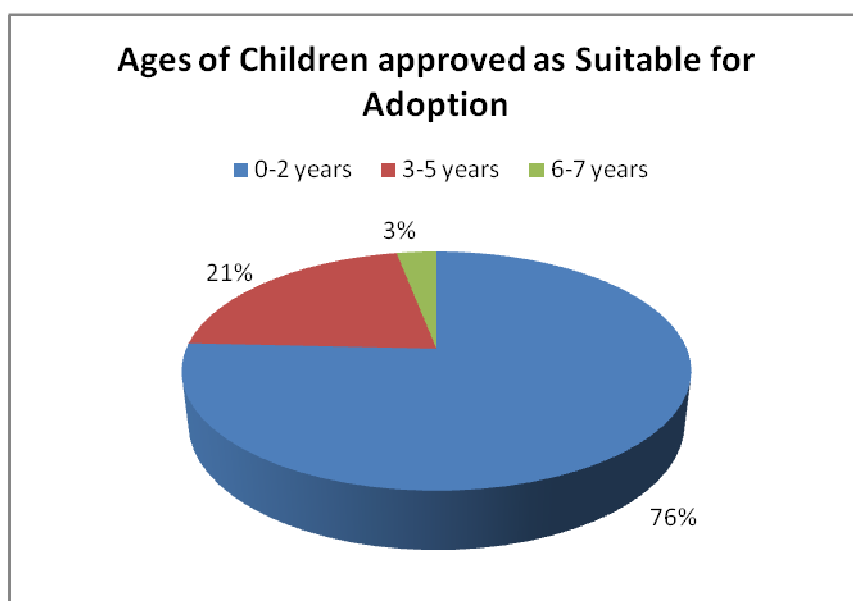
Children suitable for adoption

During this period 33 children were presented to the ADM for an adoption decision compared to only 14 for the first 6 months of 2014-15. Last year's low figures were

directly linked to the overall national reduction in adoption numbers and the increase in children being placed in family and friend arrangements. The increase this year appears to be as a result of the Government's renewed focus on adoption and Walsall's response to this in ensuring that wherever possible, adoption should be considered for a wide range of children. The evidence would also suggest that a significant number were linked to older siblings being adopted and the unborn children subsequently being presented for an adoption decision.

Social worker feedback indicates that all 33 of these children had their permanence plan considered and agreed at their 4 month statutory review. This would indicate a 100% completion rate. However, having reviewed the figures, it is clear that there may be some confusion about when social workers begin the count of the 4 month mark as some of these 33 children were in care a long time before there permanence plan was made. This is a training issue for social workers and will be addressed with the senior leadership team.

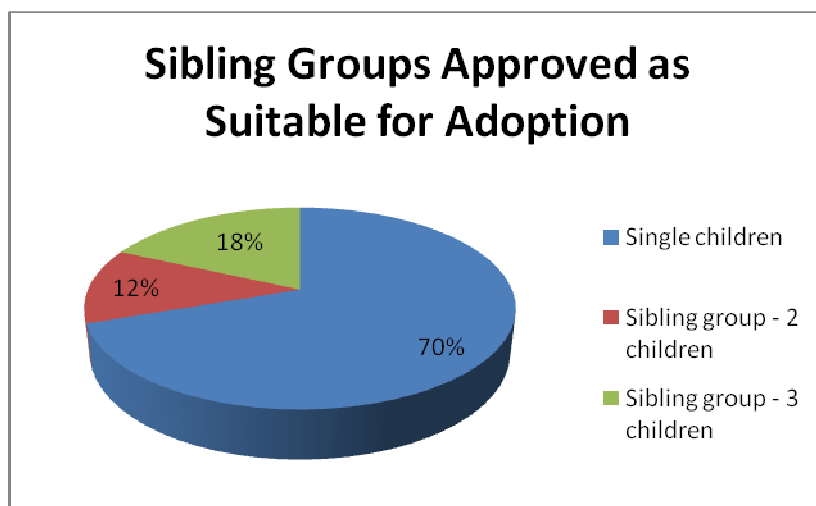
As can be seen the vast majority of children are younger than 3 years, which is consistent with previous years and is evidence of Walsall's efforts to achieve early permanence for children.



0-2 year	25
3-5 year	7
6-7 year	1

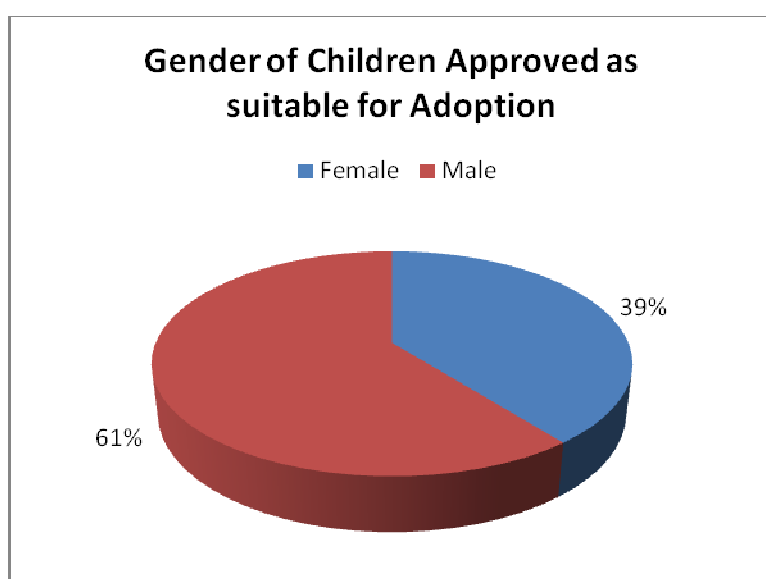
This period has seen an increase in the number of siblings groups, for the same period 2014-15 only two sibling groups were presented for an adoption decision. For the first time in two years, two cases were presented of sibling groups of three

children. Family finding for sibling groups of three and above can be problematic as the likelihood of finding an adoptive family who can manage the needs of three children is small. However, at the time of writing this report, I am pleased to say that a match for one of the sibling groups is being progressed.



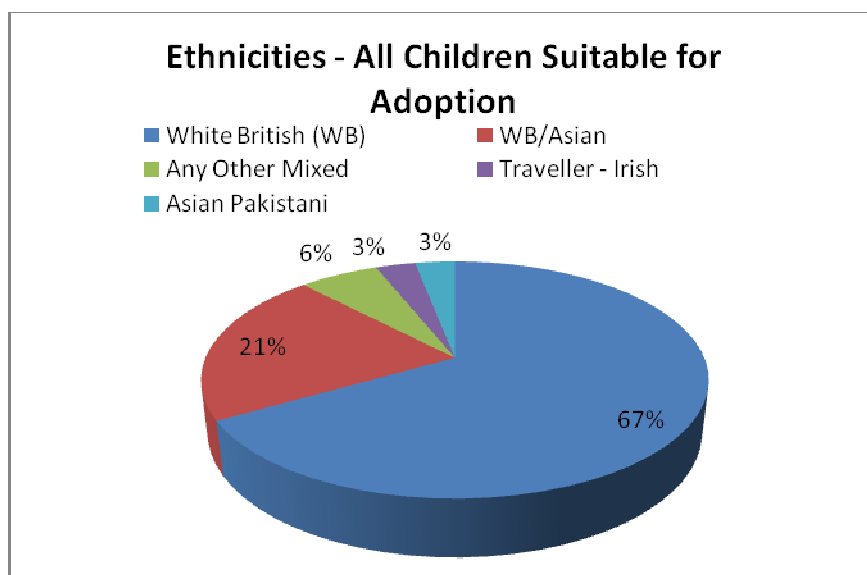
Single children	23
Sibling group - 2 children	4
Sibling group - 3 children	6

Similar to previous years, more boys than girls were presented for an adoption decision. This continues to reflect the national picture of the gender profile within the care system, with 57% being boys and 43% girls (BAAF 2015)



Female	13
Male	20

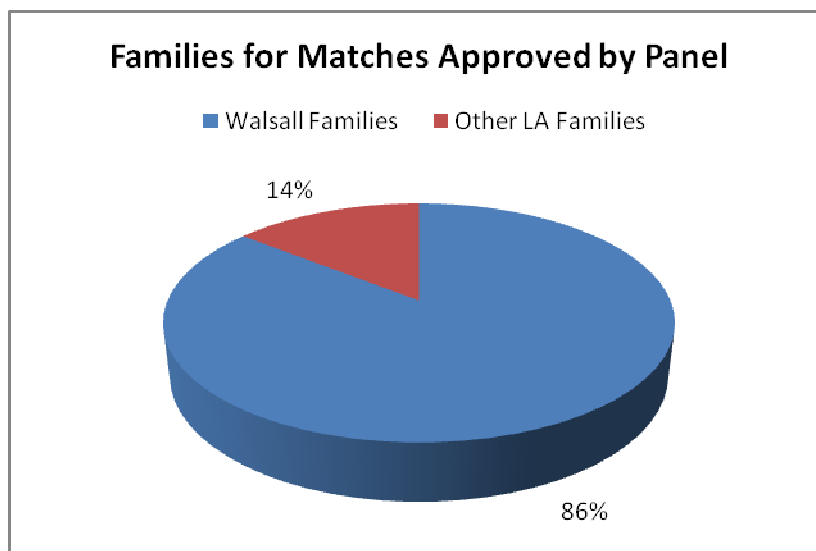
There continues to be a high number of young white British children requiring adoption, the majority of whom can be placed internally as there is never a shortage of adoptive families for young white British children. However, this period has seen an increase in White British/Asian children requiring adoption. Walsall tends to recruit a broad range of adoptive families although during this period, the majority of families were White British. It is likely that a match for children of mixed Asian heritage will be sought from our consortia arrangements.



White British (WB)	22
WB/Asian	7
Any Other Mixed	2
Traveller - Irish	1
Asian Pakistani	1

Matches of children with approved adoptive families

Walsall has made matches with 14 adoptive families offering placements to 15 children, 12 of which were with Walsall approved families, demonstrating good use of internal provision and the other two were with other local authority families. Sadly, one of the matches whilst being agreed at panel did not proceed to a placement as the adopters pulled out prior the placement. The child has remained in their foster placement and family finding for her continues.



Walsall Families	12
Other LA Families	2

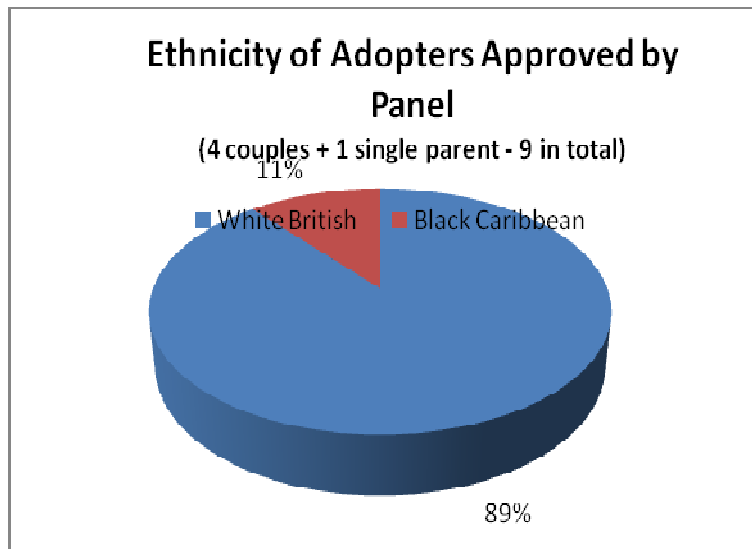
Of the 15 children matched, 12 had a proposed placement identified within 6 months of their adoption decision. The remaining 3 were subject to delay due to their underlying complex medical needs and no suitable adopters available when the initial search was undertaken.

Numbers of approved adopters

During this period, 4 adoptive families were approved; this is two less than the same period last year. The service is profiled to approve 18 families by the end of March 2016. The ethnicity of those families is as follows;

of those approved, 8 were White European, and 1 Black Caribbean.

Of these 4 couples all were presented to Panel within 6 months.



Number of approved inter country adopters: None.

5. Adoption in the Black Country, the Adoption Leadership Board and the Regionalising Adoption agenda

Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus (ABC AF) continue to move forward with their consortia working arrangements. Initially the use of Adoption Focus families was slow to get started. However, this has now improved and Walsall family finders are automatically considering Adoption Focus families if there are no Walsall approved families available.

For the period April to September, ABC and AF hosted 18 information events across the region. 267 enquiries were received into ABC and AF in total, from these 65 referrals were passed to ABC members and AF and of these 15 were passed onto Walsall for an initial assessment to be undertaken. These are similar figures to previous years. Despite a reduced budget during this period, ABC and AF have been able to retain brand awareness and retain levels of enquiries due to effective and creative use of the Adoption Reform Grant money available during the previous year.

ABC and AF continue to strive for sector led improvement; this year has seen the following new developments:

- Production of new adopters video to be shown at information events
- Development on new ABCTV (to shave videos of children and approved adopters more speedily)
- Usages of Digital Billboards in a location/Motorway Junction (A444)
- In-house exchange day hosted by adoption focus

Adoption Leadership Board

Adoption Leadership Boards were introduced by central Government during the latter part of 2014, as a way of providing a clear focus across regional areas on improvements needed to the adoption system. The board is chaired by the DCS from Dudley and membership consists of Assistant Directors and Heads of Service from local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and CorumBAAF. The board continues to meet quarterly. All local authorities report on their data on a quarterly basis, the board then produces a data pack which gives an indication of how each local authority is performing against the Adoption Scorecard measures. The board also monitors the regions use of the Adoption Support Fund and will also be instrumental in the Government's Regionalising Adoption Agenda.




Regionalising Adoption Agenda

In June 2015, the Government published their 'Regionalising Adoption' agenda. Essentially, this invited expressions of interest from Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies to join together with the intention of providing more adoption placements for more children. Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus submitted a bid for government funding to enable the creation of a standalone adoption agency. However, in July 2015, the consortium was approached by Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire asking if they could also join the consortium and all six local authorities and Adoption Focus become one Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). At the time of writing this report the RAA has received government funding to support its design and implementation.

6. Adoption Scorecard - April 1st 2015 to September 30th 2015

The Adoption Scorecard uses performance data to evidence how swiftly Local Authorities implement adoption plans for children. It compares Walsall with neighbouring authorities and England and is shown as a year three year average.

From the data below, we can see that at the end of September 2015, two of the three key performance measures were showing a significant improvement, the third is still considerably better than the England average and compared to March 2015, the number of days has only increased by a marginal amount. There are a number of factors contributing to this including the continued impact of the 26 week timeframe for care proceedings, the early identification process of children requiring adoption, the introduction of 'Adoption Link', a new family finding tool which all local authorities are now using and also our partnership working with Adoption Focus in identifying families for some of our more complex children. The third indicator, whilst positive and showing a relatively stable move in the right direction can easily be affected by cases whereby adoption family finding is protracted. This is often the case for our complex children, BME children, boys over three years and for those in sibling groups. Walsall will continue to put every effort into family finding for all children requiring adoption, this could affect this indicator and show an increase in days overall. However, this is the right thing to do for those children and as long as we can explain the story behind the figures, we will continue to achieve positive outcomes for all children requiring adoption.

Adoption			Mar-14 Eng	Mar-15 Walsall	Sep-15 Walsall
1,2	Number of children Adopted		5,050	38	18
1,2		% Looked After Children discharged adopted (BB)	17	17.8	22.2
1,2		Of those adopted, Average time from Entering Care to moving in with adopted family (Days) (3-year average)(SB)	628	599	510
1,2		Of those adopted, Average time between receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to a family (Days) (3 year average) (SB)	217	168	174

There are a number of other performance indicators captured on the scorecard. Walsall's performance at the end of September 2015 is shown below:

	No CYP currently family finding for.	n/a	29	47
	Adoptions of children aged five or over (% of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted) 2010-13	n/a	8 (6.3%)	4 (10%)
	Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (% of BME children leaving care who are adopted)	n/a	12 (18.5%)	3 (8.5%)
	Number of CYPP awaiting adoption	6370	61	77

The number of children with an adoption decision has significantly increased during this period, hence the rise in those children requiring family finding. Walsall's performance for children over 5 being adopted has been influenced this year by an increase in children 0-3rd birthday requiring adoption. However, at the time of writing this report, matches of children older than 3yrs are being considered, this is likely therefore to show improvements in 2016-17 scorecard. This is the same for BME children being adopted, Walsall's performance in this area has always been high, and it is likely that the annual report for 2015-16 will report on an improvement in this area.

Conclusions

The Adoption Team as part of the family placement service underwent a re-structure in April 2015. Over time, this will prove advantageous, however in the shorter term; it has meant the loss of some experienced members of staff and the need to recruit to posts. This has impacted on our numbers of approved adopters as the focus has had to be placed on the high number of children being referred for an adoption decision. During the latter part of this period, investment was secured to increase the social work capacity in the adoption service, overtime this will enable the service to prioritise family finding whilst also ensuring that adopter recruitment is maintained sufficiently.

The regionalising adoption agenda will also have significant benefits for Walsall, the details of which are being worked upon now. It is likely that phase one of the RAA will be ready by April 2017.

The figures tell a positive story in our drive to ensure adoption is considered for a wide range of children, more adoption decisions have been made and more children are being matched in a timely way to their adopters. This focus on permanence is a critical component of any child's care plan. The remainder of this year and moving forward into next has to focus on extending the focus on permanence to a wider pool of children. There are likely to be further service re-design proposals in order to implement this.

This report gives a brief analysis of the current situation and a more robust analysis will be undertaken at the end of the financial year (This report will be available in August 2015).

Linda Franks

(Adoption and Fostering Panels Advisor)

(28/1/2016)