

BRIEFING NOTE

TO: EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 8 SEPTEMBER, 2015

RE: FOSTERING AND ADOPTION WORKING GROUP

Purpose

To receive the report of the Fostering and Adoption Working Group established by the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel on 14 October, 2014.

Background

A working group was established by the then Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel to consider the fostering and adoption service.

The Panel are asked to consider the final report attached as appendix 1 to this report and approve the recommendations as detailed on pages 29 & 30, and replicated below, for submission to Cabinet.

The Committee are also asked to consider appendix 2 to this report which provides further detail on the timescales for the recruitment of Foster Carers and Adopters. This is provided in response to a question raised at the Committee meeting held on 23 June, 2015.

Recommendations

1. ***That Members' of the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel revisit the Fostering and Adoption Service within 12 months to review the impact of the changes to the service following the service redesign, implementation of budget savings and introduction of MOSAIC;***
2. ***That the Panel consider nominating two members from its membership to become looked after children champions;***
3. ***That information on Fostering for Adoption is included on the 'Fostering in Walsall' Website;***

<http://fosteringinwalsall.co.uk/>
4. ***That a review of 'Staying Put' arrangements be undertaken to assess its potential impact on the availability of Fostering placements in Walsall;***
5. ***That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel to provide assurance that every effort is made to identify, through both the council and its partners processes, those children and young people that are in private fostering arrangements;***

6. ***That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel providing an update on the performance of the Fostering and Adoption Service's post re-structure in November, 2015;***
7. ***That Members of the Working Group revisit teams at Essington Lodge in September, 2015 to hold a further focus group;***
8. ***That an update on the work being undertaken to reduce the time taken to process foster carer applications be considered by the Panel in November, 2015;***
9. ***That details relating to the number of assessments carried out externally be considered by the Panel together with detail as to how much this process cost the authority and options to bring this service in house;***
10. ***That Foster Carers be consulted through the Foster Care Association to establish their thoughts on the service to ascertain where improvements are required to retain existing carers and attract new ones;***
11. ***That family and friends carers be contacted to ask for their feedback on the service after the restructure has been completed to ascertain whether the decision to remove the dedicated team has impacted upon the service they receive. The findings to be reported to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel in November, 2015.***
12. ***That the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel receive regular updates on the performance of the recruitment and retention of foster carers together with comparisons with other providers.***
13. ***That all Members of the Council raise awareness, particularly in terms of short break foster care, in their role as both community representatives and as corporate parents of the Walsall Foster Care offer and actively engage with and encourage interested parties to approach the fostering and adoption recruitment team;***
14. ***That the recruitment and assessment team visit other authorities to identify ways in which the process could safely be improved to ensure that the speed of the process improves and that an update report be submitted to Panel in November, 2015.***
15. ***That work be undertaken to establish whether support from the communications team will be sustainable in light of continued budget pressures and assurance be provided that there is a robust marketing strategy in place;***
16. ***That work be undertaken to ascertain if there is an alternative way to capture the reasons for resignation by existing foster carers;***
17. ***That work be undertaken with Telford and Wrekin to establish what enables them to be so efficient and apply any subsequent learning to Walsall;***
18. ***All Members ensure that they attend training sessions to improve their understanding of their role as Corporate Parents***

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Fostering and Adoption Working Group



To be presented to Children's Services Scrutiny and
Performance Panel on 8 September, 2015



Walsall Council

Foreword

Let us make no mistake. There remains a high degree of pressure on an already pressured system to ensure that children and young people in our care are placed in an environment which provides every opportunity for a safe and positive future. Councillors, as Corporate Parents, have a fundamental role in ensuring that services which support these children and young people are as effective as possible.

Members of the working group have valued the opportunity to meet with Foster Carers, adopters and staff within the Fostering and Adoption service. What has been abundantly clear throughout our review is a committed, determined and willing approach by all to ensure that children and young people within our care are provided with the best chance in life.

There are always questions - have we got things right in Walsall? Are we doing all we can to ensure that children and young people are in the right place, at the right time? Are services that recruit and support our foster carers as good as they can be? The working group seek to answer these and others in this review.

I speak for all Members of the working group in acknowledging the hard work, dedication and perseverance of both staff and individuals that foster and adopt as together, they provide children and young people with the opportunities for a brighter future.



P. Lane

Lead, Fostering and Adoption Working group

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Introduction

The Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel (the Panel) identified the opportunity to investigate services for 'Fostering and Adoption' at its meeting on 14 October, 2014.

To complete this task a small working group was established.

Terms of Reference

Draft terms of reference were discussed and agreed by the Panel that took place on 25 November, 2014.

The full version of the Working Groups terms of reference can be found at Appendix 1 to this report.

The Working Group was supported predominantly by two Officers:

Lisa Preston	Group Manager - Strategic Lead for Provider Services
Neil Picken	Senior Committee Business and Governance Manager

Membership

The working group consisted of the following:

	P. Lane Lead		Councillor D. Shires
	Councillor K. Phillips		Councillor T. Jukes

Methodology

The working group held a number of meetings which took into account the views of numerous officers – all of whom play a key role in Walsall’s service provision. Importantly, Members met with a number of foster carers and adopters to understand and learn how the policies and procedures in place work from their perspective. Members also visited a foster care playgroup and participated in a carer consultation day.

Witnesses

The working group met and discussed issues or received evidence relating to looked after children with the following witnesses:

Lisa Preston	Group Manager- Strategic Lead for Provider Services
Manager and staff within the Assessment and Recruitment Team	Team meeting
Manager and staff within the Support and Development Team	Team meeting
Manager and staff within the Adoption Team	Team meeting
Manager and staff within the Family and Friends Team	Team meeting
Adopters	Focus Groups with Adopters
Foster Carers and Children	Foster Carer Playgroup and Carer Consultation Day

Report Format

The report sets out the working groups findings along with supporting evidence.

Overview & Context

With an annual budget in 2014/15 of £12,916,012 (£3,570,241 relating to service and support budgets and £9,345,771 relating to fostering placements¹), the Fostering and Adoption Service helped to provide a home for over 80.8% (499) of our 617 looked after children and young people (December, 2014).

At the time of this review, the Fostering and Adoption Service (also referred to as the Family Placement Service) was in the midst of a service redesign. It was expected that this would lead to improved services whilst achieving efficiencies. The revised structure was implemented on 1st April, 2015 and is attached as appendix 2.

Simultaneously a number of saving proposals, including transport allowances and the use of respite care were considered and approved by Council.

In addition, the Council's new case recording system, MOSAIC, was to be trialled with the Fostering and Adoption Service which was previously a predominantly 'paper based' system.

The redesign of the service, implementation of a new and unfamiliar computer system and potential implications of budget reductions culminates in a significant state of flux for the fostering and adoption service. This at a time when numbers of looked after children remain high whilst the projected Children's Services budget for the foreseeable future is in decline.

Members of the Working Group were keen to meet with young people to gain their views on the services they receive but understand the importance of engaging in a correct and meaningful way. Members suggest that the Panel consider nominating two members from its membership to be looked after children champions. These Members would develop relationships with both staff and young people to learn and understand about the services and enrich the knowledge of the Scrutiny Panel.

Members of the working group want to ensure that whilst the change programme is embedded, services continue without disruption and that, once implemented, the new structure delivers an improved, efficient service.

Recommendations

- 1. That Members' of the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel revisit the Fostering and Adoption Service within 12 months to review the impact of the changes to the service following the service redesign, implementation of budget savings and introduction of MOSAIC.***
- 2. That the Panel consider nominating two members from its membership to become looked after children champions.***

¹ This does not include LAC social work team but includes adoption allowances, special guardianship order and residents orders

Fostering

What did foster carers tell us?

- Despite already being a foster carer with Walsall they needed to go through the whole adoption process to adopt the same child that they were already fostering²;
- Preferred age range of children when agreeing to foster was not adhered to;
- A number of social worker changes – 7 in 2 years in one instance;
- Risk assessments are perhaps too intrusive;
- Foster to adopt should be more streamlined;
- I felt pressured to take a boy or a girl when I only wanted a boy and age range stated not adhered to;
- There isn't a £500 incentive to introduce family and friends by existing foster carers. It's now a £100 payment to the Foster Care Association;
- There are budget proposals which affect the short break service and taxi services available;
- It takes too long to receive a passport to take children away on holiday with them;
- The disbanding of a dedicated family and friends support team may have a detrimental impact on existing relationships and support;
- There is a good network of support amongst foster carers;
- Link worker advice can be inconsistent;

Members valued meeting with Foster Carers as it gave a true and honest insight into life as a foster carer in Walsall. Without hearing the views of those individuals it would not have been possible to produce a balanced report and Members would like to thank all that contributed.

Arising from discussions, it is clear that there is work to be done. However, it also has to be acknowledged that the task of finding safe and supportive homes for our children and young people, some of whom are more challenging and demanding than others, is not simple. This means that we need to be rigorous in terms of the recruitment process and also need to ask individuals to sometimes broaden their choices when it is clear that they have the attributes to be of benefit to a young person's life.

Many of the issues raised are discussed further in the body of the report.

² *This process is required as part of the Adoption Regulations and statutory guidance.*

What is Fostering?

Fostering is looking after a child in a family setting and caring for them while their own parents are unable to do so. Foster care provides a safe, secure and stable environment for children, helping them to develop and succeed. The length of fostering placements can vary from a few hours to many years, depending on the need of the child.

Foster carers play an important role, together with a team of professionals, including social workers, working with the child to make sure they get the care and support they need.

Fostering is different from adoption because the local authority in which the child lives remains responsible for them as their 'corporate parent'. In many cases, it is also important to maintain links with the child's birth family through regular 'contact' meetings, which foster carers will help facilitate.

Types of Fostering

It is important to note that Walsall Council does not have a monopoly over foster carers and adopters as independent foster agencies and voluntary adoption agencies are all 'in the market' to recruit. This is considered in more detail later in the report.

Emergency

When children need somewhere safe to stay for a few nights, placements are found at short notice at any time of the day or night. This is often required when there is an unexpected event. Placements are usually only for a few days whilst longer term plans are being considered.

Short Term (Temporary)

When children are placed with a foster carer for a specific period, or until certain tasks have been completed – this can be between several days to several years. This is often used whilst a longer term plan such as returning the child to live with their own family, a long-term foster placement or adoption is considered.

Long Term (Permanent)

Not all children who need to permanently live away from their birth family want to be adopted. The child or young person can therefore decide to remain in long-term foster care until they're adults if this is felt to be the best outcome.

Family and Friends (or connected persons)

This type of fostering enables close relatives, or one or more people connected to the child, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, step-parents or friends to come forward to care for the child when he or she is no longer able to live with his or her birth parents, and there is a need for the child to be in public care to meet the child's needs and to safeguard their welfare. These placements can be short or long term.

Members recognise that often children prefer this type of arrangement as they feel more secure and retain a sense of belonging. Members appreciate that family and friend carers may not necessarily feel that they should have to go through the same rigorous processes and training to care for family members, as reported by some in focus groups. Whilst this can be understood it is the working group's view that all foster carers should continue to have the same level of training and access to support, regardless of the type of fostering arrangement in place. This ensures consistency for all foster carers and children in their care.

Short Break

Short Term Break Carers provide regular breaks for disabled young people away from their home.

Members were encouraged to learn that all carers for disabled children are assessed and attend pre-approval training before their application is considered by the Walsall Fostering Panel.

Fostering for Adoption

Fostering for Adoption places a child during the period of temporary local authority care with foster carers who are also approved as adopters. If the court agrees that the child should be adopted and the adoption agency approves the 'match' between the carers and the child, then the 'Fostering for Adoption' placement becomes an adoption placement.

Members note that that information regarding 'Fostering for Adoption' is not included on the 'Fostering in Walsall' website and suggest that this may be a useful addition.

Recommendation

- 3. That information on Fostering for Adoption is included on the 'Fostering in Walsall' Website.***

<http://fosteringinwalsall.co.uk/>

Staying Put

Staying Put is designed to ensure that young people do not experience sudden disruption to their living arrangements on their 18th birthday by allowing them to continue in their existing placement up to the age of 21. This ensures that educational achievement and continuity are promoted, and that vulnerable young people make gradual transition from care to independence when the time is right for them.

Members support staying put arrangements as it is important to keep a young person in a supportive caring environment. However, where staying put arrangements are put in place this creates pressure on mainstream fostering as the capacity to take on new fostered children reduces as spaces remain filled.

Recommendation

- 4. That a review of 'Staying Put' arrangements be undertaken to assess its potential impact on the availability of Fostering placements in Walsall.***

Private Fostering

Private fostering is when a child under the age of 16 (under 18 if disabled) is cared for by someone who is not their parent or a 'close relative'. This is a private arrangement made between a parent and a carer, for 28 days or more. Close relatives are defined as step-parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles or aunts (whether of full blood, half blood or marriage/affinity)

Private foster carers are legally required to notify their local council but some do not, or do not know that they have to. This means that social workers are unable to check whether children are being properly cared for and may not be in a position to protect privately fostered children who are at risk of abuse or neglect.

Members of the Panel are aware that every effort is made to identify children and young people within the borough in private fostering arrangements and encourage those which are responsible to notify the council. They also recognise that there are processes in place for monitoring and reporting together with a communications plan but would a) urge all Members to prompt individuals whom they may be aware of having private fostering arrangements to notify the council, if required and b) request an update to Panel on Private Fostering and the methods used to identify and monitor these arrangements. Children's safety cannot be overlooked in any sense and it is important that we, both as a council and corporate parents, are doing all we can to safeguard our children and young people.

Recommendation

- 5. That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel to provide assurance that every effort is made to identify, through both the council and its partners processes, those children and young people that are in private fostering arrangements.***

Why do people Foster?

Members noted from attending various forums and meeting individuals that people's reasons to foster vary considerably depending on their circumstances. For many it was to give children a better chance in life whilst for others it was seen as a career choice with a greater emphasis placed on the monetary side of the role.

It is fair to say that more often than not it is a blend of both of these factors which influence people's decision to foster, after all it would be unreasonable to expect people to play such an important role in children's futures without receiving remuneration for doing so.

In terms of payment, Members found it challenging to get a clear picture of what payments are made and how these compare with Independent Foster Agencies. It is accepted, however, that payments can differ considerably, depending on the needs of the individual child.

A typical weekly payment to a new foster carer, caring for 2 children is as follows:-

Household Fee: £113.89
Fostering allowance 4 year old £142.86
Fostering allowance 7 year old £162.73
Total per week £419.48

Members understand that the overall spend on Foster care placements in 2014/15 was £11,131,696 against a budget³ of £9,345,771. This is an overspend of £1,785,925. It is clear that we have to ensure that our young people are in the right place, at the right time but it is also clear that either the allocated budget is unrealistic or that our commissioning of placements needs to be reconsidered to ensure that we are not paying for costly placements if step-down arrangements would be better for the young person concerned. This is considered further in the Finance section of the report.

³ This only includes internal and external fostering – it does not include adoption allowance, special guardianship orders and residency orders.

Walsall's Fostering Service

The Fostering Service seeks to place children and young people (up to the age of 18), unable to live with their parents, with family and friends carers. Where this is not possible, the Fostering Service will identify a suitable foster placement with an approved foster carer. This includes:-

- 'In house' - Foster Carers that have been recruited and appointed by the Council;
- Inter Agency placement – placing a child with an alternative local authority;
- Using an Independent Foster Agency - Carers recruited and trained by private companies.

The service also offers short term breaks for disabled children. It also facilitates Staying Put arrangements which enable young people to extend the fostering arrangement beyond their 18th birthday.

Finance

It would be remiss not to acknowledge that providing services for looked after children is expensive. In a continued period of austerity for local government, the pressure to provide an effective, efficient service to those in society that need support the most is challenging as resources become continually stretched. This is the challenge which we and other local authorities face but Members of the review are assured that Walsall is committed to meet this challenge head on.

In 2014/15 the Children's Services Directorate had an overspend, after corrective action has been taken, of £2.692m. Without remedial action the service would have a forecast overspend of £4.456m.

In terms of fostering and adoption, family placements were overspent by £0.769m. This is due to:-

- Special Guardianship and Residence Orders -£0.263m,
- Increased adoption activity -£0.231m;
- Independent Assessments - £0.100m;
- 8 Agency staff (some of which was grant funded) -£0.175.

In 2015/16, Children's Services is tasked with achieving savings of £4.386m with a further £2.028m in 2016/17.

Savings that may affect provider services (family placements) include:-

- £0.067m - Children's taxi budget – reduce budget and promote independent travel where possible;
- £0.004 - Internal foster care - reduce budget for new furniture for foster carers;

The pressures are clear to see – and resemble the national picture – the number of looked after children, in light of continued heightened awareness given high profile cases of mismanagement across the country, look only to increase whilst budgets for Local Authorities become more challenging than ever before. Members are concerned that further reducing payments such as furniture budgets and taxi budgets may hamper our ability to recruit and retain foster carers but equally acknowledge the significant budget pressures facing the service.

Teams and Staffing

At the time of the review, Fostering and Adoption (Provider Services) was in the midst of a service redesign. This involved significant changes including the deletion of the dedicated Family and Friends Team; reallocation of staff within teams and co-locating all staff together at Essington Lodge. The redesign also meant that Residential Services would be included with Provider Services/family placements.

The revised structure was implemented on 1st April, 2015 and a structure chart is shown as appendix 2.

During Members discussions with staff, a number of individuals raised concerns regarding the new structure and its potential impact upon services. The disbanding of the Family and Friends Team was of particular concern. It was stated that it was important to retain existing relationships with those carers and ensure that any changes to contact details are communicated effectively.

Members understand that a restructure is a difficult process for the individuals involved. They were encouraged to see that the staff affected remained committed to providing an effective service to the best of their ability. This should be recognised as a significant strength for both as staff as individuals and the service as a whole.

Recommendation

- 6. That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel providing an update on the performance of the Fostering and Adoption Service's post re-structure in November, 2015.***
- 7. That Members of the Working Group revisit teams at Essington Lodge in September, 2015 to hold a further focus group.***

Recruitment and Assessment Team

The Recruitment & Assessment Team is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and supervision of all foster carers from the time they initially contact the service expressing an interest in becoming a foster carer, until their first annual review.

The Recruitment & Assessment Team comprises of:-

- 1 Team manager
- 1 Practice Manager
- 1 Recruitment and Promotions Officer
- 7 Social Workers
- 1 Customer Support Officer

Caseloads in 2014 ranged from 9.6 to 11.6 cases per worker. The cases comprise of initial assessments, full assessments, foster carer supervision and private foster carer assessments. In addition to this the workers undertake foster carer training. Responsibility for marketing is located in the Central Communications Team, although most of the recruitment activity is undertaken by the Recruitment & Assessment Team.

Three years ago the service had an excess of 40 foster carer placements available for children and young people. Since then looked after children's numbers have gone up by more than 100. This has exhausted the availability of placements and required the team to focus on recruitment. The challenge is that foster carer recruitment can take many months, as there is a comprehensive training and assessment process.

It has taken a considerable amount of work from the team to refocus on recruitment 2013/14 with the aim of increasing the numbers of foster carers being assessed and approved.

Fostering	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Initial visits	47	43	34	71	15*
Foster carer approvals	17	22	8	9	12**

*April to June ** April to November only

Following a steady decrease in enquiries and initial visits during the last few years, there was an increase in both during 2013-14. Although approvals only increased to 9 last year, the number of assessments currently being undertaken (15) suggests that the target of 20 new approvals in 2014-15 should be met.

The average timescale of the recruitment process from receiving the prospective applicants offer to approval panel date in 2013-14 was 383 days; this is an improvement from 2012-13's 450 days. Work is underway to further reduce the time taken in 2014-15.

The assessment and approval process is set out in appendix 3. Members noted that assessments could be carried out externally and would like further detail as to how much this process cost the authority together with assurances that this was only used as a last resort.

Members are aware that many Independent Fostering Agencies advertise that the timeframe from application to approval as between 90 and 180 days. In contrast, the average time in 2013/14 for those applying through the council was 383 days.

The Panel note that within the new structure there is a Recruitment and Promotions Officer (vacant at the time of writing this report) that should encourage and increase numbers of applications, however, they feel that more work needs to be completed to safely reduce the length of the recruitment process. The council is in competition with Independent Fostering Agencies to recruit and retain foster carers. Therefore the council needs to ensure that it is able to offer a competitive service. It is fair to say that the quicker a household is approved, the quicker they are able to provide a home for children and receive their allowance for doing so.

Recommendations

- 8. That an update on the work being undertaken to reduce the time taken to process foster carer applications be considered by the Panel in November, 2015;**
- 9. That details relating to the number of assessments carried out externally be considered by the Panel together with detail as to how much this process cost the authority and options to bring this service in house.**

Support and Development Team

The remit of the team is to provide supervision and support to temporary and permanent foster carers, undertake back up duty (placement identification), general duty, family finding for children who require permanent foster placements and undertake permanence assessments.

The Support and Development Team comprises of the following:-

- 1 Team Manager
- 1 Practice Manager
- 9 Social Workers
- 1 Customer Services Officer

An average caseload for a full-time social worker is to supervise approximately 20 foster carers, undertake back up/general duty approximately twice per month. The number of children allocated for family finding varies as this depends on whether the child is to be matched to their current internal carer, whether family finding needs to be undertaken and if the children are single children, or part of a sibling group.

During the last 12 months, a significant number of foster carers have resigned for a variety of reasons – these include:-

- Ill Health
- Difficulties within their own families
- Child Protection Concerns
- Performance Issues

In terms of the recruitment of foster carers, emphasis needs to be on caring for teenagers, and recruiting to Staying Put placements. An area to be developed is the recruitment of permanent foster carers. This would have the effect of reducing reliance on external placements.

Members are concerned that a significant number of carers resigned although they are assured that the resignations were the right outcome in the circumstances and accept that there are times in which children make complaints to ensure a placement change. However, they cannot emphasise strongly enough, the importance of Walsall's offer being competitive with other providers. It is critical that our carers feel valued and supported and are appropriately paid for the role they undertake.

The service has to be looked at as a whole to ensure that the journey from initial enquiry through to placement and support thereafter all provide a positive experience.

Recommended

- 10. That Foster Carers be consulted through the Foster Care Association to establish their thoughts on the service to ascertain where improvements are required to retain existing carers and attract new ones.***

Family & Friends Team

Under the new structure the Family & Friends Team has been disbanded. Family & Friends work is now managed within the Fostering Recruitment Team and the support team which now have additional capacity as staff have been re-positioned.

The remit of the team was to provide supervision and support to temporary and approved family and friends foster carers. Advocate permanency plans for children placed with their family & friends.

Members are keen to ensure that family and friends carers receive the same, if not a better level, of support and training when staff are re-distributed amongst the Recruitment and Assessment and Support and Development Teams. They are also keen to ensure that this does not impact negatively on the number of family and friend carers resigning. Any changes in terms of contact details and other practical issues should be well communicated and discussed with family and friends carers.

Recommended

- 11. That family and friends carers be contacted to ask for their feedback on the service after the restructure has been completed to ascertain whether the decision to remove the dedicated team has impacted upon the service they receive. The findings to be reported to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel in November, 2015.***

Placement and Resources Team

The Placement and Resources team does not form part of the fostering and adoption structure. The team is responsible for commissioning placements from other local authorities and independent providers.

The purpose of the team is to identify vacancies for new children requiring placements, manage placement moves and commission, where necessary, IFA placements. They also broker all taxi deals.

Performance

Children in placements

At the end of December, 2014 - 499 (80.8%) of the 617 looked after children in the councils care in foster placements;

Distance from home address	0-20 miles		21-50 miles		51-75 miles		75-100 miles		100+ Miles		Total
	IN	OUT	IN*	OUT	IN*	OUT	IN*	OUT	IN*	OUT	
Placement within/outside Walsall											
Fostering (Approved Carer)	191	142	1	21	0	2	0	6	2	7	372
Fostering (Friend/Relative)	89	33	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	127
Grand Total	280	175	2	23	0	2	1	6	2	8	499

* NB: These 5 children are placed within Walsall but are the stated distance from their given home address. E.g. A child who was resident in Walsall when entering care and is in a Walsall based placement can have birth parents who have since moved so has a given home address in Scotland. Data is as at 31 Dec 2014

To ensure that there are sufficient placements available it is critical that the council has a sufficient number of foster placements available. That said, it is important to recognise that placing our children isn't simply a matter of numbers as each child and young person will have their own needs and so placement matching is important to ensure that there are not potential areas for conflict and failure – known as placement breakdown. It is well known that constant disruption has a negative impact on children and young people and so the importance of matching placements should not be overlooked.

In terms of recruiting foster carers, between 31 March 2010 and 31 March 2014 the Fostering Service:-

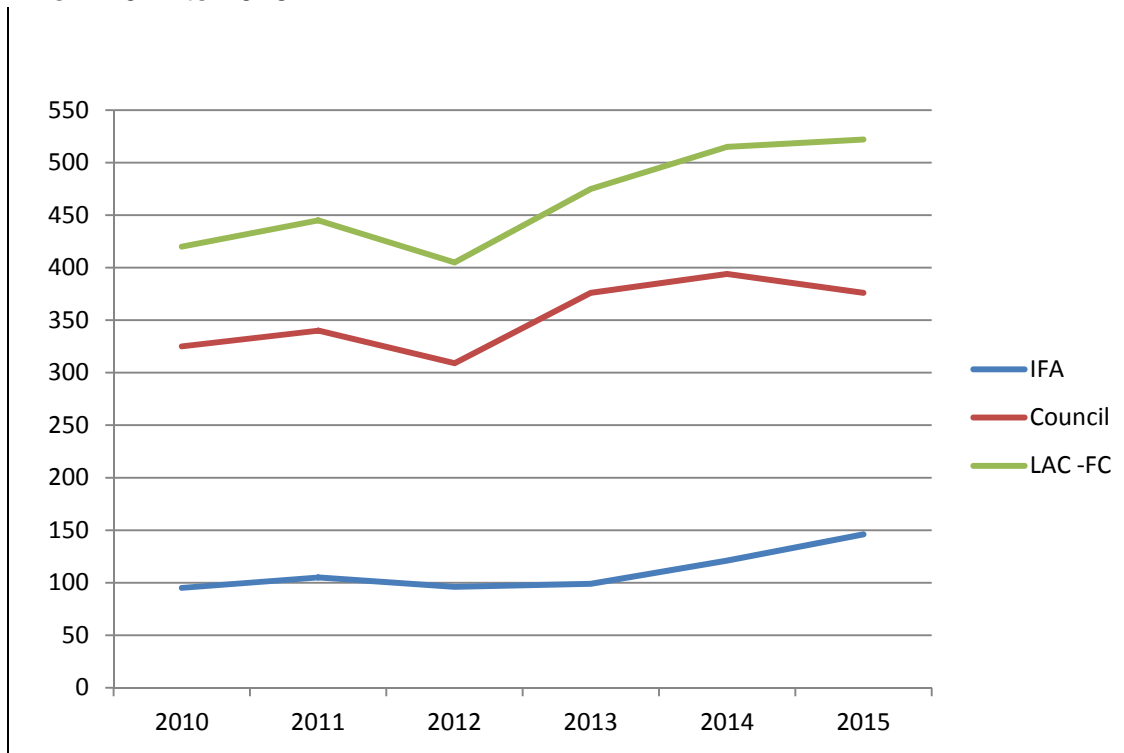
- Received 912 requests for information and enquiries;
- Approved 52 mainstream carer approvals; and
- Approved 4 short-term break approvals.

During the same period there were:-

- 47 mainstream resignations;
- 4 short-term break resignations/de-registered.

The total gain during the 4 year period was 5 mainstream foster carers and zero short-term break carers (the number recruited was equal to the number of resignations). The number of children in foster care during the same period increased by 48 to 470 resulting in increased demand.

The table below shows the trend of increasing numbers of LAC in Foster Care together with an increased reliance on Independent Foster Agencies as our own placements fell by 18 from 2014 to 2015.



No. LAC in foster care	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
		420	445	405	475	515
IFAs	95	105	96	99	121	146
In house	325	340	309	376	394	376

In 2012/13 and 2013/14 there were more resignations than gains which is a worrying trend. This is particularly severe within family and friends carers with 12 resigning in 2013/14.

Members of the Panel emphasise the need to recruit and retain our own foster carers. Failure to have sufficient carers will result in a higher dependency on alternative providers. It is important to review, particularly given that the family and friends team have been disbanded, to closely monitor performance in terms of recruitment.

Recommendation

- 12. That the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel receive regular updates on the performance of the recruitment and retention of foster carers together with comparisons with other providers.**

Timescales

As detailed earlier in the report, the average timescale of the recruitment process from receiving the prospective applicants offer, to panel date in 2013 - 14 was 383 days; this is an improvement from 2012-13's 450 days.

Members recognise and appreciate the hard work and dedication of the recruitment and retention team but are concerned that, as the number of looked after children increases, the use of IFA's and other Local Authority placements will increase, pushing up costs in an already stretched and pressured budget.

It is right and reassuring that adequate checks are in place to ensure that foster carers are up to standard and that those that are not are de-registered. It is important to capture the reasons given from existing foster carers that resign in order to learn from their experiences and identify if services can be adjusted to prevent further resignations. Members note that exit interviews are currently offered by the Independent Reviewing Officer, however, some foster carers may find this intimidating, particularly if they have concerns about the service as the IRO may be seen as 'part of the same service'.

Recommendations

- 13. That all Members of the Council raise awareness, particularly in terms of short break foster care, in their role as both community representatives and as corporate parents of the Walsall Foster Care offer and actively engage with and encourage interested parties to approach the fostering and adoption recruitment team;**
- 14. That the recruitment and assessment team visit other authorities to identify ways in which the process could safely be improved to ensure that the speed of the process improves and that an update report be submitted to Panel in November, 2015.**
- 15. That work be undertaken to establish whether support from the communications team will be sustainable in light of continued budget pressures and assurance be provided that there is a robust marketing strategy in place;**
- 16. That work be undertaken to ascertain if there is an alternative way to capture the reasons for resignation by existing foster carers;**

Adoption

What is Adoption

Adoption agencies find and equip people to be parents for children who, for whatever reason, cannot be raised by their birth parents. Each agency will have trained social workers who will discuss prospective adoptive parents circumstances and guide them through the adoption application process. Agencies also run information meetings, training sessions and help find the right child once someone has been approved to adopt. They are the guides to the adoption journey.

All adoption agencies in England are one of two types of organisation; either they are part of a Local Authority (LA) or they are an independent Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA). The main difference between the two is that LAs have children in their care, and VAAs do not. Both however prepare and support people to become adoptive parents.

Neither Local Authorities nor VAAs charge for their services to prospective parents from within the UK, though there are some charges for those who wish to adopt children from abroad.

All adoption agencies are subject to strict regulatory control and regular Ofsted inspections.

Feedback from consultation

- Very well supported throughout and after process;
- The work of Foster Carers is really valued by adopters
- The adoption process was long - 3 years reported in one case;
- Difficulties with initial contact;
- Lack of support once adoption process confirmed by court;
- Training by Sandwell was poor⁴;
- Adoption fell through at the last minute;
- The Panel hearing is intimidating (a number of adopters made this point);
- Life story praised as a very good service;
- The adoption network could be better – newsletter could be improved;

Members are mindful that this is a complicated and emotional process which gives rise to potential disagreement and distrust between adopters and the council. On the whole the service is being delivered effectively although further attention could be given to support once the adoption process has been completed. This is difficult as often parents wish to be left to raise their children. Perhaps it is more about communicating that support is available, as and when required, that adopters may find beneficial.

⁴ Walsall is part of a Black Country Consortium and so training can be undertaken at a number of Authorities

The following letter highlights the many positive aspects of the adoption process as well as some areas for improvement. Members feel that this illustrates that given the legality and complexity of the process, each journey will inevitably have a few bumps in the road. They are assured that every effort is made by the adoption team to restrict the amount of bumps adopters experience.

A letter of experience:-

Our experience to-date has been a very positive one. We've had first rate support from (social workers name) since July 2014 and we've found her to be informative and incredibly supportive throughout.

She's been very prompt for all our appointments and has gone out of her way to fit her diary with our availability, sometimes extending her own working day in order to keep our case moving forwards.

Her knowledge has been hugely valuable to us and she's been so helpful in terms of advice and direct support, including with our birth daughter, through this process so far. (social workers name) insight into adoption and the challenges we may face have and continue to help us with our preparation and to build our knowledge and confidence to support an adopted child. We can't speak highly enough of her contribution and professionalism.

The training we attended in August 2014 was extremely useful and challenged our thinking in a number of ways. It helped us to be realistic about the adoption experience and the issues we may face in the future. This has been incredibly valuable and is also helping us with our preparation.

Our first Panel experience was also positive. We were well prepared with (social workers name) support and the members put us at ease in what could have been a very stressful experience. We were also very impressed with the range of people involved in the Panel, including other adopters and 'adoptees'. This has helped to build our confidence in a process that is often badly represented in the media.

We haven't had many negative experiences so just a couple of minor points below that would have helped to iron out the small 'bumps' in our journey:-

- *We had a slow start and our initial contact with Black Country Adoption was a bit confusing. We were advised that we couldn't take children to the open event so I went alone, leaving my partner to look after our daughter. When I arrived, there were other children there and because I was on my own, we weren't able to complete the paperwork and had to take this away and arrange to attend another event a month later. This was a frustrating first experience.*
- *When we completed our initial PAR with our first social worker, we had to return it 2-3 times due to errors in some of the names and the financial data. This was partly our fault because we didn't spot all the errors at first check and so had to return it again for correction. At this point we received a rather short note saying that it couldn't be corrected again. This was a bit frustrating as the errors weren't of our doing.*

Overall, our experience has left us with a great deal of respect for the difficult work being done by Adoption Services. We feel we've come a long way in less than 12 months, largely down to the support, information and knowledge that's been provided so far. We're confident that this support will enable us to be successful parents for an adopted child in the future although we also appreciate that we still have a lot to learn.

Adoption Team in Walsall

The Adoption Team is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and preparation of a wide range of prospective adopters, and the team prepare reports for the adoption panel. The team also undertakes family finding for all Walsall's Looked After Children with a care plan of adoption and for all relinquished children.

The team undertake Step-Parent assessments, Inter-Country and other non-agency adoption proceedings. They provide a daily duty system and are active partners within the ABC (Adoption in the Black Country) Consortium attending regular information events for prospective adopters. All of the required marketing is carried out through the ABC partnership via a full time marketing officer.

The Adoption Services consist of Adoption support in line with the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2003 and offers counselling for adults who were adopted, and provides access and summaries of birth records.

The Adoption team currently comprises of:-

- 1 Team Manger
- 1 Practice Manager
- 8 Social Workers
- 1 (part time) Life Story Direct worker with children.
- 1 Part time Family Support worker.
- 2 Agency Social Workers (until 31/3/15) funded through the Adoption Reform Grant.

Caseloads are variable depending on the type of work undertaken. Some of the social workers only carry out assessments of prospective adopters, and their average case load would be 3 assessments at any one time, plus acting as a link support worker for several approved families. Workers who undertake assessments and family finding generally hold one assessment and several family finding cases. Workers who do solely family finding can have as many as 12+ cases.

Performance

Local

The table below sets out performance over recent years. What can be seen is that the numbers are broadly similar. It is clear that in 2014/15 a concerted effort was made with a significant increase in the number of children adopted and children placed for adoption.

It is noted that the number of children adopted fluctuates according to the number of looked after children with a care plan of adoption, and the amount of time the court takes to make a decision that a child can be placed for adoption. It is also important to remember that this can be a difficult journey and so it is understandable that some potential adopters may defer their applications or indeed remove themselves from the process mid way through.

Members were assured that sufficient support and guidance was being offered to support applicants through the process.

Year	Families Approved for Adoption	Children Adopted	Children placed for adoption
2011/12	19	34	27
2012/13	18	26	24
2013/14	24	26	28
2014/15	18	38	40

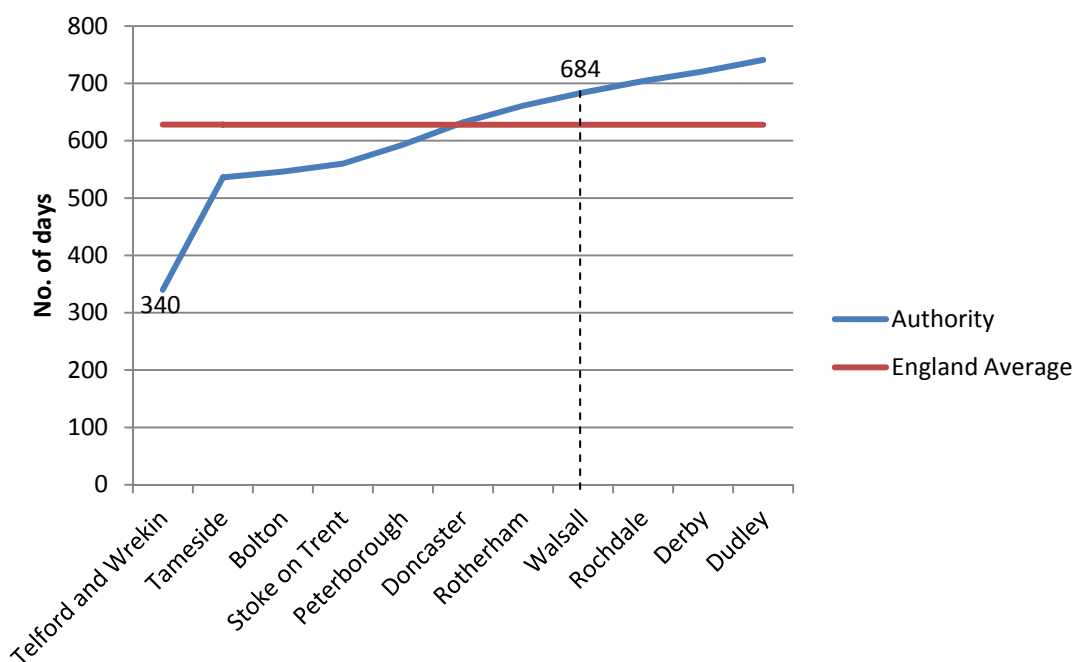
Statistical neighbour and national comparisons taken from Adoption Scorecards - (www.gov.uk – December, 2014)

Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted.

As can be seen below, Walsall takes 56 days longer than the England average (628) to place a child with adoptive parents once they enter care. Telford and Wrekin are substantially quicker, placing children within 340 days which is 288 days better than the England average.

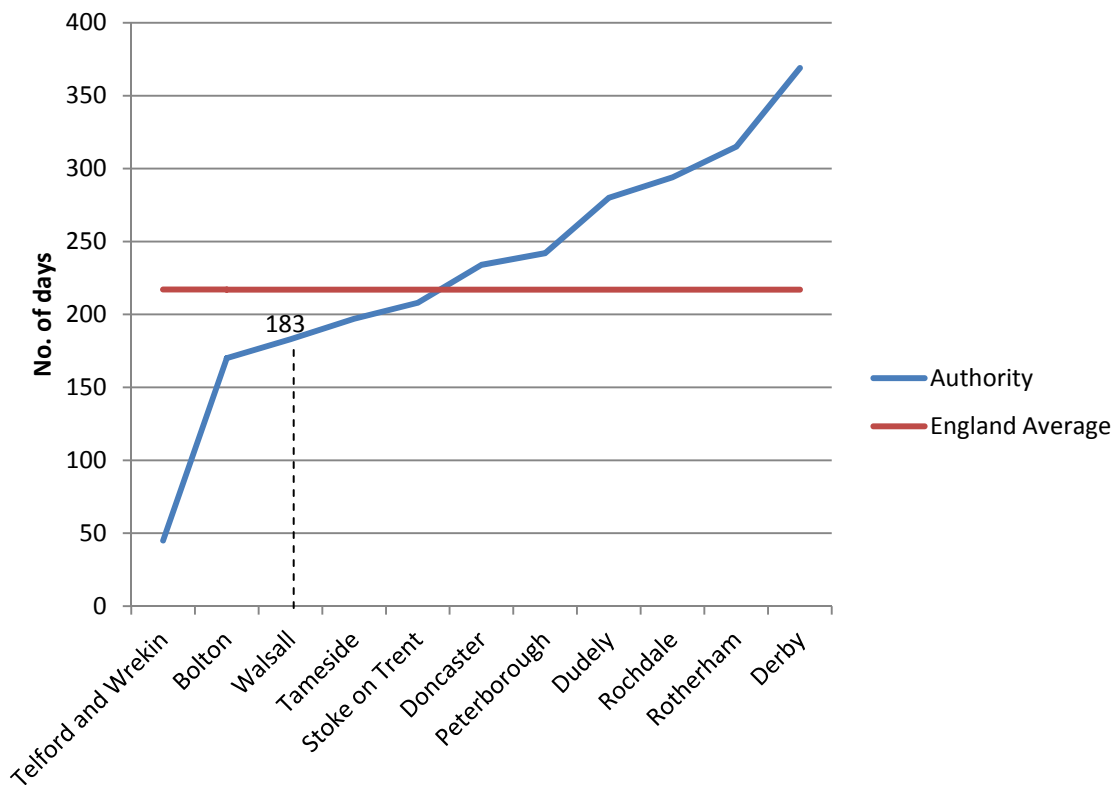
Given that there is such a significant difference, it is recommended:-

17. That work be undertaken with Telford and Wrekin to establish what enables them to be so efficient and apply any subsequent learning to Walsall.



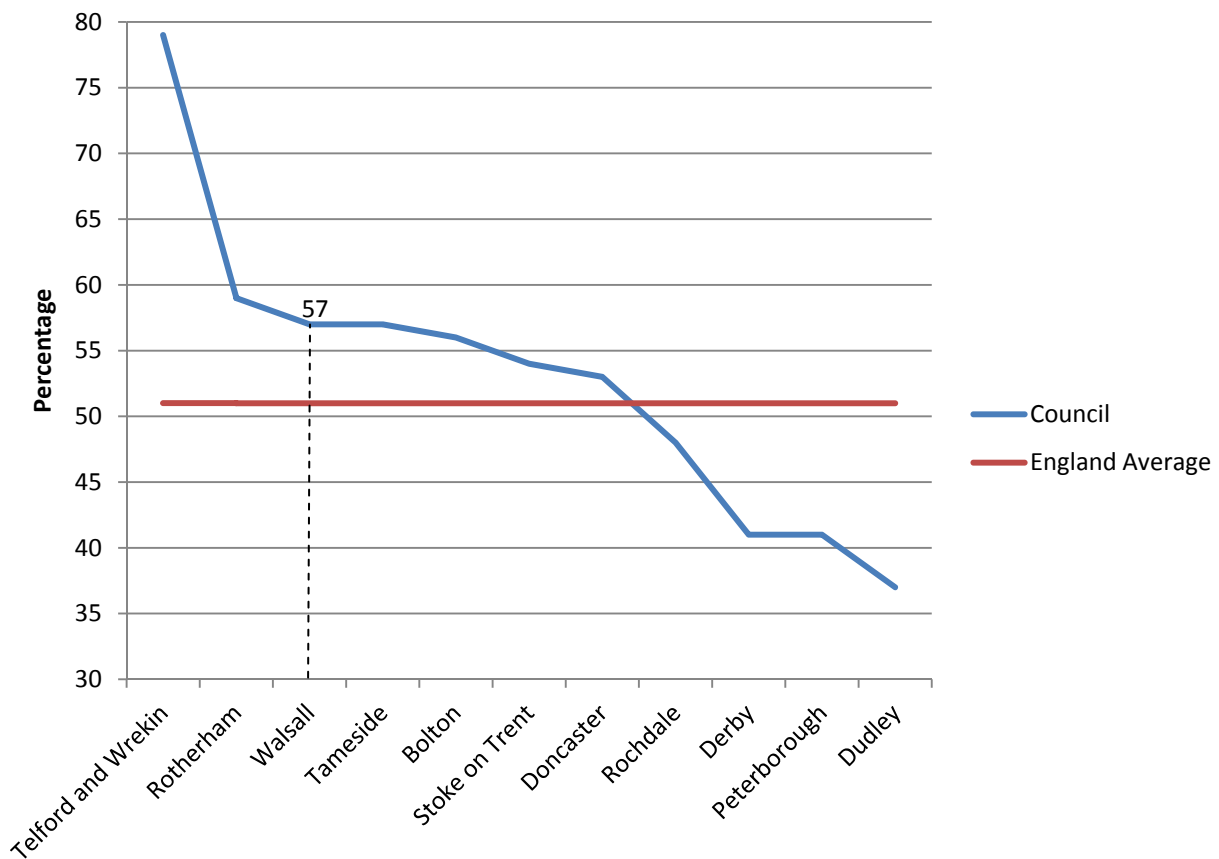
Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family

The chart below shows that Walsall performs well in terms of placing children once court authority has been approved. The England average is 217 and Walsall do so in shorter time, some 34 days quicker. Again Telford and Wrekin are class leaders placing a child on average in 45 days. The discrepancy between this statistic and the previous suggests that there may be a delay in terms of the courts which impacts negatively on the overall time taken from a child entering care to being adopted.



Percentage of children who wait **less than** 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family

This is another area in which Walsall is performing adequately with 57% of children moving in with their adoptive family within 18 months. Yet again, Telford and Wrekin top the table placing 79% of children with their adoptive family within 18 months.



Conclusion

Once in our care, it is crucial to find suitable long term homes which will provide a stable, supportive and caring environment as every breakdown and/or change in a child's journey can have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing. In order to make this happen we need to ensure that there are suitable placements both in terms of fostering and adoption.

We know that in 2012/13 there was a surplus of foster carers which assisted in ensuring that the right placements could be made, however, the landscape has now changed and every effort needs to be made to ensure that we, as an Authority, have sufficient carers and adopters in place to meet the varied needs of children and young people.

This is by no means an easy task. The recruitment and assessment team face competition from Independent Fostering and Adoption Agencies, the national economy has an impact on the decisions by people to adopt and, closer to home, the continued pressure of budget reductions exacerbates what is already a challenging task to recruit and retain our own foster carers.

It has to be acknowledged that whilst it is important that we have sufficient foster carers and adopters it is also vital that adequate checks are undertaken to ensure that the environment in which we place our children and young people are safe and supportive. In a time in which targets seem to rule, this is perhaps one area in which safe, rather than fast, is a better choice but that does not mean we should not ensure that the timescales are not improved.

It is important that Members are aware of their responsibilities as Corporate Parents for all children and young people in the councils care.

Recommended:-

- 18. All Members ensure that they attend training sessions to improve their understanding of their role as Corporate Parents**

Recommendations

That

1. ***That Members' of the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel revisit the Fostering and Adoption Service within 12 months to review the impact of the changes to the service following the service redesign, implementation of budget savings and introduction of MOSAIC;***
2. ***That the Panel consider nominating two members from its membership to become looked after children champions;***
3. ***That information on Fostering for Adoption is included on the 'Fostering in Walsall' Website;***

<http://fosteringinwalsall.co.uk/>
4. ***That a review of 'Staying Put' arrangements be undertaken to assess its potential impact on the availability of Fostering placements in Walsall;***
5. ***That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel to provide assurance that every effort is made to identify, through both the council and its partners processes, those children and young people that are in private fostering arrangements;***
6. ***That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel providing an update on the performance of the Fostering and Adoption Service's post re-structure in November, 2015;***
7. ***That Members of the Working Group revisit teams at Essington Lodge in September, 2015 to hold a further focus group;***
8. ***That an update on the work being undertaken to reduce the time taken to process foster carer applications be considered by the Panel in November, 2015;***
9. ***That details relating to the number of assessments carried out externally be considered by the Panel together with detail as to how much this process cost the authority and options to bring this service in house;***
10. ***That Foster Carers be consulted through the Foster Care Association to establish their thoughts on the service to ascertain where improvements are required to retain existing carers and attract new ones;***
11. ***That family and friends carers be contacted to ask for their feedback on the service after the restructure has been completed to ascertain whether the decision to remove the dedicated team has impacted upon the service they receive. The findings to be reported to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel in November, 2015.***

12. ***That the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel receive regular updates on the performance of the recruitment and retention of foster carers together with comparisons with other providers.***
13. ***That all Members of the Council raise awareness, particularly in terms of short break foster care, in their role as both community representatives and as corporate parents of the Walsall Foster Care offer and actively engage with and encourage interested parties to approach the fostering and adoption recruitment team;***
14. ***That the recruitment and assessment team visit other authorities to identify ways in which the process could safely be improved to ensure that the speed of the process improves and that an update report be submitted to Panel in November, 2015.***
15. ***That work be undertaken to establish whether support from the communications team will be sustainable in light of continued budget pressures and assurance be provided that there is a robust marketing strategy in place;***
16. ***That work be undertaken to ascertain if there is an alternative way to capture the reasons for resignation by existing foster carers;***
17. ***That work be undertaken with Telford and Wrekin to establish what enables them to be so efficient and apply any subsequent learning to Walsall;***
18. ***All Members ensure that they attend training sessions to improve their understanding of their role as Corporate Parents***

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Work Group Name:	Fostering and Adoption Working Group
Panel:	Children's Services
Municipal Year:	2014/15
Lead Member:	TBA
Lead Officer:	Lisa Preston
Scrutiny Officer:	Neil Picken
Membership:	P. Lane Councillor T. Jukes Councillor D. Shires Councillor K. Phillips

1. Context	<p>It is important that Members of the Children's and Young People Scrutiny Panel take the time to consider all matters within the remit of the Panel as this developed understanding leads to effective and improved Scrutiny.</p> <p>It is not possible to consider every aspect at Panel meetings in detail and so it is suggested that short term working groups be established (no more than one at any given time) and tasked with considering a number of topics in-depth.</p> <p>Fostering and Adoption was included within the work programme as an area which members wished to undertake a detailed review. Members are keen to review the service to ensure that it is effective and providing the best possible service for children and young people within Walsall.</p>
2. Objectives	<p>For Members to:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review resources and processes in place to facilitate and support fostering and adoption; • Review support available to adults, children and young people before, during and post placement; • Identify pressures/obstacles within the service and the potential impact of diminishing budgets on future service delivery; • Compare performance to statistical neighbours over a three year period; • Understand the national context; • Identify areas of good practice both in Walsall and other

	<p>authorities;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate an understanding of the legal framework in relation to fostering and adoption; • Identify barriers to fostering and adoption and explore initiatives in place to overcome these; • Consider conversion rates from potential adopters to approved adopters; • Establish the number of breakdowns in placements and understand the reasons for this and how learning is gathered to try to limit breakdowns from occurring; • identify potential areas for improvement; • Review the impact of recruitment and retention/marketing campaigns to establish what more can be done to attract foster carers and adopters; • Establish how effective the service is at providing on-going support for foster carers and adopters including how responsive it is at the point of initial expression of concern to prevent placement breakdown.
3.	Scope
	<p>Members to:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit and spend time with staff delivering services to develop an operational understanding of the service; • Visit other authorities to identify best practice; • Speak directly to service users to establish their view on existing service provision; • Meet with senior officers to establish and understand strategies in place to support and improve services for fostering and adoption; • Understand and consider the budget available for delivery of services and consider any potential impact budget reductions could have; • To request information as necessary to better understand the legal framework, key processes, governance arrangements and policies and procedures in place; • To review all information gathered both quantitative and qualitative to make recommendations for improvement where necessary.
4.	Equalities Implications
	<p>When considering each area Members will consider whether each area adequately delivers towards the six strands of equalities, namely:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Disability • Gender • Race • Religion or belief • Sexual orientation
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5. Who else will you want to take part?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff from Children's Services; • Foster Carers; • Adopters at various stages within the process; • Children and Young People.
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6. Timescales & Reporting Schedule

	<p>To report to the Children's & Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel on:</p> <p>Terms of reference – 25.11.14</p> <p>Final report – 24.02.15</p> <p>To report to – Cabinet – 18.03.15</p>
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7. Risk factors

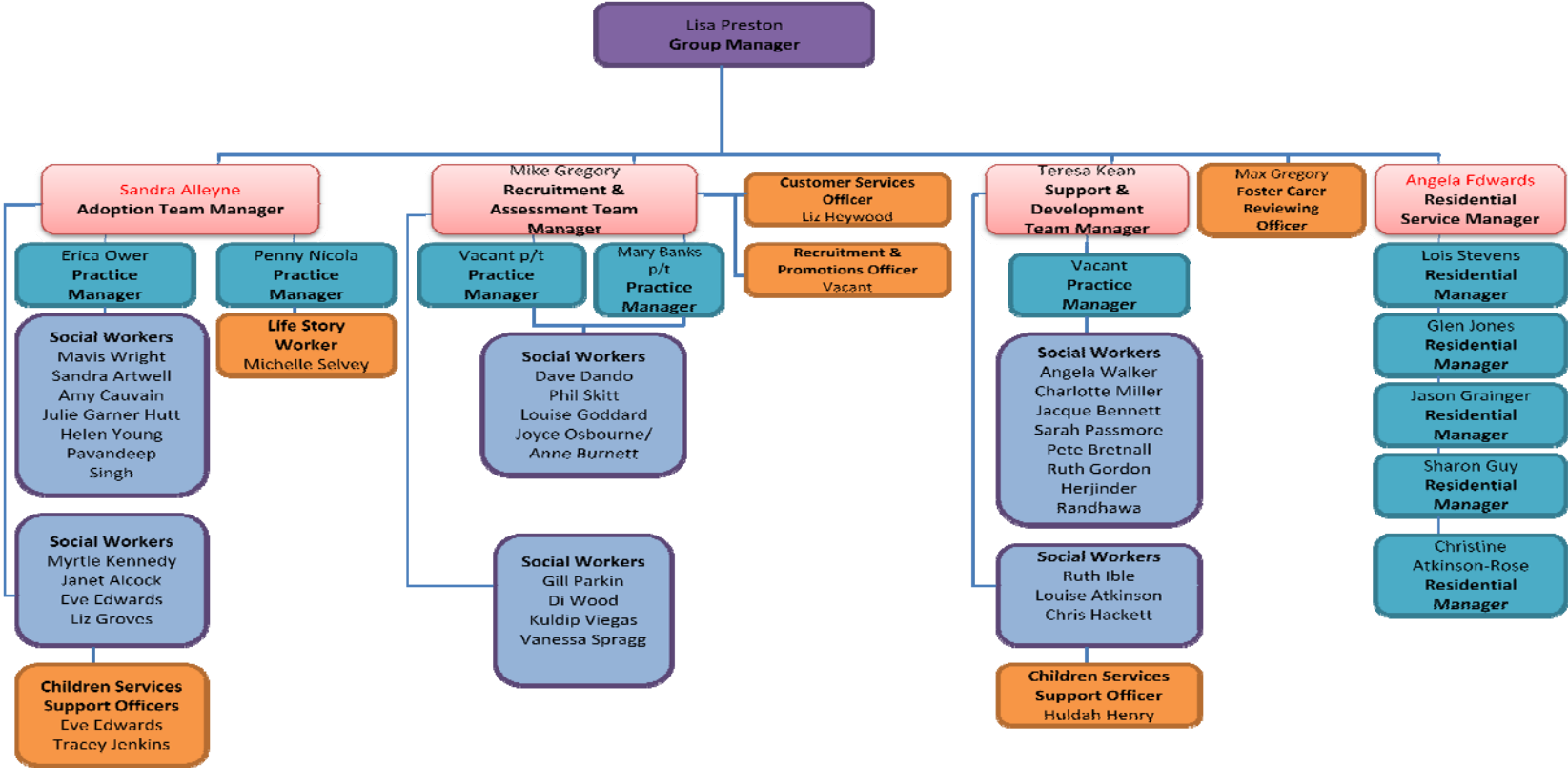
Risk	Likelihood	Measure to Resolve
Difficulties engaging with teams	Medium	Engage with teams early to make necessary arrangements
Completing all work in a timely manner	High	Advance schedule of meetings arranged. Consider interim report if necessary.

Date Agreed:		Date Updated:	
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Timetable: TBA subject to Members availability

DATE	ACTIVITY
w/c 8.12.14	Members to meet with senior management to receive an overview of services and budget arrangements/pressures.
w/c 15.12.14	Data familiarisation
w/c 12.01.15	Members to meet with frontline staff and service users
w/c 19.01.15	Members to meet with frontline staff and service users
w/c 26.01.15	Members to visit neighbouring Authority to discuss processes in relation to Fostering and Adoption
w/c 02.02.15	Members to draw together findings and draft final report
24.02.15	Final Report to Scrutiny Panel
18.03.15	Final Report to Cabinet

Provider Services



February 2015

Appendix 3

Overview from Provider Services

Fostering

Timeliness of assessments

Members have raised some questions and concerns about the length of the process for some foster care assessments. There clearly has to be sufficient time to enable the thorough and careful examination needed, while recognising that we must not lose the commitment of the applicants to working with the Council. Maintaining a positive impression is important in attracting and retaining applicants. We are pleased to say that the indications are that people are choosing Walsall over other options; this year we have had two cases in which carers have transferred to us from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), and another from a process already begun in another local authority.

The average figures to become a foster carer for each of the last two years for which we have data are:

2012-13 : 450 days

2013-14 : 383 days

This data is generated from IT system and takes some time to extract. As a result, we do not yet have the 2014-15 figure. When it is calculated, we will provide some additional data to enrich the picture; specifically some indication of the range of results - the shortest and longest assessments. Those results can then be reported to Scrutiny Committee when the progress on recommendations is reported.

However, there are occasions when the process takes longer than we would expect or desire. Recent examples of issues that have contributed to delay include:

- Bereavement within the family;
- Serious illness of the applicants;
- Difficulties in engaging foster carers' (adult) children in the assessment process.
- The need to address an applicant's poor reading and writing skills before an assessment could proceed.

Increasing internal fostering capacity

The target this year has been set at 20 new approved foster carers. This was always going to be an ambitious target at a time when the service was completing a restructure.

We currently have 5 new approvals and 18 assessments in progress.

There is an additional "Skills to Foster" course starting in September; it is possible there may be one or two additional families approved within this time period or they will begin to count towards 2016-17 approvals.

Improvements to be made

The time taken to complete an assessment in our service is greater than is the case for Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). We do have to recognise that IFAs operate differently to the Local Authority. For example, we believe that they would not consider people who might be complex to assess and therefore take more time. For example, we currently have a couple in our assessment process that who are waiting for their (dangerous) dog to pass away . This is the right and fair thing to do, however, it will push our average time up significantly.

Despite such issues we are aiming to reduce the time to assess applicants to between 210 and 240 days, over this year and next. To make this more “real” our annual performance appraisal this year has included the setting of individual targets for each worker.

In order to work toward that there are a number of measures which we will be introducing to improve on timeliness and also numbers of carers approved. These include:-

- A tracking system to monitor compliance with stage 1 and stage 2. Officers will then address directly the reasons for delay that this reveals.
- A Recruitment and Promotions worker will start in October 2015, this will enable the service to fully embed its Recruitment Strategy.
- A spend to save proposal has recently been agreed to provide additional assessment capacity and also to address other pressures within the service so that the linking to family and friend carers can be moved to the support and development team which will move the focus back to mainstream assessments.
- The re-structure has brought new people into the team and there is a renewed energy and emphasis on meeting timescales and a new mix of skill and experience;
- The new information management system (Mosaic) is now embedded and all assessment activity is reflected so that the process is now much more transparent.

Adoption

Timeliness

The team manager has continued to monitor and track the early stage of an application, during which statutory and DBS police checks are completed. The adoption preparation training is also attended. If checks are completed and we are satisfied with the responses and outcomes the family are offered the opportunity to progress onto stage 2 of the adoption process. The full assessment should be completed within 4 months. Stages 1 and 2 should be presented to panel within a 6 month period. If the timescale is not met, clear reasons have to be presented to

panel. Walsall Adoption Social workers have worked hard to comply with these timescales and the majority of assessments presented to panel have been completed within the required timescales as outlined above. With the implementation of a new IT system there has been some delay in transferring this process into the new system.

Of those approved adoptive families during 2014-15, most were completed in accordance with prescribed statutory timescales. So far in this period we have approved 3 adoptive families which were all completed within the required timescale.

Increasing adoption capacity

There is a view shared by our Black Country colleagues that, following the intense government focus on adoption, that more enquiries have been generated (though it may be that not all of those enquiries received will convert into an approved adoptive family).

During 2014-15, 33 referrals were received into Walsall from Adoption in the Black Country (ABC). Of these 16 families have either withdrawn or were deemed unsuitable to progress to the stage 2 assessment. Many of the reasons families withdrew from the process were associated with family issues which had not been shared with social workers during their attendance at the information evening. These are varied and each is understandable and to be respected. Many of them involve the revealing of historical matters that applicants had not previously shared with each other. In other case the very process itself leads people to reconsider their motivation for adoption.

Of the 33 families that applied, 11 have been approved, of whom 7 have already been matched with children and 4 families are pursuing links with Walsall children. The remaining 6 families from the 33 will be presented to panel before December 2015. There are currently an additional 10 new referrals that are all in stage 1 or stage 2 of the assessment process. It is envisaged that these families will also be presented to panel before the end of March 16.

Improvements to be made

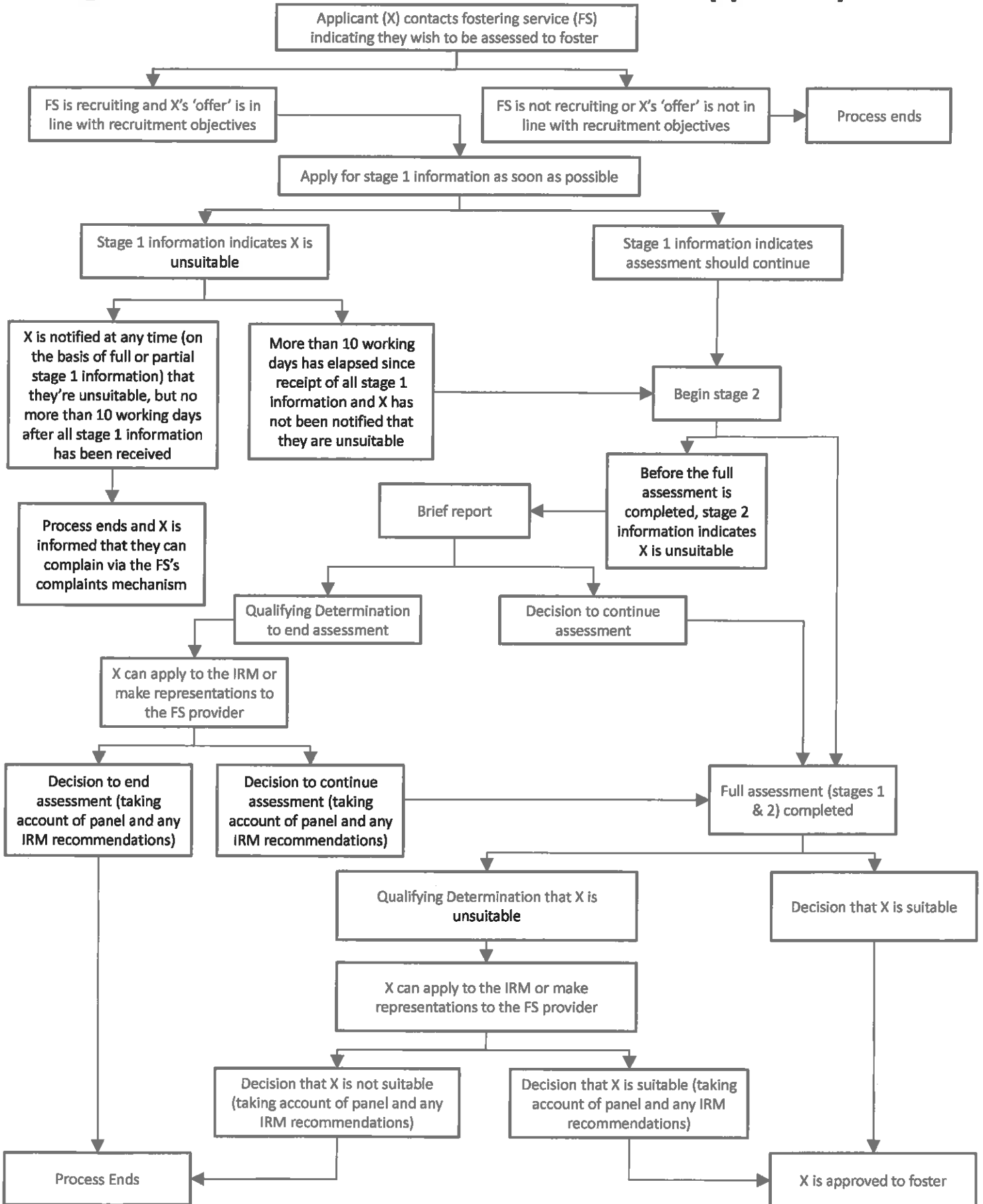
- Adoption Focus, a voluntary adoption agency, has now joined ABC with a view to providing placements for 'harder to place' children. This will also form part of a wider regional discussion regarding 'Regionalising Adoption', which now includes Telford and Shropshire. It is likely that during the next 12-18 months Walsall will become part of a regional adoption agency where all assessment activity is centralised and adopters are approved for a wider pool of children. This will support improvements in adopter approval timescales but more importantly timeliness for children.
- A spend to save proposal has resulted in the allocation of additional resources to offer post order support, this will free up further assessment capacity within the service.

- The Adoption Leadership board require quarterly returns on timeliness for assessments and for children. This enables the manager to have up to date statistics regarding progression of casework.

Author

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Stages 1 and 2: Foster carer assessment & approval process



NB - This diagram illustrates how stages 1 & 2 of the assessment process fit together. It is **not** intended to cover all actions a FS must undertake as part of the process - FSs must refer to the regulations and statutory guidance for this information. It should be noted that at any point in the process applicants (1) can withdraw, in which case the process ends; and (2) can complain to the FS (and must be informed of their right to do so if they are turned down in stage 1).