

## **Adoption Service Annual Report**

**1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018**



## **Overview of Service Delivery 2017-18**

The Adoption and Permanence Service has had a productive year and has successfully placed 28 children for adoption, secured 43 adoption orders and successfully approved 8 new adoptive families. There has also been further activity on the development of Adoption@Heart, our Regional Adoption Agency.

There has been an increase this year in the number of children being presented for an adoption decision. This increased from 35 in 2016-17 to 37 this year, which is in line with the average number of plans that Walsall usually has. We have continued to match children with their adopters in a timely way and this year 28 children have been successfully matched.

The Public Law Outline and the requirement to complete care proceedings within 26 weeks has continued to result in more timely decision making for children. The emphasis is very much on early identification of adoptive families through pro-active family finding and the need to fully explore all permanence options alongside that of adoption.

In September 2018, the service will support our adopters to host their annual 'family day'. This is usually well attended by a number of adopters and their children; with some new families who have recently had children placed in their care attending, which is very positive. Members of the team will attend the event and we will be able to consult with adopters on their views of Walsall's adoption support offer.

The Walsall Adoption Scorecard was issued on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2018. Walsall showed improvements in some areas of the scorecard, whilst some stayed similar to last year. Further information can be found in section 4.

## **Introduction and Legal Context**

The Adoption Service operates within the following legal framework: Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 and 2013, Adoption National Minimum Standards 2014, Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014 and the Children and Families Act 2014.

The requirement to report on the progress of the Adoption Service is contained within the National Minimum Standards 2014 and Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014 as follows:

### **National Minimum Standards 2014 **Standard 25.6****

The executive side of the Local Authority should:

- Receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months
- Monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and or service users
- Satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration

### **Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014:**

8.4 The agency should monitor its performance and provide reports to the executive side of the local authority every six months. These reports should cover all children who are in the care of their local authority and include:

- the number, type and age of the children waiting for an adoptive placement and length of time they have been waiting;
- the local authority's performance against the adoption scorecards;
- progress in the recruitment of suitable adoptive families;
- the number of children placed for adoption and adopted since the last report; and the number of children whose placement has disrupted or where there has been a change of plan and the child is no longer to be placed for adoption;
- whether the child's need for a permanent home has been addressed and a permanence plan made by the four month review;
- whether the adoption panel is receiving all the necessary information from the agency within six weeks of the completion of the child's permanence report;
- whether the adoption panel's recommendation on whether the child should be placed for adoption is being made within two months of a review where adoption has been identified as the permanence plan.

This report will fulfil the obligations outlined above by providing evidence and supplementary commentary on the role, function and activity of the Adoption Service during 2017-2018; it will also include our performance in relation to the Adoption Scorecard.

### **Adoption Reform Agenda**

During 2017/18, Adoption@Heart, our Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) has continued to see significant activity and development.

The recommendation that the Adoption@Heart be a hosted delivery model was made following a review of the proposed local trading company proposal. Alongside this the established work streams have been progressed around the adopter recruitment, preparation and assessment, panel operation and early permanency for children.

With the change of working model, the proposed launch date has been revised and is now likely to go live for the RAA in April 2019 with Wolverhampton being the host authority.

With now over a third of Local Authorities involved in the delivery of adoption service through a Regional Adoption Agency, Ofsted have advised the revised inspection arrangements. This confirmed that inspection of the Local Authority Children's Services will continue to be whether the authority is meeting the needs of its children and fulfilling statutory duties. The Regional Adoption Agency contribution will be considered in the in terms of the Local Authority being inspected.

Ofsted have advised when the Local Authority is inspected that RAA involved will be named; however, the evaluation is about what the Local Authority is doing with the inspectors looking

through the lens of Local Authority. The RAA will only be further referenced if their role is considered a strength or an area for improvement. As such the Local Authority will need to appoint an officer to manage the adoption service. This officer will be required to be a Local Authority officer and cannot be shared with another Local Authority. The inspection now specifies that a conversation with the link officer will be part of the inspection alongside the independent Chair of the RAA Adoption Panel. Representation of the RAA at inspection meetings will always be at the invitation of the Director of Children's Services.

Adoption Support Fund (ASF) has continued with ceiling level introduced in November 2016 and will continue to March 2018. However, from April until the end of the financial year 2019 / 2020 the Adoption Support Fund will have 2 new fair access limits which represent a further reduction: These are

- £2,500 per child per year for specialist assessment
- £5,000 per child per year for therapy

The Adoption Support Fund has advised the majority of applications to the fund fall within these limits. In exceptional cases, where there is an urgent need for higher cost support, the Local Authority is asked to match-fund applications.

The Adoption Support Fund has further confirmed that the criteria for matched funding in light of feedback of the criteria introduced in November 2016: These are

- a high risk of adoption breakdown without high cost support
- the Local Authority dealing with an unusually high number of complex cases that they cannot afford to fund without additional support from the ASF
- additional funding would help to progress hard to place adoptions
- a lack of available, affordable therapeutic support means higher cost provision is required

The Adoption Support Fund can fund up to 50% of the amount above the fair access limits, up to a maximum of £30,000 including the fair access limits

### **Role and Function of the Adoption Service**

#### **Professional Profile of the Adoption Service**

At the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018, the adoption and permanence service comprised the following;

Group Manager-Strategic Lead for Provider Services and the Adoption and Permanency Service which consisted of the following: 1 Team manager, 1 Assistant Team Manager, 10 Social workers and 3 non qualified workers whose primary focus is on preparation of adopters and children for placement. Activity is supported by the Professional Advisor to adoption panel and specialist panel administrator posts. The addition of a 10<sup>th</sup> social work post has meant that a clear focus can be given to driving other permanence options for children such as family finding for children in need of a long term foster placements.

The Adoption and Permanence team undertake the following core duties:

- recruitment, training and assessment of adopters

## Adoption Service Annual Report 2017 – 2018

- provision of support to adoptive families following their approval and subsequent match to a child
- family finding and matching for children with an adoption plan and for those requiring long term fostering placements
- provision of adoption support and special guardianship support both pre and post order
- facilitation of contact arrangements for adopted children and to adopted adults
- completion of non-agency adoption work including the completion of inter-country adoption work and completion of step-parent adoptions

The service also offers consultation on adoption related matters as part of a duty system and when required will attend court to provide evidence of family finding activity in relation to individual cases.

The team's work involves initial visits to applicants, staffing of information evenings as part of Adoption at heart hosting adoption preparation courses, conducting assessments of adopters, family finding for children with an adoption plan, provision of post adoption and special guardianship support and completion of step parent adoption applications. Specialist workers assist children in preparation to move on to their adoptive placements and also in the provision of Life Story Work. The team worked collaboratively with Consortium colleagues as part of Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus until Adoption at Heart became operational in September 2017 in its first stage of transition to the Regional Adoption Agency.

In preparing adoptive families for the realities of parenting, the majority will have the opportunity to attend a 'Child Appreciation Day'; this enables adopters to hear about children from those who know children best, such as contact supervisors, nursery and school staff, foster carers and previous and existing social workers. The use of Child Appreciation Meetings continues to have a positive impact on placement stability.

Children and adopters continue to be well prepared for the realities of adoption placements. Direct work is provided to the children to help prepare them for a move to an adoption placement, whilst practical support is given to adopters in the form of advice and support and where appropriate financial support including the purchase of essential equipment in preparation for placement. Walsall is fortunate to have a dedicated life story worker and also a worker focusing on direct work and transition planning. These workers ensure that all children moving onto adoption have life journey work undertaken with them to help them contextualise their past experiences and prepare them for their new life in their adoptive placement, ongoing direct work is available to support children once they have moved if this is felt to be appropriate. With regard to Walsall's life story worker, this person ensures that all children moving onto adoption have a life story book; these books help children understand their past experiences and are a really useful tool for adopters to use in explaining how their children came to be placed with them.

### **Activity of the Adoption Service**

### **Profile of Children suitable to be placed for Adoption**

During April 2017 to March 2018, a total of 37 children were presented for a decision on their suitability for adoption. This is slightly higher than last year's figure of 35 and is in line with Walsall's usual number of adoption plans made each year.

There was a decrease in family finding this year compared to last year of 43. Walsall has successfully placed 28 children for adoption. This impacted on the availability of internal resources to meet the placement needs of such a high number of children, therefore there was a significant rise in the number of children placed in external adoptive placements.

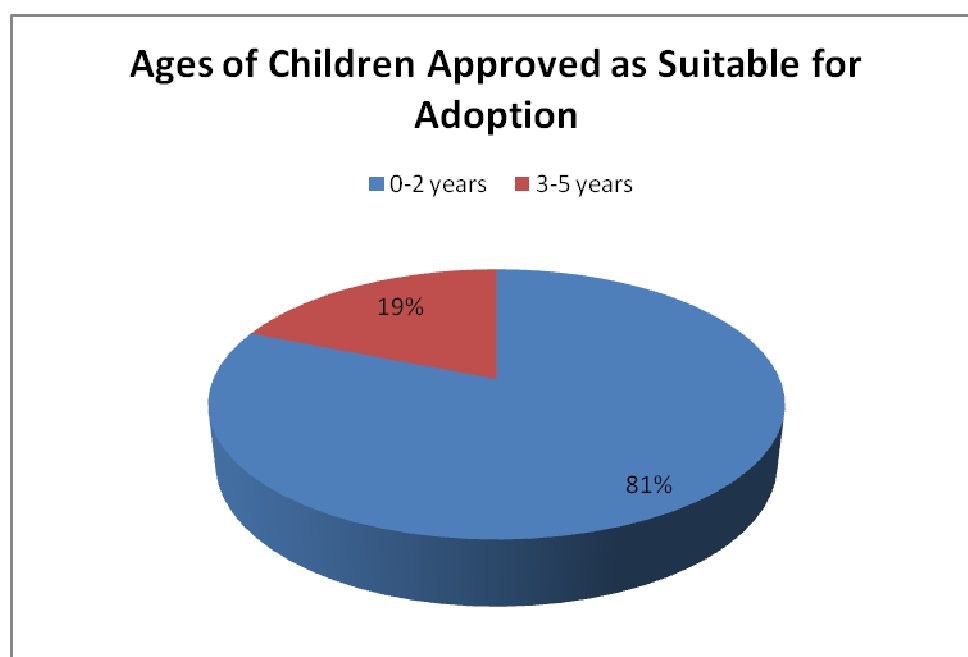
The following sections provide further detail of the profile of adoption activity.

#### **Age of children with an agreed adoption plan**

0-2 years - 30

3-5 years - 7

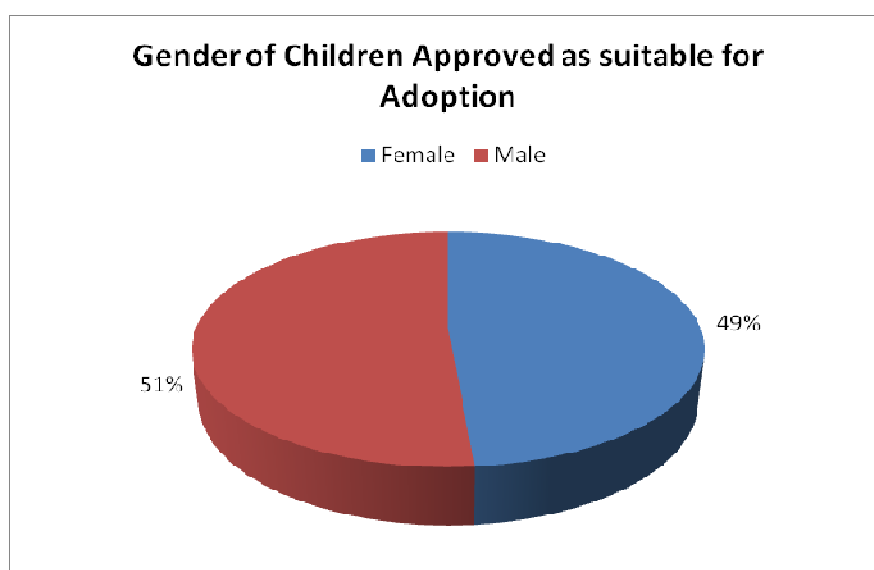
6-7 years - 0



The age profile of children requiring adoption remains similar to previous years with a high percentage under the age of 3 years. Nationally, the average age at which a child becomes legally adopted is 3 years 5 months (BAAF 2015). Walsall's average age at the point of adoption for 2017-18 was 3 years 3 months, which is higher than last year's figure which was 2 years 8 months.

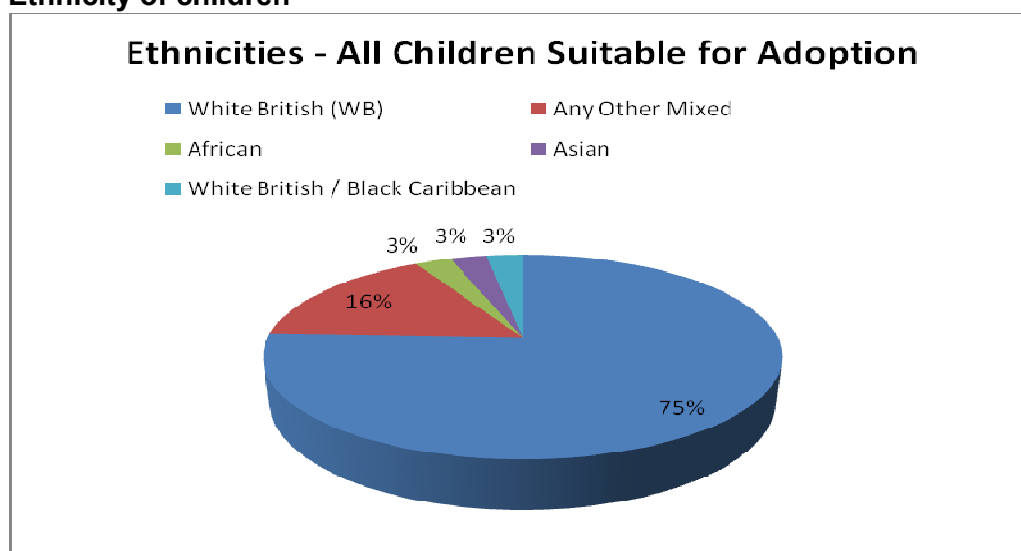
#### **Gender of children with an agreed adoption plan**

Female - 18  
Male – 19



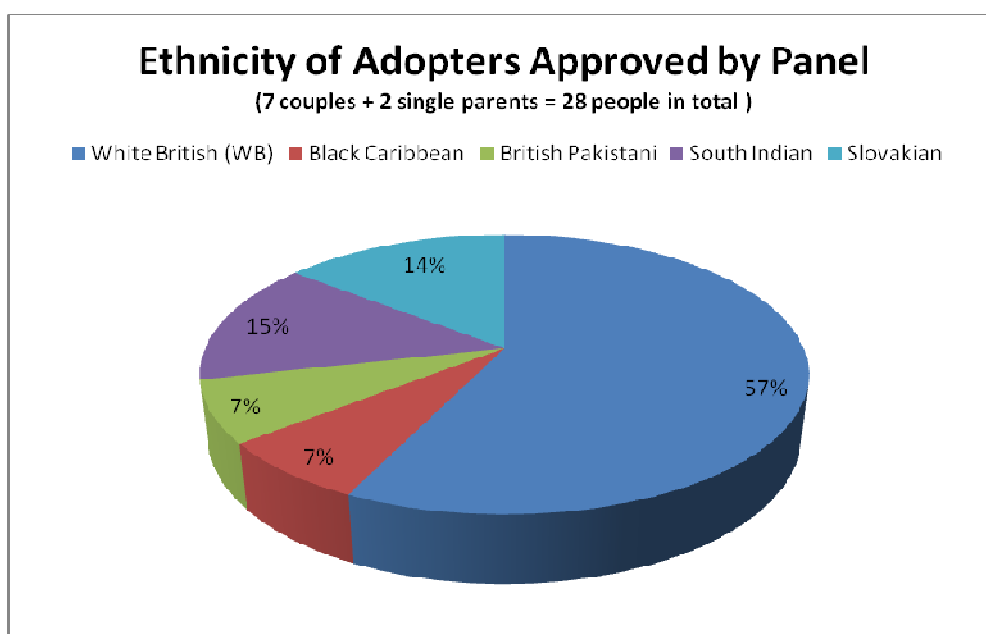
On a similar theme to last year, more boys than girls were presented for an adoption decision. This reflects the national picture of the gender profile within the care system, with 55% being boys and 45% girls (Coram BAAF 2016). Adoption@Heart has profiled boys and siblings groups as a high priority for their marketing campaign as this is a limited resource across the region, with all Local Authorities taking longer to place this cohort.

### Ethnicity of children



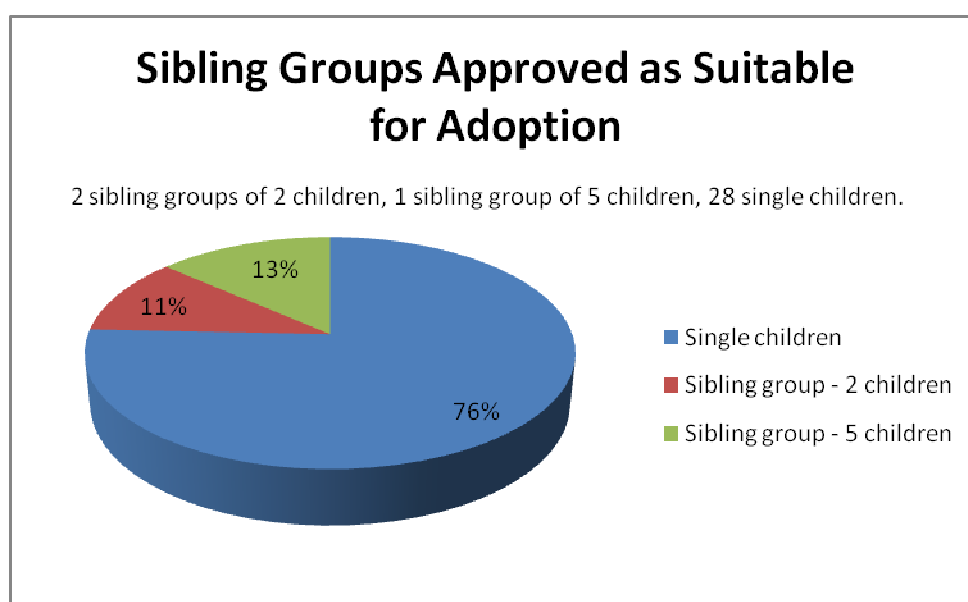
Walsall continues to have children presented for an adoption decision from black and minority ethnic groups; However, the majority (28) 75% of children were of white British origin.

### Ethnicity of adopters



During 2017 – 2018, the majority of adopters 57% that were approved by panel were of a white British ethnicity. This has decreased from last year's figure of 75%. However, Walsall has had an increase in the number of black and minority ethnic adopters. 2016-2017 figures are shown as 25% and 2017-18 figures are shown as 43%.

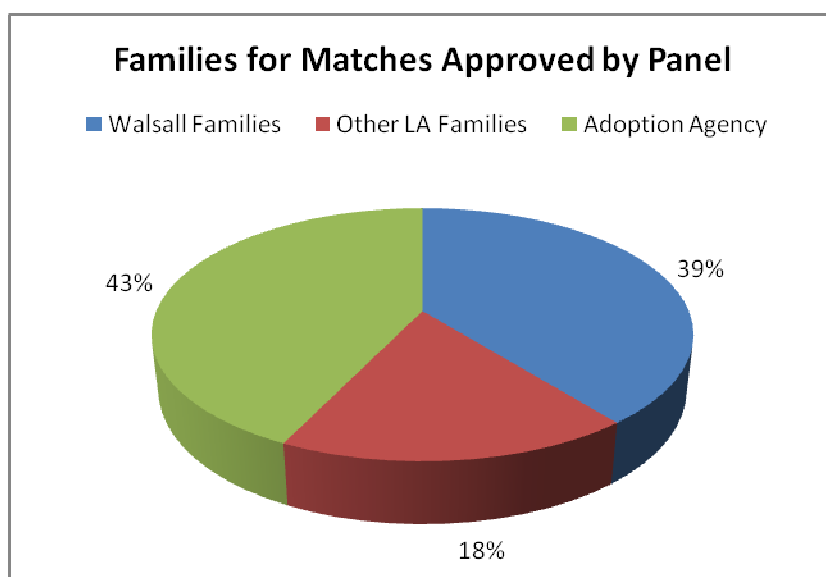
### **Sibling Placements**



With regard to placement identification, the chart above shows the number of single children compared to those in sibling groups. There were a high number of single children (28) and a steady flow of sibling groups requiring placements.

### **Children Matched 2017-2018**





The Adoption Panel recommended 28 children for a match with an approved adoptive family; this is a decrease of 8 from last year. 11 of these were matched with Walsall approved families; a further 5 were placed with other local authorities and 12 within voluntary adoption placements.

36.1% (13) of the children were matched within 6 months of their adoption decision. For those not matched within 6 months, 69.5% (16) placed within 12 months, and 22.2% (8) were over 12 months. The delays are attributable to timing of placement order applications. The cases of 2 children took longer than 12 months. The reasons for delay were

- Family finding did not identify many appropriate matches
- Placement Orders were challenged by birth parents

Cases such as these do pose a challenge to Local Authorities as the timescales involved will adversely affect scorecard data. However, the view of the service, supported by the senior leadership team is that every child has to be treated as an individual and adoption should be pursued wherever possible for children who are unable to remain within their birth family. We will not cease or alter a plan of adoption simply because it improves our apparent performance.

### Children Adopted

The total number of children adopted during 2017-18 is 43, an increase of 13 on the previous year. This is reflective of the number of children presented for adoption decision during 2016-17, which stood at 30.

## **Good Practice Requirements**

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced monitoring functions for adoption panels. In 2015, these were replaced by the new requirements of the Adoption Scorecard.

- Of the 37 children presented for an adoption decision, 72.9% had their permanence plan considered and ratified at their 4 month statutory review. This is a slight decrease on last year's figure of 77.1%.
- 54% of children were presented for an adoption decision within 2 months of the review which agreed adoption as the care plan. This is a significant decrease of last year's figure of 91.4%. In part the proportion of children has decreased because of further assessments ordered within the court process, following the IRO ratifying the Local Authority recommendation. These assessments need to be concluded before the ADM is able to consider the case.
- 10.8% of children had their wishes and feelings clearly recorded in their CPR. In the vast majority of cases the reason given for this not happening was that the children were too young to be consulted. Although this is a low number, where this happened was due to children who are not of an age appropriate level or have speech and language delays and are unable to voice their wishes and feelings for the Child's Permanency Report the child's social worker is supported to include observations of the infant's behaviour whilst in care and during contact
- 87.8% of parents had the opportunity to read and comment on the CPR prior to submission for an adoption decision. The small number of parents views not included is due to the child's social worker not being successful in sustaining parental engagement.

## **Placement Stability/Disruptions**

The Adoption Support Plans for each child remain robust and focused on the individual child's needs, the adopters to support the placement, and the key professional's responsible for that support.

All children moving onto adoption have a robust Adoption Support Plan. This plan identifies key areas of support for both adopters and children with lead professionals identified. Walsall's 'Agreement to Placement' document also makes specific reference to adopters needing to ensure that the holistic needs of children are addressed, which includes their social and emotional development and their learning needs. Adoption Support plans are monitored as part of the Statutory Review process. If additional needs are identified, these needs are met by the provision of additional services and are again subject to review.

With regard to post Adoption Support Plans, adopters are written to on an annual basis inviting them to request an annual review of their support needs. If adopters request this, an assessment is undertaken and any additional needs identified will then either be met through signposting to universal services or through the provision of additional services under our post adoption support obligations, again this will then be subject to ongoing review.

Placement stability remains high and as with last year there have been no placement disruptions post placement.

Child Appreciation Days continue to be a contributing factor to our low disruption rate. These take place prior to matching panel and enable adopters to hear all available information prior to committing to a match with a child. They are able to withdraw from the match if they feel the child is not right for them. The child is unaware of the planning process at this stage and therefore it is the adults that shoulder the emotional burden and not the child.

### **Good Practice**

Adopters are involved in all aspects of matching and planning. Prior to approval as adopters, they are invited to attend Adoption Activity Days, exchange days, and receive a copy of 'Children Who Wait' as part of their Adoption UK membership; they will also get to hear about the children waiting for adoption in Walsall. This approach enables adopters to have some input into the process and to begin to understand the processes involved in approval and subsequent matching. Following approval, if it looks unlikely that we will match the family within 3 months, we will refer them immediately to the Adoption Register. This enables adopters to have some control over the matching process as it gives them access to identifying children who they may be interested in. Families are also able to access 'Placement Link'; this is a new resource now used by a vast majority of adoption agencies. Once a possible match has been identified, the sharing of all available information to adopters begins. This includes the Child's Permanence Report, DVDs, photographs and 'All About Me' document which details the daily life experiences of the child and what is involved in caring for them. Following this, adopters have the opportunity to attend a Child Appreciation Day. During the Child Appreciation Day, they will have the opportunity to meet all those who have been involved with their child or children. Adopters attend adoption placement planning meetings and are asked to contribute to the completion of associated adoption paperwork. Adopters are asked to complete a 'Family Book' and a DVD for use during introductions, which ultimately will help them and the child in early stages of introductions. A significant number of adopters contribute to the development of our agency. These contributions include; help and support in the delivery of preparation training, in providing support to other adopters during introductions or difficult placements, in co-hosting our annual adoption picnic and other social events, in the writing, editing and publishing of our adoption newsletter and also through their inclusion on the central list for adoption panel members. There are currently 3 adopters included on Walsall's central list for adoption panel members.

### **Service User Participation**

Walsall remains pro-active in consulting with adopters and adopted children to deliver a meaningful and effective service. Consultation happens in a number of ways; through feedback about experiences of first point of contact through Adoption @ Heart, the adoption assessment process, feedback from attendance at adoption panel and through the regular communication between adopters and their social workers.

The feed-back received for 2017-2018 will become our focused objective for 2018-2019, the feedback included the need for more adoption support events including adult only events. It was evident that the adopters were confident in accessing post adoption support in Walsall and are aware of the Adoption Support Fund. This evidences Walsall commitments to open communication and engagement with the adopters to provide support to the families.

### **Profile of Adopters**

During 2017-18, 8 families were approved as suitable to adopt. This is a decrease of 7 families from the previous year. However, it is also important to highlight that 8 approvals

does not equate to the amount of assessment activity. There were a number of families that started the assessment process which then ceased for a number of reasons, including unresolved loss, lack of thought to what adoption would bring to their family, complex issues in marital and family relationships, financial matters and lack of available support network

The local coverage, national campaign and Government focus on adoption has resulted in more people coming forward much earlier in the decision making process as they are able to get through an information event screening but have not developed their thinking of adoption in enough detail to progress after an Initial Visit. This results in more work for adoption teams with no guarantee of a resource at the end of it.

### **Adoption Scorecard**

The Adoption Scorecard contains a number of key performance indicators relating to how swiftly local authorities implement adoption plans for children. Scorecard data allows local authorities and other adoption agencies to monitor their own performance and compare it to other similar local authorities or adoption agencies. It can also serve to highlight areas of practice which may require improvement.

The Scorecard provides data which is already known to Walsall. Rigorous monitoring of all adoption activity is ongoing and key actions are identified and implemented on a continuous basis. The main benefit of the Scorecard is the comparable data available from other local authorities which can sometimes highlight areas of good practice both within Walsall and often from other local authorities from whom we can share good practice.

### **Key Performance Indicators 2016-2017**

The national adoption statistics for 2017/2018 are not due for publication until November 2018. Therefore, this report compares Walsall data to the national statistics averaged and published for 2014-2017.

A1: Walsall's average time from a child entering care to moving in with their adoptive family is 517 days. The England average is 520 days (2014/2017), so Walsall has superseded this.

A2: Average time between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and the Local authority deciding on a match. The data for 2014-17 is **140**. This is better than England's 3 year average for 2014-2017 which is 220 days. It demonstrates consistent robust family finding activity with the emphasis on achieving adoption for the majority of children for whom adoption is the plan

A3: Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with an adoptive family. Walsall's average for 2014-17 is 53% in relation to this indicator.

The percentage of looked after children who are discharged from care and who were adopted has stayed the same on last year's figure of 18%

The number of children who had their permanence decision changed away from adoption during 2017-2018 was 7 which is lower than 2016-2017 figures of 24. The reason for these changes are due to children with complex health needs who have now been secured a Special Guardianship Order, a placement of long-term fostering and 1 child returned home as directed by the Court.

The percentage of children adopted from a Black or Ethnic minority background being adopted was higher than the three year England average of 8%; Walsall's stands at 14%.

The percentage of children aged 5 years and over from the point of being adopted is above the national average of 8%. Walsall's figures for 2017/2018 show 14%.

The average length of care proceedings locally stands at 36 weeks; this is higher than England's average of 30 weeks.

## **Financial Aspects of Service Delivery**

### **2017-18 Annual Adoption Report Finance Extract**

In terms of the financial context of the Adoption Service, the total budget associated with Adoption for 2017/18 is £1.109m. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the budget allocated by area. From a financial perspective, significant cost reductions can be realised through ensuring that family finding for children is done in a timely way so that those currently placed in high cost placements with Independent Fostering Agencies can join their new adoptive more quickly. During 2016/17, Children services reported an ongoing financial pressure associated with the number and mix of Looked after Children. As part of the 2017/18 budget agreed by Full Council, corporate investment was allocated to Children services to ensure budget was in line with 2016/17 costs at the start of the new financial year.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Budget</b>
Staffing	£0.557m
SLAs & Subscriptions	£0.029m
Inter-Agency Fees	£0.239m
Allowances	£0.209m
Other	£0.075m
<b>Total</b>	<b>£1.109m</b>

### **Adoption in the Black Country/adoption@heart**

The work of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) consortium has successfully continued and has seen its biggest change in the 14 years of its existence as it has progressed and developed into the Adoption@Heart Regional Adoption Agency. The 'front door' marketing service has been the first element of the RAA to launch. Through this transitional process of branding and service design referrals have fallen in-line with projected figures showing growth. Engagement with BME groups has been maintained at levels up to 26%.

The launch of Adoption@Heart called for a different approach to marketing as what in essence was a re-branding exercise needed more above-the-line marketing action and brand awareness across a wider geographic footprint rather than direct response advertising solely within the boundaries of the Black Country. For the launch of Adoption@Heart, radio media partners Heart FM were chosen to convey the message on a wider transponder area than ABC had traditionally used. Other

rebranding activity included regional bus back and selected billboard sites. This rebrand activity was supported with other traditional mediums such as local press. A movement back to 'call to action' marketing (once the launch activity had been completed) with a high emphasis on digital advertising and social media advertising to target individuals based on socio-economic and geographic fields.

Social Media continues to play a significant and growing part in the marketing strategy offering a more relaxed conversational approach to recruitment marketing and information sharing. An average organic communication on Facebook goes out to around 700 individuals and via Twitter. ABC reach roughly 4000 individuals per month. These are supported by targeted paid-for social media advertising delivered via opinion former sites.

The front door information service offers a personal concierge service approach supporting prospective adopters through pre-stage 1 into the assessment parts of the process. This year the average response times was down to just 1 minute to a digital message meaning that if a prospective adopter contacts ABC or Adoption@Heart (regardless of time of day or night) on average within 1 minute they will have a personal and none automated response answering their questions. This personal approach is fast becoming the RAA's unique selling point and the reason why so many adopters choice Adoption@Heart.

### **Walsall Referrals from ABC and Adoption@Heart**

ABC/ Adoption@Heart have continued maximise new innovative media for recruitment activities and yet again widen its footprint of recruitment targeting new areas for recruitment Shropshire and Staffordshire whilst maintaining a presence in areas such as Tamworth and Lichfield which had been the previous campaigns growth areas.

Ethnic minority engagement has remained a key strength of ABC and Adoption@Heart with a high of 26% of referrals coming from BME backgrounds, compared with 9% nationally. Within the Black Country 15.2% of our communities come from the black minority ethnic groups.

35 referrals were made Walsall MBC to proceed to Initial Visits stage up from 23 in the previous year.

### **Marketing profile**

A second year of a more coherent marketing narrative from a national government has supported marketing activity in recruiting adopters for hard to place children. The #SupportAdoption campaigns run by national government have dovetailed with the campaigns of ABC and Adoption@Heart, particularly around National Adoption week. This has significantly highlighted the support that adopters are able to access regionally and nationally. In previously recent years high profile messages from central government had encouraged people to come forward much earlier in the decision making process however these individuals and couples had not developed their thinking of adoption in enough detail to progress after an initial visit.

ABC and Adoption@Heart has maintained a high frequency of Adoption Information events spread even wider across the region therefore any prospective adopter will only wait a maximum of 14 days between each event. The wider geographic area also means that prospective adopters will not need to travel so far to events thus increasing accessibility.

We also provide monthly adoption preparation courses and on-line training materials as part of Stage One training requirements. The system is now embedded and seen as a sector innovation leader supporting adopters through Stage One and Stage Two in line with required timescales. This means a quicker more robust service for adopters but more importantly a growth in local placements for children from the Black Country.

Walsall continues to be part of wider consortium working arrangements through Adopt West Midlands and the Midlands Family Placement Group. Meetings are bi-monthly and quarterly respectively. The advantages of consortium working are the ability to share good practice, offer training at a reduced unit cost, contract service level agreements at a reduced cost and most importantly to have the opportunity to identify local matches for Walsall children.

#### **New marketing strategies have been put in place.**

1. Enhancement of targeting of ABC and Adoption@Heart website to increase the profile of the need for adopters for harder to place children.
2. New social media marketing to ensure targeted marketing for hard to place children
3. Increase in our social media presence and dialogue with prospective adopters through 'boosted' Facebook site, Twitter account and Instagram.
4. Greater utilisation of social media chat function
5. Deliver info events at a wide choice of locations
6. Specific recruitment marketing for Siblings, Children with disabilities and also specific children.
7. Embedding Foster for Adoption into the main body of all marketing activity and not positioning it as an addendum/scheme on its own
8. Specific recruitment information events for Foster for Adoption (with key messages around this about adoption in the regular information event presentations)
9. Development of #AdoptionInfoLive into a live Q&A session on the consortium Facebook channel
10. Utilisation of innovation in e-marketing such as Ad-Messenger (innovative pop-up adverts on mobile devices)

#### **Adoption Panel and Panel Membership**

Panel responsibilities continue to be recommendations for the approval of adopters; matches of adopters and children and relinquished babies of whom there was one this year

During this period 21 panel members were on the central list. Lisa Cawthorn is the Panel Chair and was appointed in October 2014. Lisa has experience of working in the field of fostering and adoption for 28 years as a Supervising Social Worker, Senior Manager, Trainer, Panel Member, Panel Advisor and Panel Chair.

Councillor Tina Jukes has sat on panel as an elected member from 3rd June 2016.

29 panel meetings occurred during this period. 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 adds to the written assessment.

Panel was well supported by the Adoption Panel administrator, Rebecca Jeffery and Lindsey Perkins.

Panel members were invited to a training day on 22nd April 2017 to look at joint working within the Adoption Team and Panel Members.

There were also a further training event held on 22nd and 24th May on PAR paperwork.

Serious Case Review discussed after a short panel on 27th April 2017.

### **Training and Development**

There is now a commitment from workforce development to ensure social workers have the necessary skills to plan and take the child through the adoption journey.

Information articles/items of interest continue to be distributed to panel members to assist them in keeping up to date with changes in law, practice and research. Feedback from individual appraisals about training needs has highlighted that panel members are particularly interested in knowing about the adoption journey for adopters, parents and children. In response to this, briefings are proposed within panel to provide additional information. A great deal of effort was put into trying to move the panel to a paperless system with the use of i-pads to reduce the cost and also the vulnerability of having to post all the panel papers to members. However, due to technical difficulties this was not possible, although there may be scope to address this at a later stage.

### **Attendance and Performance**

Quoracy and expected attendance at panels has been reduced. There is now a central list of 21 adoption panel members in operation, which allows for flexibility of membership. The central list has already been added to in an effort to have more qualified social work input to the panel. Panel meets three times monthly. In 2017/18 there were a total of 29 meetings held, all matters being dealt with at panel.

Panel members welcome adopter's attendance at panel as this assists them in asking questions to them directly and adds to the written assessment.



At the time of writing all panel members have either had their performance reviewed or are in the process of having this completed. Feedback has been both positive and constructive with any areas of concern highlighted. Overall feedback has reflected the following:

- Members continue to speak very highly of the quality of reports submitted by members of the adoption team.
- There remain some concerns about the quality of Child Permanence Reports which is being addressed through workforce development and practice training sessions with the importance of these for children in later life emphasised and reinforced. However there has been a noticeable improvement in the majority of these.
- The quality assurance element role of the team manager and panel advisor is also seen as crucial in ensuring that reports presented comprehensively cover significant issues.
- Panel members continue to have a high regard for the panel administrators skills in the management of panel information, the circulation of reports and quality of panel minutes which are seen as an accurate record of panel discussion.
- Panel members feel that they have the opportunity to express their views and have these heard with respect shown for them.
- Panel members consistently commented on the skills and experience of the panel chair.
- The input from the medical advisor continues to be recognised as significant both with respect to the contribution they make with panel decision making but also with respect to their specific medical advisory role as they undertake adoption medicals on children suitable for adoption and can give input into comments made by other doctors about adopters. Of particular note is their availability to meet with adopters to discuss any medical issues or concerns relating to children prior to placement to ensure that adopters are as well informed as they can be about any current or future health issues.

Feedback from social workers, prospective adopters and other professionals attending panel and completing feedback forms has generally been positive.

### **Adopters attending Panel**

Whilst not a requirement to do so, Walsall actively encourages adopters to attend panel at both their approval stage and their matching stage. Of all the approvals and matches achieved last year all attended. We continue to receive positive feedback from adopters about their panel experience and the service as a whole.

Some quotes received from adopters:

‘Although I was nervous, I felt encouraged by the panel who were genuinely listening and interested in my views.’

‘Panel Members were professional and welcoming and made me feel at ease (at what was a very nervous day for me). I felt very encouraged by the way panel was conducted, especially the Chair who greeted me warmly and explained the process. **I could not be happier at the outcome. After nearly 3 years in the process I am finally going to be a mommy! Thank you!**’

‘Coming to panel was a daunting process but our fears were immediately allayed. The panel were extremely welcoming and considerate, the chair particularly so. It was a wonderful experience on our journey to becoming parents. Thank you!’

‘We just want to say a big thank you to everyone that we got another chance to adopt again and bring hopefully to our lives, another happy smile into our family and give our little daughter a sibling. All the best to every panel member’

### **Adoption Support Activity**

#### **Internal Adoption Support Provision**

- Walsall Adoption Service has continued to develop the strength of the support offer available to Adoptive parents. Staffing within the Adoption Support Service has remained stable; in March 2018 the staff composition consists of 1 full time Social Worker, 1 part time Social Worker, 1 full time Life Story Worker and 1 part time Children’s Support Officer who completes direct work to support children’s transitions towards adoption.
- Adoption@Heart maintains a membership within the Adopt West Midlands Consortium; this connection has supported workforce development and opportunities for peer networking. Regional commissioning of training has been an effective way of supporting professional development for the breadth of staff whose roles influence all areas of adoption. The functions of the Adoption Support workers remain varied. Additional training has equip staff to undertake knowledge based assessments of needs. They work with adopted children and their adoptive parents, birth families and adults who have been adopted. They continue to operate the contact letterbox scheme and facilitate some direct contact arrangements.
- The Adoption Support Fund came into operation on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2015; Walsall Adoption Service have utilised the funds available to provide therapeutic support to adoptive families. The increased awareness of the Adoption Support Fund has led to a steady increase in Assessment of Needs completed by the Post Adoption Service. Social Workers have worked closely with different service providers to ensure families continue to have access to the required therapeutic services.
- The Adoption Support Service offer an annual review of children’s support plans to adoptive families who are eligible; 106 adoptive families were eligible

for an annual review during 2017-2018. The number of adoptive parents requesting additional support for this period was 31 with assessment for therapeutic support and financial support making up the greatest number of requests. Theraplay ® has been available in-house since October 2015 and referrals for Theraplay ® support are made to various providers nationally. Children have been able to access a range of therapeutic support provisions including Therapeutic Life Story Work, DDP, Art and Music Therapy and Psychotherapy interventions. Where required the Adoption Support Fund has been utilised to provide Specialist Assessments as part of a therapeutic support package.

- The Family Connections newsletter continues to be distributed two times per year and is valued by adoptive families. Two adoptive parents continue to take a lead on producing and editing the newsletter which is overseen by Adoption Support Social Workers before distribution. This has proved to be successful and the feedback from adopters continues to be positive.
- Walsall Adoption Service continues to host a Family Fun Day for adoptive families. The last event took place in October 2017 that at a children's activity centre. The event was well attended and the feedback was very positive.

### **Contact**

- Contact Agreements from adoptive parents are generally being completed just prior to the child(ren) being placed and are lodged with the Adoption Support Workers who manage the letterbox scheme. The agreements are then facilitated by the letterbox scheme allowing for consistent tracking and monitoring of the agreements.
- Referrals to facilitate contact agreements has increased with the number of children placed for adoption increasing. The letterbox scheme generates a high volume of work and a wide range of enquiries which need to be addressed and progressed by the Post Adoption Service. This may involve writing reminder letters, finding out information or sharing of information about the change in circumstances of birth families. There is also the requirement to check contents of correspondence to ensure it is appropriate and safe for the child and adoptive families. There are currently 450 letterbox arrangements held within the Adoption Service.
- There are a number of direct contact arrangements within existing contact agreements, which are managed by the respective adoptive parents. These usually involve the promotion of sibling contact between children placed in different adoptive placements. Support workers offer advice, guidance and support in respect of direct and indirect contact.

### **Working in Partnership with NHS - CAMHS**

- Walsall CAMHS Service continue to provide a FLASH Service (Foster Carer, Looked After, Adoption Supporting Hub). FLASH has been available since

2016; referrals are accepted for adoptive families as well as prospective adopters as part of the adopter assessment process. Strong working relationships has meant that this Service is regularly utilised by Adoption Support Social Workers to support multi agency professional reflections on complex issues children experience; this in turn informs Adoption Support Plans, Assessment of Needs and the recommended support provisions for families. FLASH provide direct therapeutic support services for families within a 20 mile radius.

### **Commissioned Adoption Support Services**

- Additional adoption support services are commissioned from Adoption UK/PAC. The service level agreement is commissioned through Adoption@Heart; jointly with Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley Council.
- Walsall Adoption Service are keen to ensure that Adoptive families are able to access key research and developments around adoption related issues. All newly approved adopters are automatically given one year's free membership to Adoption UK/PAC-UK. All adopters, once members, are invited to Adoption UK support group meetings.
- Adoption UK run local support groups on a bi-monthly basis in Walsall and Halesowen, the meetings schedule speakers and presentations and a time to socialise. During 2017 – 2018 the group covered various topics including 'Adoption and Education, Direct and Indirect Contact, Support for Family and Friends'. The agreement in place has also ensured prospective adopters are able access additional support during their assessment process; this in turn provides greater insight into adoption at an early stage in the journey towards adopting a child. Adoption UK support groups offer the opportunity to develop a wide adoption support network early on. Adopters are also able to access Adoption UK training workshops and a lending library.
- Adoption@Heart has a Service Level Agreement with an Independent Adoption Agency (After Adoption) to provide a support service for ( schedule 2 and section 98)
  - Birth parents and other family members seeking information, support and advice
  - Adopted adults seeking support to access their records and counselling
  - Intermediary services for adopted adults and birth relatives
  - Adoptive families and children
- There continue to be requests made by other adoption agencies on behalf of adult adoptees and birth relatives for access to records which involve the retrieval and research into archived files by Adoption Support social workers. In some cases a file summary is prepared for the other adoption agency.
- Walsall Adoption Service have continued to commission the Safe Base Parenting Programme which is run by After Adoption; the program has supported adoptive parents to develop therapeutic parenting skills.

- Adoption@Heart provide post approval training; this year training has included Education Issues for Adopted Children; The Impact of Childhood Trauma and Readiness for Learning. Talking about Adoption: Therapeutic Life Story Work. Sensory Integration: which included defining Sensory Integration and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) and exploring therapies which help children cope with SPD, Child to Parent Violence; for adoptive families struggling with violence in the home.

**Mosaic-** Audit activity will continue to monitor the ‘adoption’ footprint onto children’s records. This should include clear evidence of family finding activity, direct work undertaken and life story work. Whilst mosaic is supporting the service with regard to some data requests, there is still a gap with regard to statutory reporting which has led to collating data manually.

**Embedding permanence-** There is an identified need within Walsall to ensure that every child who is looked after has their permanence plan identified and implemented as soon as possible. This does not only extend to those children requiring adoption, it also extends to children who need the security of an alternative permanence order such as Special Guardianship Orders. The priority for this year will be to improve on key adoption indicators but in doing so ensure that family finding plans are robust and timely and where extra time is needed to identify an adoptive family that this is given full consideration. It will also be to track and monitor all other permanence plans so that a timely discharge through alternative orders can be secured.

**Adoption reform-** the intense focus on adoption reform is likely to continue, the service must therefore remain flexible to accommodate change. The service must also further embed Fostering for Adoption and to continue to consult with adopters and adoptees to influence future service delivery. The focus for next year will be the transition to the Regional Adoption Agency for the region.

## **Conclusions**

The government’s determination to improve adoption services continues to have an impact on the Local Authority. There is an expectation on all adoption agencies that delay will be minimised, more adopters will be recruited and more children from the care system will be placed in new families. Within this context it is to be noted that the figures for this period show that there has been a decrease and an increase, in comparison to the previous year reported period, in the number of children placed for adoption and the number of children for whom adoption is the decided plan. The Local Authority has always shown a commitment to the improvement of its adoption service so as to meet the enduring demands for new families for children who cannot return to their birth families.

The success for the service this year has been the placement of 28 children for adoption, 43 secured adoption orders, and the approval of 8 new families. More children have been matched with adopters outside the Walsall Area and we have used the voluntary sector to meet this need.

The use of internal provision alongside the voluntary sector has provided those families required for Walsall's children. Having a good economy of provision is clear evidence of the council's commitment to considering adoption for a wider and diverse range of children.

There have been significant changes to the overall delivery of adoption services in response to the intense government scrutiny of local authority performance. This has meant significant growth in the service to accommodate family finding for permanence and support to special guardians, it has also seen the development of 'Regional Adoption Agencies'. This government scrutiny will most likely continue for the foreseeable future, as the Government continues to push local authorities to improve their adoption performance. Walsall continues to remain flexible in its approach to adoption reform, there are likely to be more changes ahead which will affect practice across children's services.

Service development for the year ahead will focus on three critical areas, each of these will require significant input from everyone involved in the delivery of adoption practice, including adopters and children and young people. The service is confident that with the continued investment and focus on adoption activity that there will continue to be improvements in all areas of adoption practice, these will not only reflect positively on our adoption scorecard but more importantly on the individual outcomes for our Looked after Children.

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