

17 February 2020

Title of the Report: Adoption Annual Report

Executive Summary:

This report presents Corporate Parenting Board with an executive summary of Walsall Adoption Service for 2018/19.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (the Act) is the principal piece of legislation governing adoption in England and Wales. It has been in force since 30 December 2005, and has been amended by other legislation since then. The Act provides the framework for implementing plans for adoption, with much of the detail set out in subsequent regulations and statutory guidance.

The Adoption Service has continued to focus on achieving the best outcomes for children and to prevent delay in achieving permanence for a child with a plan of adoption. The Adoption Service has aimed to make and sustain stable adoption placements and to ensure that the lifelong needs of those affected by adoption are met.

The Annual Report outlines the work of the Adoption Service during 2018/19 and outlines the future challenges and priorities of the service to meet the needs of the increased number of Looked After Children.

During April 2018 to March 2019:

- 25 children were presented for a decision on their suitability for adoption
- 32 children were adopted
- 26 children were placed for adoption
- 18 Placement Orders granted

2018/19 was a pivotal year for the Adoption Service during which culminated in the establishment of regional adoption agency, Adoption@Heart, encompassing Walsall, Wolverhampton, Dudley local authorities and Sandwell Children's Trust on 1st April 2019.

Following legislation arising from Department for Education policy papers on adoption, the Regionalising Adoption paper published in June 2015 set out the Government's expectations for all local authorities to be part of a regional adoption agency and 'Adoption: A vision for change' (April 2016) committed to deliver a radical, whole system redesign by regionalising adoption services by 2020.

Adoption@Heart Regional Adoption Agency builds on the strong foundation of Adoption Black Country recruitment and adopter preparation arrangements and having considered a range of delivery options it was agreed that a hosted service delivery model would provide the cost effective arrangement with Wolverhampton City Council as the host local authority.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board:

This report meets legislative and regulatory requirements on reporting and the full annual report provides information about adoption activity for the period between 01/04/18 and 31/03/19.

Councils have a statutory duty to provide adoption services to all of those affected by adoption living in their area. Services to meet those responsibilities are required to meet legislative requirements and Minimum Standards for Adoption Services and are inspected regularly by Ofsted to ensure they do so.

As part of the Minimum Standards, reports must be presented to the Council every six months, so that Council Members can satisfy themselves that the services provided are effective and achieve good outcomes for children and others affected by adoption.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Board note the duty to ensure that Members are fully aware of the activity of the Council's Adoption Service, and have the opportunity to comment on the outcomes and delivery of the service for the period between 01/04/18 and 31/03/19.

Background papers:

Adoption Statutory Guidance 2013

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoptionstatutory-guidance-2013>

Minimum Standards for Adoption Services 2014

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336069/Adoption_NMS_July_2014_for_publication.pdf

Corporate Parenting Pledges

- We will improve the transition into adulthood so that all young people leaving care are better prepared and supported to live independently.
- We will improve access to education, employment and training and help you with your career plans.
- We will help you to experience stability in your lives, and feel safe and secure, including help to find and keep a stable place to live.
- We will provide improved access to health support, and go to medical appointments with you if you are worried to go alone.
- We will help you learn about budgeting and what bills to pay to help achievement of financial stability.
- We will respect you as individuals, not judge you on the past, and we will believe in your future.
- We will listen to you, hear what you say and spend some time with you away from the office.

Resource and legal considerations:

The resources of the Adoption Service transfer to the Regional Adoption Agency in April 2019.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.
- People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities.

Citizen impact:

The services and the improvements play a key role in the quality of life and outcomes for the children, young people and families of Walsall. The Council and its partners as Corporate Parents make critical contributions to improve outcomes.

Environmental impact:

None.

Performance management:

Reporting on the activity of the adoption service not only meets this statutory requirement but supports elected members fulfil their Corporate Parenting role and in particular, provides the opportunity for challenge and scrutiny in this area of work..

In addition Adoption performance is monitored quarterly by the Directorate Management Team, Quarterly returns are submitted to the Department of Education. Quarterly and annual reports will be provided to the Corporate Parenting Board by Adoption@Heart from April 2019.

The adoption performance of the Local Authority is inspected by Ofsted, during the inspection, the focus is on 'the effectiveness of Local Authority services and arrangements to help and protect children, as well as the experiences and progress of looked after children – including adoption'.

Reducing inequalities:

None

Consultation:

Adopter and children's voices are central to securing permanence for children. Wider service development and design ensures that this is informed by the experiences and voices of children and their families.



Walsall Borough Council Adoption Service Annual Report 2018/19

- 1.0 This report is the Annual Report of Walsall Borough Council's Adoption Service. The report details the activity and performance of Walsall's Adoption Service for 2018/19.

This report fulfils the obligations outlined in legislation by providing evidence and supplementary commentary on the role, function and activity of the Adoption Service and will also include our performance in relation to the Adoption Scorecard.

Council Adoption Service's remit is to recruit and approve prospective adopters, match and place children with approved adoptive families, and to provide adoption support to adopted children, adoptive parents and adopted adults.

It is a legislative requirement that the service provides reports on its activity and performance to Elected Members at least every 6 months.

1.1 Overview of Service Delivery 2018-19:

2018/19 was a pivotal year for the Adoption Service during which culminated in the establishment of regional adoption agency, Adoption@Heart, encompassing Walsall, Wolverhampton, Dudley local authorities and Sandwell Children's Trust on 1st April 2019.

Following legislation arising from four Department for Education policy papers on adoption, the Regionalising Adoption paper published in June 2015 set out the Government's expectations for all local authorities to be part of a regional adoption agency and 'Adoption: A vision for change' (April 2016) committed to deliver a radical, whole system redesign by regionalising adoption services by 2020.

Adoption@Heart Regional Adoption Agency built on the strong foundation of Adoption Black Country recruitment and adopter preparation arrangements and having consider the different service delivery options it was agreed that a hosted service delivery model would provide the cost effective arrangement with Wolverhampton City Council as the host local authority.

1.2 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 (NMS) 2014 and Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014. The NMS are issued by the Secretary of State under sections 23 and 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000 and are issued for use by Ofsted who take them into account in their inspections.

- 1.3 Standard 25.6 states that:

The executive side of the local authority receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months; monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users; satisfies itself that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

1.4 Standard 18.3 states that:

The executive side of the local authority formally approves the statement of purpose and children's guides and reviews them at least annually. 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.

1.5 **Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014 stipulates that:**

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.

Update on the Adoption Reform Agenda:

1.6 With now over a third of Local Authorities involved in the delivery of adoption service through a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), 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 within the terms of the Local Authority being inspected.

1.7 **Adoption Support Fund (ASF):** The ASF has continued with a ceiling level introduced in November 2016 and will continue to March 2018. However, from April 2019 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 The Adoption Support Fund has advised the majority of applications to the fund fall within these limits and these are:

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

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. In July 2019 the Local Authority was advised that funding through the Adoption Support Fund will be available to 2020/21.

From April 2019 all new applications to the Fund will be made by Adoption@Heart, the regional adoption agency. Walsall Children Services will oversee existing applications including remittance of unspent funds and matching funds when required.

- 1.8 **Adoption in the Black Country Consortium:** Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) Consortium is made up of, Sandwell Children's Trust, and Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton local authorities (LA). It also included Adoption Focus, a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) for part of this reporting period, however due to the development of the RAA, Adoption Focus left the consortium arrangement in September 2017.

The original remit of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) was to recruit adopters for the four LA's with specific marketing including targeting adopters for older children, sibling groups and those of black and minority ethnic groups. The enquiries are equally shared throughout the four local authorities.

Joint adoption preparation training takes place throughout the year and enables training to be delivered monthly. Joint family finding meetings take place monthly to explore links between approved adopters and children within the consortium, as a result interagency placement within the ABC consortium have improved.

Post approval training among the consortium offers training to local adopters on an annual basis and covers a wide range of activities (refer to adoption support section). ABC Consortium members have continued to jointly purchase services from Voluntary Adoption Agencies to support in the delivery of adoption services. Adoption UK is an adopter led support service, the contract includes 12 monthly memberships for all approved adopters and access to support groups and After Adoption Charity undertakes birth record counselling.

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

2.1 **Professional Profile of the Adoption Service:**

At the 31st March 2019, the Adoption Service comprised the following;
Group Manager-Strategic Lead for Provider Services: 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 was supported by the Professional Advisor to adoption panel and specialist panel administrators. All posts with the exception of the Group Manager, Panel Advisor and SGO Lead were transferred to Adoption@Heart with staff being subject to TUPE arrangements. These were concluded by 1 April 2019.

2.2 The Adoption and Permanence Team undertook 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 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

2.3 The service also offered 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 involved 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 assisted children in preparation to move on to their adoptive placements and also in the provision of Life Story Work.

2.4 In preparing adoptive families for the realities of parenting, the majority children had the opportunity to attend a 'Child Appreciation Day'; this enabled 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 with only one disruption recorded in the past five years.

2.5 Children and prospective adopters continue to be well prepared for the realities of adoption placements. Direct work has continued to be provided to the children to help prepare them for a move to an adoption placement, whilst practical support was 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.

2.6 Life story work for children with an Adoption plan is undertaken by a dedicated life story worker and also a worker focusing on direct work and transition planning. These workers have ensured 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 was available to support children once they have moved if this was felt to be appropriate. The post also ensure 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.

3.0 **Activity of the Adoption Service**

During April 2018 to March 2019:

- 25 children were presented for a decision on their suitability for adoption
- 32 children were adopted
- 26 children were placed for adoption
- 18 new placement orders granted

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

25 children were presented for a decision on their suitability for adoption and 14 were female and 11 male children. 96% had their permanence plan considered and ratified at their 4 month statutory review and this is an improvement from March 2018 when the performance was 72.9%.

12% of children had their wishes and feelings clearly recorded in their CPR. In the vast majority of reports the reason given for this not happening was that the children were too young to be

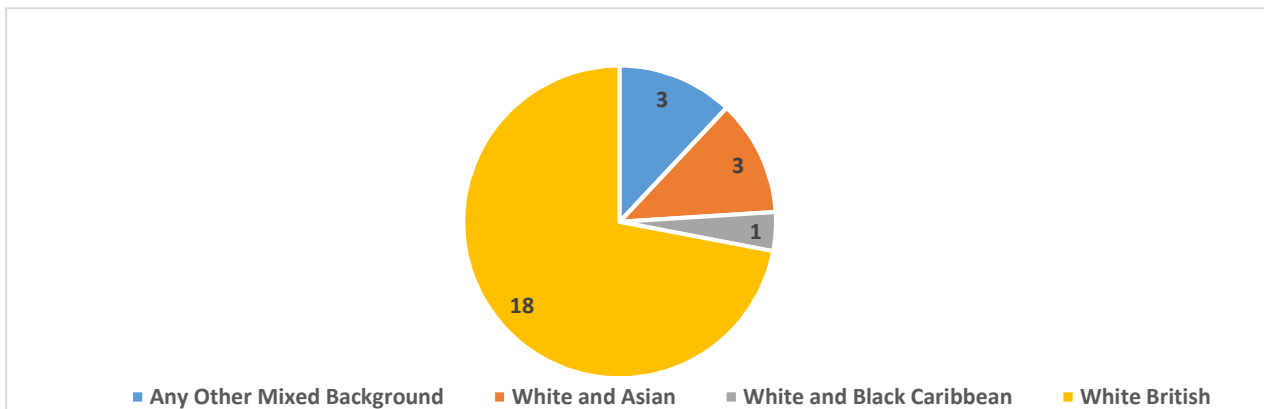
consulted. Although this is a low number, where this occurred it is because the children who are not of an age appropriate level or have speech and language delays and are unable to voice their wishes and feelings. The child's social worker is supported to include observations of the infant's behaviour whilst in care and during observations of during contact for the Child's Permanency Report.

More girls than boys were presented for an adoption decision. Nationally, the gender profile of children in care shows that more boys (56%) than girls (44%) (DFE March 2019) are looked after. The age profile of children requiring adoption remains similar to previous years with a high percentage under the age of 3 years.

Aged 0-2 years 19 children
 Aged 3-5 years 4 children
 Aged 6-7 years 2 children

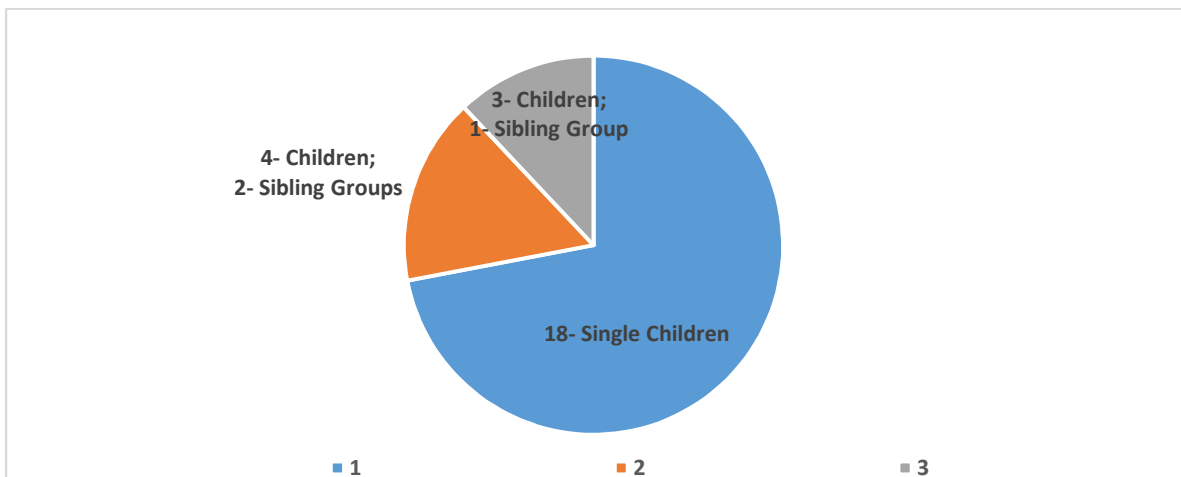
3.2 Ethnicity of children approved as Suitable to Adopt

Walsall continues to have children presented for an adoption decision from black and minority ethnic groups; However, the majority (18) 72% of children were of White British origin.



3.3 Sibling placements

The chart below shows the number of single children compared to those in sibling groups. There were a high number of single children (18) accounting for 72% and a steady flow of sibling groups requiring placements (2 groups of 2 children and a group of 3 children).



3.4 Children Matched for Adoption in 2018/19

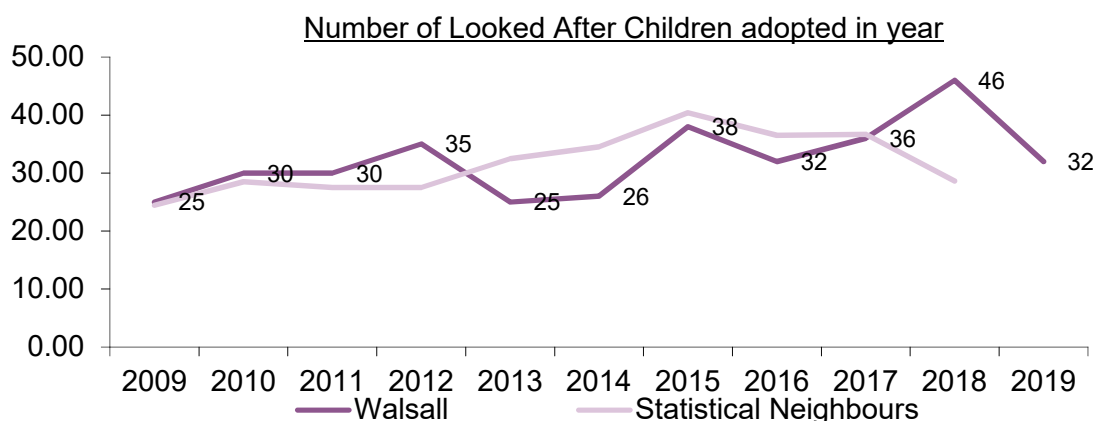
The Adoption Panel recommended 27 children for a match with an approved adoptive family; this is a decrease of 1 from last year. 11 of these were matched with Walsall approved families; a further 9 were placed with other local authorities approved adopters and 7 within voluntary adoption placements.

33% (9) of the children were matched within 6 months of their adoption decision. For those not matched within 6 months, 48% (13) placed within 12 months, and 18% (5) were over 12 months. The delays are attributable to timing of placement order applications.

5 children from four families took longer than 12 months and the reason for this delay was that either family finding did not identify many appropriate matches or birth parents challenged the Placement Orders.

The impact of this delay will adversely affect scorecard data. However, Walsall remains committed to ensuring 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. Walsall will not cease or alter a plan of adoption simply because it improves our apparent performance.

3.5 Children Adopted: The total number of children adopted during 2018/19 is 32, this is lower than the number of children adopted at March 2018 and is reflective of the 33 children presented for adoption decision during 2017/18.

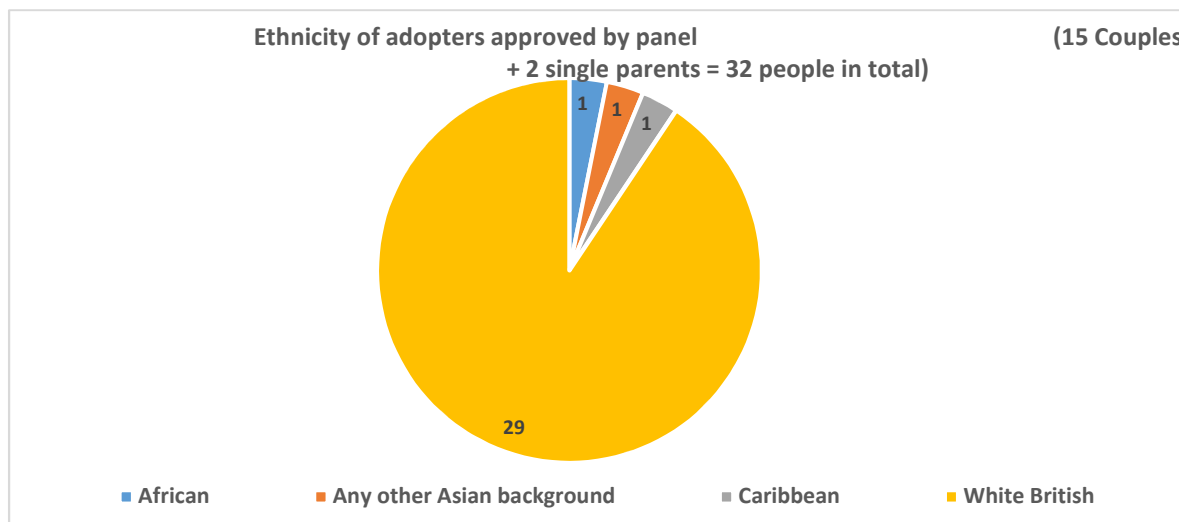


3.6 Adopter Approvals: In 2018-19 there were 17 adopter approvals, 15 couples and 2 single parents. These took 274 days on average from referral to end of assessment to be approved as adopters.

Whilst this is a decrease of adoption approvals since 2017/18, there were 38 adopter applications where assessments were in progress at 31 March 2019, increasing from 21 at March 2018 and 9 at March 2017.

- By June 2019, 9 adopters had children placed including 5 where an adoption order granted.
- At 31 March 2019, 9 approved adoptive families were not yet matched to children and 7 of these have been waiting more than 3 months to be matched since approval.
- 5 families out of 11 (45%) that were matched to children in 2018-19 waited for more than 3 months from approval to being matched.

3.7 **Ethnicity of adopters:** In 2018/19 the majority of adopters 91% approved by Panel were of a white British ethnicity. This has increased from last year's figure of 57%. Both single parent adopters are of BME, whilst the other is part a couple.



3.8 **Placement Stability/Disruptions**

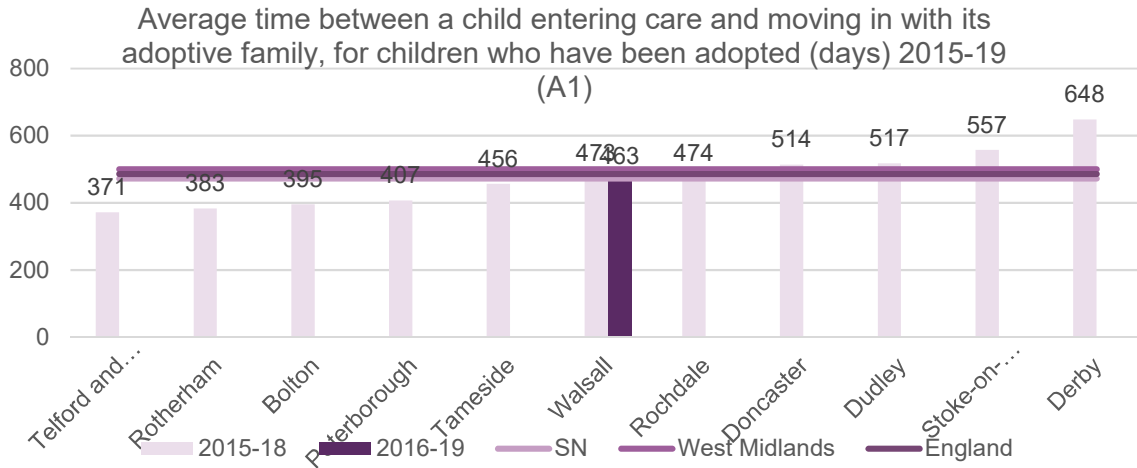
In 2018-19, there was 1 disruption of an adoption placement this was due to breakdown of adoptive placement and as such the child has returned to previous foster carers. Placement stability remains high although there has been one placement disruption. This has been subject to detailed disruption meeting with learning identified for the agency. This learning has been shared with the Regional Adoption Agency. 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.

3.9 **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 and any additional needs are met by the provision of additional services, and are subject to review. Adoption Support Plans are reviewed regularly and if appropriate 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.

4.0 **Adoption Scorecard** : The Adoption Scorecard contains key performance indicators relating to how swiftly local authorities implement adoption plans for children. The government introduced Adoption Scorecards to track local authority performance and to tackle delay in the adoption system. Scorecards are produced for a 3-year rolling average with the latest data being published for the period April 2015 to March 2018. 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.

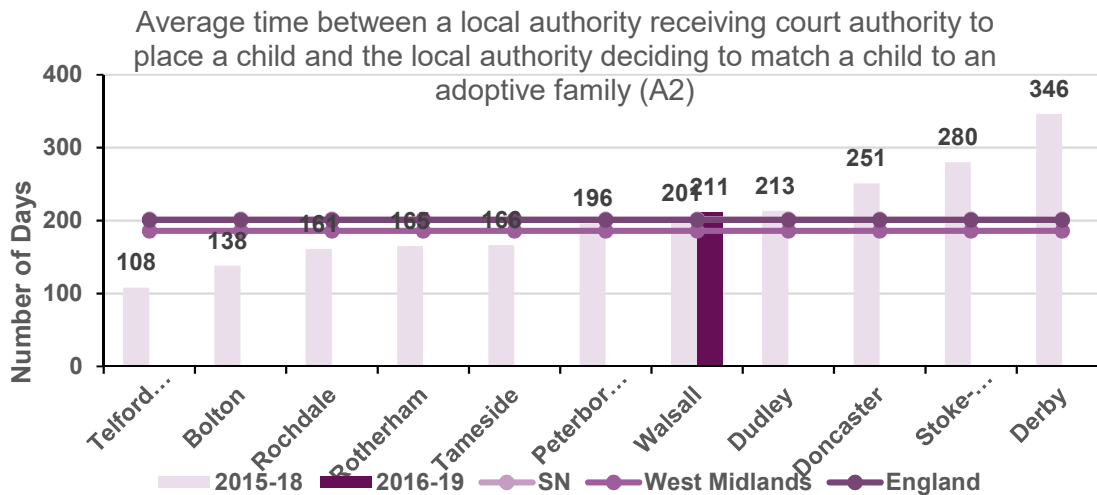
4.1 **A1:** Walsall's average time from a child entering care to moving in with their adoptive family has decreased from 473 days (2015-18) to 463 days (2016-19).

This is better than the 2015-18 West Midlands average (500), the statistical neighbour average (500) and the England average (486). At 463 this is 47 days above the DfE target of 426. A low number represents good performance.



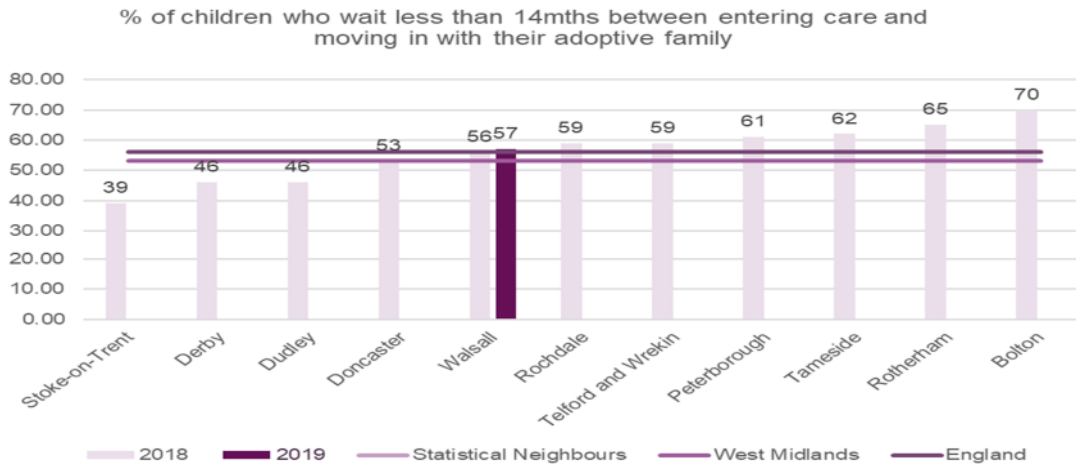
4.2 **A2:** The average time between receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to a family increased from 201 days (2015-18) to 211 days (2016-19),

This is higher than the national target of 121 days as well as the comparator averages from 2018, Statistical Neighbours (202), England (201) and West Midlands (186)



4.3 **A3:** Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with an adoptive family. Walsall's average for 2016-19 is 57% in relation to this indicator, remaining static at 56% (2015-18).

This is slightly higher than the England average of 56% and Statistical Neighbour and West Midlands Average of 53%

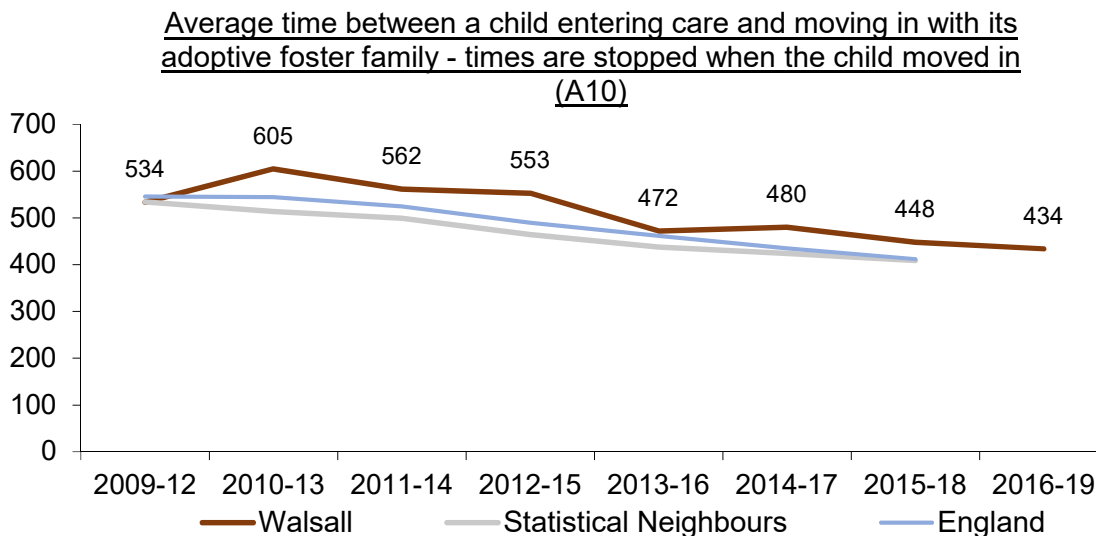


5.4% of children leaving care (Over-5 years of age) were adopted (2016-19). Decreasing from 6.6% (2015-18).

4.3% (24) of children looked after were waiting to be placed for adoption. Decreasing from 5.5% on 31st March 2018.

4.4 **A10:** Walsall's average time from a child entering care to moving in with their adoptive family has reduced to 434 days over 2016-19, compared with 448 days 2015/18 and 480 days 2014/17.

The current performance at 434 days is slightly higher than the 2015-18 average for Statistical Neighbours and England which is 431 days.



- 20.9% children who left care were adopted and remains the same at 2017/18, 21.1%
- 19 children who had their permanence decision changed away from adoption during 2016-2019, this is higher than 2015-2018 figures of 15. 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.
- Over 2016/19, 20.1% (35) children from a Black or Ethnic Minority background were adopted and this higher than previous years from 17.0% (2015-18) and 13.9% (2014-17). being adopted , this is higher than was higher than the three year England average of 7%.
- 5.4% of children aged 5 years and over from the point of being adopted (2016/19) decreasing from 6.6% (2015/18)

5.0 **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 20 panel members were on the central list. Lisa Cawthorn is the Panel Chair and was appointed in October 2014. 27 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 Specialist Administrators.

All Panel members and chair were invited to become members of the Adoption@Heart Panel. This panel will recommend approval of all adopters and matches to Walsall children. It will meet weekly with one Panel held in Walsall on a monthly basis.

5.1 **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.
- Future working arrangement with the Regional Adoption Agency will be subject to further consultations.

6.0 **Conclusion**

The transition to Adoption@Heart has been the major focus for the Adoption Service in 2018/19 and as included preparation for the changes for Safeguarding and Family Support service that will come with the regional approach to adoption.

This includes how Adoption @ Heart will be notified of children with a likely plan of adoption to improve timeliness of children matched to a prospective adopters, to time taken to move in with proactive adopter and finally the time taken to secure an adoption order. Effective partnership, relationships and communication between Walsall and the Adoption at Heart have continued to build and embed.