

Cabinet – 21 October 2009

Walsall Adoption Service Annual Report

Portfolio: Councillor Walker, Children's services

Service: Children's Services

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary of report

- 1.1 It is a requirement of the National Minimum Standards for Local Adoption Services (England) 2003, that the Council executive receives written reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency, every six months. The Adoption Service report for the period April 2008 to March 2009, found at **Appendix 1**, highlights the progress of the adoption service within this period.
- 1.2 Walsall adoption service made good progress towards meeting its annual targets set for March 2009. Key successes are the re-structuring of the adoption service, implementation of all the key requirements and recommendations from the Ofsted inspection of the adoption service in December 2007, and an increase in the numbers of children matched and placed for adoption. The outcome of the inspection was a judgement of "satisfactory" and the service is aiming to be judged as "good" in the next inspection, which is scheduled for an unspecified date beyond April 2010.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is recommended to consider the contents of this report which describes the progress of Walsall adoption service, for the period April 2008 to March 2009
- 2.2 Cabinet is recommended to note key management activity and service outcomes contained within this annual adoption service report.
- 2.3 Cabinet extends thanks and appreciation to the members of the Adoption Panel for their hard work and commitment to the children of Walsall.

3. Background information

- 3.1 The report summarises the work of Walsall Children's Services adoption service from April 2008 to March 2009.
- 3.2 All the requirements and recommendations of the inspection in December 2007 have been fully implemented within this period.
- 3.3 The adoption service has been re-structured to integrate the adoption support functions into the work of the adoption team. This function was previously part of the remit of the permanency team. There is clear evidence of improved adoption support services as a result of this change, in that there have been no placement disruptions in families receiving an adoption support service, there have been improvements in securing contact arrangements and the number of contact arrangements that are supported has increased.
- 3.4 The report, found at **Appendix 1**, highlights the recruitment and training of adopters and the role provided by the Black Country Consortium (Adoption across the Black Country – ABC) partnership. This partnership has secured successful adoption placements for children and adoptive families from the Black Country Local Authorities (LA). The number of enquiries received during this period has remained high and at the same level as last year. This has culminated in there being 11 families in assessment in March 2009. Analysis of outcomes shows that 14 adoptive families were approved between April and March 2009 as a result of this activity 12 families were white British, one dual heritage and one single black Caribbean adopter. This is a reduction of 6 compared to the previous year and is a direct result of a regional drop in applications to the ABC partnership reflecting the national trend in the recruitment of adopters.
- 3.5 There has been an increase in the numbers of children matched and placed for adoption during this period, 34, compared with 26 for the previous year. Although there was a drop in the number of adoption orders made, 26 compared with 38 for the previous year, (which is confirmed in regional trends), the increase in the number of children placed between September 2008 and March 2009 means that progress in achieving the target for the number of adoption orders granted by March 2010 has successfully been made.
- 3.6 Adopters themselves attend panel for their approval and also attend when they are matched with children and find this a positive experience. The medical and legal advisors continue to support the activity of the panel by providing relevant advice and training.
- 3.7 The adoption panel is effective and members regularly receive information and guidance in relation to key issues in adoption, trends, policies, procedures and new legislation.
- 3.8 Partnership working and networking continues to develop for adoption and adoption support, within the Black Country Consortium, Adoption UK, Adoption Support across the West Midlands and the Birth Parents Advocacy Service.

4. Resource considerations

- 4.1 **Financial:** The financial implications for the council for managing effectiveness, outcomes for children and adoption agency services, are considered during the annual budget setting process and are in line with the medium term financial plan.
- 4.2 **Legal:** The report satisfies the requirement under standard 17(3) of the National Adoption Minimum Standards, which derive from sections 23(1) and 49(1) of the Care Standards Act 2000, for the Council Executive to receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the services of the adoption agency, in order to monitor progress.
- 4.3 **Staffing:** The re-alignment of the Adoption Support Service was achieved within the existing staffing assignment and staff are able to utilise their extensive knowledge and skills to improve service delivery.

5. Citizen impact

5. The progress of the adoption service in providing services to Walsall children requiring adoption, birth families and adoptive families, is an integral aspect of the report found at **appendix 1**. The continued developments have ensured improved performance, positively impacting on key indicators for local citizens. The improvements will ensure that more looked after children can be placed with suitable adoptive carers, and develop secure attachments in a permanent home. This is an integral aspect of the Corporate Parenting Strategy 2009/2010.

6. Community safety

There are no specific issues that impact on community safety arising from this report.

7. Environmental impact

There are no specific issues that impact upon the environment from this report.

8. Performance and risk management issues

- 8.1 **Risk:** The key risks emerging from the Adoption Service Report (**Appendix 1**) include securing effective management systems to ensure that the target for the number of children adopted in the next period, 09/10(10%) is met .The report also refers to strategies to recruit more Walsall families for children with complex needs and those from specific religious and cultural backgrounds.

Measures to respond positively to these risks are integral to the Corporate Parenting Strategy and its risk register, which covers the priorities and work of the adoption service. This particularly relates to good management planning in anticipation of the forthcoming inspection of the service by Ofsted expected from April 2010.

- 8.2 Performance management:** Continued high performance is achieved through effective recruitment, assessment, training and support of a wide range of adoptive parents, and through the provision of adoption support services to adopted children and adults and birth parents. In Walsall this is now achieved through an integrated adoption service with the adoption support service fully integrated within the adoption team.

The adoption service impacts on three key performance indicators. The first is the number of children adopted during the year. The 2008/9 target was 11% but the outturn was 8.1 % (not met). Current information indicates that the target for 09/10 of 10% will be met. The second relates to the stability of children placed for adoption. The target was 80.4% and the outturn was 92.3% (exceeded). The third indicator is the numbers of children placed for adoption or fostering, the target was 81.7% and the outturn was 83.1 % (exceeded). Additionally, the provision of high quality adoption placements will contribute to the Every Child Matters Outcomes.

9. Equality implications

These continued improvements will ensure that looked after children can be placed with suitable adoptive carers within timescales, which meet their long term needs and in a manner, which minimises the risk of placement breakdown. The report specifically reports on the number of children adopted in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and sibling group matches placements secured for children.

10. Consultation

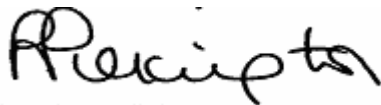
The annual reporting process has been informed by consultation and feedback from relevant stakeholders; most importantly adoptive children, adoptive parents and adoption panel members. This report is a public document, which can be accessed by anyone wishing to do so, and will be available on the council website.

Background papers

Annual Report (Appendix 1)

Author

Kay Child
Interim Assistant Director
☎ 01922 652756
✉ childk@walsall.gov.uk



Pauline Pilkington
Executive Director
8 October 2009



Councillor Rachel Walker
Portfolio holder
8 October 2009



Walsall Council

Children's Services

ADOPTION SERVICE REPORT

2008/2009

**Author: Lisa Preston
Adoption Service Manager and Professional
Adviser to Walsall Adoption Panel**

1 Introduction

This report details the work of Walsall MBC Adoption Service from April 2008 to March 2009.

It has been a steady but progressive year for the Adoption Service. There was a significant drop in the number of adoption orders made from 43 to 26, this will be explored in more detail further on in the report. There was however, towards the end of the period a rise in the numbers of children matched and placed with adopters, which will have a direct impact on the adoption statistics for 2009-2010.

The most significant development within the service has been the joining up of the adoption support service with the adoption team and being appropriately re-titled Walsall Adoption Service. This move happened on the 1st July 2008.

The partnerships with our neighbouring agencies through Adoption in the Black Country, Adoption Support and Adoption UK also continue to develop and provide vital services on behalf of Walsall MBC.

2 Regional Developments

Walsall continues to be a member of the WMRFPC, along with 13 other West Midlands Local Authorities, and 1 voluntary agency, namely adoption focus.

Of the 32 matches made this year, three were with Consortium families whilst a large proportion of the children were either placed within Walsall approved families or were placed country wide due to their assessed placement needs.

The Consortium continues to meet on a bi-monthly basis and discusses and develops policy, procedural and practice issues.

3 Adoption Support

Walsall continues to purchase a service from Adoption Support across the West Midlands, which, in accordance with our current service level agreements offers up to 4 sessions to anyone living in the Walsall Borough, who is affected by adoption (more sessions can be offered on a negotiated basis). They also offer activity days for adopted children, including an Easter and spring camping holiday.

The Adoption Support Service level agreement has been extended to provide an independent counselling support and advice service for birth relatives.

4 Adoption UK

The partnership between Adoption UK and Walsall MBC continues to grow. The service level agreement, commissioned jointly with the other Black County agencies has extended the partnership with Adoption UK, which now provides support, information, advice and encouragement to adopters, carers and practitioners as follows:

- Telephone Helpline, offering up to date information on all aspects of adoption and the adoption process
- Local Support Groups, run by adoptive parents, regular meeting and events, both locally and nationwide
- Adoption Today Magazine, 10 editions per year

- Information Leaflets and Publications
- Contact Networks, databases of over 800 adoptive parents willing to speak to others about specific aspects of adoption
- Lending Library, over 400 books and videos
- Adoption UK's on-line community inter-active website
- Training Courses, for parents and practitioners, including "A Piece of Cake" training
- Buddy Schemes

The Buddy scheme which was introduced by Adoption UK in the latter part of 2006 continues to promote a level of support to new adoptive parents. The take up of the service to date has been relatively low. In order to address this Adoption UK are making more attempts to engage with adopters through local support groups and sharing information with them about the benefits of the Buddy scheme.

Walsall MBC has continued to have an increase in its membership of Adoption UK as all newly approved Adopters are automatically given one year's free membership to Adoption UK; which includes adopters receiving up to date information on new research and development in the arena of adoption. All adopters, once members are invited to Adoption UK support group meetings.

Adoption UK runs quarterly support groups at the Village Hotel in Walsall, approved adopters from Walsall and Wolverhampton are invited as are other approved adopters who subscribe to Adoption UK who also live within close proximity to Walsall and surrounding areas. The groups give adopters the opportunity to meet with other adopters at all stages of the process; it also facilitates the use of outside speakers to advice on specialist areas of adoption.

5 Black Country Consortium

Adoption in the Black Country is now in its 6th year and the partnership between the four authorities involved continues to grow from strength to strength.

The partnership has continued to provide a shared annual programme of adoption preparation training, 8 courses were being facilitated per annum, each authority providing 2 courses. Feedback from attendees and facilitators has always indicated the course is positively received by prospective adopters. Social workers continue to network effectively to ensure the course reflects any new changes to law, policy and practice. During 2008-09 there was a regional drop in the number of prospective applicants coming forward to adopt, as a result of this a number of courses had to be cancelled. This created additional pressure for all four authorities as much preparation time is needed to organise and facilitate the running of a training course.

To try and address the issue, the programme for training has now changed to ensure that a course is now run every two months, and authorities have agreed to run the course even with low numbers to ensure equity of provision across the four authorities.

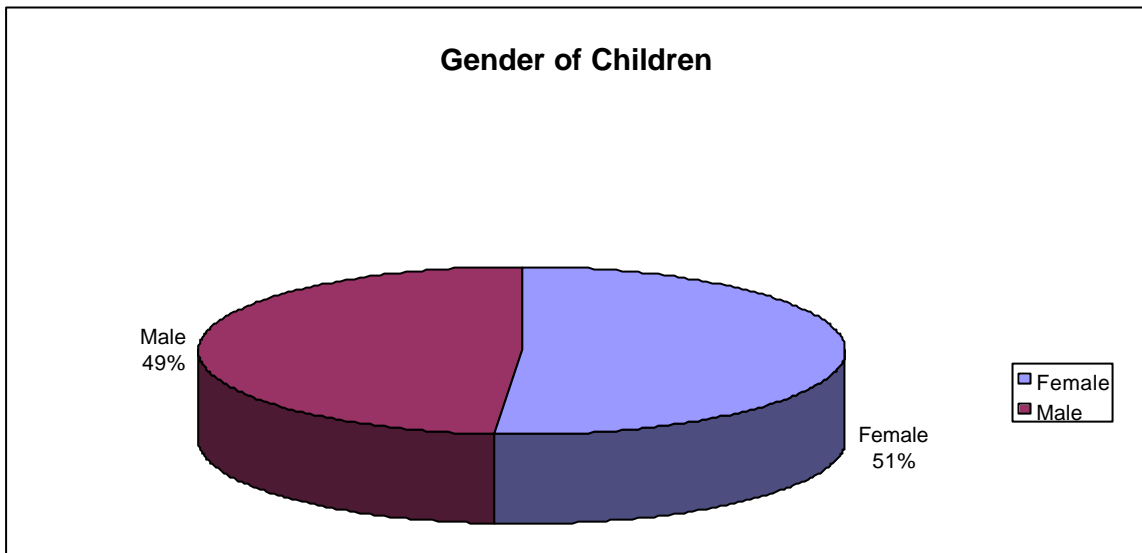
'Meet the Children' Events continue to prove effective as a means of placing children for adoption. The events are organised to try and meet the needs of older more complex children, children who are part of sibling groups and children from minority ethnic backgrounds by raising their profile with approved adopters. Videos of the children, which are now professionally edited, are shown as is their artwork and profile needs. This year only one event ran as opposed to two due to the departure of the marketing officer halfway through the year. A high number of Walsall children were featured and a high number of Walsall adopters attended, in total there are four potential matches within the consortium as a result of the event.

Since Adoption in the Black Country was first launched, the number of enquiries has increased year on year. Integrated strategic campaigns have resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of adoption enquiries. As the project and the brand have become more established results have increased. The previous three years saw a steady increase in the number of referrals received and the conversion rate to approved adopters has improved year on year. However, with the departure of the marketing officer in November 07 the numbers of referrals received did drop as there was a short period of time whereby the service was staffed by a variety of people from the four authorities and no one person taking overall charge of events or recruitment activity. The new marketing officer came into post on June 2008 and as anticipated the number of enquiries and subsequent referrals has begun to increase. During the period 08-09 there was a total of 134 enquiries, which resulted in 92 referrals onto partner agencies.

7 Number of children suitable to be placed for adoption April 08 – March 09

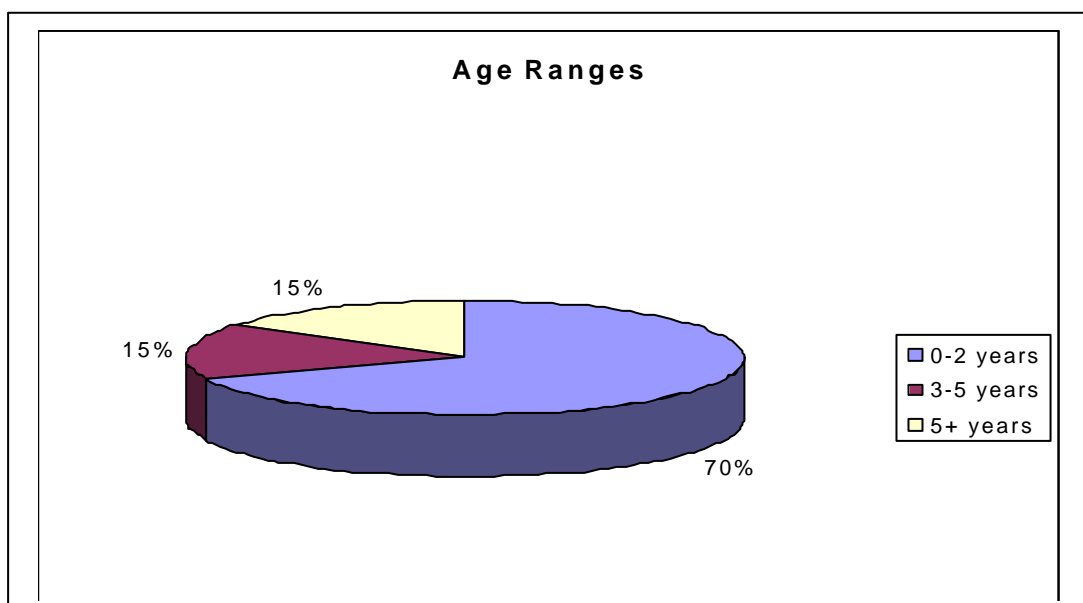
During April 08 to March 09 a total of 39 children were suitable to be placed for adoption.

Unlike previous years where we have had significantly more boys than girls, this year there has been a more even split with regard to gender, with 20 girls and 19 boys being suitable to be placed for adoption.



Female	20
Male	19

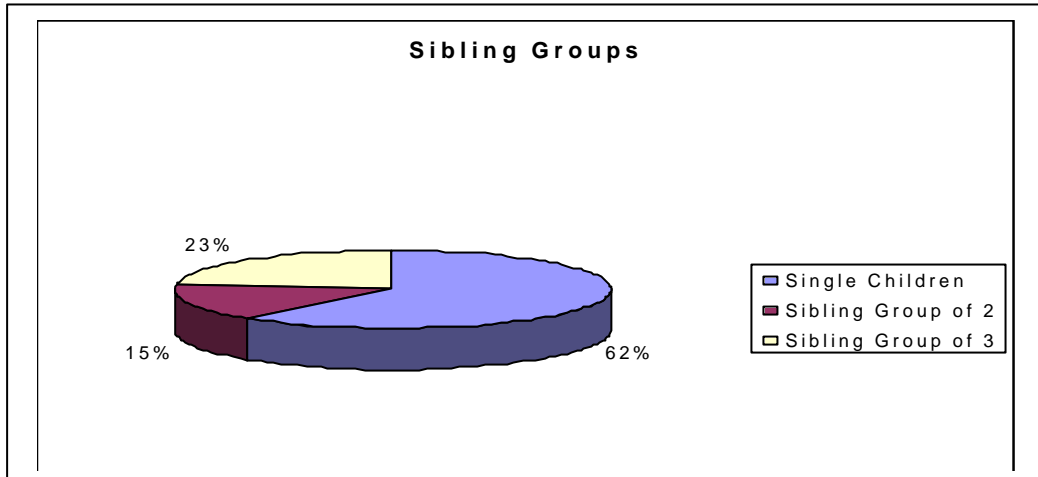
The majority of those children requiring adoption in Walsall continue to be aged 2 and under, although there was an increase in the number of older children being considered suitable for adoption, in particular those aged over 5. Again, this is reflective of the national picture where the average age of children adopted is 4yrs 2 months (CSCI 06)



0-2 Years	27
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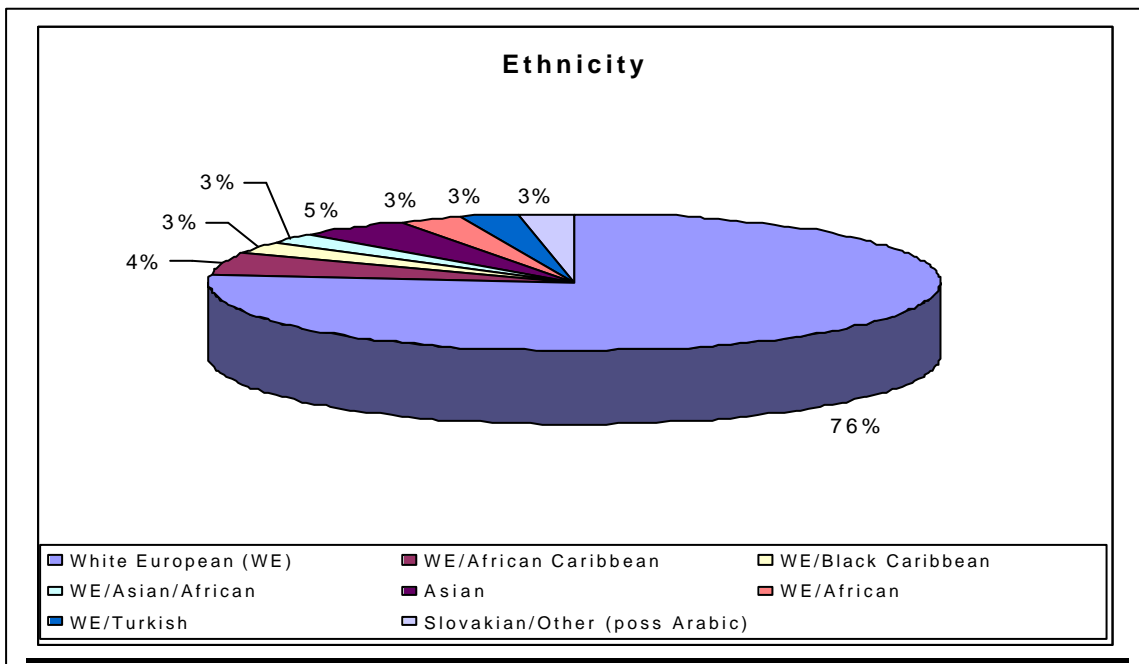
3-5 Years	6
5+ years	6

There continues to be a large number of single children needing adoptive placements. However, there are still a number of sibling groups requiring adoptive placements; this continues to be challenge not only for Walsall but nationwide as the numbers of families coming forward to adopt sibling groups is still relatively low.



Single Children		24 children
Sibling Group of 2	3	6 children
Sibling Group of 3	3	9 children

This year has seen another steady increase in the number of black, dual heritage and multi heritage children needing adoptive placements. Last year's figures indicate that 28% of children were either, Black, Asian or Dual heritage, this year this figure has risen to 39%, which includes some children of multi ethnic origin. Again, this presents a particular challenge not only to Walsall but nationally as the numbers of Black, Asian and Dual Heritage children far outweigh the number of adopters within similar ethnic backgrounds who can meet the needs of these children.



White European	30
Dual Heritage White European /African Caribbean	2

Dual Heritage White European/Black Caribbean	1
Dual Heritage White/Asian/African	1
Asian Background	2
Mixed Heritage White European/Asian/African	1
Dual Heritage White European/Turkish	1
Dual Heritage Slovakian/Other (possibly Arabic)	1

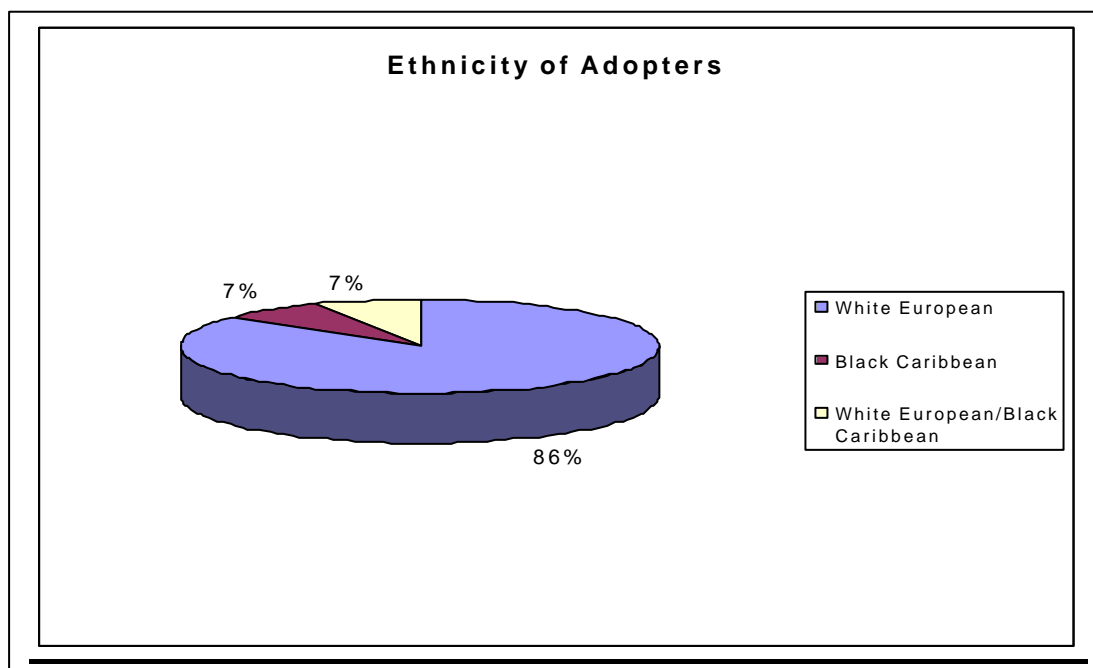
8 Children Adopted 2008/2009

Between April 2008 and March 2009, 34 children were placed for adoption; this is an increase in last year's figure of 26. In total there were 26 adoption orders made during this period of time, which is a significant drop in last year's figure of 38. The number of adoption orders is reflective of the number of children of children placed for adoption in the previous year, this figure was 26. As the number of children placed for adoption increased in the period 08-09, there will be an increase in the number of adoption orders made during the period 09-10.

Of the 26 children adopted, 23 were placed for adoption within 12 months of the agency deciding that the child should be placed for adoption. This gives a success rate of 88%, which is a huge improvement on last years 29%.

9 Adopters

14 prospective adoptive families were presented for approval; this is a drop in last year's figure of 20 families. However, this drop in the number of approved families is as a direct result of the regional drop in applications to the Adoption in the Black Country project, some of which is attributable to the lack of a marketing officer for a period of time. All 14 families presented were approved. Of the approved families, 12 were white British; one was a dual heritage family and one a single black Caribbean adopter.

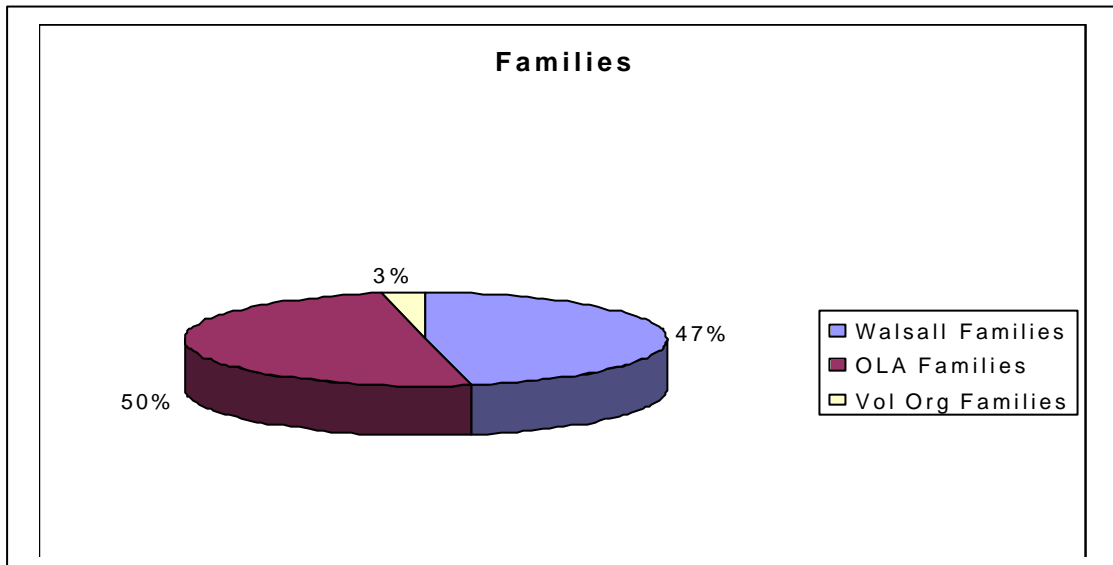


White European	12
Black Caribbean	1

10 Children Matched 2007-2008

Panel recommended 32 matches from April 2008 to March 2009 in comparison to 30 for the previous year.

15 matches were made with Walsall approved families and 17 with inter-agency families. Of the remaining 17 matches, the vast majority were other local authority approved adopters. The reasons for the high number of inter-agency placements were the children's diverse racial and cultural background, the number of children with complex needs and those within sibling groups.



Walsall Families	15
Other LA Families	16
Vol Org Families	1

The recruitment strategy in Walsall continues to be;

'The Adoption Team will consider white/European families who could preferably take 2 or more children of Pre School or school age. We will also consider those who can take 1 child, but this should be children of up to 5 years of age.'

'For families able to meet the needs of dual heritage, black or Asian children, we would positively consider these families who can consider 1 or 2 children aged 0-3 and over. We especially have children of Caribbean/White and Asian/White heritage.'

'Families expressing an interest in disabled children should be responded to positively regardless of the age or ethnicity of the child.'

However, in recent months Walsall have begun to take on some families who only want to take one child 0-3 as consistently over the last few years the majority of our children requiring adoptive placements are aged less than 3 years.

11 Adopters Attending Panel

Of all the matches presented to adoption panel all but one family attended, the reason for their absence was them being stranded on a local motorway following an accident. Adopters continue to give us positive feedback about their experience of attending adoption panel.

12 Disruption Following Placement

Unfortunately, 1 placement disrupted in the period April 2008 to March 2009.

The disruption report was completed and was presented to panel and lessons have been learnt by all involved. These include similar themes to other disrupted adoption placements in recent years, which include the particular difficulties in the placement of older children as part of a sibling group; it became apparent in this case the needs of the older child were not fully known and her pre-placement experiences were far greater than initially anticipated. What was also apparent in the disruption of placement was that despite rigorous adoption assessments the adoptive mother seemed unprepared for the life changes that having children placed would bring. The family were from a voluntary adoption agency and as such they received support from their own link worker. With regard to the children, family finding for adoption ceased, there is now a plan for the children to remain in long term foster placement due to their significant issues in forming a relationship with a 'forever family'. With regard to changes to practice, Child Appreciation Days are now undertaken for all children 18 months and older in an attempt to better prepare adopters for the realities of caring for a child. The feedback from adopters so far has been very positive. The introduction of the new Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) will also assist in enabling families to consider carefully what adoption will bring to their family and assist social workers in assessing adopters to view adoption as a life long process.

13 The Role of Medical Adviser

The medical adviser undertakes a key function in the work of panel. Indeed this is the only membership that is not subject to tenure.

Dr Vidya Rao is now into the sixth year as medical adviser. Dr Rao has continued to experience some problems with social workers providing all the necessary paperwork for adoption medicals and asked for this to be addressed by the agency. As a result of workshops being run with social workers, the quality and timeliness of paperwork submission has improved.

14 Significant Issues and Developments Affecting Legal Services

Panel has received advice and assistance from Legal Services throughout from Lynn Levesley. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 continues to impact significantly upon the court process. There continues to be some legal challenges brought against the making of Placement Orders from birth family relatives.

The introduction of the Public Law Outline; which came into effect on the 1st May 2008, has seen a number of changes. The most significant one being the reduced amount of time available, following presentation to adoption panel for family finding activity. Once children receive their adoption decision, the final hearing is scheduled to take place shortly after, hence the need for timely and structured family finding. Whilst this is improving outcomes for children, it does present a particular challenge for adoption social workers as the need to identify a suitable family in a very short time

scale has increased dramatically, this therefore adds to the overall pressure on the service.

16 Good Practice Requirements

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced new requirements to be monitored by panel. The monitoring forms which were designed to take into account the National Minimum standards for adoption tell us the following;

Prospective adopter's assessments

- Prospective Adopters Reports – **64%** of assessments were completed within the required 8 month timescales
- For the **36%** that did not meet the timescales relevant reasons given were – two had outstanding CRB checks, two had outstanding issues to be worked through prior to presentation to panel and one who was coming forward for a specific match experienced a delay on the care planning for the child.

Best interest decisions

- **59%** of children who were presented to panel had their permanence plan ratified at the 4 month review. The remaining **41%** did not have their permanence plan ratified at the 4 month review due to outstanding assessments of birth family members. This is a significant drop to last year's figure of **84%**, the main reason for this significant drop has been the impact of the PLO and the need to have all assessments completed prior to the initiation of proceedings, which therefore delays the requirement to consider permanence at the 4 month review.
- **68%** of children were presented to panel within 2 months of the 4 month review. For the remaining **32%** who did not meet the timescales, reasons cited were excessive workloads and outstanding assessments.

Children's wishes and feeling be recorded

- Of the 39 children presented to panel, **6** children had their views clearly represented within their Child's Permanence Report, which represents **15%**. 33 children (**85%**) did not have their views recorded. However, of these remaining 33, the vast majority were young children (mostly babies under the age of 2 years).

Parents being given the opportunity to give their account of events and to see and comment on what has been written about them

- **56%** of parents were given the opportunity to give their account of events, which was then recorded in the Child's Permanence Report.
- **44%** of birth parents did not have sight of the reports presented. Reasons cited were parents' non co operation and parents' whereabouts unknown.

Adoption support plans

- Similarly to 2007/2008, **100%** of adoption support plans were presented to panel; they continued to be of a good standard.

Child's Permanence Reports

- Panel members have continued to express concern throughout the year regarding the quality of the Child's Permanence Reports being presented to panel. In order to address this, the Adoption Team have run three workshops for Corporate Parenting social workers looking at the quality of Child's Permanence Reports and how to improve the quality. The process for submission of panel papers has also been amended to allow sufficient time for quality assurance of all panel paperwork which also then gives time to social workers to make required amendments. If after following this Panel are still

unhappy with the quality or content of the paperwork, Panel have agreed that whilst they will continue to hear the item, they will defer their recommendation until the next available panel, during which time the Child's Permanence Reports will have been up-dated and presented to Lisa Preston, Professional Adviser to the panel, to quality assure them.

Matches

- **59%** of children were matched within 6 months of either the court or adoption panel recommending that they were suitable to be placed for adoption. Reasons cited for the **41%** who did not meet the required standard were for children with more complex needs, those in need of sibling placements, those of dual heritage and those whose assessments of birth family members were not complete.
- However, in comparison, **94%** of children were matched within 12 months of adoption panel recommending that they were suitable to be placed for adoption.

17 Adoption Panel Functions

The following information remains unchanged from the Annual Report of 2007/2008.

- Tenure for all members, with the exception of the medical adviser, has been extended to 3 consecutive terms, each with duration of 3 years.
- Independent panel chair
- New structure to reports presented ;child permanence report ;prospective adopters report; adoption placement report
- Panel quoracy is now 5 members previously this was 6 members
- No 'in principal' recommendations can be made.
- Considering the plan for the child is now referred to as 'whether a child is suitable to be placed for adoption'.
- Suitability of prospective adopters – when recommending the suitability of prospective adopters panel can only advise regarding numbers of children their ages, genders and background factors prospective adopters can consider. (This excludes inter-country adoption approvals)
- Brief reports should be presented to panel where following an application the assessing social worker is not minded to recommend approval. Applicants can access the independent review mechanism.
- Prospective adopters have 40 days (previously 28 days) to decide whether to accept a decision made by the agency, or consider making representations to the agency OR apply to the independent review mechanism, they can't do both.
- Panel will monitor arrangements for informing the prospective adopters, the child and, where appropriate, the parents of panel's recommendation and decision.

18 Attendance and Performance

At the time of writing this report in May 2009, all panel members are in the process of having their performance reviewed for the second time.

Regular attendance is clearly one the most important objectives which will require monitoring. This year the minimum attendance requirement of 75% was fulfilled by 7 of the 11 panel members involved during the year.

For the period covered by this report, there were 15 Adoption Panel meetings Attendance details are recorded in the attached grid situated at the back page of this report. (See Attached)

The overall feedback from social workers/prospective adopters and other professionals attending panel and completing the feedback forms was generally very positive.

The overall feedback from Panel members has continued to reflect the following:

- The written information can sometimes be insufficient to assist, inform discussion and make recommendations.
- Members felt that exceptionally good reports were generally presented by the adoption team in the form of the prospective adopters report.
- All panel members felt they are allowed to express their views and that their views are respected and acknowledged.

19 Adoption Agency

During the period 08-09 Pauline Pilkington, Assistant Director for Children's Services, continued to act as the agency decision maker. In Pauline's absence, Kay Child, Operations Manager Safeguarding, acts in this role. However, from April 2009, Pauline will step down from her role as agency decision maker to commence an interim post as Executive Director of Children's Services. Kay Child will then become the interim Assistant Director for Children's Services and will become the agency decision maker.

The ASSA for Walsall MBC is now Louise Watts, operational manager for Family Placements.

20 The Adoption Team

There have been some significant staffing changes in 2008/09. Zoe Ashton left the team in June 08 to take up a post in Vulnerable Children. Lisa Preston left for maternity leave in June 08 to return in April 09. In her absence Myrtle Kennedy was the interim Adoption Team Manager. Liz Groves was appointed Senior Practitioner in the Adoption Team and we also welcomed Mavis Wright who was a former fostering social worker. We sadly lost Emma Wheatley, who left to take up a post in safeguarding services in Devon. However, the most significant change happened in July 08, with the amalgamation of adoption support team with the adoption team all of which is based at Pinfold Health Centre. Joining us from adoption support were Penny Nicola, Senior Practitioner, Michelle Selvey life story worker, and two vacant posts, one a practice manager 21 hours a week and a full time social work post. The joining of the teams has so far proved to be extremely beneficial as there is now a more holistic view of adoption through all its stages and future service planning can take into account all aspects of the adoption journey.

The team continues to be supported in its activities by a family support officer and a customer service officer who undertakes all initial enquiry work for those seeking information about adoption.

21 Training and Development

The training day that had been arranged for 08-09 had due to be cancelled due to sickness of the trainer. The course is due to be rerun in September 2009. The

course will focus on the impact of neglect on Looked After Children.

22 Information

A number of consultation, skills and knowledge information/articles have been distributed to panel members which continue to help panel members stay abreast of changes in law, practice and research.

23 Miscellaneous Figures

Number of approved adopters who have been deregistered † 1
Number of children subject to best interest decision which was subsequently rescinded † 1
Number of adopters in representation process † 0.
Number of non-agency adoption orders † 0.
Number of adoptions of children from other agency placed with Walsall approved adopter's † 0

24 Complaints and Representations

There have been two complaints in the pre- adoption service from April 2008-March 2009, they are as follows

1,) Complaint received from prospective adoptive applicant that we were incompetent in locating his address to undertake an initial assessment, and that they were dissatisfied with the overall service provided by Walsall Adoption Service
Outcome-Complaint not upheld for the following reasons,

1.) The family had been offered an alternative appointment time, and whilst an acknowledgment was made that time keeping is important, it is not an indication of a social worker's level of competence in undertaking the task of assessing adoptive applicants.

2.)Foster carers wishing to adopt a child placed with them. Decisions made not to fully assess, then to move him to a bridging placement in order to move him onto adoption.

Specifics

1. That their health was unfairly assessed – not upheld.
2. That they had been unfairly judged in relation to changing the child's name – not upheld.
3. That they had been unfairly assessed as not being able to work in partnership with the agency because they had shared with their family and the other child in placement of their wish to adopt this child – not upheld.
4. They felt bullied into making decisions in the meeting on 22 October 2008 – upheld.
5. Inappropriate behaviour from staff in the meeting – upheld.
6. They felt inappropriately penalised during the initial adoption assessment due to their location – not upheld.

25 Statement of Purpose

This was amended and updated in April 2009

26 Service/Panel Developments 2009/10

Adoption Team targets for this year are to maintain the excellent performance of 2007/08

- A target of 10% of looked after children to be adopted by March 2010 current progress indicates this can be achieved. The target for adoption orders is 38.
- Minimise delay for children, so that all children should be placed within 6 months of the court's decision or panel's recommendation where children are not party to court proceedings.
- To begin to prepare for the next Adoption Inspection, which is likely to be sometime after April 2010.
- To continue to develop pre and post adoption work to ensure better outcomes for Walsall Children.
- One of the continuing overriding targets for the coming year is to focus specifically on the reduction of Looked after Children, clearly this impacts on adoption as adoption is one of the many discharge routes for children.

Lisa Preston
Adoption Panel Professional Adviser

Adoption Support Services

1. Introduction

The Family Placement Service was re-structured in July 2008, in response to requirements and good practice recommendations as a result of the Ofsted Adoption Inspection in December 2007. Since July 2008, the adoption support services are located back with the adoption team at the Pinfold Health Centre.

The staff composition is as follows;

A part time (21 hours) Adoption support team leader (not recruited yet)

A full time adoption support co-ordinator/senior practitioner(position filled)

A full time social worker (recruited awaiting to take up post)

A full time life story worker (position filled)

2. Support to Families and Children under 18 years of age

The number of adoptive families eligible for an Annual Adoption Support Service Review grows proportionate to the number of pre-adoption/adoption placements made each year. There has been no increase in the numbers of adoptive parents agreeing to or requesting that reviews take place. The greatest number of requests for adoption support services remains for assessment of financial support, as a result of adoptive parents having to adjust their working patterns to meet the unanticipated needs of the children or for therapeutic input.

The electronic data base system alerting adoption support service reviews has been developed and has been implemented.

Adoption support services reviews continue to elicit the co-operation and involvement of partner agencies and relevant universal services.

Total number of adoption support plans eligible for review is **104**

The "Excellence for Adoption" service user group which previously met quarterly and fed their contributions into all aspects of service planning and delivery has not continued. This is due to changes in social work staff due to the reengineering, vacant positions and other commitments of the service user group. It is envisaged that the group will formulate again when the staff within the team is fully complemented.

The Telling Training was successfully run in June 2007 offering adoptive families training on Life Story work, although there was poor take up of the service user group. Walsall Adoption Support Team works in partnership with the three other Black Country neighbouring authorities and together is addressing the need for post approval training which will be available to approved adopters from the four agencies. It is envisaged that a training programme can be implemented by January 2010.

The piece of Cake course continues to be accessible to Adopters who already have a child placed with them. Walsall Adoption Support services work in partnership with Adoption UK to deliver this training.

All Adoption Support Services Information leaflets have been updated now that the service is realigned within the Adoption Team.

The Adoption Connections Newsletter has now been renamed to 'Family Connections' and continues to develop and to be valued by adoptive families. This is distributed on a quarterly basis.

In March 2008 we introduced an Adoption Support Duty system offering a faster response to service user enquiries; completing verification of Schedule 2 and Sec 98 applications and identifying of locations of adoption records more rapidly.

3. Disruptions

There have been no disruptions of adoptive placements receiving support from Walsall Adoption support services in this period.

4. Contact

There have been considerable improvements in obtaining completed contact agreements from adoptive parents once a pre-adoptive placement has been made, since the adoption support service has become part of the adoption team. The number of referrals to the Adoption Support team to facilitate these arrangements increased in line with the numbers of children placed for adoption.

An electronic data base for all contact has now been established which operates a reminder system, and standard reminder letters are sent to birth parents and adoptive parents just before contact is due.

Adoption Support workers are to develop a training session for adoptive parents and potentially social care staff on Promoting Post Adoption Contact to be run in 2009.

Contact Activity

Between 1.4.08 and 31.3.09 the contact activity is as follows:
New Referrals for Post Box contact: **35** for adopted children
Direct Contact: **8** Post Adoption

Total numbers of indirect contact arrangements supported are **305** from adopted children and **470** exchanges from birth relatives.

There are several other direct contact arrangements within existing contact agreements which are managed by the respective adoptive parents and for which no support service is required.

There is evidence of increased activity on all aspects of adoption support services which is to be expected with the steady increase of the numbers of adopted families eligible for support and the increasing complexity of the needs of the children being placed.

5. Section 98 and Schedule 2

The number of referrals for Section 98 and Schedule 2 services has reduced from the high numbers we received following national publication of the changes in Access to Birth Records Information regulations.

In accordance with legislation the service continues to prioritise applications in respect of pre 1975 adoptions.

Once Initial verification of applications and obtaining of relevant information is complete we are now immediately passing referrals to Adoption Support Across the West Midlands who can provide Schedule 2 counselling, access to birth records, assistance with tracing, reunification and for ongoing counselling. There are some situations however where this piece of work remains with the Adoption Support team e.g. where they may be potential of significant harm or for the purpose of staff learning. The service continues to retain those cases where the adopted person is requesting access to LAC records as well as to Adoption records.

6. Complaints

Three complaints were received related to Adoption Support services for the period April 2008 to March 2009. The complaints are as follows:

Complaint 1 from adopters Dec 08

- I. Contact arrangements – delay – lack of sharing information – upheld.
- II. Family information – wanted to know about sibling/pass on information to L/A – not upheld.
- III. Contact list – upheld – telephone numbers provided
- IV. Lack of customer focus- upheld – need to share information in timely and sensitive way.

Complaint 2 from adopters January 2009

- I. Adopters requested Walsall to delegate adoption support services to LA in their area complaint upheld – action agreed
- II. Additional education support – not upheld – to access universal services
- III. Payment for costs for direct contact – upheld – (paid)
- IV. Adoption allowance – not upheld – Walsall will review within annual review of support plan.

Complaint 3 from birth parent March 2009

- i. Birth father – complained that he did not receive 3 contacts from adopters as agreed. Not upheld – no legally binding agreement.

7. Partner Agencies & Networking.

Black Country Consortium

Walsall Adoption Support Services continues to work closely with our Black Country Consortium partner local authorities of Wolverhampton, Dudley and Sandwell. Walsall Adoption Team Manager attends Adoption across the Black Country, (ABC), meetings, where possible.

Walsall holds joint Black Country Consortium contracts with Adoption UK and Adoption Support Across the West Midlands.

Adoption Support Services Senior Practitioner meets regularly with the Black Country peers to exchange information and consider practice issues. Any initiative that can be more effectively operated jointly is considered.

Adoption UK

The Black Country Consortium Agreement with Adoption UK was renewed in January 2008.

Adoption UK provides Support Groups, Newsletters, Family Days and a Buddy Scheme.

On behalf of the Black Country Consortium members, Adoption UK runs two distinct Support Groups; one to cover Dudley and Sandwell adoptive families held in Oldbury and one to cover Wolverhampton and Walsall adoptive families held at the Village Hotel, Walsall. The Oldbury Support Group is an established and very well attended group, at which Walsall adopters attend. The take up of the Walsall/Wolverhampton Support Group has improved and is always well attended.

Each of the four Black Country Consortium authorities funds initial membership to Adoption UK for adopters approved by their agency.

Walsall continues to pre reserve 4 places per year on the Adoption UK "Piece of Cake" Training Course for adoptive parents. The course continues to receive very positive feedback from participants and is highly valued by adoptive parents. Walsall has no difficulties in allocating our reserved places.

Adoption Support across the West Midlands. (ASAWM)

ASAWM continues to provide Intermediary, Access to Birth Records services and Independent Social Work support to birth parents and birth family members.

Walsall has an established positive working relationship with ASAWM which ensures a smooth transition of service provider following initial counselling and access to birth records for service users in relation to Intermediary services.

Take up of Independent Support to Birth Parents is still low. Team Manager's and Senior Practitioners chairing Permanence Planning Meetings now ensure that they give a copy of the referral to children's social workers at this meeting. Social workers are also requested that they share the information regarding birth parent's rights to access independent support early on in the adoption process.

Birth Parent's Advocacy Service

This service provides birth parents that have learning difficulties support, advice and advocacy regarding adoption processes and adoption contact arrangements.

Midlands ASSA Group.

The Adoption Support Services Senior Practitioner attends the Midlands Region ASSA Group which meets quarterly at BAAF's offices in Birmingham. The group has become an invaluable forum to be able to consider common adoption support difficulties, issues and to share information and ideas. The operations manager is Walsall's named ASSA

8. Development areas

- a) The reunification of Adoption Support services with the Adoption Team took place in July 2008 when the Family Placement Service was re engineered.
- b) Adoption Support services operational procedures have been revised where necessary and continue to be developed in line with the re engineering of the service.
- c) A new format for adoption support assessments has yet to be finalised in consultation with our partner local authorities. PARIS for the family Placement Service is still being developed which will also inform the format that we need to use.
- d) A method of collating and transmitting information to adopters, of changes in the birth families of their children, still needs to be developed. This may need to be external of the PARIS system
- e) The Permanence Financial Support Procedures, with accompanying standard paperwork will be implemented within Family Placement Services and will be included in the Children's Services procedures manual. Details regarding loan/grant scheme and financial assistance will need to be included.

ADOPTION PANEL ATTENDANCE 2008/09

	April	May	Jun	July (15th)	July (22nd)	Aug	Sept	Oct (21 st)	Oct (28 th)	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar (3 rd)	Mar (17 th)	
Jan Toplis	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	X	A	X	80%
Lisa Ainsworth	X	X	A	X	X	A	X	X	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	80%
Cllr Alan Paul	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	100%
Alan Velvett	A	X	X	X	X	X	A	A	X	X	X	A	X	A	X	67%
Dr Rao	X	X	X	X	A	X	A	I	I	I	I	I	X	X	X	80% (8/10)
Diane Browne	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	A	A	X	X	X	X	X	X	87%
Bob Heighway	O	O	O	-	X	X	A	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	A	82% (9/11)
Dr Anand	-	-	-	-	-	-	C	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	100% (5/5)

Key:

X - Attended (Panel member)

A - Apologies

C - Attended (cover)

I - Unable to attend due to illness

O - Observing

Panel members agree to attend 75% of meetings