



Walsall Council

**Adoption Service - Six Monthly Report  
1 April to 30 September 2019**

## 1. Introduction and Purpose of the Report:

This report fulfils the obligations in Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002 to report to the “executive side” of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in the report below.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 30 September 2019.

Adoption@Heart is a Regional Adoption Agency providing adoption services on behalf of Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton Councils. The service is hosted by Wolverhampton and went live on 1 April 2019. Following a directive from the Department for Education 2015 all local authorities in England are required to enter into regional arrangements by 2020.

## 2. Number, type and age of children waiting for adoption and length of time waiting:

As at 30 September 2019 there were 22 children subject to placement orders but not yet placed for adoption. The breakdown of timescales for these children is below:

Less than 3 months	8
Between 3 and 6 months	6
Between 6 and 12 months	8
Between 12 and 24 months	0
Children waiting over 2 years.	0

### Summary / Analysis Regarding Children Waiting:

Of the 22 children waiting with Placement Orders for adoptive placements, 16 are in the process of being linked, matched and placed by Adoption@Heart with adoptive parents. 3 of these are in the process of being adopted by their foster carers.

The remaining 6 children who are still subject to active family finding, all have a characteristics that would categorise them as “harder to place” and continued efforts will be made via the inter-agency system to identify adoptive parents along with care planning reviews within the local authority.

### 2.1 Children Made Subject to Placement Orders:

April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Total
1	2	4	2	1	3	13

During the 3 previous years, the number of Placement Orders granted were as follows:

Financial Year:	16/17	17/18	18/19
	30	28	18

The number of Placement Orders granted in the 6 months, suggests there will be a significant increase in comparison to the previous year and similar performance to the two previous years.

## 2.2 Children Subject to “Should be Placed for Adoption”(SHOBPA) decisions:

As at 30 September 2019, there are 8 children with the decision to be placed for adoption (SHOBPA), but not yet subject to a placement order.

## 2.3 Number of Children who had a SHOBPA during the period:

April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Total
0	4	1	4	3	5	17

Financial Year:	16/17	17/18	18/19
	34	37	25

The numbers of children with a SHOBPA decision in the year to date is slightly above the previous year’s performance and consistent with the 2 previous Years.

## 2.4 The Numbers of Children who had a Change of Plan in the Period:

5 children were subject to a change of plan away from adoption during the 6-month period.

## 2.5 Number of Children Placed for Adoption during the period:

April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Total
1	0	0		0	1	2

The number of children placed for adoption in the 3 previous years is as below:

Financial Year:	16/17	17/18	18/19
	43	29	26

Whilst the numbers of children being placed for adoption has reduced over the 3-year period, the numbers of children placed during the 6-month period has reduced significantly in comparison to the previous 3 years. Difficulties in accessing information and family finding capacity, have been significant factors impacting on the first 6 months performance. The projected number of children that the service expects to place before year end is 13 (*Based on children already matched and placed or matched and due to be placed prior to 31 March 2020, as at December 2019*).

It is evident from the analysis of children waiting, that the majority are in the process of being placed and therefore the year end performance will be significantly improved, although the

number of children placed in year, will be half of the number for the previous year. The numbers of children placed over the last 3 years has consistently reduced.

The transition process to the Regional Adoption Agency will be a factor impacting on family finding performance in this period, as outlined in section 4.2 (Family Finding). The improved projected performance to year end reflects the progress of the service in resolving transitional arrangements in accessing information about children (without access to their files) and embedding the regional family finding approach.

**3. Number of Children Adopted:**

The number of children placed with adoptive parents and subsequently legally adopted by them in the year to date is 7.

Number of children adopted in the 3 previous years is below:

Financial Year:	16/17	17/18	18/19
Walsall	36	46	32

The number of children adopted has reduced significantly in comparison to the 3 previous years. Due to the time delay in a child being placed and adopted this does not at this stage relate to Adoption@Heart practice. The national context to this is that the numbers of children leaving care via adoption has reduced continuously since 2017.

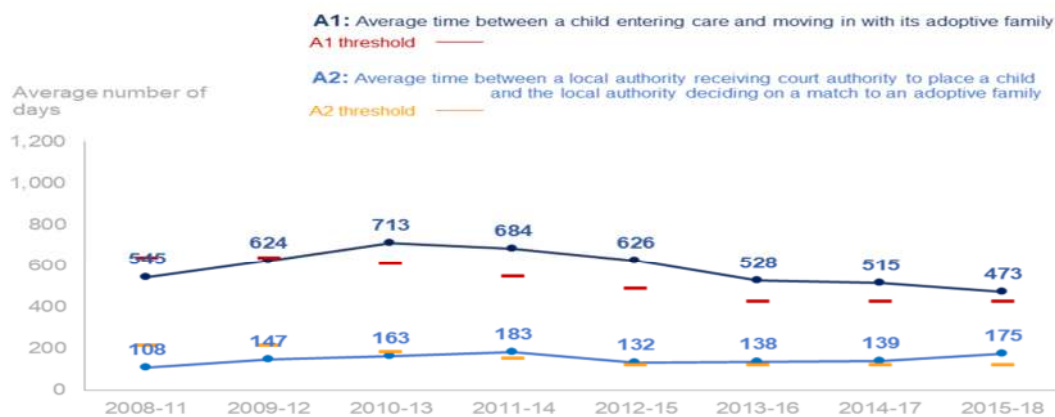
**Adoption Scorecard Performance:**

In 2014, as part of its' Adoption Reform Agenda, 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. Walsall performance is detailed below. Data for April 2018-March 2019 is expected to be published in Spring 2020.

The indicators are:

**A1** – number of days between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. The current threshold is 426 days.

**A2** – the number of days between receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and the Agency decision about a match to an adoptive family. The current threshold is 121 days.



This shows that although the length of time between a child entering care and moving into the adoptive family (A1) has decreased for the last three years. At 473 this is 47 days above the target. A low number represents good performance. With regard to the A2, this has continued to rise for the last 4 years. At 175 this is 54 days above the target.

The chart above shows that Walsall Council is one of the better performing authorities against the A1 measure (low is good) with the England average being 486 days.

With regard to the A2 measure, whilst Walsall Council is above the target of 121 days, this performance is significantly better than the England average of 201 days.

For the 7 children adopted in the 6 months to date, the Scorecard performance is as below.

A1 - 792 days average (Threshold 426)

A2 – 257 days average (Threshold 121).

As these children were placed prior to the Adoption@Heart service becoming operational, the narrative for these children is not included in this report. 1 or more of these children where the adoption order has taken longer than the 6 month average, this has led both indicators to be significantly above both thresholds.

### 3.1 Early Permanency:

There were 2 children placed in early permanence placements during this 6-month period and this was under Foster for Adoption Regulations.

1 child was placed before 1 April 2019 and subject to an application to court for an adoption order.

1 child was placed in a Foster to Adopt Placement by Adoption@Heart, subsequent to 1 April 2019.

#### **4. Recruitment of Adopters:**

##### **4.1 Introduction / Background:**

The Adoption@Heart service went live as a Regional Adoption Agency on 1 April 2019. At that point adopters who were already in the process with either Dudley, Sandwell or Walsall, transferred across to the new service located in Wolverhampton. The combined pool of adopters from the 4 local authorities therefore became the available “in house” resource for children within the group from that date. This included adopters in the assessment process, as well as those approved and waiting to be matched with a child.

Prior to the service going live during 2018/19 the marketing was undertaken collaboratively on behalf of the 4 services under the Adoption@Heart brand. Prior to this there was a strong history of collaboration under the Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) brand, involving the same 4 local authority partners.

Following the DfE decision to regionalise adoption services nationally in 2015, a decision was made to integrate the adoption services fully for Sandwell, Dudley, Wolverhampton and Walsall Councils. This went live in April 2019.

##### **4.2 New Enquiries:**

The service started taking new enquiries as a regional agency from 1 April 2019.

From April to September 2019, 160 enquiries via a web-based contact form have been received, 72 of these resulted in an initial home visit.

##### **4.3 Information Events:**

Information events provide an opportunity to find out more about Adoption@Heart, children in need of adoption and the adoption process, as well as having questions and concerns answered.

Changes have been made to the style of the events since the service went live, by improving the presentation and delivery to ensure a clear message is shared with prospective adopters. The presentation has been rebranded and redesigned in line with the Adoption@Heart brand. Feedback from attendees has been positive, with many saying all the information they needed was delivered via the presentation.

New marketing material has been created including a presentation, sidewinders, leaflets and adoption jargon buster. The new material has helped with brand awareness and consistency. The events take place every two weeks across the region. 53 individuals attended the events in the 4 months, June to September 2019. The key venues have been Walsall Leather Museum, The Lighthouse Media Centre in Wolverhampton and Priory Green in Wolverhampton.

For the next phase of development, it is intended that we will further extend our catchment area and encourage people from outside Wolverhampton, Walsall, Sandwell and Dudley to attend the events. This will enable the service to reach people outside of the region, who may be interested in adopting.

**4.4 Initial visits:**

Social workers have carried out 72 initial home visits to people who had made enquiries to adopt in the 6-month period. Following the visits, a management decision is made about inviting the applicant forward to register their interest to commence stage 1 of the assessment and preparation process.

**4.5 Registrations of Interest:**

There have been 43 adopter Registrations of Interest received in this 6-month period. Following Registration of Interest, checks and references are completed within stage 1 and applicants are invited to attend the 3-day adoption preparation training which takes place monthly at venues across the region.

**4.6 Current position:**

At the end of the period (30<sup>th</sup> September 2019), there were 34 families in Stage One or in a break between stage 1 and 2 and 19 in Stage Two.

These are made up of a mixture of adopters who transferred to the service at 1 April 2019 and new Registrations of Interest since the service went live.

**4.7 Adopters Approved:**

There have been 20 adopters approved in this period. Given this is the first 6 months of the service being operational, there is no previous period to make a comparison with. The majority of adopters approved by the service to date are those who transferred across from the local authority services at 1 April 2019. The 4 adoption services for Walsall, Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley approved 73 adopters combined in the year 2018/19 and 49 in the year 2017/18.

Based on numbers of adopters in stage 1 and 2 of the assessment process at 30 September 2019, the projected number of approvals in the pipeline is likely to be between 60 and 70. It is difficult to say how many of these will be approved before 31 March, as not all will be completed in timescales.

The performance of the service in the first year has been significantly affected by the low numbers of transferring adopters in the assessment process as at 1.4.19, as well as the impact on performance of the significant transitional issues that were experienced during April, May and June.

Approved March to September 2019	Stage 1	Stage 2	Projected Number Approved in Year 1
20	34	19	Between 50 and 60

**4.8 Adopters Required (Analysis):**

Prior to the service going live, a target was set for the number of adopter approvals in year 1 at 120 (105 for A@H children plus 15 for income generation). This projection was based on the expected numbers of children that each local authority would need to place with adopters

recruited by the service (105) and some additional adopters who would have children placed by other local authorities to generate income (15). In view of the number of transferring adopters and performance of the service in the previous two years, further consideration has been given to the projected numbers of adopter approvals for years 1 and 2 and the Service Head is working closely with the Management Board in communicating clear expectations about the likely performance regarding adopter recruitment. Given this is lower than projected, more children have been placed on an inter-agency basis, than expected in the first 6 months.

#### 4.9 Step Parent adoptions:

It was agreed that the service would undertake 4 Step Parent Adoption cases for each local authority each year. This will be considerably below the demand for each local authority. Work has been undertaken to embed consistent practice in screening enquiries in the local authorities and Adoption@Heart staff offer consultation on all enquiries received. To date the numbers referred to the service are in the table below.

Walsall	2
Sandwell	0
Dudley	1
Wolverhampton	0

#### 5. Marketing Report:

Marketing figures for this period are:

- 98 enquiries received between 31 May – 30 September.
- 53 information events attended since 31 May (70 approx. since 1 April)
- 321 Twitter followers (+49 from 1 April – 26 November)
  - Average reach per day – 4,016
  - Average impressions per day – 90,915
- 2,048 Facebook likes (+120 from 1 April – 26 November)
  - Average reach per day – 1,557
  - Average impressions per day – 383,927
- Website statistics for the period April 2019 to September 2019 (new website launched in November 2019)
  - Unique visits – 5,623 (31 daily)
  - Page views – 21,384

#### Marketing Activity:

Marketing activity for the last 6 months has mainly focused on the Adoption@Heart brand, ensuring that all materials distributed have a consistent look and feel. This has been achieved through the creation of the Adoption@Heart brand guidelines. Work has been scheduled with the design team at City of Wolverhampton Council, to rebrand all our materials which should be completed early 2020.

A marketing 'tracker' has been established to monitor the number of enquiries received, how far along the process adopters get and where the drop off point is. The new tracker will be



used to closely track progress against how many enquiries are needed each year to reach our approved adopter target.

Changes have been made to information events, improving the presentation and delivery to ensure the right information is shared with prospective adopters. Feedback from attendees has been extremely positive.

A new website was launched in November, offering a much better user experience, whilst providing valuable information to those who are considering adoption. Within the first week of launching, the site had 348 (50 daily) unique visitors compared to 178 (25 daily) for the last week of the old site. The new site includes information on the adoption process, criteria to adopt, the different types of adoption and support available, as well as latest news and adoption events.

An internal newsletter has been created with the first edition sent out in October. The newsletter will update management board, Adoption@Heart employees and employees across the four LA's and Trust, on Adoption@Heart.

Leading with a digital by design approach, a big emphasis has been placed on the social media channels (Facebook and Twitter) to ensure we are putting out, not only relevant, but creative and consistent content. The service is reaching on average 1,557 people via Facebook and 4,016 via Twitter.

#### **Department of Education (DfE) campaign:**

Over the summer, the DfE awarded each RAA £25,000 to help with their adopter recruitment strategy. RAA leaders met and decided it would be better to pool all the money together (650k) and create a national campaign, particularly focusing on finding adoptive families for harder to place children and recruiting BAME adopters.

A National Adopter Recruitment steering group has been set up with representatives from across the UK, to help adoption agencies with recruitment campaigns, locally, regionally and nationally, to increase the number of relevant enquiries received.

The selected approach for the campaign is being developed for a national launch 2020, with three subsequent bursts of activity, with a campaign toolkit and channel recommendations to support local areas. The marketing campaign will launch in February 2020 with 3 subsequent bursts of activity (LGBTQ+ week in March, mothering Sunday, Easter). All marketing to be completed by the end of May 2020.

#### **Planned Adoption@Heart activity for 2019/20 and into the next year:**

- Meeting planned with communication leads from each of the four LA's and Trust to help plan the recruitment and marketing strategy for Adoption@Heart and tap into their knowledge and expertise of their areas. The plan going forward is to meet with the group once a quarter.
- A meeting has been set up with Adoption Counts in Manchester for December as they have successfully run a bespoke family finding campaign via social media, which is something we are looking to emulate.
- Joint work is planned with the 4 other Midlands based RAA's regarding opportunities for joint marketing activity and sharing of practice. The aim of this is for the Midlands 5 RAA's to share share best practice and work together in placing children in the region

going forward. The plan going forward is to bring together marketing officers across the region to establish a Midland steering group.

- Establish a successful Google AdWords campaign to increase traffic to the new website and generate adopter enquiries.
- Promotional video for Adoption@Heart to be shared across our channels. Adopters to share their experiences on camera, why they chose adoption and why they would encourage others to adopt through Adoption@Heart. Following on from this, we will establish a list of 'adopter champions', those adopters and adoptees we can call upon to help with marketing recruitment activity.
- Bespoke social media campaign profiling particular children who are taking longer to be placed for adoption to generate child specific enquiries.
- Week-long campaign, planned for March, to highlight LGBT Fostering and Adoption Week.
- Month long campaign, planned for April 2020, to celebrate Adoption@Heart's year anniversary.
- A reference group from within the staff team to be established to consult on marketing activity going forward, share ideas and best practice. One member from each team at Adoption@Heart to be involved.
- Google Adwords Campaign to raise the profile of the Adoption@Heart brand.

## **6. Requirements on the Preparation of Adoption Report Regulations:**

### **6.1 Complaints:**

There have been 17 informal complaints during the 6-month period. These related to a range of issues relating mainly to the transition between the local authorities and the new service.

Many of these were caused by delays in accessing information about adoptive parents who were in the process of either assessment or being matched with a child at the time the service went live, but where their case was not allocated to a social worker who transferred into the service, the information was not immediately accessible. Delays in progressing adoption support requests and Adoption Support Fund applications were also included along with delay in progressing agency decision following panel, due to reduced panel administration resources when the service went live.

Managers have resolved these in discussion with adopters and avoided escalation to the formal process. As the impact of the transition has reduced, the volume of these issues arising has also reduced.

**6.2 Staffing:**

There are 61 staff in the service and the staffing in each team is as per below:

<b>Adoption Support:</b>	<b>Adopter Recruitment:</b>	<b>Family Finding:</b>	<b>Business Support:</b>	<b>Panel:</b>
1 Manager 1 Senior Social Worker 9 Social Workers 1 Adoption Support Worker 3 Family Support workers 4 x Agency: (3 x SW & 1 x FSW)	1 Marketing Executive 1 Manager 1 Senior Social worker 11 Social Workers	1 Manager 1 Senior Social Worker 7 Social Workers 5 Family Support Workers 1 x Agency SW 1 x Student SW	1 Manager 5 Business Support Officers	2 Panel advisors (1 is Agency) 2 Panel Administrators (1 is Agency) 1 Panel Coordinator
<b>Total: 19</b>	<b>Total: 14</b>	<b>Total: 16</b>	<b>Total: 6</b>	<b>Total: 5</b>
1 Head of Service				
<b>Total: 61</b>				

Staff in the service have continued to settle, following the initial period of transition. The service is now in a position where staff are allocated the work relevant to their team's remit, rather than the mixed caseload, that was the case when the service went live. This has assisted progress towards establishing staff in new roles and creating a greater sense of team identity.

The summer period has been challenging, due to many staff transferring significant amounts of annual leave at the point of TUPE and pre-booked leave being honoured. This has created significant delay and additional pressure on managers in progressing work in all three service areas, while allocated staff are not at work.

Despite considerable challenges during the process of transition, vacancy levels are very low and no staff have resigned from the service.

An all staff service event took place in June with another one took place in October. The focus of these events is on "whole service" team building, partnership and developing and embedding a clear vision and culture relating to the way the service will work with children and adoptive parents.

**Business support:**

The business support team is fully staffed, following a high vacancy rate in April. The Business Support Manager started in May and under her management this area is becoming a very

established team with each team member having clear designated areas of responsibility and agreed processes are in place for most areas of work. There have been challenges for the team regarding ICT and in supporting the process of embedding adopter and children's tracking, but good progress is now being made in these areas. Ongoing issues in developing Eclipse have also had an impact.

### **Vacancy Recruitment & new starters:**

The vacancy position remains positive, as no staff have resigned since the TUPE exercise. New staff recruited to the social work vacancies via interview in July started during October and November. Interviews are planned to take place in October for the 1 social worker in adoption support and 0.5 in family finding. A social worker from within the service was appointed to the permanent senior social worker role in Adoption Support and it is hoped that her substantive social worker role will be filled from the interviews in October. The vacant panel administration and panel advisor roles remain vacant and are subject to a recruitment process.

### **6.3 Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM):**

There have been no referrals to the IRM in this period.

## **7. Development of Adoption@Heart:**

### **7.1 Practice:**

#### **Practice development work:**

In addition to the policy development work that took place during the project phase, there is a significant need to complete detailed practice guidance, which will provide a clear understanding of the expected and agreed practice within the service for the staff in Adoption@Heart, as well as across the partnership, within the local authorities.

A detailed family finding practice guidance document has been developed with the staff in that service area, following a series of development sessions. This has been shared with the management board and family finders are working to the process within this. A panel policy has also been developed by the panel advisors, in discussion with the 3 panel chairs.

Clear processes have been agreed for pre-stage 1 and stage 1 of the adopter recruitment process, with a view to ensuring that enquiries are effectively screened and robust management decision making is in place regarding decisions to progress adopters into stage 2 of the process.

Baseline policy guidance is in place for the Adoption Support service area and there is a need for further work regarding the range of activities and services that are to be developed, within a comprehensive regional offer for adopters accessing this service.

Further work is needed with regard to Early Permanence, with a view to ensuring that a clear agreed understanding of Foster for Adopt procedures and regulations is in place across the partnership.

Agreement has been reached with the management board for an additional interim role to be created to lead on practice development for 12 months. An initial attempt to recruit to this role has been unsuccessful, but continued efforts are being made to add this resource to the

management team with a view to progressing this in years 1 and 2 of the service being operational.

## 7.2 Family Finding Activity:

The numbers of the children that the service was expected to place in year 1 was 150. The numbers expected over the first 3 years are outlined in the table below.

Placements required	2019/20		2020/21		2021/22	
	(Year 1)		(Year 2)		(Year 3 onwards)	
Total children to be placed for adoption	150		155		160	
Placed by RAA	105	70%	116	75%	128	80%
Placements provided by another agency*	45	30%	39	25%	32	20%
Placements found by RAA for other children (income)	15		15		16	
<b>Total placements to be 'made' by Adoption@Heart:</b>	<b>120</b>		<b>131</b>		<b>144</b>	

### Summary of progress:

The process of transition had a major impact on performance during April and May 2019, due to difficulties accessing information and the service not having access to ICT systems in Dudley, Sandwell or Walsall. Despite this, considerable progress has been made and there has been a small, but steady, overall increase in children notified for Family Finding over the first 6 months.

The demand for family finding, in particular regarding children in proceedings, has been higher than expected, with all 4 local authorities / Trust showing increases. This is highly significant given the activity rate and amount of time spent for the family finders, input increases significantly from the point of issue / LAC compared with pre-proceedings.

The number of children with an adoption decision (SHOBPA) or Placement Order has been greater than expected, therefore the staffing capacity within the service has been insufficient to meet this demand.

The table below contains the numbers of children waiting with a plan of adoption in each LA / Trust as at 30 September 2019. This data provides an indicator of the family finding demand from each LA / Trust and how this differs from the expected demand, prior to the service going live.

LA / Trust	Number of Placements Required for Year 1	Children Matched by A@H April to Sept	Children on SHOBPA	Children on Placement Order	Total children waiting
Sandwell	34	25	28	33	61
Dudley	40	9	9	17	26
Walsall	35	4	20	22	42
Wolverhampton	40	10	17	31	48
Totals	149	48	74	103	177

47 children were placed by A@H in the first 6 months. The split by LA / Trust is below:

Dudley	Sandwell	Walsall	Wolverhampton
9	24	2	12

The number of children placed for Walsall and Dudley are lower than expected, with those for Sandwell being significantly higher. The allocation of family finding resources to the children waiting the longest is a factor in this position. It is expected that the numbers placed over the remainder of the year will see an increase for Walsall and Dudley.

Of these 47 children, 32 were placed inter-agency and 15 in house. Inter-agency usage is therefore significantly above the target for year one (68 percent against target of 30 percent) and given the pool of available “in house” adopters remains small it is expected that this will remain high during the remainder of the year.

As the marketing activity progresses there is every expectation that the “in house” pool of adopters will increase. The expected inter-agency usage for year 2 has been revised to 40 percent with a view to placing 60 percent of children with an Adoption@Heart adopters.

Given staff have previously been working in 4 different services, there are inevitable differences in practice and the procedural approach to family finding. As an RAA there is a need to define the service approach clearly in order to ensure effective tracking, early profiling and matching takes place. Considerable work has therefore already been undertaken in developing clear practice guidance for family finders, building on the policy development work that took place in the project phase. This is now completed in draft and has been shared with the management board and key staff in the local authorities.

Practice workshops are taking place in each local authority / trust during quarters 2 and 3 with a view to improving understanding of the model and developing and embedding a clearer sense of partnership.

### **Child Notifications:**

A system was developed in early April, whereby managers from the service attend key meetings in each LA with a view to being notified of children potentially in need of family finding. This is viewed as preferable to a referral process as it ensures A@H are including in planning and discussions about children.

By July 2019 it was understood that the service did not have staffing capacity to maintain this approach based on the numbers of children in the system and in need of an allocated family finder. A decision was therefore made after discussion with both boards to implement a notification system whereby a family finder is allocated at a later stage when it is known that the child has a “single track” plan of adoption.

This process was put in place in July 2019 to ensure that family finder time was focused on the children most likely to need an adoptive placement, however it is not considered best practice and is only in place while further analysis of the likely long-term demand and subsequent staffing needs is undertaken. Board agreement was given to recruit an additional 2 family finding social workers to the team for a 12-month period while this work takes place. The interim family finding process is likely to remain in place for the remainder of the year 2019/20.

### **7.3 Information Technology:**

#### **Eclipse:**

The Eclipse system is the RAA platform procured for the service. It was quickly realised following go live that it did not meet the service needs in a number of areas. In particular the reporting function for both adopters and children, does not enable reliable data to be generated for performance reporting. Consequently, the service will continue to run Excel spread sheets for both and data will be entered into both Eclipse and the spreadsheet, whilst work continues with a view to making Eclipse effective. A business analyst is currently assessing how well the system meets the needs of the service and this work will assist further decisions.

#### **Access to LA Systems:**

The lack of access by Adoption@Heart staff to children’s electronic files in the local authorities / Trust has presented a significant risk to performance in the first 6 months. In addition family finding activity is held on the Eclipse system but this is not visible to local authority social workers or managers. A joint ICT and Information governance workstream was convened in June with involvement for all four services. In October 2019 it is expected that the service will have read only access to the local authority systems. Further work will then be undertaken in moving to a position where staff have full editing access to the systems so that the child’s file can be held in one place with visibility to both services.

Considerable progress has been made in resolving ICT difficulties the service has experienced since April.

### **7.4 Adoption Panels:**

Panels have operated since early April across the four Local Authority / Trust locations on a weekly basis. Panels have approved 20 Adopters and matched 47 children. Panels have been robust in raising issues about practice where appropriate.

The service has 3 panel chairs and a further chair is being recruited. The 2 panel advisors and the panel coordinator have driven the development of clear processes and a draft policy has now been completed. The Service Head has held 2 quarterly meetings with the chairs and a joint staff / panel member development day is scheduled for January 2020.



An agreed ADM process has been circulated to ADMs and their business support in August. There had initially been some delays in providing documents and minutes to ADMs due to panel administration vacancies. Support from Dudley and Walsall in providing staff to undertake minuting has relieved pressure created by this. The delay in successfully recruiting to the vacant panel administration position has impacted on timeliness and consistency of minutes but agency cover for this post is now in place.

There have been challenges in ensuring panels are quorate therefore additional panel members are being recruited from within the local authorities. This will reduce dependence on independent panel members, improve quoracy and enable effective involvement by partner agencies in panel delivery.

Further work is being undertaken on the quality assurance process via the use of a CPR audit tool and feedback forms.

#### **7.5 Establishing Culture:**

Very positive progress has been made in establishing a “whole service” staff culture. Staff have developed a series of vision and culture statements which are due to be reviewed by the management board and Strategic Commissioning Board before being circulated within the partnership. A team charter has also been developed by staff within the service, following work on this at the first all service event. An Adoption@Heart conference is planned for Spring 2020 to include staff from the 4 local authorities in developing the joint culture and identity across the regional service.

#### **7.6 Voice and Influence of adopted children and young people, parents and adopted adults:**

Following agreement with the Management Board the service plans to work with Participation Officers in each Local Authority and Trust to progress a range of activities designed to involve young people in the development and delivery of the service during the next phase of service development.

A young person who is a care leaver within Wolverhampton has been involved in staff recruitment by sitting on an interview panel.

#### **7.7 Partnership Working:**

Further work is needed across the partnership in engaging with staff and improving understanding of the service, with a view to improving communication. The Service Head has been attending key meetings with senior managers and over the next 6 months staff workshops will be held in each location to brief and consult with social workers. This will focus initially on the family finding model and seek to improve joint working between social workers and family finders in progressing linking, matching and placement of children.

Management Board members have a key role in linking and communicating between the two services and strong links are now being developed with other key managers across the two services.

Family finders are routinely in the Local Authority / Trust locations working closely with social workers for children and managers regularly attend meetings to review children’s care plans and obtain tracking and updated information regarding children.



A joint staff / partner conference is planned to take place in Spring 2020.

A joint Early Permanence partnership event is also planned for Spring 2020.

## **8. Adoption Support:**

The Government has committed to reform the adoption system to improve the quality and consistency of support. In respect of regionalisation, the government's vision is for, "enough high-quality adoption support services available nationwide." Adoption@Heart recognises that adopted children and their families need to be able to access appropriate and sensitive adoption support at any time in their lives. Guidance is clear that adoption support services need to be available to all parties affected by adoption, including birth families and adopted adults.

The government's vision for adoption support services as set out in the Children and Adoption 2002 act outlines that adoption support is the entitlement to an assessment of need for specific groups of people affected by adoption. A Vision for Change report 2016 outlines that: Every adoptive family has access to an ongoing package of appropriate support with a right to a high quality, specialist assessment of need. This proposal is that support is delivered from day one and continues throughout childhood whenever it is required.

The remit of Adoption@Heart Adoption Support service was to provide adoption support services pre and post order to all those affected by adoption. Adopter support transfers from the Recruitment and Assessment Service at the point of approval panel in recognition of the need to promote adoption support to adopters from the outset. Social workers therefore take supervisory responsibility for adopters from the point of approval. The social work service undertakes assessments of adoption support needs as required, undertakes post adoption contact, access to records for adopted adults and birth parent support.

The Adoption Support Fund provides for therapeutic support for families whose children left care through adoption or special guardianship arrangements. These children are likely to have experienced severe trauma prior to coming into care and need therapeutic support to help them thrive.

The Department for Education (DfE) announced in March 2019 an extension to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) beyond its original end date of March 2020. The DfE has taken the unusual step of making this commitment before the annual Government Spending Review, which will take place in the Autumn.

The allocation and backlog of adoption support cases only became apparent once the RAA went live. It was much higher than anticipated and within the modelling exercise. The SW's undertaking post order cases only, have in excess of 30 cases however due to geographical issues this is very challenging to maintain regular contact with all allocated families. Adopters are often in crisis at the point they make contact with the service and are often dissatisfied with previous involvement and demanding a service immediately.

Due to capacity there is a waiting list for assessment of need to be undertaken, cases are dealt with due to complexity so there have been cases waiting in excess of four months. The cases can be located all over the country and this contributes to the challenge of allocating.

A significant number of workers were not proficient in undertaking post adoption support duties prior to the launch of the RAA, they were new to the role, and inexperienced.

We are committed to addressing waiting lists and we are considering using creative ways of consultations, to enable adoptive families to access a service as quickly as possible and recruiting a duty work with knowledge of adoption support.

**Regionalising the Adoption Support Fund (ASF):**

In May 2019 Adoption@Heart Regional Adoption Agency became responsible for the single portal for Adoption@Heart Adoption Support Fund (ASF) applications, which enables applications to be submitted on behalf of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton families. Access was provided to each Local Authorities legacy data for historic applications.

A system for processing ASF applications with administrative support is established which has supported Adoption Support Workers and has enabled applications to be made in a timely manner.

There have been 90 applications to date for a range of therapeutic interventions including Developmental Dyadic Psychotherapy, Theraplay, Sensory Integration therapy, therapeutic parenting work and therapeutic life story work.

Many families have struggled with the needs of very challenging children/young people and the therapeutic intervention has enabled the family to stay together with improved outcomes. There has been an increase in referrals involving child to parent violence, we have identified training and parenting support and will be considering delivering in house training.

**Adoption Support Fund Applications:**

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Number of ASF Applications</b> April 2019 – September 2019
Walsall	16
Sandwell	13
Wolverhampton	23
Dudley	38

**Referrals / Enquiries for Adoption Support:**

The transition of casework from each local authority and Children Trust Case Management system to using Eclipse has been fraught with challenges, as most adoption support cases had to be added manually. To date, we are still discovering cases that are receiving therapeutic support by a provider yet were not transferred and allocated to the RAA.

There have been 44 new referrals for assessment of need since April 2019, many of these requests have resulted in delivering specialist intervention, additionally there have been a significant number of reviews of therapeutic intervention and we have made 106 applications to the ASF and requested £366.577 funding for therapeutic support. The following therapy is

being provided; Theraplay, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), Family Therapy, Therapeutic life story work.

An Adoption Support Therapist is delivering the following therapeutic support; Therapeutic Life Story work, Nurturing Attachment Parenting Programme and DDP informed practice and we have applied to the ASF for £75,917.

The future plans for development in this area will be to recruit the Clinical Psychologist who will act in an advisory capacity to social workers undertaking adoption support assessments, advising on appropriate therapeutic interventions, provide a professional opinion/challenge regarding reports and recommendations for therapeutic provision provided by external providers.

Additionally, the clinician will deliver training and nominal therapeutic support reclaimable from the ASF. It is intended that this post will be recruited to for early in the second year of the service being operational. It has been delayed due to budgetary pressures in the first year.

**Number of open cases:**

There is the equivalent of 8.5 social workers in the service.

We currently have 117 adopters allocated which includes;

- 62 approved adopters with children placed
- 33 approved adopters not yet matched / placed
- 199 pre and post order children referred to the service. This is made up of 123 single children, 29 siblings groups of 2 and 2 siblings groups of 3.
- 22 unallocated adoption support cases at 30 September (plus 4 requests for birth parent counselling)

When the RAA launched there were no permanent FSW's in the Adoption Support team, so agency workers were recruited. Following successful interviews, permanent FSW's took up their posts in October/November. The FSW's have had to manually record all post adoption cases onto the electronic system and devise databases which has generated a significant amount of work.

Furthermore, there have been a number of cases that did not have a post adoption agreement and birth parents have contacted us querying arrangements so there has been close liaison with agencies regarding this work.

We are proposing amending the post adoption contract to include information about social media as since the launch we have received notification from some adopters that birth parents have traced them and their child via social media.

Adoption@Heart are responsible for the following post adoption contact arrangements. The table below shows the number of children and the work generated as some children will have multiple post adoption recipients.

Council	Number of Adoptee	Number of Contacts for Adoptee
Dudley	343	906
Sandwell	509	1008
Walsall	668	1756
Wolverhampton	269	833

We are in the process of collating figures for direct contact arrangements, that will need to be supervised by Adoption@Heart, to date we have identified six arrangements, however, we do not believe this is an accurate figure.

Sibling relationships are amongst the most significant and potentially important bonds that individuals have in the course of their lifetime (Allan, 1979). Unless placed together for adoption, children cease to have a legal relationship with the birth family. Therefore, any contact between an adopted child and a birth sibling living elsewhere is almost always reliant on an informal agreement between the involved parties (Cossar and Neil, 2013). Some children placed apart from their birth siblings have plans that have not yet materialised, having FSW's administering post adoption contact enables us to prioritise this and we are currently reviewing arrangements and will be liaising with adoptive families to explore setting up sibling contact arrangements.

We have received 44 new referrals for post adoption support since the launch of Adoption@Heart, this does not include referrals for birth parent and access to records. In addition, there were a significant number of cases that were waiting for therapy to be applied for or a review of therapeutic support at the time of the launch, which has created capacity issues.

Local Authority	Adopted Adult	Adoptive Family	Birth Family	Signposting
Walsall	7		3	
Sandwell	5		0	
Wolverhampton	8		7	
Dudley	10		0	
<b>Total</b>	30		10	

### Group work:

An Adopter support group is run in Wolverhampton on a monthly basis that has been running prior to Adoption@Heart's launch, the group has been advertised however, there is currently a low take up. We are continuing to advertise and hope to develop the group further, the members find it invaluable and supportive and are keen to recruit more members. It gives adopters an opportunity to meet with other adopters and share experiences and build a

network. We have recruited Family Support Workers recently and they are in the process of developing a similar adopter support group in Halesowen or surrounding area, to enable adopters in Dudley and Sandwell the opportunity to meet and network.

Additionally, we are in the process of setting up stay and play groups in Wolverhampton and Halesowen and it is envisaged they will be commencing in January 2020.

We are working in partnership in Wolverhampton with a Primary School, who is committed to supporting former and looked after children in their school and within the local community and will be utilising the venue for training sessions also.

We are in the process of setting up adoptee support groups in Wolverhampton and Dudley/Halesowen and will develop a participation group, so adoptees understand what services are available to them and are able to influence their development.

### **Training:**

We have developed an Adopter Training and Development programme and have delivered the following training;

Introduction to Theraplay

Nurturing Attachment Parenting Programme – a 16 week programme.

Due to capacity issues and low take up training sessions were cancelled, sessions are rescheduled for January.

We have a calendar of events for the next year and will be advertising the groups on the website to expand reach. Adoption support workers discuss the training programme when they meet approved adopters for the first time and any new referrals receive a programme following their contact with the service. We will be creating a booking facility on the website.

The model necessitates cases are allocated when prospective adopters move to stage two, social workers undertake two joint visits prior to attendance at panel. Once the case is transferred, social workers prioritise links, including for example, visits to adopters and all the associated practice and they are routinely neglecting completing assessment of need visits and reports due to capacity issues. To combat this, we have made applications to the ASF without a full assessment of need being written up. To date there have been 147 ASF applications made, however there are a significant number of assessment of needs not completed.

All workers with a mixed case load including pre order post adoption support cases and post order adoption support cases prioritise pre order cases, there is no option as links, necessitate paperwork, once a link is presented at panel it progresses to plan of introductions, visits and completion of an annex. Timescales are enforced and the expectation is they are adhered to.

The duty system has operated in a rotating system will all social workers tasked to undertake one primary and one back-up session a month. However, as the number of referrals increase it has now become a pressing issue.

We would like to develop the use of the ASF to support placements from the outset or at the earliest point, it enables therapeutic support to be delivered post placement without delay.

## **9. Focus on Outcomes for Children:**

### **9.1 How do you involve adopters in matching, linking and subsequent planning?**

The matching process within the Adoption@Heart Family Finding policy requires full information about the child to be shared with adopters after a linking decision has been made. Adopters will meet the key professionals for the child as well as their foster carer and have the option of meeting the placing agency's medical advisor. Child Appreciation Days are held wherever possible to promote best practice in sharing the full history of the child with adoptive parents. There is also sometimes an opportunity to meet the child through 'Chemistry Meetings' at which adopters meet and interact with children prior to formal introductions as part of the matching process.

Adopter led family finding is undertaken via Link Maker and activity days. The service is planning to hold its first in-house Activity Day in March 2020.

### **9.2 How do you involve adopters in the development of your agency?**

Adoption@Heart has agreed with the management board that Adoption UK "Adopter Voice" will be used to assist in accessing adopters views about a range of issues related to the delivery and future development of the service. This service will be in place prior to the year end.

Work is underway to develop a promotional video for the service and a number of adoptive parents are involved in this.

The service takes feedback from prospective adopters after attendance at panel. The feedback is then collated and fed into practice.

Further work will be undertaken in during the next 6 months within the Adoption Support service to increase adopter involvement via buddying and peer support arrangements.

## **10. Learning from Disruptions:**

There have been 2 disruptions in the 6-month period. Both of these were during the introductions process and not children who had been placed. Disruption meetings are scheduled to take place and the learning will be included in the end of year report.

Neither of these involved a Walsall child.

## **11. Accountability**

### **Management board:**

The Service Head reports on a monthly basis to Adoption@Heart Management Board, attended by Assistant Directors or Heads of Service from the 3 local authorities and Sandwell Children's Trust. The board has met monthly since the service went live and regular communication has taken place between the service head and board members in between meetings and via teleconferences. Further work is taking place to improve communication and engagement with board members and a board "away day" is planned to take place in the second 6 months period of 2019/20. This will be used to consider key service priorities for the coming period.

**Purpose:**

The RAA (Regional Adoption Agency) Management Board's purpose is to oversee the functioning and performance of the RAA at an operational level, ensure the full participation of a range of key stakeholders, and provide an interface between the RAA and the Strategic Commissioning Board (SCB).

**Key Tasks of Board Members:**

- To oversee the day to day working of the RAA and support service development.
- To support the RAA with stakeholder relationship building.
- To monitor performance particularly in terms of how it is meeting the agreed requirements of each LA/Trust.
- To ensure that in the running of the RAA, there is due account taken of stakeholder views, including the voice of adoptees and birth families, and via the Adopter Advisory Group.

**Strategic Commissioning Board:**

The Strategic Commissioning Board is attended by the Directors of the 4 local authority services and has met once during the 6-month period. A further meeting is due to take place in October.

**Purpose of the Strategic Commissioning Board (SCB):**

The purpose of the Strategic Commissioning Board (SCB) is:

- To provide strategic oversight and direction of all aspects of adoption services within the four local authority areas including:
  - The jointly commissioned services and
  - Other adoption related services which will continue to be delivered by the local authorities (or their agents).
- To take responsibility for planning the way Black Country authorities (and their agents) work together to commission adoption services.
- To take responsibility for contract monitoring, management and review in relation to the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) which has been commissioned to meet the adoption needs of children in the care of the four partner local authorities / trusts.
- To oversee joint and efficient commissioning of activity which will improve outcomes for those children and young people living in the Black Country who have a plan for and/or have been adopted.
- To ensure that services offered to "those affected by adoption" e.g. adopters, adopted adults and birth families, living in the Black Country, are jointly and efficiently commissioned and delivered.
- To ensure that the voice of all those affected by adoption is considered.

## **12 Summary**

During the first six months of operating the Adoption@Heart service has made significant progress and there are many successes that should be acknowledged in placing children with adoptive parents. The service has also faced some significant challenges with regard to the transition phase in establishing the new agency. Performance regarding family finding and adopter recruitment at the end of September 2019 is reflective of these challenges and it is likely the impact of the transition will continue to have an impact during the remainder of year one.

Key priorities as the service moves forward and becomes more established are:

- The development of improved and established practice guidance for all areas of practice.
- Improved access to children's information and communication between the service and partners in progressing family finding for children more effectively.
- Further development of the adopter marketing and recruitment strategy with a view to increasing the "in house" pool of adopters and reducing inter-agency usage.
- Further development of the Adoption Support "offer" for the region.
- Improved engagement and partnership working within the region.

**Report completed by:** Mark Tobin

**Role:** Service Head

**Date:** 16.12.2019