

## **Cabinet – 16 December 2015**

### **Adoption Service Annual Report 1 April 2014-31 March 2015**

**Portfolio:** Councillor Hughes, Care and safeguarding

**Related portfolios:** N/A

**Service:** Adoption Service – Specialist Children's Services

**Wards:** All

**Key decision:** No

**Forward plan:** No

#### **1. Summary**

The requirement to report on the progress of the Adoption Service is contained within the Adoption 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:**

The agency should monitor its performance and provide 6 monthly updates to the executive side of the council. These updates 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.

The report contained in **Appendix A** is the Annual Adoption Service Report for the period 1 April 2014 to the 31 March 2015.

The report details the work of Walsall Council's Adoption Service during this period. It contains commentary with regard to adoption performance locally and how we compare nationally, it will comment on adoption panel activity, adoption support activity, service user involvement and also the key areas identified for future service developments.

The report is being submitted slightly later than anticipated as the adoption panel advisor who is responsible for the completion of these reports has been focusing her efforts in co-ordinating extra fostering panels to accommodate the recent growth in this area.

## 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the contents of this report are accepted as an accurate reflection of how Walsall council is meeting its statutory duties in relation to delivery of adoption services.

## 3. Report detail

Please see the report in **Appendix A**. The headlines from this report are as follows:

- 3.1 The number of children approved as suitable for adoption within this 12 month period is considerably lower than the previous year. The reasons for this are that the figure for the previous year was the highest Walsall has ever seen and was as a direct result of Walsall's Ofsted finding from 2012 and subsequent increase in Looked after Children numbers. This year's figure is a little below the average number from the previous five years but is in line with a national trend towards supporting more children to remain within their extended family.
- 3.2 The figure for children being matched with adopters is higher than last year and there has been an increase in the number of these children being placed with Walsall approved adoptive families, which is evidence of the effective use of internal provision.

3.3 The total number of children adopted during 2014-15 is 38; this is an increase of 12 on the previous year. This is reflective of the high number presented for adoption decision during 2013-14. At the time of writing this report in October 2015, there were already 19 adoption orders achieved with a further 30 children placed for adoption.

3.4 Adoption Reform monies have continued to enable the service to develop at a faster rate than would have otherwise been possible.

3.5 Walsall's responsibility for the provision of adoption support continues to grow as more children are adopted year on year.

Service user participation has enabled us to respond to the need to develop Welcome Packs for Looked after Children and to increase the number of social events for adopters.

There are three clear areas for service development for the coming year, the implementation of mosaic, the impact of the re-structure of children's services and the need to keep this under regular review and the need to respond to the on-going government focus on adoption activity.

#### **4. Council priorities**

**Improving Safeguarding, Learning and the life chances for children and young people, raising aspirations-** For those children where it is decided adoption is the most appropriate plan; this plan should be implemented without delay. Walsall should as part of care planning, ensure that permanency for all children is considered at the earliest opportunity. The priority for progressing adoption plans will be met through effective and targeted recruitment of prospective adopters who are able to meet a diverse range of needs.

#### **5. Risk management**

In order to monitor compliance with required statutory duties it is important that cabinet is made aware of service priorities, developments and resource implications.

#### **6. Financial implications**

Additional funding has been available from central Government this year. The challenge for 2015-16 will be the need to continue with service development with no additional resources.

#### **7. Legal implications**

Legal services have been consulted and no legal implications were identified.

#### **8. Property implications**

None

**9. Health and wellbeing implications**

None

**10. Staffing implications**

Additional funding from central government has enabled us to bolster capacity within the adoption service, this funding will not be available for 2015-16, the capacity needs of the service will be considered as part of the planned re-structure of specialist children's services.

**11. Equality implications**

None identified.

**12. Consultation**

Lynn Levesley – Legal Services Manager.  
Nilu Ghai – Senior HR consultant.  
Lynn Harvey-Service accountant

**Background papers**

None

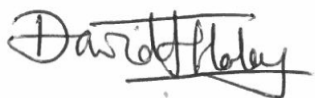
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David Haley  
Executive Director  
27 November 2015



Councillor Eddie Hughes  
Portfolio holder  
3 December 2015



Better Together for Children

## Adoption Service Annual Report April 2014 – March 2015

### **Overview of Service Delivery 2014-15**

The Adoption Service has had a busy and challenging year with regard to adoption planning for children, assessment and approval of adopters and in continuing to move forward with the Government's agenda of reforming the adoption system.

There has been a reduction this year in the number of children being presented for an adoption agency decision. This has reduced from 60 in 2013-14 to 25 this year. Whilst this may seem a dramatic reduction, it must be seen in the context that the figure of 60 is the highest Walsall has ever had and that over the course of the previous 5 years, the figure has always been within the range of 29-35. The 25 children this year with a decision is low, however, this has to be seen in the context of an increase in children being placed within their extended family and the national decrease in the overall numbers of children being suitable for adoption. We have continued to match children with their adopters in a timely way and this year there was an increase from 37 in 2013/14 to 38 this year. The number of approved families decreased from 24 during 2013-14 to 17 this year, which is a similar figure achieved across the previous five years. However, on a more positive note, the majority of approved families have offered placements to Walsall children or are in the process of doing so; which continues to demonstrate good use of internal provision.

Primarily the revision of the Public Law Outline and the requirement to complete care proceedings within 26 weeks has resulted in more timely decision making for children. This has enabled Walsall to increase family finding and to invest in further growth opportunities for Adoption in the Black Country (ABC).

In September 2014 and February 2015, the service hosted their bi-annual 'Adoption Picnic' and adoption day event. This was well attended by a number of adopters and their children; some consultation was undertaken with those attending regarding future service delivery. On a similar theme, a group of adopted young people were consulted during the early part of 2014 on their views regarding the production of Walsall's children's guides to adoption and adoption support. These have now been finalised and are being used with all children who have a plan of adoption.

The new Adoption Scorecard was published in December 2014. Whilst Walsall showed improvements in some areas, there was also a decline in others. Further information can be found in section 4.

Towards the end of February 2014, changes needed to be made to the central list of adoption panel members, this was because it was decided the reciprocal arrangements of chairing panels on behalf of Wolverhampton and Walsall would end. Following a successful recruitment process a suitably qualified and experienced independent chair has been appointed who will chair both Walsall and Wolverhampton's adoption panels. The post holder commenced her duties in August 2014. The post of Professional Advisor also became vacant in September 2013; whilst the recruitment process was initiated the post has been filled by experienced and competent agency advisors. The substantive post was appointed to in March 2014 and the new Professional Advisor commenced her duties on the 3rd November 2014.

## **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 2014-2015; it will also include our performance in relation to the 2014 Adoption Scorecard and predictions for the 2016 Scorecard (This will be published in January 2016).

The improvements made as a result of the 2014-15 Adoption Reform Grant (ARG) will also be considered as will new areas for ongoing change and development for any future grant allocations.

### **The 2014-15 Adoption Improvement Grant**

In April 2014 Walsall was successful in obtaining a further year's grant of £268,315. This was utilised in sustaining the momentum within the Adoption service to build upon the progress of last year, and to improve in all areas of adoption practice through a continued focus on improving outcomes for children requiring permanence. Two examples of this were that funding was used to consult with young people about the introduction of Welcome Packs for children and young people entering care and also an additional post was funded to support the progression of special guardianship plans.

The reform grant enabled the service to retain the 2 additional agency social work posts in the adoption team to undertake family finding for children with a plan of adoption and eventually long term fostering and also to undertake adoption assessments which will continue to increase internal placement provision.

Our contribution (quarter share) to the Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) enabled the continued funding of admin/marketing activities to support the growth of ABC to meet the demands of adopters needed for our LAC population. ABC is well established and seen as

an example of good consortium working by Ofsted. Part of the funding was used to support the completion of independent assessments of prospective adopters, which increased the pool of available adopters across the region.

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

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

At the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015, the adoption service comprised the following;

Operational Manager Family Placements Service (Louise Watts) left the service in July 2014. Lisa Preston was appointed as Group Manager.

The Adoption Team comprises of 1 Team manager, 3 senior practitioners and 6 Social workers, 3 non qualified workers and 3 business support members of staff. (a restructure of the service is in progress).

The adoption team undertake the following core duties:

- recruitment, training and assessment of adopters
- 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
- provision of adoption support both pre and post adoption order
- facilitation of contact arrangements for adopted children and 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 Adoption Team's work involves initial visits to applicants, staffing of information evenings as part of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC), hosting adoption preparation courses, conducting assessments of adopters, family finding for children with an adoption plan, provision of post adoption support and completion of step parent adoption 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 continue to work collaboratively with Consortium colleagues.

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.

An Adoption Development Manager was appointed in May 2013, funded by the Adoption Reform Grant. This was extended for a further year as additional funding was received in 2014. This role was deleted in August 2014 due to restructuring of Children's Services. Throughout this period the post holder worked hard to ensure that Walsall continued to meet Government expectations regarding tackling delay, streamlining the assessment process, leading on policy and development, ensuring effective adoption support and in providing a strategic overview of Walsall's commitment to improving adoption.

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

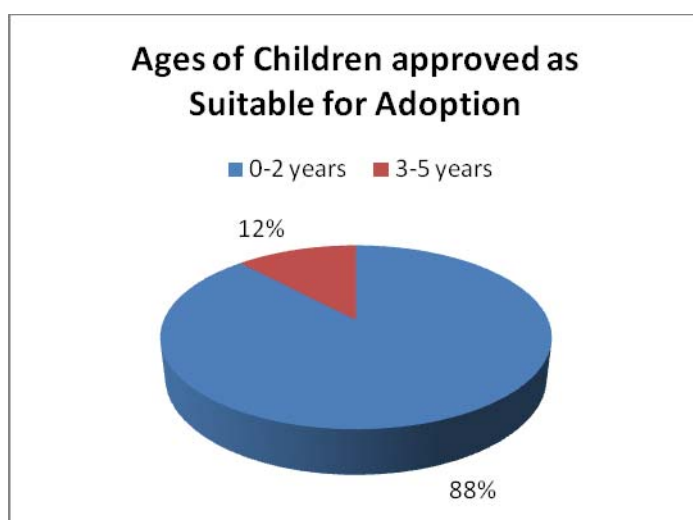
#### **Profile of Children suitable to be placed for Adoption**

During April 2014 to March 2015, a total of 25 children were presented for a decision on their suitability for adoption. This is considerably lower than last year; reasons for the increase last year were greater numbers in Walsall's Looked after Children population and the renewed emphasis as a result of the Family Justice Review to make swift robust decisions for children. A combination of children awaiting a match from 2013/14 and those children having an ADM decision this year has culminated in 38 children being placed of which 11 have been adopted and 27 are progressing towards a final adoption order.

This significant rise in family finding proved challenging, however, the Adoption Improvement Grant has been invaluable in providing additional family finding capacity and has meant that despite the marked increase in numbers, all those matched and placed with adoptive families to date have been achieved in a timely manner.

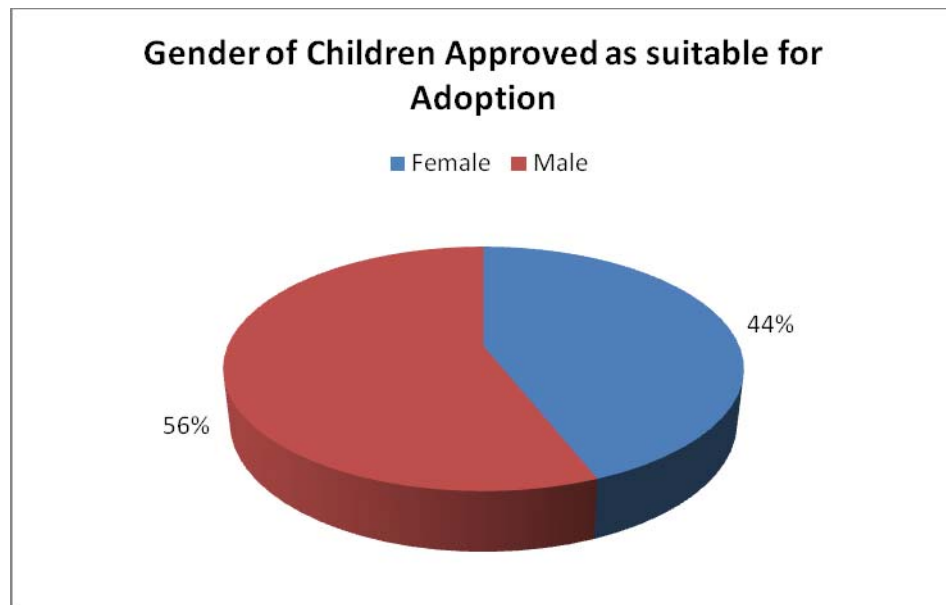
The following sections provide further detail of the profile of these 25 children.

#### **Age**



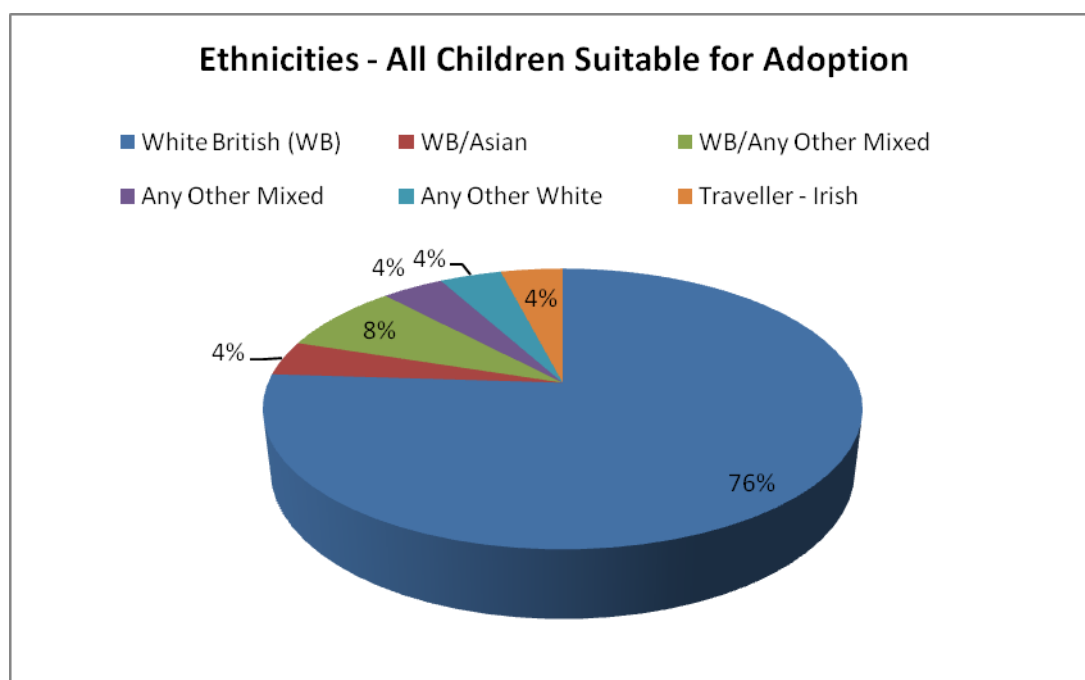
The age profile of children requiring adoption remains similar to previous years with a high percentage under the age of 3 years. Nationally, the average age at which a child becomes legally adopted is 3 years 5 months (BAAF 2015). Walsall's average age at the point of adoption for 2014-15 was 2 years 1 month; this is evidence of Walsall's commitment to ensure adoption is considered at the earliest opportunity if it becomes clear a child is unable to remain with their birth family.

## Gender



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 57% being boys and 43% girls (BAAF 2015). All 25 children presented have been matched and placed with prospective adopters within this period with minimal delays. Adoption in the Black Country Consortium (ABC) has placed boys and siblings groups as a high priority for their marketing campaign.

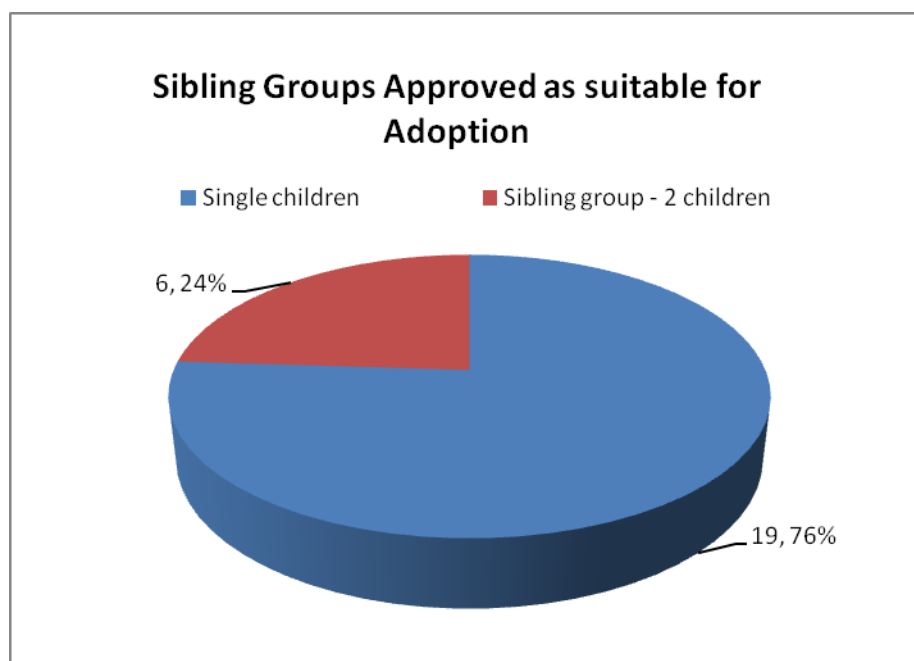
## Ethnicity



Walsall continues to have children presented for an adoption decision from black and minority ethnic groups; however this year there has been a decrease. The majority 76% of children were from a white European origin, which is then also reflective in the number of white European children matched to adopted families, of which 87% were of white European origin.

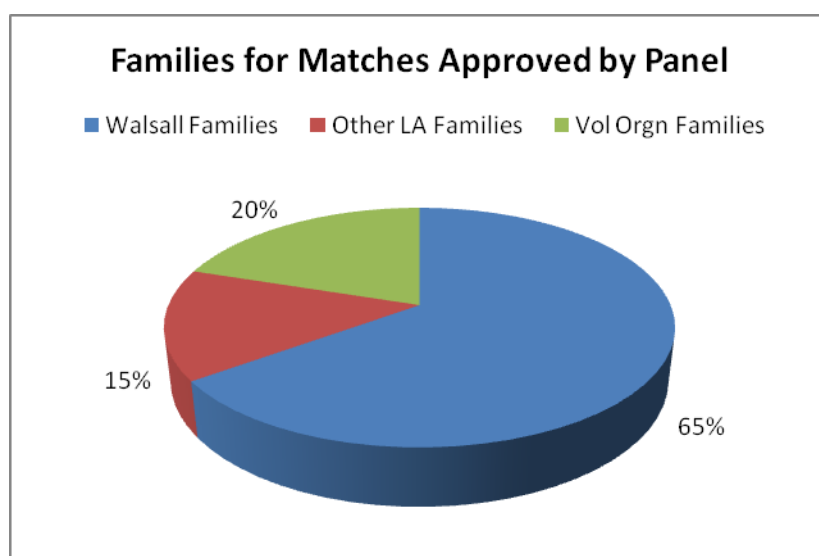
Finding suitable placements for black and ethnic minority children continues to be problematic nationally as there is a shortage of black and minority ethnic adopters. In response to this, the Government has made an amendment to the Children and Families Act 2014 and supplementary Statutory Guidance and has removed the clause requiring us to consider ethnicity as a predominant factor in matching. The intention is that this will open up adoption of black and minority ethnic children to a wider range of approved adoptive families. Whilst this may have an impact for children nationally, for many years the practice in Walsall has been to consider ethnicity as part of a child's holistic needs and because of this children have always been placed in appropriate trans-racial placements. The important factor is careful consideration of the holistic needs of a child. Sometimes an ethnic match is identified as the priority need, if this is the case then every effort is made to find the most appropriate match.

## 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 (19) requiring placements; however, there was a significant decrease in the number of sibling groups compared with last year (3 groups of 2 children). During 2013/14 there were 24 sibling groups of 2 children compared with 3 groups of 2 children for the period 2014/15, and no sibling groups of 3 children reported for the year.

## Children Matched 2014-2015



The Adoption Panel recommended 38 children for a match with an approved adoptive family; this is an increase of 9 from last year. 24 of these were matched with Walsall approved

families; a further 6 were placed with other local authorities and 8 within voluntary adoption placements.

47.5% (19) of the children were matched within 6 months of their adoption decision. For those not matched within 6 months, 43% (9) placed within 12 months, and 57% (12) were over 12 months. The delays are attributable to timing of placement order applications. The cases of 12 children took longer than 12 months. The reasons for delay were

- Family Finding/parents with appropriate matches
- Challenged Placement Orders by birth parents
- Family Finding for siblings with appropriate matches

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 2014-15 is 38, an increase of 12 on the previous year. This is reflective of the number of children presented for adoption decision during 2013-14, which stood at 60. At the time of writing this report in September 2015, there were 29 children already placed for adoption, the majority of who are progressing towards final adoption order.

## **Good Practice Requirements**

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced monitoring functions for adoption panels. During 2014-15, these will be replaced by the new requirements of the Adoption Scorecard.

- Of the 38 children presented for an adoption decision, 88% had their permanence plan considered and ratified at their 4 month statutory review. This is a marginal decrease on last year's figure of 92% but continues to demonstrate Walsall's commitment to securing permanence for children.
- 100% of children were presented for an adoption decision within 2 months of the review which agreed adoption as the care plan.
- 4% of children had their wishes and feelings clearly recorded in their CPR. The reason given for this not happening in the vast majority of cases was that the children were too young to be consulted. Training on the completion of CPR's is now mandatory. There have been improvements in the quality and social workers have provided evidence of their interpretation of children's wishes and feelings through their observational and assessment skills. The reasons for this low number are due to the number of children below the age of 2 years who are unable to voice their wishes and feelings for the Childs Permanency Report.

- 84% of parents had the opportunity to read and comment on the CPR prior to submission for an adoption decision. This is an improvement on last year's figure of 63%. The increase is because of the consistent message that birth parents views must be sought at every opportunity; this is reinforced through mandatory training and also feedback from the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) and Adoption Panel Advisor. The reasons for comments not being received were due to birth parents refusal to engage.

## **Placement Stability/Disruptions**

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 is high in Walsall, with only one pre-adoption order disruption this year. This related to a 7 year old girl who had been in placement only a short time before the adopters made the decision that they were unable to form an enduring relationship with her and asked for her to be moved. Following the disruption, she returned to her previous foster carer, who is currently considering offering permanency via a Special Guardianship Order.

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. Once a possible match has been identified, the sharing of all available information to adopters begins; this includes the CPR, DVDs, photographs, '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**

The need to consult with adopters and adopted children is vital in ensuring effective service delivery. Consultation happens in a number of ways: through feedback about experiences of first point of contact through Adoption in the Black Country, the adoption assessment process, feedback from attendance at adoption panel and through the regular communication between adopters and their social workers.

This year the service undertook two adoption participation events which utilised adopters input to produce the children's 'Welcome Pack'. The Group manager attended the 'Adoption Fun Day' and Adoption events which took place in September and February and was able to converse with adopters about what Walsall does well and what areas we could improve on.

The service has listened to important feedback from adopters, birth parents and children and has made the following changes:

All adopters about to embark on a match for a child are referred to Adoption UK for the 'Buddy Scheme' which facilitates more networking with adopters.

Adopters requested that there was more than one social event a year for Walsall adopters; this has now been extended to two events, one in the summer and one in the New Year.

One area that adopters wanted us to consider was the option to run the letter box scheme via email. Having considered this, the decision was that the service is unable to offer the facility to operate the letter box scheme via email for two main reasons:

- Data protection rules prevent us from sending sensitive and confidential material via email; and
- The importance of having original signed letters and hand written envelopes for adopted children must not be underestimated.

### **Profile of Adopters**

During 2014-15, 17 families were approved as suitable to adopt. This is a decrease of 7 families from the previous year (2013/14 = 24; 2012/13 = 18). The average percentage of approvals range from 53% to 77%. The lower percentage of approvals could become a more permanent feature as Adoption in the Black Country generally use its marketing as a filtering

tool as well as a recruitment tool (for instance constant messages and visuals of adopters aged over 25 on Adoption in the Black Country materials). The coverage/national campaign has also encouraged people to come forward much earlier in the decision making process (able to get through an info event screening but not developed their thinking of adoption in enough detail to progress after an Initial Visit). Also the removal of the barriers to adoption and the promotion of these have had effect. The 'glass barriers' seemed to maintain the quality of adopter.

During 2013-14 ABC undertook some assessments for Walsall as well as our additional capacity from the Adoption Reform Grant. The majority of approved families (17) were white European. Similar to other local authorities, recruitment of black and ethnic minority families remains a high priority. The vast majority of approved adopters have been matched with Walsall children with an adoption plan or are currently being considered as a potential match for a Walsall child. There have been no external matches with children from another local authority.

### **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 2010-2014**

#### **Adoption Scorecard - April 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 to March 31<sup>st</sup> 2015**

The Adoption Scorecard uses performance data to evidence how swiftly Local Authorities implement adoption plans for children. It compares Walsall with neighbouring authorities and the England average.

38 adoption orders were made during this period and data from these cases has been used in the following calculations:

- Number of Adoption Orders made: 38
- Date when first entered the care system: Dates range from 02.11.05 to 04.02.14
- Average time from entering the care system and moving in with adopted family for children who have been adopted in days: This ranged from 60 days to 679 days. The average was 322. Walsall's performance is in reserve of the national trend and takes less time than the national average 426 days.
- Average time between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and the Local authority deciding on a match: This ranged from 2 to 670 days. The average was 201 days. The 3 yearly English average for 2010- 2013 was 163.



- The time from entering the care system to being adopted ranged from 212 days to 1,079 days. The average was 550 days. (No 3 yearly average comparison figures available).
- Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with an adoptive family was 72%.
- The percentage of LAC discharges who were adopted fell towards the England average of 14% from 22% in 2011 to 15% in 2013. The reason for the high figure in 2011 was due to the lower number of overall discharges from care, which then inflated the percentage number of adoption discharges.
- The percentage of LAC discharges due to a special guardianship order remained below the England average of 10% and stands at 8%. There are currently a high number of special guardianship assessments underway; this is likely to increase our performance to be more in line with the England average.
- The 3 year average for adoptions from care is 19% (90 children) which is higher than the equivalent national average of 13%.
- Over the 3 years 2010-13, 25 children from a black and ethnic minority background were adopted (17%) compared with 7% nationally. During 2014-15, 11 of the 38 children adopted, were of black and ethnic minority background
- 6 children aged 5 or over were adopted (7%) compared with 4% nationally 2013/4.
- The average length of care proceedings locally was 54 weeks, compared with a national average of 51 weeks. Recently CAFCASS published a heat map this showed Walsall's average currently stands at 30 weeks for completion of care proceedings. Other Local Authorities in the Black Country had a similar average, Wolverhampton were slightly higher at 34 weeks due to the high number of ongoing proceedings.

## **Changes within Adoption Practice**

### **Key points**

Since the publication of the statutory guidance in July 2013, the Government has taken forward a number of adoption changes through the Children and Families Act 2014. These changes will:

- enable children to move in with their potential adoptive families much earlier (known as Fostering for Adoption);
- remove the barriers to good placements caused by undue emphasis on finding a "perfect" ethnic match;- adoption agencies no longer having to give due consideration to a child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background when matching a child and prospective adopters;
- engage approved prospective adopters more closely in the matching process by opening up the Adoption and Children Act Register to them;

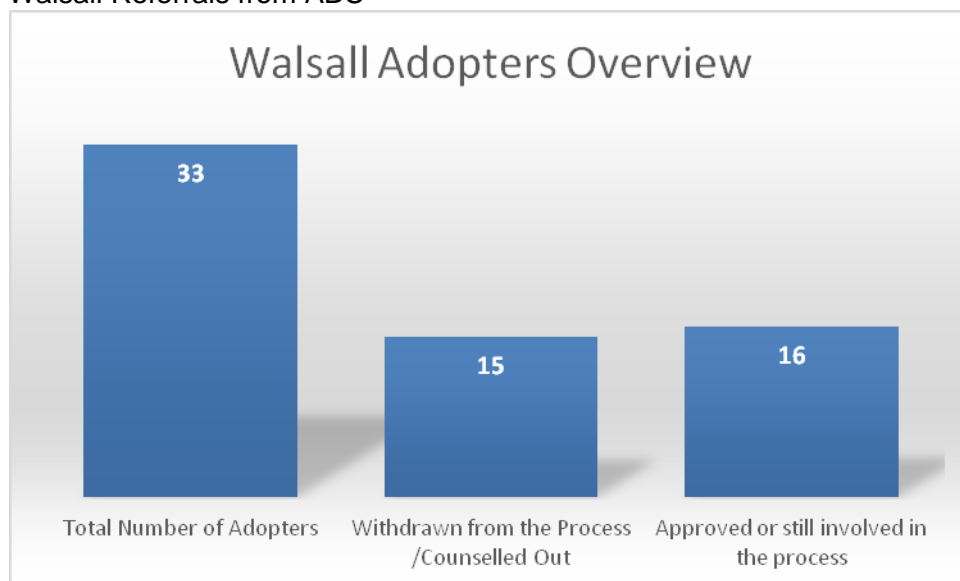
- make changes to post adoption contact; contact orders that either allow or prohibit contact at and after the adoption order stage;
- enable structural reform of the adopter recruitment system so that it becomes more responsive to demand;
- deciding early whether it is in the interests of each child to be placed for adoption with their sibling or separately;
- The National Minimum Standards should reflect the key performance indicators of the Adoption Scorecard.

These changes are now embedded within Walsall procedures and policies.

### **Adoption in the Black Country**

The work of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) continues to be very successful. There has been a 3% growth in referrals from the previous year.

Walsall Referrals from ABC



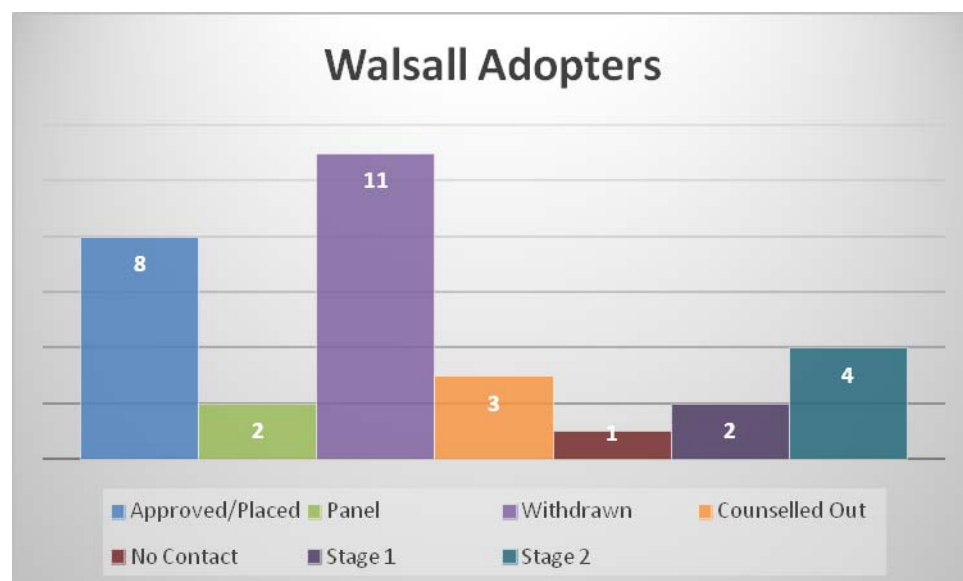
The adoption improvement grant has enabled increased funding to ABC to focus on recruitment. This has led to more information events, and increasing geographic recruitment to include Lichfield, Nuneaton and Worcester. There has been a 15.2% regional increase in referrals from black and ethnic minority applicants double the National average of 9%.

With Adoption Focus joining the consortium this has increased assessment capacity so applicants can be assessed in a more timely way.

### **Walsall conversation rate from ABC**

The number of prospective adopters withdrawing is higher than last year at 48% compared to 23% in 2013/14. The rationale for this is the coverage/national campaign which has

encouraged people to come forward much earlier in the decision making process (able to get through an information event screening but not developed their thinking of adoption in enough detail to progress after an initial visit).



ABC has increased the number of Adoption Information events from 22 to 36 therefore any prospective adopter will only wait a maximum of 10 days between each event. We also provide monthly adoption preparation courses and on-line training materials as part of Stage One training requirements. Early indicators suggest we are progressing 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.

The most recent development has been the joining of Adoption Focus voluntary adoption agency to ABC. This has seen an increase in placements available for harder to place children, these being sibling groups, children from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and those with additional needs.

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.

- Redesign of the ABC website to increase the profile of the need for adopters for harder to place children.
- Increase in our social media presence and dialogue with prospective adopters through the creation of an enhanced Facebook site and Twitter account.
- New information pack for prospective applicants.
- Creation and roll out of a 'text message short cut code' for prospective adopters to obtain more information.
- Increase in outdoor advertising presence, for example, utilising Europe's largest LED motorway digital billboard, mobile trailer bike advertising within hard to reach community groups and 10 targeted media screens around the region.

- Increase in our digital presence, for example, regional radio station website 'home page takeovers'.

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

Panel responsibilities with respect to recommendations for the approval of adopters; matches of adopters and children and relinquished babies of whom there were 1 this year. The panel also deals with rescind reports presented to them. A rescind report is where a care plan has been altered away from adoption or where a match did not proceed and panel are asked to consider the situation and to recommend a way forward.

During this period 12 panel members were on the central list. Dawn Williams took over as Panel Chair with the previous chair, Jan Toplis becoming the Vice Chair. Dawn worked for Wolverhampton Council and chaired the Walsall Adoption Panel under a reciprocal arrangement until July 2014. The post of chair was advertised and in October Lisa Cawthorn was appointed. During the interim period Jan Toplis and Robert Heighway chaired the adoption panels.

Councillor Robert Thomas did not stand for re-election therefore his last panel was May 2014. Councillor Jukes has been identified to sit on panel and this is in progress.

12 panel meetings occurred during this period. All matters were dealt with at panel with no items being deferred. 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 members are asked to fill in feedback forms regarding panel functioning but are not fulfilling the quality assurance role of panel in a formalised manner. This is an area for development in the coming year.

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

Panel members were invited to a training event in May 2014, presented by Nicky Probert from BAAF on 'The Changing face of Adoption including Foster to Adopt'.

A joint training day was held with Fostering and Adoption panel members in 20<sup>th</sup> March 2015 on the role of panel roles and responsibilities presented by Louise Ridgley from BAAF.

### **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 12 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 monthly and additional dates are added if required. In 2014/15 there were a total of 12 panel meetings held, all matters being dealt with at panel and no items being deferred.

Panel members welcome adopters 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.
- The legal advisor is no longer required to attend panel. However, they are available to attend if required. Their role continues in line with the new

arrangements for the consideration of children for adoption. They provide legal advice to the Agency Decision Maker as and when required.

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:

**‘Just a little note to thank you for all the time and effort you put into our home study and then finally getting us approved and matched to C. (Especially the journey you made in the snow!!)’**

**‘Thank you for all your support through this journey and thank you for helping me find my very special daughter’**

**‘We just want to say a really big “thank you” for all your help, support, hard work and encouragement during our adoption journey. We really appreciate all you’ve done for us. We now feel complete with our wonderful little boy J. He’s just amazing! Thank you so much.’**

**‘Well what can we say, this is the beginning of what’s been a very long journey, and you have played a major part in making us extremely happy. We will never be able to thank you enough for all you’ve done and your support through this. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts’**

## **Adoption Support Activity**

### **Contract with After Adoption**

Walsall, in conjunction with other Black Country authorities, has a service level agreement with After Adoption which is based in Birmingham. The provision has remained the same as it was when the service was provided by Adoption Support Birmingham and still represents excellent value for its services. They provide intermediary support, access to birth records, access to adoption records and independent support services to birth parents and birth family members. In October 2014 they launched a new project ‘Breaking the Cycle’ for birth mothers who have lost a child to adoption. This is available for the Black Country agencies to access.

### **Contract with Adoption UK**

The partnership between Adoption UK and Walsall Council is still active and fully operational. The service level agreement is commissioned jointly with the other Black Country authorities and regular liaison meetings take place to review the service provision.

Walsall 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. This 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. As a supportive measure to some adoptive families, we have on occasion agreed to fund a further year's membership to enable continued support to families who we identify would benefit from this.

In order to increase our use of the Buddy scheme, those families, who are about to go through the matching process with a child or children, are encouraged to have a referral made to the Buddy Scheme to ensure they have independent support during the critical stage of introductions.

Adoption UK continues to run monthly support groups at venues in Walsall and Halesowen. Approved adopters from the four Black Country Consortium agencies are invited, as are other approved adopters who subscribe to Adoption UK and may 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 and facilitates the use of outside speakers to advise on specialist areas of adoption.

### **In House Adoption Support Provision**

The adoption support aspect of the service was at Pinfold Health Centre, within the Adoption Team. This changed in February 2015 when the Adoption Team was relocated to Essington Lodge to join Family Placement Services.

The staff composition up until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 was as follows:

- A fulltime Adoption Support Co-ordinator
- A full time Social Worker
- A full time Life Story Worker

The functions of the Adoption Support workers are varied. 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.

There continues to be increased activity in all aspects of adoption support with steady increase of the numbers of adopted families eligible for support and generally adopters being more aware that support is available. This may increase further from the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2015, with the implementation of the much publicised government Adoption Support Fund.

Adopted adults and birth relatives are also more aware that services are available to them.

There continues to be joint working with the three other agencies in the Black Country, particularly around training for adopters on relevant adoption issues such as 'Attachment', 'Explaining Adoption to Children' and 'Education and the Adopted Child'.

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

The Adoption Support side of the service continues to offer an annual review of children's support plans to adoptive families who are eligible. The number of adoptive families eligible for an annual review for 2014-2015 was 100. The number of adoptive parents requesting



additional support for this period was 13, with assessment for therapeutic support and financial support making up the greatest number of requests. In-house therapeutic support is available from the 'Family Care Associates' therapeutic support services should this be required, to support adoptive parents. Adoption support workers have also developed good working relationships with Walsall CAMHS commissioning service, to support families who live outside of the Walsall boundary, in securing funding for relevant therapeutic services which cannot be met by their local CAMHS. There have also been a number of requests for support to adoptive families and their children to provide information about their children's birth history, medical history or information about their birth families. These account for 4 referrals in this period. The work this generates involves the retrieval and research of archived records and possibly communication with birth relatives by phone, letter or face to face.

Training workshops for approved adopters are now well established and Walsall continues joint working with the Black Country agencies to achieve this. Workshops that were offered and taken up by adopters during 2014-2015 covered the following topics:

- Understanding Attachment;
- Parenting using the PACE model;
- Contact and Internet Social Networking
- Explaining Adoption to children.
- Specific training for adopters may also be arranged depending on need.

Walsall and the Black Country partner agencies have commissioned the Safe Base Parenting Programme which is run by After Adoption, which commenced in September 2013. Two programmes run each year, of which Walsall is able to nominate 5 families per year. The feedback from adopters who have attended has been very positive. The Black Country partner agencies are also piloting the ADOPT parenting programme which runs sessions over 16 weeks. There has been improvement on the take up by Walsall adopters in attending this programme.

The Family Connections newsletter continues to be distributed three times per year and is valued by adoptive families. Several 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 its own family events for adoptive families. There was a Family Fun day in September 2014 that took place at a children's activity centre which was hired exclusively for adoptive families. In February 2015 a children's 'New Year Party' was held which included a disco and hired children's entertainers, which was hugely successful. The feedback from both events was very positive.

During 2014-2015 three coffee mornings for adopters were organised and hosted by different adopters. The numbers attending remains low and is an area for future consideration.

Adoption UK continues to offer monthly support groups to adopters across the Black Country with guest speakers for specific topics being invited. These are always well attended by Walsall adopters and the feedback remains positive.

A steady stream of enquiries from adoptive parents, birth parents/relatives, adopted adults and professionals continues to be received by the duty system. There is a daily duty system which allows for these enquiries to be dealt with rapidly. Many of the enquiries generate



pieces of work for the social workers to undertake, all of which are dealt with in timely manner.

Adoption Support social workers continued to attend the Adoption Placement Planning meetings to introduce themselves to adopters at an early stage and to promote the support that may be available for them.

## **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 better tracking and monitoring of the agreements.

The contact agreements of birth relatives, which are the responsibility of the child's social worker, are sometimes delayed in being completed and Adoption Support workers have to complete these. Referrals to facilitate contact agreements grew with the number of children placed for adoption. The numbers of children with contact agreements is 470 which could potentially generate 1870 letter exchanges between adopters and birth relatives each year. The letterbox scheme generates a high volume of work and a wide range of enquiries which need to be addressed and dealt with by workers. This may involve writing reminder letters, finding out information or sharing of information about the change in circumstances of birth families e.g. new siblings being born or sharing of medical information and updating or creating contact agreements.

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. Adoption Support workers supported and facilitated 4 direct contact meetings, which involves staff arranging and supervising the contact.

Social media continues to present some difficulties for adoptive families when unauthorised contact is being made between adopted children and their birth families. Generally it has been adopted children in their teenage years who have initiated this out of curiosity. Adoption support workers have supported adoptive families in these circumstances.

## **Schedule 2 and Section 98**

The service continues to receive referrals from adopted adults, who wish to access their birth/adoption records (Schedule 2). There were 12 referrals received this period with 4 being signposted to their residing authority or After Adoption, if Walsall was not the placing adoption agency.

There were 18 enquiries/referrals from adopted adults who wish to trace their birth relatives or birth relatives wishing to contact or be reunited with adult adoptees (S.98). 13 of these were signposted to After Adoption in line with our service level agreement for intermediary services or were signposted to their residing authority. Some cases are held and worked by Walsall Adoption Support social workers. The reasons for this are either the complexity of presenting issues or risk factors relating to early life experiences, which may have a detrimental effect on the adoptee or members of the birth family. There have been several requests by birth parents to be reunited with adults, who were adopted as children which have not been realised as the adoptees have not wished for this to progress. No vetoes have been received into the adoption agency this past year. A veto is when an adopted

adult can record on their adoption file, which indicates that should an approach be made by a member of the birth family for contact, the adopted adult has no wish or desire for any contact now or in the future. 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. There were 6 such requests this year.

## **Service Development Plan 2015-2016**

There are three significant areas for development during the year. These are the introduction of 'Mosaic', electronic recording system for children, the re-structure of Children's Services and the need for Walsall to continue to be able to respond quickly to any new initiatives introduced by the government as part of Adoption Reform Agenda.

**Mosaic-** the introduction of Mosaic will transform the way adoption and fostering capture the work they undertake with carers and children. Up until now the service has been reliant on paper files. Implementation of this new system will prove challenging for the workforce, some of whom rely heavily on the paper based system and have limited IT skills.

**Re-structure-** Specialist Children's Services re-structure became operational on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015. Considerable work had been undertaken in preparation for this re-structure which has seen the introduction of practice managers, the deletion of one of the fostering teams and the movement of remaining staff across the family placement service. This re-structure will be kept under review to ensure that performance within the adoption service continues to improve.

**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 sustain the improvements made to the adoption scorecard; embed Fostering for Adoption and to continue to consult with adopters and adoptees to influence future service delivery. The senior leadership team have supported the transition of ABC in accommodating its fifth member Adoption Focus in order to support increased placement choice for Walsall children.

## **Conclusions**

The success for the service this year has been the increase in the use of internal provision which means that more Walsall children have been placed with approved Walsall families. We have also seen an increase in the number of children placed for adoption and we have ensured creative use of the Adoption Reform Grant which in turn has enabled us to contribute to growth opportunities of Adoption in the Black Country Consortium.

There have been significant changes to the overall delivery of adoption services and the intense government scrutiny of local authority performance will most likely continue for the foreseeable future, this has meant that the service have had to work hard to implement and sustain improvement. 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.

Linda Franks Professional Panel Advisor  
September 2015