

## **Cabinet – 17 September 2008**

### **Walsall Adoption Agency-Annual Report**

**Portfolio:** Councillor Zahid Ali, Children's Services

**Service:** Children's Services

**Wards:** All

**Key decision:** No

**Forward plan:** No

#### **1. Summary of report**

- 1.1 Standard 17.3 of the National Minimum Standards for Local Adoption Services (England) 2003 requires the Adoption Agency to produce an Annual Report to be received by the Council Executive. The Annual Adoption Report 2007/08 found at **Appendix 1**, highlights the success of the Adoption Agency.
- 1.2 Walsall Adoption agency met all of its annual targets for the period 2007/8, maintained effective partnerships and continued to provide high levels of adoption support for all those affected by Adoption. The performance of the Adoption agency in enabling looked after children to be placed in permanent families places Walsall in the top quartile of all English authorities.

#### **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 Cabinet is recommended to note the contents of the Annual Report and the work of the Walsall Adoption Agency.
- 2.2 Cabinet is recommended to receive reports of the Adoption Agency biannually in line with legislative requirements.

#### **3. Background information**

- 3.1 The attached report summarises the work of Walsall Childrens' Services Adoption Service from April 2007 to March 2008. It provides information about the recruitment and training of adopters and the critical role played by the Black Country Consortium (ABC Adoption across the Black Country) in achieving this. The consortium is a partnership between all four Black Country authorities and has been successful in securing successful adoption placements for Black Country children and prospective adopters. Although the charts within the report indicate a slight decrease in adoption enquiries during the year, with the subsequent recruitment of a marketing officer within the ABC consortium,

enquiries are now increasing. Analysis of outcomes shows that a total of twenty adoptive families were approved in 2007/8 including an increase of 5% approvals of families for black and dual heritage children in line with key recruitment priorities and equality targets.

- 3.2 The report highlights that the needs profile of children has changed with adoption panel recommending 30 matches in 2007/8 compared to 43 the previous year. Furthermore a total number of children adopted in 2007/8 decreased slightly from 43 in 2006/7 to 38 in The main reasons for this are that children's needs have become more complex in terms of the impact of early negative experiences, attachment issues, diverse racial and cultural background needs and large sibling group needs. This is compounded by there being a reduction nationally in the numbers of families who are able and willing to adopt children with such complex needs.
- 3.3 Most importantly, the report highlights a new requirement that adopters themselves attend panel for their approval and also attend when they are matched with children. The medical and legal advisors continue to support the activity of the panel by providing relevant advice and training.
- 3.4 The report identifies that the challenge for 2008/9 for both the Adoption Panel and Children's Services will be managing the impact of the new Public Law Outline in terms of managing the process of evidence and delay. The panel is effective and it held a successful training day this year which explored issues of attachment for adults and children.
- 3.5 The report contains information on several key indicators linked to the National Minimum Standards for Adoption in which Walsall continues to perform well. Adoption support continues to be provided to families and children less than 18 years of age; and to adults affected by adoption. Appropriate levels of contact with birth families are supported and continue to be developed.
- 3.6 Partnership working and networking continues to develop for adoption and adoption support, within the Black Country Consortium, Adoption UK, Adoption Support across the West Midlands and the Birth Parents Advocacy Service.

#### **4. Resource considerations**

- 4.1 **Financial:** The financial implications for the council for managing effectiveness, outcomes for children and adoption agency services, are considered during the annual budget setting process and are in line with the medium term financial plan.
- 4.2 **Legal:** There is a requirement under standard 17(3) of the National Adoption Minimum Standards, which derive from sections 23(1) and 49(1) of the Care Standards Act 2000, for the Council Executive to receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the services of the adoption agency, in order to monitor progress.

- 4.3 **Staffing:** Current staffing levels are sufficient to meet the requirements of a continued high quality service.

## 5. **Citizen impact**

The report confirms the progress of the Adoption Service in providing services to Walsall children requiring adoption, birth families and adoptive parents. Continued developments have ensured further improvement in performance against the relevant indicators, particularly numbers of children adopted. The Agency enables children who are looked after by the local authority to secure permanent and stable placements.

## 6. **Community safety**

There are no specific issues that impact on community safety arising from the recommendations.

## 7. **Environmental impact**

There are no specific issues that impact upon the environment from this report.

## 8. **Performance and risk management issues**

### 8.1 **Risk:**

- 8.1.1 The relevant risk applicable to this cabinet report is the requirement for the Council Executive to receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the services of the adoption agency, in order to monitor progress.

- 8.1.2 The key risks emerging from the Adoption Panel Report (**Appendix 1**) that will require effective management are ensuring that adoptive placements are identified for children with the most complex needs. This particularly relates to sibling groups, children with attachment issues and children from specific cultural and religious backgrounds.

- 8.1.3 In addition a potential new risk exists for both the Adoption Panel and Children's Services in managing the impact of the new Public Law Outline (PLO) in terms of managing the process of evidence and delay.

- 8.1.4 Measures to respond positively to these needs and risk areas are integral to the Corporate Parenting Service Plan and its risk register which covers the priorities and work of the Adoption agency.

### 8.2 **Performance management:**

- 8.2.1 Continued high performance is achieved through effective recruitment, assessment, training and support of a wide range of adoptive parents, and through the provision of adoption support services to adopted children and adults and birth parents. In Walsall this is currently achieved through a dedicated adoption team and the permanence support team. However, following the good

practice recommendation made by Ofsted within their inspection of the Adoption Service in December 2007, adoption support services will become part of the adoption team. This is to be achieved as part of the remodelling of the Family Placement Service and will be effective from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2008.

- 8.2.2 Adoption Agency success is having an impact on key performance indicators, most notably C23, (percentage of children looked after adopted from local authority care), which continues to achieve “very good” performance within the top quartile nationally. Additionally, the provision of stable high quality adoption placements will contribute to achieving the outcomes of the Children Act 2004 for our children and young people, namely staying safe and healthy, enjoying and achieving in life, making a positive contribution to their communities and achieving social and economic wellbeing in adulthood.

## **9. Equality implications**

The continued improvements will ensure that looked after children can be placed with suitable adoptive carers within timescales, which meet their long term needs and in a manner, which minimises the risk of placement breakdown. The report specifically reports on the number of children adopted in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and sibling group matches placements secured for children.

## **10. Consultation**

The annual reporting process has been informed by consultation and extensive feedback from relevant stakeholders; most importantly adoptive children, adoptive parents and adoption panel members. The Annual Report is a public document, which can be accessed by anyone wishing to do so, and will be available on the council website.

## **Background papers**

Annual Report (Appendix 1)

### **Author**

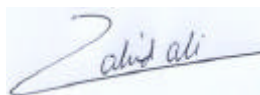
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David Brown  
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**Walsall Council**

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# **ADOPTION PANEL REPORT**

**2007/2008**

**Author: Lisa Preston**  
**Adoption Team Manager and Professional**  
**Adviser to Walsall Adoption Panel**

## **1     Introduction**

This report details the work of Walsall MBC Adoption Service from April 2007 to March 2008.

It has been yet another good year for the service, which has seen a steady number of adopters approved and also children matched and placed with Walsall approved families and families from other agencies.

The permanence support team continue to develop and deliver post adoption support services to all those affected by adoption (see Attached report).

Adoption Services were inspected by OFSTED in December 2007, which has resulted in a number of changes to the service, these shall be addressed through the body of this report.

The partnerships with our neighbouring agencies through Adoption in the Black Country, Adoption Support and Adoption UK also continue to develop and provide vital services on behalf of Walsall MBC.

## **2     Regional Developments**

Walsall continues to be a member of the WMRFPC, along with 13 other West Midlands Local Authorities, and 3 voluntary agencies, namely Barnardo's, Father Hudson's and NCH Midlands Projects being members for the third year.

Of the 30 matches made this year, one was with a Consortium family whilst a large proportion of the children were either placed within Walsall approved families or were placed country wide due to their assessed placement needs.

The Consortium continues to meet on a bi-monthly basis and discusses and develops policy, procedural and practice issues. This year the significant issue for most agencies was the preparation for forthcoming adoption and fostering inspections. The majority of consortium agencies were all inspected by OFSTED within a relatively short space of time.

## **3     Adoption Support**

Walsall continues to purchase a service from Adoption Support across the West Midlands, which, in accordance with our current service level agreements offers up to 4 sessions to anyone living in the Walsall Borough, who is affected by adoption (more sessions can be offered on a negotiated basis). They also offer activity days for adopted children, including an Easter and spring camping holiday.

The Adoption Support Service level agreement has been extended to provide an independent counselling support and advice service for birth relatives.

A report from the Permanence Support Service, which plays an integral support in adoption support services have prepared an additional report. (See Appendix 2)

## **4     Adoption UK**

The partnership between Adoption UK and Walsall MBC continues to grow to meet with the many new requirements of current legislation and regulations.

A new service level agreement, commissioned jointly with the other Black County agencies has extended the partnership with Adoption UK, which now provides support, information, advice and encouragement to adopters, carers and practitioners as follows:

- Telephone Helpline, offering up to date information on all aspects of adoption and the adoption process
- Local Support Groups, run by adoptive parents, regular meeting and events, both locally and nationwide
- Adoption Today Magazine, 10 editions per year
- Information Leaflets and Publications
- Contact Networks, databases of over 800 adoptive parents willing to speak to others about specific aspects of adoption
- Lending Library, over 400 books and videos
- Adoption UK's on-line community inter-active website
- Training Courses, for parents and practitioners, including "A Piece of Cake" training
- Buddy Schemes

The Buddy scheme which was introduced by Adoption UK in the latter part of 2006 continues to promote a level of support to new adoptive parents. The take up of the service to date has been relatively low. In order to address this Adoption UK are making more attempts to engage with adopters through local support groups and sharing information with them about the benefits of the Buddy scheme.

Walsall MBC has continued to have an increase in its membership of Adoption UK as all newly approved Adopters are automatically given one year's free membership to Adoption UK; which includes adopters receiving up to date information on new research and development in the arena of adoption. All adopters, once members are invited to Adoption UK support group meetings.

Adoption UK runs quarterly support groups at the Village Hotel in Walsall, approved adopters from Walsall and Wolverhampton are invited as are other approved adopters who subscribe to Adoption UK who also live within close proximity to Walsall and surrounding areas. The groups give adopters the opportunity to meet with other adopters at all stages of the process; it also facilitates the use of outside speakers to advice on specialist areas of adoption. Adoption UK had seen a decrease in the number of adopters attending its support group at the Village Hotel and feedback from those families who had attended was that they wanted more outside speakers. Adoption UK therefore made a concerted effort in 2007 to organise guest speakers and to publicize the event as such attendance figures have started to increase.

## **5     Black Country Consortium**

Adoption in the Black Country is now in its 5<sup>th</sup> year and the partnership between the four authorities involved continues to grow from strength to strength.

The partnership continues to provide a shared annual programme of adoption preparation training, 8 courses are facilitated per annum, each authority providing 2

courses. Feedback from attendees and facilitators indicate that the course is positively received by prospective adopters. Social workers continue to network effectively to ensure the course reflects any new changes to law, policy and practice. However, due to a lack of attendees two of the courses this year had to be cancelled at short notice

Wolverhampton, Sandwell, Walsall and Dudley are continuing to take a consistent approach in terms of financial support to adoptive families. However, whilst Wolverhampton, Dudley and Sandwell use the Dfes model for the calculation of adoption allowances, Walsall continues to use its current system.

'Meet the Children' Events continue to prove effective as a means of placing children for adoption. The events are organised to try and meet the needs of older more complex children, children who are part of sibling groups and children from minority ethnic backgrounds by raising their profile with approved adopters. Videos of the children are shown as is their artwork and profile needs. This year only one event ran as opposed to two due to the departure of the marketing officer halfway through the year. A high number of Walsall children were featured and a high number of Walsall adopters attended, in total 7 children from within the Black Country authorities were placed for adoption as a result of the event.

Since Adoption in the Black Country was first launched, the number of enquiries has increased year on year. Integrated strategic campaigns have resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of adoption enquiries. As the project and the brand have become more established results have increased. The past three years has seen a steady increase in the number of referrals received and the conversion rate to approved adopters has improved year on year. Sadly for the project the marketing officer left to further her career in October 2007. The job was advertised and a new marketing officer appointed in February 2008. This person is due to come into post in June 2008. The lack of a marketing officer has seen a dramatic decrease in the number of adopters coming through the project and as a result all four partner agencies have seen a decrease in approved adopters. It is anticipated that the arrival of the new marketing officer will have the required impact on marketing activity and all four authorities will see an increase in the numbers of prospective adopters being referred.

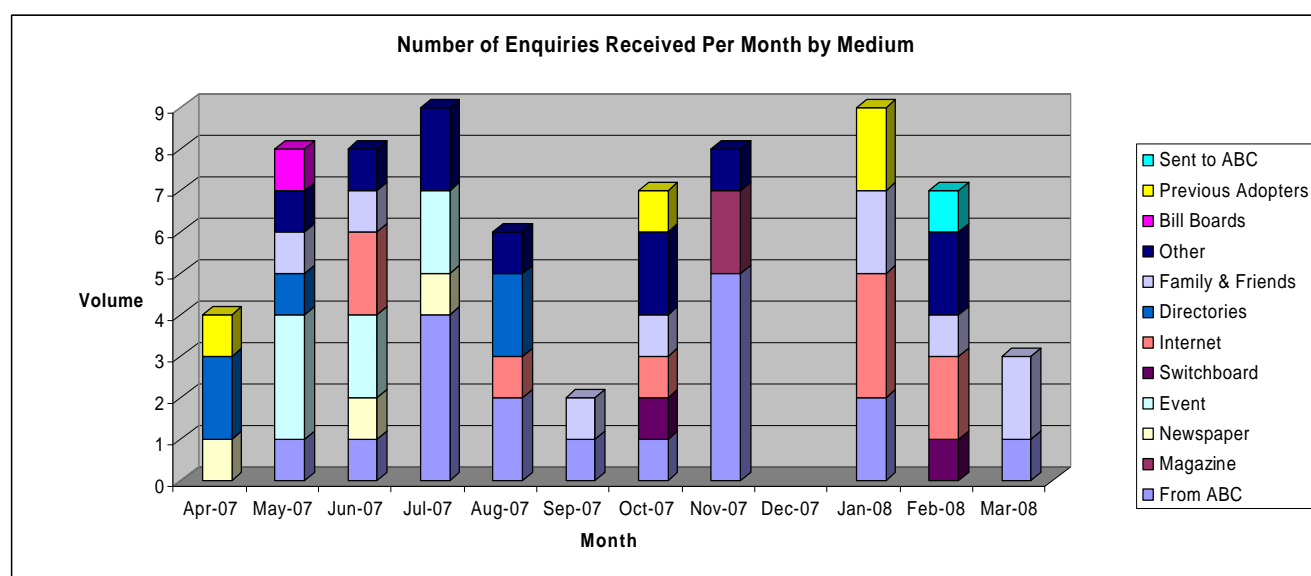


## 6 Walsall Adoption Marketing Charts

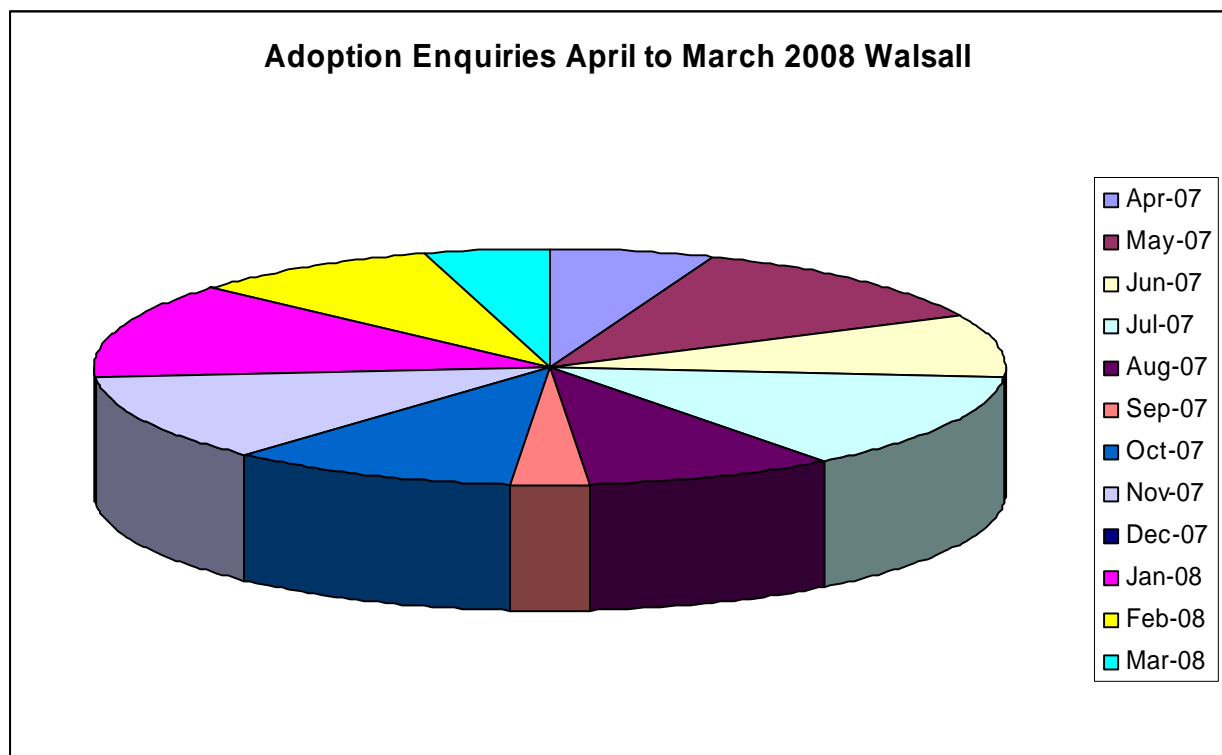
Walsall is in the fortunate position to be able to benefit from the work of the ABC project and also its own internal marketing strategy and campaign.

Marketing Campaigns do have an impact on the number of enquires received but because of placement needs of children looked after by Walsall MBC many enquiries cannot be processed. However, those enquiries are passed onto the ABC project for consideration by our other partners and in turn we receive enquiries back from the ABC project that are more able to meet the identified placement needs of Walsall children. During April 07-March 08 Walsall Customer Services officers received 68 adoption enquiries; this is a decrease in the figure of 112 from the previous year. This is linked to the lack of recruitment activity from ABC, as a large proportion of referrals are sent to Walsall via the ABC project. Of those 68 enquiries, 31 offers were sent out and as a result 25 referrals for assessment were generated.

The table below shows the numbers of enquiries received each month by medium; it is clear to see not only the significant contribution of the ABC project but also the success of social workers co-ordinating and running events to publicise adoption and also the role the internet.



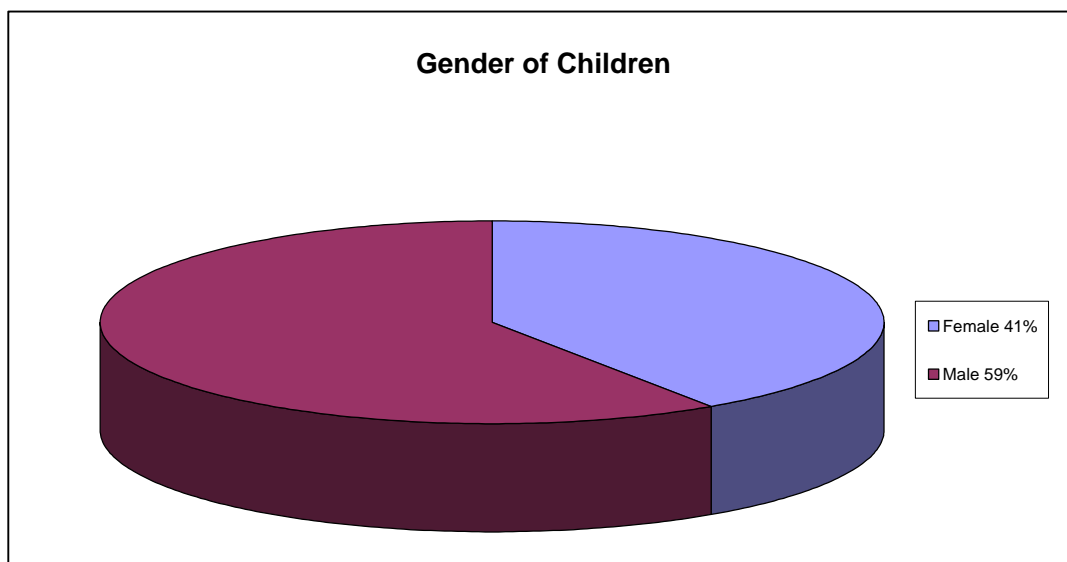
The pie chart below gives us another pictorial image of the number of enquiries received during April 07-March 08. Again we can see the large number of enquiries received during National Adoption Week, higher numbers for July and May reflect enquiries received after an open information evening.



## 7 Number of children suitable to be placed for adoption April 07 – March 08

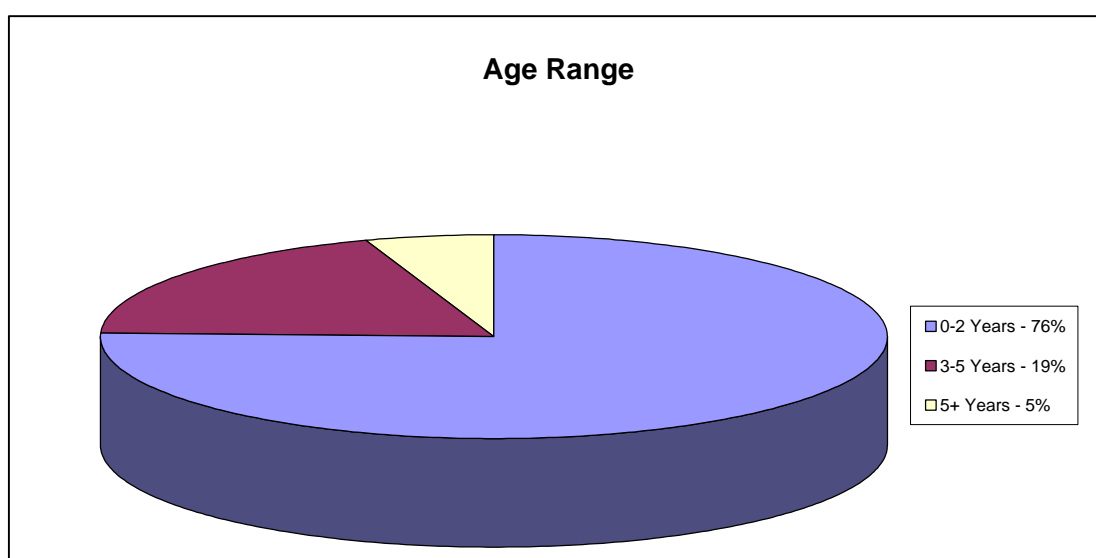
During April 07 to March 08 a total of 37 children were suitable to be placed for adoption.

There continues to be a higher proportion of boys needing adoptive placements; this is reflective of the national picture.



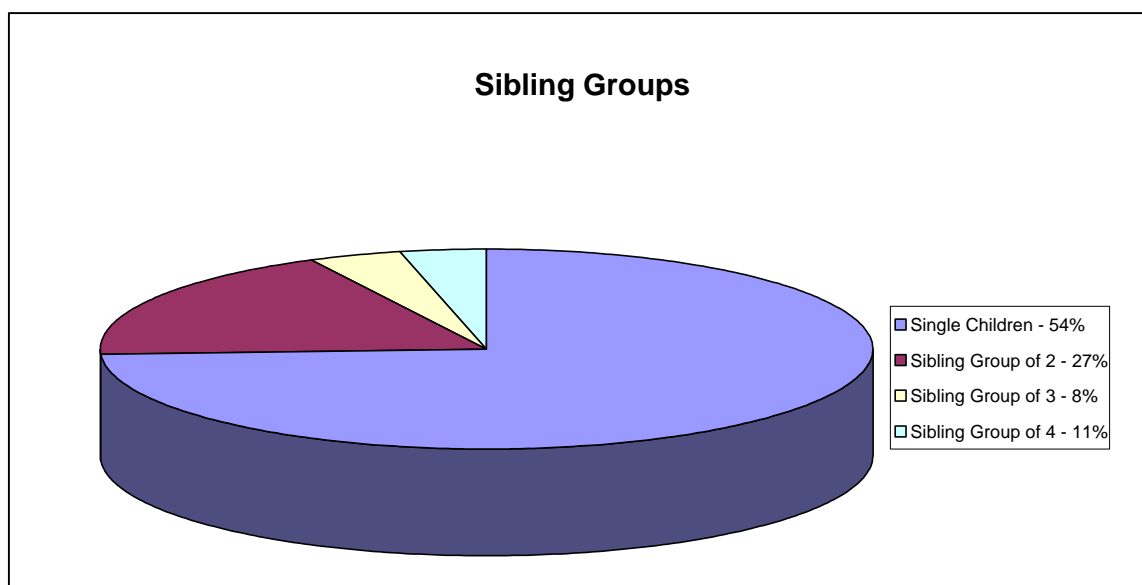
Female	15
Male	22

The majority of those children requiring adoption in Walsall continue to be aged 2 and under, although there is still a number of older children being considered suitable for adoption. Again, this is reflective of the national picture where the average age of children adopted is 4yrs 2 months (CSCI 06)



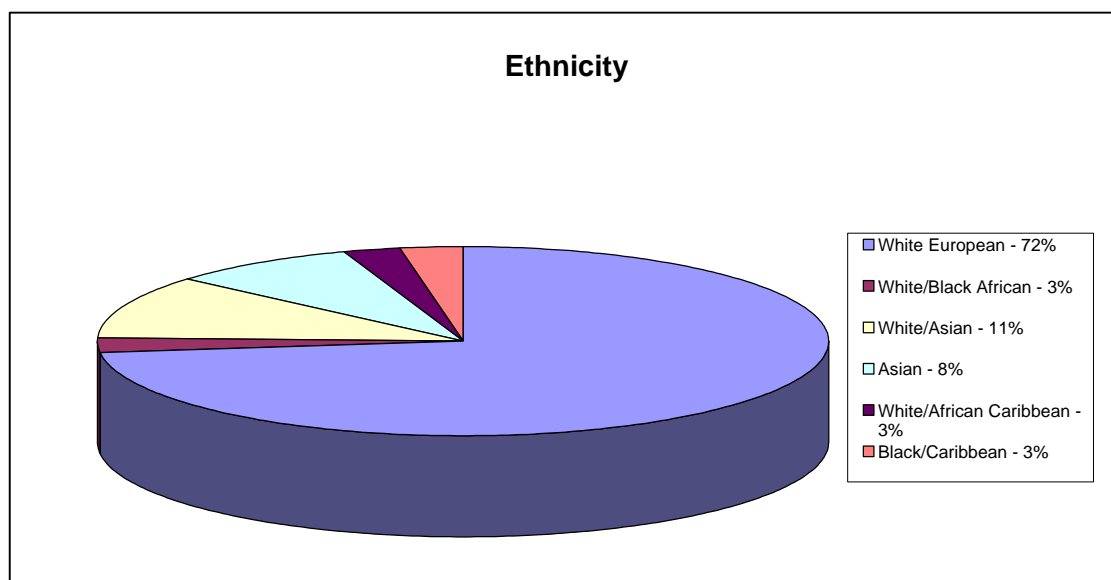
0-2 Years	28
3-5 Years	7
5+ years	2

There continues to be a large number of single children needing adoptive placements. There are still a number of sibling groups requiring adoptive placements; this continues to be challenge not only for Walsall but nationwide as the numbers of families coming forward to adopt sibling groups is still relatively low.



Sibling Group of 2	5
Sibling Group of 3	1
Sibling Group of 4	1

This year has seen a steady number of black and dual heritage children needing adoptive placements. Last year's figures indicate that 31% of children were either, Black, Asian or Dual heritage, this year this figure has fallen slightly to 28%. Again, this presents a particular challenge to not only to Walsall but nationally as the numbers of Black, Asian and Dual Heritage children far outweigh the number of adopters within similar ethnic backgrounds who can meet the needs of these children.



White European	27
Dual Heritage White/Black African	1
Dual Heritage White/Asian	4
Asian Background	3
Mixed Heritage WE/African Caribbean	1
Dual Heritage Black/Caribbean	1

## 8 Children Adopted 2007/2008

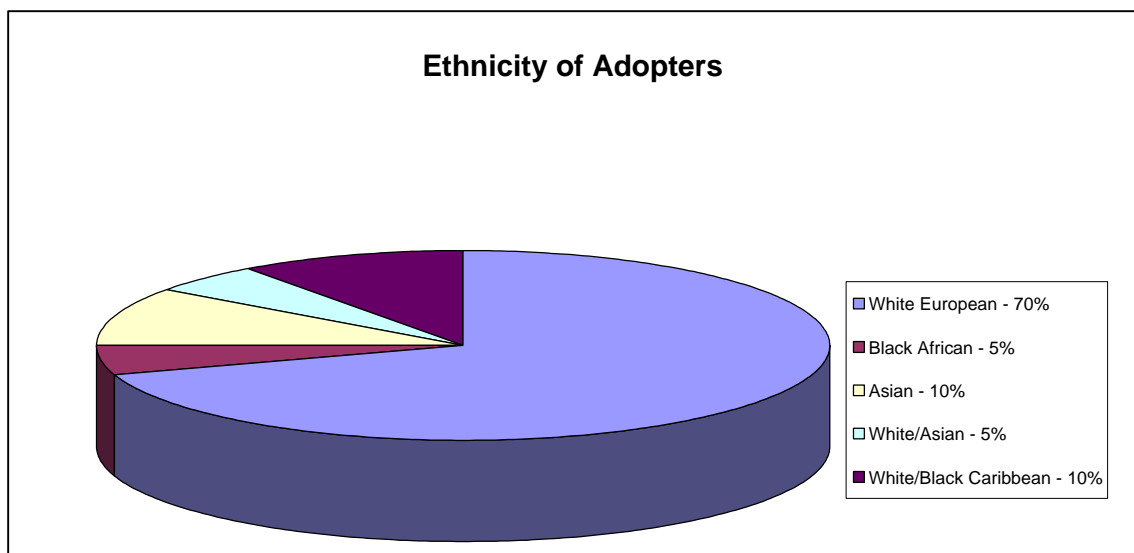
Between April 2006 and March 2007, 26 children were placed for adoption; this is a significant drop in last year's figure of 48. Of these 26, 5 were adopted during the same period. A further 33 children were adopted who were placed during previous years, making a total of 38 adoption orders, which is consistent with April 2006/March 2007.

The reasons for this reduction in the numbers of children placed for adoption are due to several interconnected factors. The needs of the children who are suitable for adoption have become more complex. Their early histories of neglect and abuse have resulted in significant attachment difficulties which are manifested in higher levels of emotional, behavioural and psychological difficulties. There continues to be numbers of sibling groups to place, as well as children from Black, Asian and dual heritage backgrounds. Nationally there is a shortage of adopters who are willing or able to meet the need of these children through adoption.

Of the 38 children adopted, 11 were placed for adoption within 12 months of the agency deciding that the child should be placed for adoption. This gives a success rate of 29%.

## 9 Adopters

20 prospective adoptive families were presented for approval. All families presented were approved. The diversity of adopters has improved significantly to last year's figure of 5% approvals from black or dual heritage children. The reason for this increase has been a number of approvals for specific children who had siblings adopted already and whose adopters were originally approved by other agencies. The use of independent social workers has enabled Walsall to assess these families to enable them to become approved adopters for specific children.

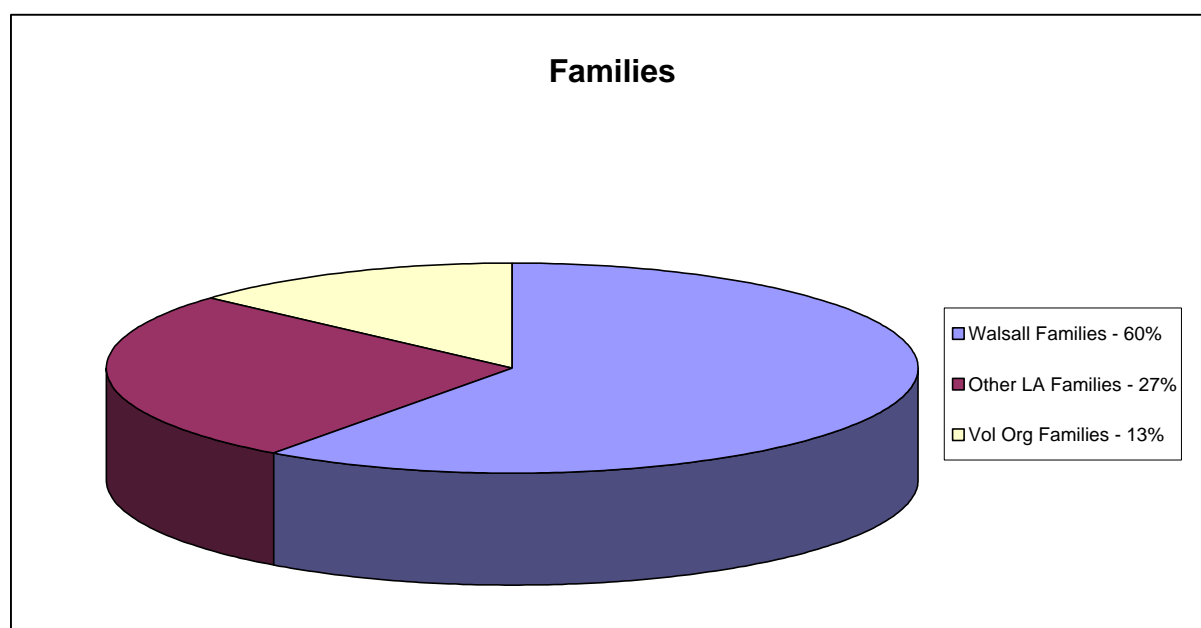


White European	14
Black African	1
Asian	2
White/Asian	1
White European/Black Caribbean	2

## 10 Children Matched 2007-2008

Panel recommended 30 matches from April 2007 to March 2008 in comparison to 43 for the previous year.

18 matches were made with Walsall approved families and 12 with inter-agency families. Of the remaining 12 matches, 7 were with other local authorities outside of the Consortium and 4 were with voluntary organisations. In comparison to last year's figure of 29 matches being made with Walsall approved families we placed far fewer children within our own resources. The reasons for this are that the children's diverse racial and cultural background, the number of children with complex needs and those within sibling groups.



Walsall Families	18
Other LA Families	8
Vol Org Families	4

In view of the changing picture of adoption, the recruitment strategy was revised in January 05 to ensure the majority of adopters presented to panel would be able to consider more than one placement as this met the profile needs of Walsall children waiting for adoption. However, it became apparent towards the middle of June 2006 we were quickly using up our adopters and we faced a potential problem of not having enough families to meet the placement needs of single children. As such the recruitment strategy was again revised in November 2006 to the following;

*'The Adoption Team will consider white/European families who could preferably take 2 or more children of Pre School or school age. We will also consider those who can take 1 child, but this should be children of up to 5 years of age.*

*For families able to meet the needs of dual heritage, black or Asian children, we would positively consider these families who can consider 1 or 2 children aged 0-3 and over. We especially have children of Caribbean/White and Asian/White heritage.*

*Families expressing an interest in disabled children should be responded to positively regardless of the age or ethnicity of the child'*

## **11 Adopters Attending Panel**

As with the previous year, the feedback from applicants indicates that they have welcomed the opportunity to attend and on the whole have given positive feedback on their experience. There are no issues in relation to panel members' interaction with prospective adopters. Of the 20 families approved by Walsall, 19 attended panel for their approval, one did not attend due to location issues.

From May 06 approved families have been given the opportunity to attend panel when the match is being presented and to date the majority of adopters do attend their match, of the matches made this year only one did not attend for their match, which was due to location issues.

## **12 Disruption Following Placement**

Unfortunately, 1 placement disrupted in the period April 2007 to March 2008 and a further one disrupted during introductions.

Disruption reports have been presented to panel and lessons have been learnt by all involved. These include the particular difficulties in the placement of older children as part of a sibling group; it became apparent the needs of the older child were not fully known and her pre-placement experiences were far greater than initially anticipated. What was also apparent in both the disruption of placement and introductions was that despite rigorous adoption assessments both sets of adoptive parents seemed unprepared for the life changes that have children placed would bring. It was also apparent in both cases that one member of each partnership had had difficult childhood experience themselves and it is now questionable whether these had been fully resolved. Both of these families have received support from their link workers and both hope to another child placed in the future. With regard to the children, family finding is continuing for all three. With regard to changes to practice, Child Appreciation Days will now be undertaken for all children 18 months and older in an attempt to better prepare adopters for the realities of caring for a child. The introduction of the new Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) will also assist in enabling families to consider carefully what adoption will bring to their family and assist social workers in assessing adopters to view adoption as a life long process.

## **13 The Role of Medical Adviser**

The medical adviser undertakes a key function in the work of panel. Indeed this is the only membership that is not subject to tenure.

Dr Vidya Rao is now into the fifth year as medical adviser. Dr Rao has continued to experience some problems with social workers providing all the necessary paperwork for adoption medicals and asked for this to be addressed by the agency. As a result of this the Adoption Team ran workshops for Corporate Parenting social workers on key adoption issues, these being Adoption Medicals, Child's Permanence Reports and Annex A reports as part of Adoption hearings.

## **14 Significant Issues and Developments Affecting Legal Services**

Panel has received advice and assistance from Legal Services throughout from Lynn Levesley. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 continues to impact significantly upon the court process. There continues to be some legal challenges brought against the making of Placement Orders from birth family relatives.

The challenge for the coming year will be the impact of the Public Law Outline; this comes into effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2008.

## **16 Good Practice Requirements**

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced new requirements to be monitored by panel. The monitoring forms which were designed to take into account the National Minimum standards for adoption tell us the following;

### **Prospective adopter's assessments**

- Prospective Adopters Reports – **85%** of assessments were completed within the required 6 month timescales
- For the **15%** that did not meet the timescales relevant reasons given were – two being excessive workloads of the assessing social worker and the other being a change in circumstances in the adopter's family.

### **Best interest decisions**

- **84%** of children who were presented to panel had their permanence plan ratified at the 4 month review. The remaining **16%** did not have their permanence plan ratified at the 4 month review due to outstanding assessments of birth family members. This is an improvement on last year's figure of **79%**
- **68%** of children were presented to panel within 2 months of the 4 month review. For the remaining **32%** who did not meet the timescales, reasons cited were excessive workloads and outstanding assessments.

### **Children's wishes and feeling be recorded**

- Of the 37 children presented to panel, **6** children had their views clearly represented within their Child's Permanence Report, which represents **16%**. 31 children (**84%**) did not have their views recorded. However, of these remaining 31, the vast majority were young children (mostly babies under the age of 2 year).

### **Parents being given the opportunity to give their account of events and to see and comment on what has been written about them**

- **57%** of parents were given the opportunity to give their account of events, which was then recorded in the Child's Permanence Report.



- **43%** of birth parents did not have sight of the reports presented. Reasons cited were parents' non co operation and parents' whereabouts unknown.

#### **Adoption support plans**

- Similarly to 2006/2007, **100%** of adoption support plans were presented to panel; they continued to be of a good standard.

#### **Child's Permanence Reports**

- Panel members have continued to express concern throughout the year regarding the quality of the Child's Permanence Reports being presented to panel. In order to address this, the Adoption Team have run three workshops for Corporate Parenting social workers looking at the quality of Child's Permanence Reports and how to improve the quality. The process for submission of panel papers has also been amended to allow sufficient time for quality assurance of all panel paperwork which also then gives time to social workers to make required amendments. If after following this Panel are still unhappy with the quality or content of the paperwork, Panel have agreed that whilst they will continue to hear the item, they will defer their recommendation until the next available panel, during which time the Child's Permanence Reports will have been up-dated and presented to Lisa Preston, Professional Adviser to the panel, to quality assure them.

#### **Matches**

- **57%** of children were matched within 6 months of either the court or adoption panel recommending that they were suitable to be placed for adoption. Reasons cited for the **43%** who did not meet the required standard were for children with more complex needs, those in need of sibling placements, those of dual heritage and those whose assessments of birth family members were not complete.
- However, in comparison, **83%** of children were matched within 12 months of adoption panel recommending that they were suitable to be placed for adoption.

## **17 Adoption Panel Functions**

The following information remains unchanged from the Annual Report of 2006/2007.

- Tenure for all members, with the exception of the medical adviser, has been extended to 3 consecutive terms, each with duration of 3 years.
- Independent panel chair
- New structure to reports presented ;child permanence report ;prospective adopters report; adoption placement report
- Panel quoracy is now 5 members previously this was 6 members
- No 'in principal' recommendations can be made.
- Considering the plan for the child is now referred to as 'whether a child is suitable to be placed for adoption'.
- Suitability of prospective adopters – when recommending the suitability of prospective adopters panel can only advise regarding numbers of children their ages, genders and background factors prospective adopters can consider. (This excludes inter-country adoption approvals )
- Brief reports should be presented to panel where following an application the assessing social worker is not minded to recommend approval. Applicants can access the independent review mechanism.

- Prospective adopters have 40 days (previously 28days) to decide whether to accept a decision made by the agency, or consider making representations to the agency OR apply to the independent review mechanism, they can't do both.
- Panel will monitor arrangements for informing the prospective adopters, the child and, where appropriate, the parents of panel's recommendation and decision.

## **18 Attendance and Performance**

At the time of writing this report in May 2008, all panel members are in the process of having their performance reviewed for the second time.

Regular attendance is clearly one the most important objectives which will require monitoring. This year the minimum attendance requirement of 75% was fulfilled by 6 of the 11 panel members involved during the year.

For the period covered by this report, there were 12 Adoption Panel meetings Attendance details are recorded in the attached grid situated at the back page of this report. (See Attached)

The overall feedback from social workers/prospective adopters and other professionals attending panel and completing the feedback forms was generally very positive.

The overall feedback from Panel members has continued to reflect the following:

- The written information can sometimes be insufficient to assist, inform discussion and make recommendations.
- Members felt that exceptionally good reports were generally presented by the adoption team in the form of the prospective adopters report.
- All panel members felt they are allowed to express their views and that their views are respected and acknowledged.

Some general comments from feedback forms:

"The panel made us feel that our contribution to the assessment was invaluable.

Having the recommendation immediately at the panel was very helpful and meant we were no kept waiting at a very anxious time"

"Adoptive parent felt well supported by the agency and by panel"

"We felt our matter was dealt with effectively and efficiently"

"We found the chair meeting us before panel was very helpful. Good engagement by panel, they asked very key questions to our child and our match"

"The panel has much strength, particularly addressing sensitive issues with families enabling important clarification to be appropriately sought"

## **19 Adoption Agency**

Pauline Pilkington, Assistant Director for Children's Services, continues to act as the agency decision maker. In Pauline's absence, Kay Child, Operations Manager Safeguarding, will act in this role.

The significant change in relation to the agency decision making role is where the decision maker is minded not to ratify panel's recommendation to approve prospective

adopter/s. The decision maker must consult a senior manager who is not a member of panel and record the reasons for that decision on the agency file.

Walsall Adoption Agency underwent an announced inspection in December 2007

## **20 The Adoption Team**

It is evident from the figures presented that the Adoption Team has had another very busy year.

There have been some staffing changes in 2007/08. Zoe Ashton was appointed as a senior practitioner in the Adoption Team. However, the most significant changes will be made as a result of the inspection findings, which will most likely occur in 2008/09. The team continues to be supported in its activities by a family support officer and a customer service officer who undertakes all initial enquiry work for those seeking information about adoption.

## **21 Training and Development**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> October 2006, the annual training day for Adoption Panel members and Adoption Team members took place. This year the day considered Adult and Child attachment patterns and implications for successful placements. The course was facilitated by Peter Littleford.

## **22 Information**

A number of consultation, skills and knowledge information/articles have been distributed to panel members which continue to help panel members stay abreast of changes in law, practice and research.

## **23 Miscellaneous Figures**

Number of approved adopters who have been deregistered : 1  
Number of children subject to best interest decision which was subsequently rescinded : 2  
Number of adopters in representation process : 0.  
Number of non-agency adoption orders : 0.  
Number of adoptions of children from other agency placed with Walsall approved adopter's : 2

## **24 Complaints and Representations**

There has been one complaint received from a prospective adoptive parent pre-assessment. The complaint was dealt with speedily and as a result they were successfully passed onto another Black Country Authority, we were unable to assess them as they lived in the borough of Walsall and our recruitment strategy specifically targets families who live outside of the Walsall Borough due to the difficulty in placing children within the same borough in which they were born.

A user feedback form has been introduced and distributed at key stages of the enquiry, approval and placement process. Information gained will be used to develop practice/policy and improve the service delivery.

## **25 Statement of Purpose**

This was amended and updated in December 2006.

## **26 Service/Panel Developments 2008/09**

Adoption Team targets for this year are to maintain the excellent performance of 2007/08

- A target of 10% of looked after children to be adopted by March 2009 current progress indicates this can be achieved. The target for adoption orders is 40.
- Minimise delay for children, so that all children should be placed within 6 months of the court's decision or panel's recommendation where children are not party to court proceedings.
- To implement the requirements of the Adoption Inspection and to consider carefully the good practice recommendations.
- Continue with the implementation of the Adoption Support Strategy as it evolves into its fourth year, together with the development of the Permanence Strategy.
- One of the continuing overriding targets for the coming year is to focus specifically on the reduction of Looked After Children, clearly this impacts on adoption as adoption is one of the many discharge routes for children.

**Lisa Preston**  
**Adoption Panel Professional Adviser**

## **Adoption Support Services Summary September 2007 – April 2008**

### **1 Adoption Support Services**

All Adoption Support Services for Walsall residents and children placed for adoption by Walsall are accessed via the Permanence Support Team, Family Placement Services. The responsibilities of the team are Adoption Support Services, support to Permanent Foster Carers, assessment and support of Family and Friend Foster Carers and assessment and support of Special Guardianship Order arrangements.

### **2 Adoption & Fostering Services Ofsted Inspection**

As you are aware our first Ofsted inspection took place in December 2007. Whilst there were no requirements identified in relation to Adoption Support Services, there were several recommendations as follows:

- i) That Adoption Support Services would be better placed as part of the Adoption Team. The current positioning provides confusion for service users and other adoption agencies. It also decreases the opportunity for adoption support workers to become involved early in placements and in consequence acts as a deterrent to adoptive parents who are experiencing difficulties from contacting for help, advice or support. The current position of the service also results in a loss of joint learning from practice between the adoption support workers and the rest of the adoption service.
- ii) That Adoption Contact, Post Box, needs an electronic data base that can generate exchange of indirect contact reminder letters.
- iii) That Adoption Contact needs additional administrative support in order to reduce the amount of time qualified social workers are spending undertaking routine administrative tasks.

### **3 Re-Engineering of Family Placement Services**

Family Placement Services management had been aware for some time that a re-consideration of the deployment of staff and responsibilities needed to take place to maximise efficiency in a climate of increased demands for foster placements and to accommodate the changing ratios of the composition of foster placements, (increase in numbers of family & friend foster carers; increase in requests for baby and for teenage placements). The service was further alert to the strong possibility that Ofsted may make a requirement that none social work qualified staff were no longer allowed to supervise foster carers. The management team had decided to await the outcomes of our first joint Ofsted inspection to ensure that requirements and recommendations were addressed within the re-engineering of the service structure.

As recommendation i) above the proposed Re-engineered Model places Adoption Support Services back within the Adoption Team based at Pinfold Health Centre and under the overall management of the Adoption Team Manager.

The proposed staff composition will be:

A part-time (21 hours) Adoption Support Practice Manager.

A full-time Senior Practitioner taking a lead on Adoption Contact.

A full time Social Worker.

Additional administrative support with a dedicated lead within our current Adoption Team.

Benchmarking with comparative authorities has taken place.

The proposed staffing structure will be achieved by the re-designation of existing posts. No additional posts will be created and no redundancies will be required.

The part-time Adoption Support Services Practice Manager post will be achieved by the conversion of the Adoption Support Services Senior Practitioner full-time post. This senior practitioner post has been vacant since February 2008 when the person in post left the service.

Whilst the senior practitioner will retain lead responsibility for contact, they as all other adoption support workers, will have a generic adoption support caseload.

It is proposed that the dedicated Life Story Worker be repositioned within the Outreach Service to ensure that all children placed with adoptive parents have Life Story information available to them and their new parents. To date the primary aim of this post, i.e. to undertake life story work which helped the adoptive parents to understand the impact of the child's life experiences on attachment and global development of the child has not been achieved. This I believe is largely as a result of not being able under our current structure to engage at an early enough stage with adoptive parents.

The Life Story worker will with the Adoption and Outreach Team Manager's consider offering a service for all adoptive parents to meet with them to help them contextualise the child's life story information.

The final significant change within the re-engineering process is that the Senior Co-ordinator who leads on Adoption Contact will no longer be responsible for leading on monitoring, review and support of Special Guardianship Order arrangements. Responsibility for Special Guardianship support will remain within the Permanence Support Team.

It is envisaged that the new Family Placement Services structure will be in place before September 2008.

The Adoption Support Practice Manager post is yet to be advertised and the adoption support social worker has yet to be identified. As part of the re-engineering process existing Family Placement Services staff will be asked to select their preferred area of work within their current grade. Only once this has been done will the service be sure where post vacancies exist.

Current Staffing

:

Since the departure of the senior practitioner for adoption support services in February we have had one month staff cover for this post.

In view of the proposed changes we have decided to obtain social work agency cover for this post, rather than senior practitioner cover. We will use this period to continue

the audit of existing work we commenced in February and to respond to requests for support only, we will not focus on developmental initiatives until Adoption Support unites with the Adoption Team.

As you are aware from previous summaries, we currently have a part-time agency social worker for two days per week. Her tasks primarily focus on Sec 98 and Schedule 2 work, but she also does adoption support case work as and when required. Whilst we still have a vacancy for a dedicated full-time social worker we will continue to require this cover.

#### **4      Support to Families and Children under 18 years of age**

- a) Although the number of adoptive families eligible for an Annual Adoption Support Service Review grows proportionate to the number of pre-adoption/adoption placements made each year, we have not seen any increase in the numbers of adoptive parents agreeing to or requesting that reviews take place. Indeed there appears to have been a slight decrease in requests for adoption support services reviews and assessments. The greatest number of requests for adoption support services is for assessment for financial support; most frequent requests are as a result of adoptive parents having to adjust their working patterns to meet the unanticipated needs of the children or for therapeutic input.

Whilst it is comfortable for us to conclude that the decrease in requests for review or assessment may be due to support needs being thoroughly assessed and addressed at the time of matching, it is likely that other factors influence this lack of take up; such as, adopter's not having a clear understanding of their support service entitlements, desire to consolidate the adoptive family without statutory agency involvement, concerns of being seen to be not good enough parents. It is hoped that the proposed re-engineering will go some way to address these issues.

We are in the process of developing an electronic data base to flag up when adoption support service reviews are due rather than having to rely on our manual system. We are also looking at improving our storage of files system by filing alphabetically under month of review due.

- b) A continued theme in adoption support services reviews is the imperative to elicit the co-operation and involvement early on of partner agencies and relevant universal services. A significant number of adoptive families, particularly where placements are made outside of the Walsall area, have experienced obtaining appropriate support for adopted children within school especially difficult. Similar difficulties are frequently experienced when attempting to obtain CAMHS input. There continue to be massive regional variations in the responses received to requests for assessment/services and in the type of support services available, with the effect that it has been necessary to fund specialist input in more complex cases, especially in relation to CAMHS work, from Walsall's adoption support budget.
- c) The Permanence Support Strategy was officially launched in January '07. The strategy aligns support service planning for Adoption and Special Guardianship (SGO) arrangements and aligns financial support for Adoption, SGO and Residence Orders. The strategy has been devised to take account of the need to attempt to minimise potential financial and support disincentives to foster carers applying for any permanence orders. The programme of annual briefings for both social care and partner agency staff has been deferred pending the Re-engineering of the service.

Procedural Guidance for Permanence Financial Support, including guidance in respect of the assessment, approval and support of foster carers applying for adoption in respect of a child they look after, has been completed. However, consequent of competing demands since September '07, whilst the newly created or updated documentation has been in use, the accompanying procedures will need to be updated to reflect the changes to Family Placement Structure before they will be ready for inclusion on Triax.

- d) A proposed financial assistance policy aimed to provide equitable financial support in relation to a range of services, but primarily to contact, access to birth records and reunion has been devised and is currently being considered by the Family Placement Services Manager.
- e) The Head of Corporate Parenting Services and Family Placement Services Manager have introduced a loan/grant scheme for families applying for permanence orders. Procedures will need to be included in the Guidance for Permanence Financial Support.
- f) The "Excellence for Adoption" service user group continues to meet. The group meets quarterly and their contributions feed into all aspects of service planning and delivery. Whilst the group is service user lead, the Adoption Support workers continue to facilitate these meetings. Naturally the group members have at this point not been informed of the proposed changes to Adoption Support Services. When they have been informed that are likely to want to meet with the Adoption Service Manager to re-consider the focus and role of the group within the new structure.
- g) In January/February 2008 Walsall CAMHS led a course on Attachment specifically devised with our assistance for adoptive parents. Take up of places was very low, despite places also being offered to adopters from our Black Country partners. Of the 15 places offered only 8 were taken up. Nonetheless feedback from those who attended the course has been extremely positive. The adoptive parents who attended have feedback that they feel better able to interpret their child's behaviour and feel more confident in responding to and communicating with their child. Those who attended have also expressed a greater understanding of the importance of contact in a child's life and of the child having a good understanding of their life history. From those who attended we noted an increase in requests for review of contact agreements.

From leading the Telling Training last year we are already aware of real need to offer training to adoptive families on Life Story work. Support is needed to help adoptive parents make their own sense of their child's past and to help them help the child to integrate the past with their current lives. Our plans were for the Life Story worker to lead on the development of a Life Story Course for adoptive parents over the next twelve months and to take on the lead responsibility for the facilitation of the Telling Course in order that the two course contents can be integrated. With the agreement of Outreach and Adoption Team Managers there are no reasons why this plan can not be carried out under the new structure.

We will also look to work with CAMHS in the future to run the Attachment Course again and will consider the scheduling of this training alongside the any future Life Story and Telling Training.

- h) All Adoption Support Services Information Leaflets will need to be updated when the service realigns within the Adoption Team. To date our outstanding leaflets are: Updated Children's Guides which are to be updated in conjunction with our Black



Country partners and the Special Guardianship leaflet for prospective Special Guardians, the text for which is complete but has yet to be formatted.

- i) Between June 2007 and April 2008, one Special Guardianship Order has been made in respect of looked after children. There are currently 16 assessments of Special Guardianship applicants being undertaken, in relation to 19 children. Of these 15 are looked after children. Ten of the applicants are approved foster carers already looking after the children; eight are approved as family and friend foster carers and two are foster carers who are unrelated to the child. Two applicants already hold residence orders in respect of the children and are therefore children who are not looked after. There are two assessments being undertaken as part of care for proceedings for children currently placed with non related foster carers. There are two assessments in relation to children who are not looked after living with relatives.
- j) The Adoption Connections Newsletter continues to develop and to be valued by adoptive families. Family Placement Services new Marketing Officer has now taken up her post and so the co-ordination of the publication and the Editorial Group has reverted to her management. Adoption Support and Adoption workers alongside a dedicated if small number of adopters continue to make contributions to the Newsletter. However, we continue to struggle to elicit contributions from the wider adoptive family population. The Marketing Officer with the editorial group is to look at the number of publications per year and to consider the timing of the publications to attempt to increase service user participation.
- k) In March 2008 we introduced a limited Adoption Support Duty system. It operates for three half days per week. To date it has proven to be successful in that we are offering a faster response to service user enquiries; completing verification of Schedule 2 and Sec 98 applications and identifying of locations of adoption records more rapidly.

l) **Disruptions**

There have been no disruptions of adoptive placements receiving support from Walsall Adoption Support services since June 2007.

However, via our Contact Co-ordinator we are aware of a disruption of a placement of a 14 year old girl who was placed by Walsall with adoptive parents in Wales. The young person has been adopted for approximately 7 years and is now Looked After by her local authority. Her adoptive parents maintain regular contact with this service in relation to contact with her older siblings and to ask for advice and emotional support.

m) **Complaints**

Adoption Support Services have received three complaints between June 2007 and April 2008.

**Complaint 1 – October 2007.**

This complaint related to not only to Adoption Support Services, but also to the Looked After Children's Services, the Adoption Team and Fostering Support services. In essence the complaint related to the need to improve communication within Children's services, to clarify workers responsibilities in acting on information

received and to ensure that Children's Services electronic information systems are fit for purpose.

On 14/11/07 the complaint was investigated at stage 1 and upheld. However, the complainants were dissatisfied with the response and on 03/12/07 the complaint was taken to stage 2 and investigated independently.

The complaint was from adoptive parents of a child who has four half siblings. Two of the siblings are adopted separately and two looked after.

The complaint had 6 elements outlined below;

#### Element 1

Walsall Social Services failed to inform the adopters and the child that the child's birth mother had died as soon as it found out she had died.

This element was upheld by the Stage 2 investigation.

#### Element 2

Walsall Social Services knew for some time that birth mother had died and made no effort to inform the family of her death because by Walsall's own admission at stage 1 it was dealing with the impact of birth mother's death on other siblings.

This element was partially upheld by the Stage 2 investigation.

#### Element 3

Walsall Social Services told the complainant on the telephone that birth mother had died as a result of another conversation regarding one of the child's siblings. The department did not write to the complainants or offer them a meeting to discuss this significant piece of information.

This element was upheld by the Stage 2 investigation.

#### Element 4

Walsall Social Services never explained the full circumstances of birth mother's death to the family. Walsall did not indicate how long she had been ill or inform the family whether birth mother knew she was dying. The complainants believe that Walsall could have liaised with birth mother to offer them a chance to visit her to talk to her about how well the child was doing before she died.

This element was not upheld by the Stage 2 investigation.

#### Element 5

This element had two parts.

Part 1: That Walsall Social Services wrote to the complainants to notify them of the date of the interment of birth mother's ashes with too little notice to make arrangements for both adopters to attend.

This part of the complaint was upheld by the Stage 2 investigation.

Part 2: That the card on the flowers taken to the internment on behalf of the adopted child was removed with no explanation given to the adoptive parent.

This part of the complaint was upheld by the Stage 2 investigation.

#### Element 6

The complainants believed that their child found out about his birth mother's death after his siblings had done so. The complainants therefore believed that he had been discriminated against by Social Services.

This element was not upheld by the Stage 2 investigation.

The detailed and comprehensive independent investigation in summary found that the backdrop of this complaint arose from an act of unplanned omission by the Children's Services as a whole to follow procedures to ensure that the child's Contact Agreement was maintained.

It recommended that the Department considers purchasing a bespoke software package to capture all relevant data for children and siblings in the LAC system and who are adopted or otherwise to prevent loss of information sharing with them and their respective families and carers.

#### **Complaint 2 – February 2008.**

This complaint relates to a letter sent to the adoptive parents of a child who has two siblings. All three children are placed separately. The letter was sent at the request of another adoption agency who wanted to know if the child's adoptive parents would consider letter box contact with the adoptive parents of the youngest child, who was not yet born at the time of the complainant's adopted child's adoption order being made.

The complaint was investigated by the Family Placement Services Manager at Stage 1.

This complaint had three elements;

#### Element 1

That the first and surname of the male adopter was the wrong way round on the letter.

This element was upheld.

#### Element 2

That the letter should never have been sent to the adopters as on their contact agreement they had stated that they wanted no further or future information regarding birth family members, including siblings and did not want to consider in direct contact.

This element was upheld.

### Element 3

That the letter was sent to the adopters signed by two adoption support workers asking them to contact either or.

This element was not upheld.

### **Complaint 3 – April 2008.**

This related to a 20 year old person who has indirect contact to her younger adopted siblings twice per year. This person complained about the same issue in February 2007. Last year's complaint was responded to at stage 1 of the complaints process by the team manager and the complainant made no further representations. As the new complaint was made in April 2008 outside of initial complaint timescales this had to be treated as a new complaint and investigated at Stage 1 by the Family Placement Services Manager.

This complaint has only one element.

The complainant's view is that the assessment of her siblings needs for contact to her have not been adequately assessed at the point they were placed for adoption and had not taken into account her needs for contact. She is now requesting increased contact. The young person was dissatisfied with the response she had received from the Strategic Manager when she raised her complaints previously to February 2007's complaint to the Safeguarding Service. From last years complaint whilst she agrees that her siblings needs must be put first she feels that the level of contact is unfair.

The most recent complaint has been investigated by the Family Placement Services Manager and has not been upheld. At the time of preparing this report we await the complainant's response.

## **5 Contact.**

- a) The Senior Co-ordinator leading on Adoption Contact reports that there remain significant difficulties in getting completed contact agreements from both adoptive parents and birth families once a pre-adoptive placement has been made. It is intended that the "Moving On" project incorporates the need to complete contact agreements at the Introductions Planning stage into future procedures.
- b) Operational Guidance for use by the Permanence Support Team has also been compiled. It will now need to be formatted for inclusion on Triax.
- c) For some time adoption support workers have debated whether or not to send a standard reminder letter to birth parents and adoptive parents just before their exchange of indirect contact is due. When we have sent reminder letters these have not always been responded to positively by adoptive parents and our Black Country partners who do have reminder systems in place report to us similar negative reactions. However, following the Adoption Inspection recommending that we should have an automated system in place we have now decided that we will introduce a reminder system with immediate effect. Initially the system will be manually operated; however, we will be liaising with Dudley Adoption Team who has kindly offered to allow us access to their electronic reminder system.

- d) Adoption Support workers have prepared a course for adoptive parents and potentially social care staff on Promoting Adoption Contact. It was hoped that the course could have been run in late Spring '08, but this has not been possible due to shortage of staff following the departure of one of the senior practitioners in February '08. Plans to run the course will be made once Adoption Support is reunited with the Adoption Team and all adoption support staff are in place.

## **6      Section 98 and Schedule 2**

- a) The number of referrals for Section 98 and Schedule 2 services has now started to reduce from the high numbers we received following national publication of the changes in Access to Birth Records Information regulations.

In accordance with legislation the service continues to prioritise applications in respects of pre 1975 adoptions.

Due to the high volume received in the 06/07 period at the start of this year we continued to have a high number of not completed cases. However, since February we have made considerable head way at progressing these cases to completion or to the point where they can be transferred to Adoption Support Across the West Midlands, (ASAWM).

- b) Once initial verification of applications and obtaining of relevant information is complete we are now immediately passing referrals to Adoption Support Across the West Midlands who can provide Schedule 2 counselling, access to birth records, assistance with tracing, reunification and for ongoing counselling. Naturally in situations where a welfare assessment is required these are undertaken within our service before passing to ASAWM.

Where circumstances are very complex and include the potential for significant harm to a child or for the purposes of staff learning the team continues to consider providing these services directly. The service also retains those cases where the adopted person is requesting access to LAC records as well as to Adoption records.

- c) The review of procedures for Access to Birth Records and Intermediary Services was last year put in abeyance pending the publication of Dfes guidance in September 2006. Some of the guidance is now available as are some new recording formats, (including new processes for registering contact Veto's and exchange and sharing of information), recommended by BAAF working in conjunction with NORCAP. Our procedural review will need to take into account the new guidance and recording formats. This work is unlikely to be completed until the proposed re-engineering of the service has been implemented.

## **7      Adoption Support Activity**

Between 20<sup>th</sup> September 2007 and 28th April 2008 the analysis of new referrals to Walsall's Adoption Support Services are as follows:

Adoption Support Plans eligible for review: @ **128**

Requests for Adoption Support Assessment: **08**

Signposted Referrals: @12  
New Referrals for Schedule 2 + Sec 98: 16

### **Contact Activity**

Between 13/09/07 and 28/04/08 the analysis of Contact activity is as follows:

New Referrals: 20 for adopted children/ 0 for children subject to SGO's.

Direct Contact: 10 Post Adoption/ 3 for children subject to SGO.

Total numbers of Indirect Contact arrangements supported as of 23/04/08 are 284.

There are several other direct contact arrangements within existing Contact Agreements which are managed by the respective adoptive parents and for which no support service is required.

## **8 Partner Agencies & Networking.**

### **Black Country Consortium.**

Walsall Adoption Support Services continues to work closely with our Black Country Consortium partner local authorities of Wolverhampton, Dudley and Sandwell. Walsall Adoption and Permanence Support Team Managers both attend Adoption across the Black Country, (ABC), meetings, where possible.

Walsall holds joint Black Country Consortium contracts with Adoption UK and Adoption Support Across the West Midlands.

Adoption Support Services Senior Practitioners meet regularly with their Black Country peers to exchange information and consider practice issues. Any initiative that can be more effectively operated jointly is considered.

It has been agreed that the Black Country adoption support services peer group will review the consortium's Children's Guide to update adoption support services information. Walsall's marketing officer has agreed to format the text.

### **Adoption UK**

The Black Country Consortium Agreement with Adoption UK was renewed in January 2007.

Adoption UK provides Support Groups, Newsletters, Family Days and a Buddy Scheme.

On behalf of the Black Country Consortium members, Adoption UK runs two distinct Support Groups; one to cover Dudley and Sandwell adoptive families held in Oldbury and one to cover Wolverhampton and Walsall adoptive families held at the Village Hotel, Walsall. The Oldbury Support Group is an established and very well attended group, at which many Walsall adopters attend.

As you are aware the take up of the Walsall/Wolverhampton Support Group has been very small for some time. This was exacerbated by the group's regional Adoption UK support group co-ordinator leaving in summer 2007.

Walsall and Wolverhampton adoption support services managers met with the Adoption UK scheme manager to attempt to plan to try to resolve issues of poor attendance. From this point the Regional Manager, Sharon McCall, took over the organisation of the support group herself until a replacement could be identified. Recent attendance at the support group has pleasingly increased. This month Sharon has informed us that a new Regional Support Group Co-ordinator, Julie Chilton, has been identified. Julie and Sharon will attend the next support group meeting in May with Walsall and Wolverhampton Team Managers.

Each of the four Black Country Consortium authorities funds initial membership to Adoption UK for adopters approved by their agency. Up until recently Walsall approved adopters had the option of joining at the point of approval. Regrettably, many have chosen not to do so. From May '07 Walsall will have asked adoptive parents to register a choice to opt out, rather than in to Adoption UK membership and we will review this practice in May '08.

Walsall continues to pre reserve 4 places per year on the Adoption UK "Piece of Cake" Training Course for adoptive parents. The course continues to receive very positive feedback from participants and is highly valued by adoptive parents. Walsall has no difficulties in allocating our reserved places.

Adoption UK are proposing a new way of costing the Black Country Contract to ensure that each authority is funding only the services they are receiving for the adoptive families for whom they are responsible. The new proposals will be considered at the Adoption across the Black Country meeting in May.

#### Adoption Support Across the West Midlands. (ASAWM)

The contract with Adoption Support Across the West Midlands was renewed in February 2007, the lead local authority for the commissioning process is now Sandwell.

ASAWM continues to provide Intermediary, Access to Birth Records services and Independent Social Work support to birth parents and birth family members.

Walsall has an established positive working relationship with ASAWM which ensures a smooth transition of service provider following initial counselling and access to birth records for service users in relation to Intermediary services.

Take up of Independent Support to Birth Parents remains disappointing. Team Manager's and Senior Practitioners chairing Permanence Planning Meetings will from now on ensure that they give a copy of the referral to children's social workers at this meeting with the request that they share the information regarding birth parent's rights to access independent support early on in the adoption process.

ASAWM manager, Julie McBride, has reported that Walsall have been under using their capacity for Schedule 2 and Sec 98. Since February 2008 Walsall has been passing the majority of these cases over to ASAWM and I am sure that ASAWM's next report will reflect this change in practice.

#### Birth Parent's Advocacy Service

The Senior Co-ordinator leading on Contact has been in liaison with Mencap's, Parent's Advocacy Service. This service provides birth parents who have learning difficulties support, advice and advocacy regarding adoption processes and adoption contact arrangements. Involved adoption support workers are planning to provide Mencap with a workshop/briefing on making and promoting positive adoption contact.

#### Midlands ASSA Group.

The Adoption Support Services Senior Practitioner attends the Midlands Region ASSA Group which meets quarterly at BAAF's offices in Birmingham. The group has become an invaluable forum to be able to consider common adoption support difficulties, issues and to share information and ideas. It will be invaluable for the proposed Adoption Support Services Practice Manager to attend these meetings in the future.

## **9 Priority Development Areas for 2008 - 2009**

- a) The reunification of Adoption Support Services with the Adoption Team will need to be the priority focus for the next few months.
- b) Adoption Support Services operational procedures will need to be revisited and revised where necessary to adapt to the proposed re-engineering of the service.
- c) A part – time Practice Manager will need to be recruited.
- d) Walsall Adoption Support Services, in consultation with our partner local authorities and national adoption agencies, need to devise a new format for adoption support assessments. Currently, adoption support workers use the National Framework for Assessment of Children's and Families in Need when completing initial or core assessments for adoption support assessments. The conduct of these assessments is governed by specific Dfes Guidance on Assessing the Needs of Adoptive Families. The outcomes of these assessments are then built into the Adoption Support Plan. With the forthcoming implementation of PARIS, Walsall's electronic file and data collection system, within Family Placement Services and the rollout of the Integrated Children's System it will no longer be possible to use these formats without effecting corporate data collection regarding assessment time scales for children in need. As yet there are no timescales attached to Adoption Support assessments.
- e) The Permanence Financial Support Procedures, with accompanying standard paperwork will be implemented within Family Placement Services and will be included in Triax. Details regarding loan/grant scheme and financial assistance will need to be included.
- f) The Family Placement Services Manager and ASSA are to review the positioning within the service structure of this key role and develop a communication structure appropriate to any subsequent change in its position.
- g) The delay in rolling out PARIS systems to Family Placement Services continues to present the day to day operation and the long term planning of the service with many difficulties in relation to our ability to collate and retrieve vital data. There also remain many concerns regarding the inputting of service user information to provide both security of information and the ability to securely cross reference related referrals.



The Family Placement Services Manager is leading on developing PARIS implementation within Family Placement Services.

- h) A data base to flag up reminders for post box exchange of information and adoption support reviews is to be introduced following exploration of options.
- i) A method of collating and transmitting information regarding adopted siblings to ensure that the adoptive parents of all adopted children receive change of circumstance information regarding their birth family is to be considered by the Family Placement Services Manager. As g) above this may need to be external to the PARIS system.
- j) The previous Adoption Registers are currently being copied as the original volumes are now some what fragile from frequent use for Schedule 2 and Sec 98 referrals. Once copied the original volumes will be securely stored and only the copies used for duty purposes.
- k) A card index system is to be introduced to record where adopted adults or their birth relatives have indicated that they do or do not want to be contacted in the event of an enquiry being made about them.

**Elaine Baggott**  
**Permanence Support Team Manager,**  
**Family Placement Services.**  
**28/04/08.**

# ADOPTION PANEL ATTENDANCE 2007/08

	April	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar		
Jan Toplis	X	A	X	X	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	10 OF 12	83%
Lisa Ainsworth	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	11 OF 12	92%
Cllr Alan Paul	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12 OF 12	100%
Alan Velvett	A	X	X	A	X	A	X	X	A	X	X	X	9 OF 12	75%
Karen Grandison	X	X	X	A	A	X	X	X	A	A	X	X	8 OF 12	67%
Dr Rao	X	X	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	X	A	10 OF 12	83%
Diane Browne	X	X	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	X	X	11 OF 12	91%
Lorna Carr	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	8 OF 9	89%
David Bovell	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	A	A	X	A	8 OF 12	67%

Key:

X Attended

A Apologies sent

Panel members agree to attend 75% of meetings