



## **Corporate Parenting Board**

**Monday 2 September 2024 at 18:00**

**Conference room 2 at the Council House, Lichfield Street, Walsall**

**Membership:**

Councillor S. Elson (Chair)  
Councillor T. Jukes (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor A. Hicken  
Councillor K. Ferguson  
Councillor Chapman  
Councillor Nasreen  
Vacancy

**Non-Elected**

**Non-Voting Advisors:**

NHS Walsall CCG  
Head of Virtual School  
Director of Customer Engagement

**Quorum:**

Three Members

The Relevant Authorities (Disclosable Pecuniary Interests) Regulations 2012  
Specified pecuniary interests

The pecuniary interests which are specified for the purposes of Chapter 7 of Part 1 of the Localism Act 2011 are the interests specified in the second column of the following:

| <b>Subject</b>                                    | <b>Prescribed description</b>  |
|---|--|
| Employment, office, trade, profession or vocation | Any employment, office, trade, profession or vocation carried on for profit or gain.   |
| Sponsorship                                       | <p>Any payment or provision of any other financial benefit (other than from the relevant authority) made or provided within the relevant period in respect of any expenses incurred by a member in carrying out duties as a member, or towards the election expenses of a member.</p> <p>This includes any payment or financial benefit from a trade union within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Regulations (Consolidation) Act 1992.</p>  |
| Contracts   | <p>Any contract which is made between the relevant person (or a body in which the relevant person has a beneficial interest) and the relevant authority:</p> <p>(a) under which goods or services are to be provided or works are to be executed; and</p> <p>(b) which has not been fully discharged.</p>  |
| Land  | Any beneficial interest in land which is within the area of the relevant authority.  |
| Licences  | Any licence (alone or jointly with others) to occupy land in the area of the relevant authority for a month or longer.   |
| Corporate tenancies                               | <p>Any tenancy where (to a member's knowledge):</p> <p>(a) the landlord is the relevant authority;</p> <p>(b) the tenant is a body in which the relevant person has a beneficial interest.</p>   |
| Securities  | <p>Any beneficial interest in securities of a body where:</p> <p>(a) that body (to a member's knowledge) has a place of business or land in the area of the relevant authority; and</p> <p>(b) either:</p> <p>(i) the total nominal value of the securities exceeds £25,000 or one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that body; or</p> <p>(ii) if the share capital of that body is more than one class, the total nominal value of the shares of any one class in which the relevant person has a beneficial interest exceeds one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that class.</p> |

Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended)

Access to information: Exempt information

Part 1

Descriptions of exempt information: England

1. Information relating to any individual.
2. Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).
4. Information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority.
5. Information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.
6. Information which reveals that the authority proposes:
  - (a) to give any enactment a notice under or by virtue of which requirements are imposed on a person; or
  - (b) to make an order or direction under any enactment.
7. Information relating to any action taken or to be taken in connection with the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime.
8. Information being disclosed during a meeting of a Scrutiny and Performance Panel when considering flood risk management functions which:
  - (a) Constitutes a trades secret;
  - (b) Its disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of any person (including the risk management authority);
  - (c) It was obtained by a risk management authority from any other person and its disclosure to the public by the risk management authority would constitute a breach of confidence actionable by that other person.

## Part 1 – Public Session

1. Apologies
2. Substitutions  
To receive notice of any substitutions for a Member of the Committee for the duration of the meeting.
3. Minutes  
To approve and sign the minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2024  
(Enclosed)
4. Declarations of Interest
5. Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended):  
To agree that the public be excluded from the private session during consideration of the agenda items indicated for the reasons shown on the agenda.
6. Adoption @Heart Service Annual Report 2024  
The report summarises the activity of the Adoption @Heart Service from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.  
(Enclosed)
7. Walsall Fostering Service Annual Report 2023-2024  
The report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.  
(Enclosed)
8. Placement Sufficiency Strategy Update.  
This report will give an update on the progress of delivering the outcomes within the Placement Sufficiency Strategy.  
(Enclosed)
9. Work Programme 2024 – 2025.  
To note the work programme of the Corporate Parenting Board 2024 – 2025.  
(Enclosed)
10. Date of next meeting  
The date of the next meeting will be 11 November 2024, and will be held at the TLC Hub, Brineton Street, Pleck, Walsall, WS2 9EP.

# **Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Board held in Conference Room 2 at the Council House.**

**Monday 1 July 2024 6.00 PM**

## **Committee Members present:**

Councillor S. Elson (Chair)  
Councillor T. Jukes (Vice Chair)  
Councillor A. Hicken

## **Officers Present:**

Rita Homer – Director, Children’s Social Work  
Lorraine Thompson – Head of Virtual School  
Catherine Masterson – Walsall ICB  
Elyse Hopkins – Director, Customer Engagement  
Andy Caville – Team Manager, Corporate Parenting  
David Hughes – Children’s Services

Two Young People

## **26. Apologies**

An apology was submitted on behalf of Councillor Nasreen.

## **27. Substitutions**

There were no substitutions submitted for the duration of the meeting.

## **28. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest submitted.

## **29. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There was no information in private session.

## **30. Minutes**

The Board considered the minutes of the meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2024.

**Resolved**

The minutes of the meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2024 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

### 31. **Establishment of a Work Programme 2024 –2025**

A report was submitted:

[annexed]

Members of the Board received a presentation and noted that, within the Corporate Parenting Board annual report 2023/24, the Board set out its priorities for 2024/25 as: -

- Continue to review and evolve the approach to engagement with young people to make engagement meaningful.
- Build relationships with children and young people in care and care leavers and be an advocate for them.
- Attend future events and activities with young people to further develop relationships.
- Challenge services and partners to ensure that young people are receiving the best services and given every opportunity to succeed.
- Monitor the delivery of the Corporate Parenting Strategy and associated action plan and set the Boards remit around its priorities.

#### **Resolved**

1. **That the work programme of the Corporate Parenting Board for the 2024/25 municipal year be agreed.**
2. **A Total Respect training course be organised at the earliest opportunity for all Elected Members.**
3. **That the Board considers member champion nominations to visit residential homes.**

### 32. **Events and Engagement**

The Board received a presentation;

[Annexed]

Members of the Board praised the work undertaken to engage with children in care and care leavers. Of note was the care experienced football team which had competed at an event at the Molineux football grounds. It was a well-attended and highly regarded event. Young people present at the meeting agreed that it was a good event and also provided opportunity to connect and make friends with care leavers from other boroughs.

When asked by the Chair what could be improved, young people explained that additional out of hours services would be helpful, including football training, as this was when young people had more time.

Mr Hughes explained that Oak Park provided the pitch for free during less busy times but prioritised fee paying clients in busier periods. The Chair undertook to review this issue.

### **Resolved**

That the Chair, in consultation with officers, reviews the request for out of hours playing pitch provision at Oak Park.

## **33. Quarterly Performance Report**

A report was submitted:

[annexed]

The Director, Children's Social Work provided an overview highlighting that there was a:-

- slight increase in children in care placed 20 miles from home, outside of LA boundary;
- reduction in the number placed in residential homes as a first placement;
- significant increase in special guardianship in 22/23 and 34 between April and March 24

Referring to Initial Health Checks, a member asked what was in place to improve the figure as 49.7% were not undertaken within 28 days. The ICB Lead explained that there were 2 paediatricians offering 16 clinics per month and that a business case for additional resource would be considered.

Whilst staying put was positive, a member asked if this impacted on foster care provision? The Director of Children's Social Work confirmed that staying put was the best thing for young people and so whilst there was an impact on Foster Carers, the Council had a strong offer and marketing campaign to recruit. It was also confirmed that when young people moved on many individuals who had entered into staying put arrangements, go back to offering foster care provision.

The Board considered safely reducing numbers of children in care, noting that the number was 648. The Director of Children's Social Work explained that the early help offer and multi disciplinary approach such as family outreach services could help safely reduce the number of children in care.

### **Resolved**

That the report be noted.

**34. Walsall Care Leavers Joint Protocol**

A report was submitted:

[annexed]

The Director of Children's Social Work referred to the Open Lens production 'It Takes a Village' which delivered a real and honest insight into the everyday challenges faced by young Care Leavers and focuses on themes of independence, accommodation, and mental health.

Following the production of 'It Takes a Village' there was a call to action whereby the Council and its partners committed pledges to supporting children and young people specific to the issues raised by them.

The intention of forming a Children in Care and Care Experienced Alliance is to build on the learning of the Walsall Children's Alliance and form an alliance committed to achieving the pledges committed by wider partners.

The Director of Children's Social Work confirmed that the Board would have oversight of the action plan, produced by the alliance, to monitor progress.

The Chair and members supported the establishment of the Alliance and thanked staff within children's services for continuing to listen and change services to meet the needs of children in care and care leavers.

Further to a discussion as to how to share the video with all members of the Council the Principal Democratic Services Officer agreed to liaise with the Chair outside of the meeting.

**Resolved**

That:-

1. The formation of a Children in Care and Care Experienced Alliance be approved;
2. Terms of Reference be approved; and
3. Corporate Parenting Board oversee the action plans developed within the alliance
4. The principal Democratic Services Officer meets with the Chair of the Board to confirm arrangements for the 'It takes a village' to be shown to all members.



35. **LGA Placements for Children in Care Resource Pack**

The resource pack was submitted:

[see annexed]

Members noted that the resource pack has been published by the Local Government Association (LGA) for all councillors. The aim of the pack was to provide an overview of the key legislation and policy issues, an understanding of what 'good' looks like and some key questions for members to consider.

Members noted the resource pack and:-

**Resolved**

That the pack be circulated to all members of the Council.

36. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 6.56 pm.

Signed:

Date:

**Corporate Parenting Board**  
**Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2024**

**Agenda  
Item No.**  
  
**6.**

**Adoption @Heart Annual Report 2024**

**Ward(s)**                      All

**Portfolios:**    Cllr Stacie Elson

**Report:**

The reports sets out the work within the Adoption@Heart service during the year (1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024), including progress with adopter recruitment and the each of the four partner agencies.

**Recommendations:**

To note and identify any further information required by the Board.

**That:**

1. CPB to note the report.
2. Identify any information required by the Board.

**Contact Officer:**

Nikki Gough  
Democratic Services Officer  
[Nikki.gough@walsall.gov.uk](mailto:Nikki.gough@walsall.gov.uk)

# ADOPTION @HEART ANNUAL REPORT 2024



1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

**Report for:**

- City of Wolverhampton Council
- Sandwell Council and Sandwell Children's Trust
- Dudley Council
- Walsall Council

**Produced by**

Head of Service Simon Green  
Adoption@Heart

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# Introduction & Purpose of Report



Adoption@Heart is a Regional Adoption Agency, providing adoption services on behalf of City of Wolverhampton Council, Sandwell Council, Dudley Council and Walsall Council. The service is hosted by City of Wolverhampton Council and became operational on 1 April 2019. The service is now five years old. In 2015, the government announced plans to regionalise adoption services to improve adopter recruitment and support, reduce costs, and speed up matching to deliver the best outcome for children in care. Regional Adoption Agencies bring together local services and expertise to streamline the adoption process and provide a child-centred approach to adoption in England.

There are currently 32 Regional Adoption Agencies in England. This report fulfils the obligations in the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002, to report to the “executive side” of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in this report. The report covers the full year 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, covering the overall work within Adoption@Heart, the progress with adopter recruitment and the service specific for each of the four partner agencies.

# Adoption@Heart Provides

## A child centred approach to adoption

The well-being and best interests of the child whose plan is that of adoption, as well as those of adopted children and young people, are the primary focus of RAAs.

## Collaborative model

RAAs operate on a collaborative model, working to pool expertise, resources, and knowledge to provide better support for both adoptive families and children with a plan for adoption.

## Dedicated support

RAAs offer tailored and dedicated support to adoptive families and children, utilising years of experience to help both adopted children and prospective adoptive parents. This personalised approach helps create strong foundations for successful adoptions and ensures ongoing support for families throughout their journey.

## Efficiency and consistency

The consolidation of more local adoption services into regional agencies enhances efficiency and consistency in the adoption process. By centralising resources, RAAs can standardise procedures and reduce delays in finding suitable homes for children.

## Community and engagement

Regional Adoption Agencies actively engage with their local communities to promote awareness and understanding of adoption, while addressing any unique regional challenges.



# Head of Service Overview



The year 2023-24 has been a period of significant achievements and positive changes for Adoption@Heart, marking good progress against our priorities and laying a solid foundation for future improvements.

## Our Key Achievements

### **Reversing the Downward Trend in Adopter Recruitment:**

This year has been remarkably successful in reversing the two-year downward trend in adopter recruitment. Through improved marketing strategies and the hard work of our Recruitment and Assessment Service, we have successfully attracted more prospective adopters, ensuring a broader pool of in-house adopters for children in need.

### **Leadership Appointment:**

In October, we filled a significant vacancy by appointing an experienced Head of Service. This strategic appointment has already made substantial contributions to our operations and strategic direction, bringing renewed energy and expertise to our team.

**Workforce Stability:**

We have achieved greater stability within our workforce, which has been crucial for maintaining consistent and high-quality support to both children and adoptive families. This stability has also enabled us to focus more on strategic goals and less on staffing concerns.

**Governance Strengthening:**

Our governance arrangements have been strengthened, enhancing our ability to oversee and manage our operations effectively. These improvements have contributed to better decision-making processes and increased accountability.

**Financial Management:**

We responded swiftly to a predicted interagency overspend, implementing measures that not only managed the situation but also prevented any financial overreach. This immediate action has helped us maintain financial stability and integrity.

**Tracking and Management Improvements:**

We have improved our arrangements for tracking children with a plan for adoption. These enhancements have resulted in more timely and accurate tracking, facilitating better outcomes for children awaiting adoption.

## Key Priorities for 2024-25

**Focus on In-House Placements:**

Continuing our focus on in-house placements will reduce reliance on interagency placements. We aim to achieve this through three main work-streams.

**Adopter Recruitment:**

We plan to recruit more adopters than ever before, building on the successful strategies implemented this past year.

**Adoption Support:**

One of the main challenges we face is that the demand for adoption support services is exceeding the resources currently available. Addressing this imbalance will be a priority, ensuring that we continue to provide high-quality support to all adoptive families.

**Process and Practice Improvements:**

We will improve our processes and practices to facilitate more in-house placements, enhancing our ability to place children swiftly and effectively with A@H adopters.

**Innovation and Collaboration:**

Through innovation and collaboration with other RAAs, and policy development, we aim to streamline and enhance our adoption services further.

**Engagement:**

Enhancing the participation and involvement of adopted people, adopters and their families in our services is a key focus for the upcoming year, to improve overall service quality.



## Other 2024-25 Activity

### **Additional Reporting Requirements for 2024/25**

In line with the governance board's request, we will conduct and present two additional reports this coming year:

#### **Review of the Structure of Adoption@Heart:**

This review will assess our structure to ensure it is optimally designed to meet our strategic goals and service delivery requirements.

#### **Review of the Funding Formula:**

A thorough review of our funding formula will help ensure that LA/Trust financial resources are allocated most effectively to meet the needs of children and families.

## Conclusion

In 2023-24, Adoption@Heart has demonstrated resilience and innovation, overcoming challenges and setting a course for future success. Our continued commitment to working in a restorative way to achieve permanency for all children remains unwavering. As we look to 2024-25, we are enthusiastic about building on our achievements and tackling the challenges ahead with dedication and strategic focus.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2024.

# Head of Service Budget Summary

This past year presented challenging moments in budget management, due to an increase in the use of inter-agency placement and significant overspend highlighted at the end of the second and third quarters. Thanks to diligent recovery planning and robust financial management, we successfully mitigated these concerns and concluded the year on a positive note, avoiding the worst-case financial scenarios.

Adoption@Heart did end the year with an overspend on our inter-agency budget, however this overspend was less severe than anticipated. The primary cause was an increased reliance on inter-agency placements, driven by a shortage of in-house options and a less successful recruitment period in 2022-2023. Fortunately, this overspend was partially offset by savings in other areas, including both staffing and non-staffing costs.



As a result, our overall budget health remains relatively strong. The overspend for this year fell well within our available reserves, accumulated from previous years. Adoption@Heart is in a position to carry forward a reserve of £338,000 into 2024-2025. Of this reserve, £250,000 has been earmarked to bolster the interagency budget for 2024-2025, while the remaining £88,000 will be retained in line with the reserves policy agreed in the collaboration agreement between Council's'.

In conclusion, our effective budget management strategies have ensured that no additional financial contributions have been required from Partners. Moreover, we have allocated extra funds to support the inter-agency budget for 2024-2025, ensuring financial stability and preparedness for the year ahead.

# Our Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of Adoption@Heart is to provide secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families through their lifelong adoption journey. Adoption@Heart offers child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team.

Adoption@Heart supports the ethos that children and young people are best able to develop close and enduring relationships within a family setting. Adoption@Heart aims to ensure that all children whom it places within adoptive families will experience stability, security, and quality of care throughout their childhood and into their adulthood.

Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided by Adoption@Heart.

We will work to develop opportunities for young people to meet and influence the development of support and services, develop opportunities for adopted adults and birth families to have an increased voice and influence within their RAA, and work with adopters to ensure they have an influence in the development of support and services.

## The objectives of Adoption@Heart are to:

- Provide secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families through their lifelong adoption journey. Adoption@Heart offers child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team.
- Meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, associated standards, regulations, and guidance.
- Ensure the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process, as outlined in the Welfare Checklist (Adoption & Children Act 2002).
- Support the process of timely decision making for children in relation to permanence options, including the use of Early Permanence Placements.
- Recruit, assess and approve a range of adoptive families in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of our LA and Children's Trust partners children for whom adoption is the plan, including children who wait longer, sibling groups and those children who require an early permanence placement.
- Promote best practice in adoption through the provision of advice and support to our LA and Children's Trust partners with the care planning process.

## The objectives of Adoption@Heart are to:

- Ensure the assessment and preparation of adoptive families is comprehensive and robust, in order that adopters are aware of and prepared to meet the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan.
- Provide a child centred, needs led matching, transition, and moving in process for children.
- Provide a comprehensive adoption support service for adopted children and young people and their parents, adopted adults and birth family members.
- Ensure all staff involved in the work of Adoption@Heart have the appropriate level of skill, knowledge, and experience to deliver an effective service.
- Regularly review and evaluate services provided to ensure services delivered are of the highest possible standard and continue to meet the needs of our LA and Children's Trust partners and the children and families in receipt of our services.

## Staffing

The service employs 32 qualified Social Workers on a permanent basis, two of which in the Recruitment & Assessment Team have recently moved to a 12-month secondment opportunity in CWC. We have one agency Social Worker who is acting as a Stage 1 Social Worker in the Recruitment & Assessment Team covering one of the secondments and we are currently interviewing for an additional agency Social Worker to cover the second secondment in the Recruitment & Assessment Team. There is also an Agency Social Worker in the Adoption Support Team supporting with capacity challenges.

There is a Head of Service, Service Manager and three Team Managers, with one covering each of the thematic service areas.

There are a number of differently qualified posts such as Family Support Workers and Business Support colleagues. The Business Support Team have a Business Support Manager and have had a vacancy for a Senior Business Support Officer, which has now been appointed to. There are five Business Support Officers, two of which are part time. The Panel Team have two Panel Advisors along with a Panel Co-ordinator and three Panel Administrators.

# Nationally



Over the last five years there has been an overall decline in children leaving care achieving permanence through adoption, special guardianship and child arrangements order or returning home. However, the highest decline for these children has been in adoption orders.

The number of moving in orders has declined, and the reasons for this are multifaceted, with changes in practice focussing on family support and kinship care, the historic adoption legacy, the impact of new case law and the pandemic. Whilst the reversals of adoption plans for children have declined, there is a recent increase in new adoption plans being agreed for children by local authorities.

Children who typically wait the longest: Adopters are in greatest demand for the children who typically wait the longest to be adopted - children over 5, children under 5 with multiple needs, brother and sister groups, and children from Black and mixed heritage backgrounds.

The system is institutionally racist: We know from the Ending Racial Disparity in Adoption report, that Black children are overrepresented in the care system. Black children wait longer for adoption than white children. Black children are the least likely to achieve the lifetime stability and permanency of a family through adoption. We must seek to end the racial disparity in adoption.

**Adopter Sufficiency:** Despite an increase in recruitment between 2020 - 2022 there has been a decline in adopters in the last 18 months, with less registrations of interest to adopt overall, but with regional variations. The national picture is concerning, and at a national level a collaborative approach is necessary to ensure there are enough adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoption. An increasing number of adopters have withdrawn from the process, and the reasons for this are varied, and the following are highlighted here:

The cost-of-living crisis is an increasing barrier to adoption: The current cost of living crisis is a significant threat to the number of approved adopters. Nine out of ten prospective adopters say the cost-of-living crisis is affecting their decisions about adoption, according to Adoption UK's December 2022 survey. Adopters are withdrawing from the process as they are concerned about not being able to afford the cost of caring for children.

There are a range of barriers to adoption: We know that there are several things hampering recruitment: prospective adopters lack confidence in their suitability, capacity, and capability to be 'good enough' adopters; there is a lack of trust in the process, particularly amongst minoritised groups; variability in support being provided and a fear that that the right support will not be available at the right time. For Black people considering adoption, there remain multiple hurdles including barriers of perception as well as practical, cultural, and personal issues. Fewer children and more children with multiple needs: The number of children with a placement order has declined, whilst the multiple needs of children have grown.

Some adopters have been waiting for the right match for some time and have withdrawn from the process, becoming disheartened after expressing interest in several children.

Whilst representing a small part of the total children's social work sector, adoption continues to have a high profile politically. The programme of regionalisation which commenced in 2016 is now almost complete, with 32 Regional Adoption Agencies covering virtually all Local Authorities in England. There continues to be some areas, such as Birmingham, where they have formed as a Voluntary Adoption Agency, due to the nature and size of their individual organisations and Children's Trust status.

The government launched their Adoption Strategy: Achieving Excellence Everywhere in July 2021, setting out its vision to further improve the adoption system across England, with the provision of sector-led support to create national models of best-practice.

Nationally RAA Leaders are working to, deliver against key areas of the strategy in line with the 3 key priority areas identified in their plan for 2021-2023:

- Adoption Recruitment
- The Child's Journey
- Adoption Support

The National RAA leaders group meets monthly and there are working groups in place to address these three priority areas.



# Regionally



Adoption@Heart continues to be an active member of the Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC). The shared aim of the MTC partnership is to work together to enhance moving in choice at the earliest possible opportunity for children and to ensure effective arrangements and protocols are in place for providing longer term adoption support. There are 18 Local Authority members and two Voluntary Adoption Agency members. There are five Regional Adoption Agencies represented.

The key aims are to:

- Reduce the moving in waiting times for children.
- Increase the number of children placed regionally.
- Enhance adopter involvement in placement identification.

Improve the co-ordination and access to adoption support services and to take advantage of opportunities to develop best practice across the region, to improve opportunities and services for children to be adopted and adoptive families.

Whilst all RAA's are working to ensure sufficiency for approval of adopters to meet the needs of children with an adoption plan, Adoption@Heart still uses a relatively high number of inter-agency placements, securing regional links is preferable to placing children at a distance.

The focus this year has continued to be embedding the MTC Early Permanence Good Practice Guide. This follows the launch of the National Early Permanence Standards. This is in recognition of the need to ensure we consider early permanence for all children with a likely plan of adoption. Since the launch of the Good Practice Guide in February and March 2023, referrals for Fostering to Adopt (FFA) placements have increased. The challenge for Adoption@Heart and other RAA's is recruiting enough adopters to meet the increase in demand.

# Marketing Summary



## 2023 - 2024

The analysis of the marketing performance for the periods 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 reveals several noteworthy trends and changes.

### Enquiries

There was a modest increase in enquiries, from 541 in 2022/2023 to 572 in 2023/2024. This suggests a gradual growth in interest and could be attributed to enhanced marketing efforts or expanding market awareness.

### Phone Consultations and Information Events

The number of phone consultations increased substantially from 6 in 2022/2023 to 63 in 2023/2024, indicating a more proactive engagement strategy that might be responding to customer preferences for personalised interactions. However, there was a significant drop in household attendance at information events, from 169 in 2022/2023 to 129 in 2023/2024. This might be due to the increased number of phone consultations, suggesting a shift towards more direct and perhaps convenient forms of communication.

### Website Visits

The total number of website visits had an increase of 64,291 views with 23,557 unique visits for both years. This likely indicates improved visibility, greater interest from newer audiences, and greater online audience reach.



# Marketing Summary



## 2023 - 2024

### Social Media Followers

Twitter showed a slight increase in followers from 482 to 489 year over year. This is a minimal growth, indicating a relatively stagnant presence on this platform.

Facebook likes saw a modest increase from 2,180 to 2,200. As one of the more significant social platforms for engagement, the small growth might suggest the need for more compelling content or promotions to boost engagement.

Instagram showed more significant growth, from 340 followers in 2022/2023 to 408 in 2023/2024, marking a 20% increase. This suggests that Instagram may be a more effective platform for engaging with the audience, possibly due to more visually appealing content or a younger demographic.

### Overall Assessment:

The year-over-year analysis indicates that while there is an overall growth in engagement metrics like enquiries and social media presence, there are areas such as event attendance and website traffic that are either declining or stagnating.

This could suggest that while efforts to increase direct engagement (like phone consultations and Instagram content) are succeeding, broader outreach initiatives might need revisiting or revitalising to sustain and build upon the current growth trends.

# Marketing Data 23-24

572

Enquiries

63

Phone Consultations

21 information events were held both in person and virtually with 129 households attended information events.

18,611

Website Visits

Made up of 13,491 unique visits.

489

Twitter Followers

2,200

Facebook likes

408

Instagram Followers

# Marketing Activity for this period

In March, a recruitment campaign for LGBTQ+ Adoption Week was launched, including a digital radio placement targeting LGBTQ+ communities, resulting in increased activity that positively impacted enquiries from April onwards.

A digital ads campaign was launched and featured in the Express & Star, running until June.

These ads included clickable graphics appearing on various websites through retargeting, filtered by geography to target areas up to an hour's drive from the Black Country.

In late spring, a national campaign was launched by 'You Can Adopt,' focusing on children waiting longer for adoption (older children, siblings, those with additional needs, and from ethnic minorities). Adoption@Heart supported this with local PR, organic and paid social media posts, and a Google Ads campaign.

In June, Adoption@Heart had stalls at regional Pride 2023 events (Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley, Sandwell, and Birmingham), this also included marketing collateral such as printed flyers, pull up banners with visuals and messaging reflective of the LGBTQ+ community. Our presence there, was successful in generating brand awareness and it created opportunity for further conversations.

Throughout June and July, a summer recruitment campaign took place, continued to implement the ongoing Google AdWords campaign alongside a strategic advertising approach. This included 80,000 playouts over 6 weeks in D6 bus shelters, strategically located for a well-weighted campaign. Additionally, a press release in June that highlighted the need for more adopters, supported by organic social media content.

Bi-Monthly Internal Communications continued across four LA's/Trust (Wolverhampton, Dudley, Sandwell, and Walsall) partnership, ensuring alignment and coordination.

From October to November, Adoption@Heart launched a campaign alongside National Adoption Week, aiming to increase awareness and encourage contact with Adoption@Heart. Artwork and messaging focused on the brand and the strength of the three Local Authority and Children's Trust brands.

The campaign included billboard display advertisements in Sandwell and Wolverhampton, a 'mega rear' bus back advert, a featured advert in the Sandwell Herald, and a digital 'page takeover' on the Express & Star website. Google Ads continued, including a featured ad in the 'In Your Area' app and coordinated social media posts.

# Marketing Activity for this period

**A new Marketing Executive was appointed** – Yolanda Mapfurire, joined at the beginning of March 2024. “As the new Marketing Executive at Adoption@Heart, my aim is to continue to be engaged in various marketing efforts to raise awareness of adoption, encourage prospective adopters, and support our adoption community.

“I am passionate about leveraging data to develop multimedia marketing campaigns, including SEO, PPC, advertisements, and online/offline content, to maximise reach and hopefully conversions. Picking up from the previous marketing activity, my objective is to continuously to adapt our marketing strategies to align with the evolving adoption community, both nationally and regionally.”

## Future Marketing Plans 2024/25:



## Quarterly newsletters

The beginning of this quarter saw the re-launch of the Adoption@Heart quarterly newsletter, and email marketing activity - the plan is to continue to develop the adopter newsletter, share news stories, relevant information, and key updates with the adoption community. This year we will re-establish a presence in the Local Authority and Trust partnership newsletters and to ensure brand awareness and to inform colleagues across the four areas, what is taking place across the service area.

### Pride 2024

This late spring, Adoption@Heart will be actively participating in regional Pride events, as previously, (Wolverhampton, Sandwell, and Walsall) to encourage those from the LGBTQ+ community who are considering adoption or would like more information to come forward and to also consider whether they could adopt siblings and highlighting the inclusivity of adoption.

There will be press release to support the 'You Can Adopt' campaign mainly focusing on the LGBTQ+ community, there will also be an Express & Star page takeover and retargeted ads, which will run alongside our Facebook Ads. In addition to that the Adoption@Heart team will have stands at the regional events across Wolverhampton, Sandwell, and Walsall. The aim is to encourage conversations and create brand awareness.

### Launches

**Website Launch:** At the end of May there will be a launch of the recently revamped website to provide better support and resources for prospective adopters and those affected by adoption. With an improved navigation, user experience, and additional content such as videos and article. In addition to the website, they will be a launch of an Adopters Area SharePoint site, specifically for our Adoption@Heart community. This platform will provide a space for adopters to share experiences, and access resources, fostering a sense of community and support.

**Adoption@Heart Podcast:** This summer will see the launch of the "Adoption at Heart" podcast, which will serve as a platform, to debunk myths, tackle frequently asked questions and become a platform for real adoption stories and community engagement.

### Campaigns

**National Adoption Week** – As previously Adoption@Heart will continue to support the "You Can Adopt" national campaign, alongside it we will run a recruitment campaign, focusing on finding homes for children who wait longer for adoption. During the month of this campaign, marketing activity will include, regional PR, social media posts, Google Ads, billboard advertisements, and collaborative initiatives with our regional partners.

## #YouCanAdopt

This year, they will be a separate marketing strategy to coincide with the main strategy, one that specifically focuses on recruitment of black adopters. The strategy needs to focus on year-round marketing activity and not just relate to specific events such as Black History Month. The plan is to work alongside faith and community groups across the West Midlands to promote the adoption message. Work with local councillors from the four Local Authorities to help reach into different communities that may not necessarily come forward and consider adoption. Also establish – bespoke virtual events, etc. Speak/present at different faith/community group events across the Black Country.

## Ongoing Marketing Activity

**Information events** - Continue with virtual and in person information events. Develop bespoke information events for different messaging such as, sibling groups, disability awareness and target audiences such as BAME, LGBT+ etc.

**Outdoor advertising:** Bus, train, metro, and billboard display if appropriate.

**Print advertising:** Local media advertising, within the regions such as the Sandwell Herald etc.

**Digital advertising:** Online advertising via adoption specific websites as well as Express & Star and Free radio. Make use of advertising on our partnership websites as well as digital display boards inside key buildings.

**Google AdWords:** Continue with our campaign, managed by MNA Digital for the next six months. Then bring the PPC work in house and look at further opportunities to maximise our ads.

**Radio:** Campaigns during peak times and to promote Adoption@Heart services and where to find more information (website/information events etc.)

## Local Authority communication support

We will continue to build strong relationships with the Local Authorities and Trusts that form our partnership to ensure they are on board with all marketing/communication activity (Wolverhampton, Walsall, Sandwell, and Dudley). Meetings are held on monthly with representation from Wolverhampton, Walsall, Sandwell, Dudley, and Adoption@Heart. The plan is to further develop these meetings so it isn't just about us delivering information, each of the communication teams need to take an interest in Adoption@Heart and a joint approach needs to be established and, to share any campaigns, events happening that we can get involved with.



# Adopter Recruitment



## National Picture

Nationally, there has been an overall decline in the number of adopters being approved and a decline in the number of adopters starting the adoption process. Whilst there are no nationally defined reasons for the decline in adopter numbers, the RAA leaders' group has begun to gather intelligence on the impact of the current cost of living crisis. Prospective adopters are making different decisions regarding family size and delay in pursuing adoption. There is a clear North/South divide with adopter enquiry numbers holding steady in some Southern areas whereas the Midlands and the North of the country are being adversely affected with overall decline in enquiries and approvals.

In addition to this, In November 2022, Adoption UK published survey results of over 300 adopter households in different stages of the adoption process on the impact of the cost-of living crisis. They found: 7% delayed beginning their adoption approvals process. 5% paused the process after it had begun. 41% said they were considering adopting fewer children than previously.

The survey also found adopters were concerned about the expense of setting up a home for a child, buying essential equipment, being able to afford to take off their full adoption leave entitlement and having enough finance to enable them as a family to enjoy family experiences, such as days out and activities. These pressures were more acute for self-employed applicants, single applicants, and low-income households.

Adoption@Heart is focused on ensuring recruitment activity is robust and visible and is clear in its messaging that finance is not a barrier to adoption. However, for those who were in stage 1 during 2022-23 and within assessment during 2023-24, it is clear finance was an issue for many families with some deciding to withdraw from the process and others having to take a break to address their debt. In addition to finance issues, during the year, we have seen a high number of complex assessments with some adopters having to take a considerable amount of time to come to terms with their personal histories including, loss and grief, poor mental health, and adverse childhood experiences. This has also adversely impacted on the completion of adoption assessments within six months.

Recruitment Performance

The service has done an excellent job reversing a two-year declining trend in adopter recruitment.

Through strategic initiatives and dedicated efforts, they have not only halted the downward trajectory but also sparked a positive growth trend in attracting new adopters. There’s also every indication that this will continue into the coming year, with ambitious recruitment targets set. These targets are supported by a robust plan that includes enhanced recruitment strategies, improved support for potential adopters, and innovative marketing campaigns designed to sustain the current momentum.

| Year               | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2024/25    |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------------|
| Recruited adopters | 50      | 69      | 54      | 41      | 65      | *80 Target |

Adoption@Heart approved 65 adopter households in 2023/24. Compared to 2022/23, this evidences a positive trajectory and an increase of 24 adopter households.



- 21.5% (14) were approved within the six months statutory timescale. We note that this is 16% lower than the previous year.
- 78.5% (51) were not approved with the six-month statutory timescale. We note that this is 15.5% higher than the previous year.
- Throughout 2023/24 32 adopters had been matched with a child and 31 had a child move in.
- 22% (7) of households were matched to a child within three months of approval.
- 40 Adopter households (49 individual children) had Adoption Orders made.
- At the end of March 2024, 54 adopters were waiting to be matched. These include adopters who are "linked" but not formally matched at panel. We have a total of 62 households yet to be approved (28 in Stage Two, 29 in Stage One and 5 on a process break between Stage One and Stage Two).

Although the number of Stage one's appear lower than the previous year- it demonstrates that we had a higher number of adopters from the previous year, who have now completed Stage one and progressed to Stage two- this would decrease the number of adopters waiting in Stage one for this year and, in turn, influenced a higher number of approvals which we have seen during 2023/24.

This was predicted and reported on within the annual report for 2022/23: "The high number of adopters in stage one and stage two is positive and should overall increase the number of adopter approvals for 2023-24".

Projecting forward, for the year 2024/25, we have 62 adopters not yet approved at the start of the financial year. We anticipate that with these adopters, combined with any new Stage one's or Fast-Tracked applications ( second time adopters and foster carers applying to adopt),we could match or exceed 80 approvals.

### Stage Two

65 Households completed Stage two and were approved as adopters throughout 2023/24. The average number of days in stage two was 166.

The fewest number of days was 80 and the longest \*882 days.

We consider the Stage 2 that took 882 days to complete as a significant outlier. This was an exceptional and complex assessment which resulted in multiple stops and starts to the assessment, a deferral, a break from the applicant and further work completed with the applicant before a subsequent approval.

Removing this outlier from our data, it would reduce the timeline for Stage two to an average of 4.36 months (132.61 days). This would bring our timescales for the majority of our stage 2 assessments in line with the statutory guidelines for completing Stage two assessments, which is 4 months. Albeit our average timescale is slightly higher with 0.36 months (10.95 days).

For a more detailed breakdown of all Stage two completion timescales, please see below.

For the households completing Stage Two

- 40.0% (26) completed in less than four months.
- 47.7% (31) between four and eight months
- 6.2% (4) between eight months and a year
- 4.6% (3) between twelve and eighteen months
- 1.5% (1) over eighteen months. (An anomaly at 29 months and referred to in section above).

For the households completing Stage One

- The average time for an adopter spent in Stage one with a completion date throughout 2023/24 was 5.12 months.
- Adopters approved throughout 2023/24 spent an average time of three months in Stage One.
- Excluding those adopters being fast tracked, the time taken from Stage one to approval was 12 months. 45 Of the 65 approvals were first time adopters.
- 17.8% (8) less than eight months
- 46.7% (21) between eight and 12 months
- 22% (10) between 12 and 18 months
- 6.67% (3) between 18 and 24 months
- 6.67% (3) between 24 and 30 months.

At the end of March 2024 there were 28 families in Stage Two.

- \*One household (3.6%) has been in stage two for over a year.
- No households have been in stage two for between 8 and 12 months.
- 10.7% (3 households) have been in stage two between 4 and 8 months
- 85.7% (24 households) have been in stage two for under 4 months

In the above data, it is notable that a significant outlier is one household that has been in Stage 2 for over 12 months. This relates to an exceptional and complex assessment where a historical criminal charge has come to light (not known by the agency in Stage one). Consequently, the relevant risk assessments had to be completed and further work and training were accessed by the applicants.

Positively the majority of assessments are on track to be completed within 4 months or as close to 4 months as possible.

### Stage One

61 households completed stage one throughout 2023/24. The average number of days in stage one was 198. The fewest number of days was 43 and the longest 654 days.

For the households completing Stage one:

- 34.4% (21) completed in less than four months
- 39.3% (24) between four and eight months
- 16.4% (10) between eight months and a year
- 4.9% (3) between twelve and eighteen months
- 4.9% (3) over eighteen months.

The average time for an adopter spent in Stage one with a completion date throughout 2023/24 was just less than six months at 5.96 months.

At the end of March 2024 there were 29 families in Stage One (no families on hold) (Part of the not yet approved cohort 46.8%. Of these:

- 16 (55.2%) have been in Stage One for over two months.
- 13 (44.8%) have been in Stage One for less than two months.

Five families are currently between Stage One and Stage Two. It has been less than six months for all families since completing Stage One. (Part of the not yet approved cohort 8.1%).

We are not meeting the requirement to complete Stage one within 2 months and recognise that this is an area in Recruitment and Assessment requiring our greatest improvement.

As part of addressing this concern and improving our Stage one timescales, we have re-shaped the service and now have a new role and a dedicated social worker responsible for all adopters during Pre- Stage one and Stage one of the adoption process. Through tracking and supporting adopters robustly during Stage 1, we aim to improve the likelihood of adopters completing Stage one in a timely manner, and or addressing concerns; which would have contributed to delay at the earliest opportunity.

Our dedicated Stage one worker is supported by 1.5 Business Support workers, who actively support the Stage one Worker in completing all checks and references and escalating any issues, where delays are experienced.



Unfortunately, we continue to experience delays with the following statutory checks in particular:

- Overseas Checks – Due to the unique process for each overseas country, we continue to experience inconsistent timescales for completion. This matter can only be addressed by looking at matters case by case.
- Disclosure and Barring Service – We are reliant on a three-part process when adopters complete their DBS application (Part 1- Adopter to complete their section online, Part 2- the agency views records used as evidence and Part 3- CWC internal HR department oversees the agency submission to the DBS). To mitigate for any process driven delays, the stage 1 worker now ensures that evidence is seen at the point the applicants submit their Registration of Interest form. Any subsequent delays are escalated with the relevant department in CWC responsible for completing the DBS on behalf of Adoption@Heart.
- Adopter Medicals - We understand that GPs are not commissioned to complete adult health assessments, so they reserve the right to refuse or charge any value. As with many adoption agencies- we therefore experience inconsistencies re the timeliness of the completion of the Adopters' Adult Health Assessment, prior to it being submitted to the relevant Medical Advisors. Our Stage one worker now advises applicants to pre-book their appointments with their GPs at the point their Registration of Interest is submitted. This may not always be possible but is our preferred approach. Where matters cannot be resolved with the GP by the applicants or the agency, we have an escalation process in place with the designated Child in Care Nurse for CWC. We also have quarterly meetings with Adoption@Heart Medical Advisors to improve the process and discuss case specific or general issues of delay.

### Adopters Approved and Waiting

As at the end of March 2024 there were 54 adopters approved and waiting (including two households on hold).

Of these:

- 8 (14.8%) have been approved and waiting over one year.
- 7 (13%) between nine and 12 months
- 5 (9.3%) between six and nine months
- 9 (16.6%) between three and six months
- 25 (46.3%) under 3 months

### Adopter Approvals demographics

- 65 Adopter approvals were recorded throughout 2023/24 relating to 119 individuals; 53 males and 66 females.
- The relationship status for the 119 are 49 married couples, one civil partnership, three male/female relationships, one same sex partnership and 11 single adopters.
- All were aged between 29 and 66 years. 41.2% (49) were aged between 30 and 39 years and 36.1% (43) between 40 and 49 years.
- 84% (100) are heterosexual, eight lesbian, four gay and one bisexual. The sexual orientation of six approved adopters are unknown.
- The ethnicity of the adopter approvals is 70.6% (84) white British, 8.4% (10) Asian Pakistani, 5.04% Asian Indian (6) and white other (6), 3.4% (4) Black African, 2.52% (3) black Caribbean, and 2.52% mixed other (3) black other 1.7% (2) and one adopter with other ethnicity.
- Three approved adopters have a disability.
- The number of adopters in stage one and stage two is positive and should overall increase the number of adopter approvals for 2024-25.

However, we do anticipate to still see the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and adverse experiences of adopters on the final number of approved and available families.

To provide strategic oversight on the progress of adopter assessments, the Service Manager for Adoption@Heart is undertaking monthly tracking. This enables any delays to be closely monitored and issues such as delays in the completion of statutory checks to be escalated.

# Children We Work With



## The Data

It's important to avoid sampling comparing the data of the four partners with Adoption@ Heart. Each of these local authorities and Trust has different characteristics in their population, and they are not statistical neighbours. Consequently, the profile of their children in care will be different, and specific to the needs of their own children.

There might also be historical trends or past policies within the local council that have influenced the current situation. This can include past practices regarding family support services and thresholds for intervention.

Across the region, by Walsall, Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley there is strong performance in terms of children's plans, exiting care via adoption and timeliness.



## The total number of children awaiting adoption placements:

|   | Wolverhampton | Dudley | Sandwell | Walsall | Total |
|---|---------------|--------|----------|---------|-------|
| No children waiting pre-Placement Order | 36            | 24     | 41       | 46      | 147   |
| No children waiting with PO             | 21            | 25     | 21       | 44      | 111   |
| No children waiting 6+ months           | 12            | 15     | 12       | 18      | 57    |

The total number of children we are family finding for, including those not yet subject to Placement Orders in the four LA's and CT combined is 147, with the highest number in Walsall (46) and the lowest in Dudley (24). Those children waiting to be placed- who are subject to a Placement Orders totals at 111. Walsall (44) again showing the highest figure, which includes an increase in sibling groups and older children indicating potential delays or complexities in finding suitable placements in this area.

## Number of Children who had a SHOPBA during the period:

| Wolverhampton | Dudley | Sandwell | Walsall | Total |
|---------------|--------|----------|---------|-------|
| 34            | 34     | 28       | 55      | 151   |

The above breakdown provides an overview of the number of children who had a decision made that they should be placed for adoption (SHOPBA) and who are awaiting Placement Orders in each of four Local Authorities and Children's Trust.

**Number of Children who had a Change of Care Plan away from Adoption during this period:**

| Wolverhampton | Dudley | Sandwell | Walsall | Total |
|---------------|--------|----------|---------|-------|
| 16            | 20     | 37       | 62      | 135   |

Essentially this is recording all Stage 1 and 2 notifications where there has been a change of plan away from adoption. For many children this includes children with a dual or triple track plan. Walsall’s notifications at Stage 1 include all children subject to parallel planning where adoption may be considered, and Stage 2 notifications when a single-track plan of adoption has been agreed. Over this period adoptions plans for 8 children have been rescinded.

**Number of Children placed for adoption and the number of Adoption Orders granted during this period:**

|                                     | Wolverhampton | Dudley | Sandwell | Walsall | Total |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|--------|----------|---------|-------|
| Number of children placed           | 19            | 21     | 20       | 32      | 92    |
| Number of children placed 6+ months | 6             | 9      | 7        | 15      | 37    |
| Number of children adopted          | 15            | 13     | 17       | 28      | 74    |

A total of 90 children have been placed, with Walsall showing a comparatively higher number of placements (32) than others. This suggests a more efficient placement process in Walsall, contrary to the waiting figures. Out of these placements, 37 children had been placed for over 6 months without Adoption Orders being granted, highlighting a significant delay which could impact on these children’s outcomes.

There have been 74 adoptions, with Walsall having the largest share (28 adoptions). This is a positive indicator of finality and stability for children in this region.

### Number of Children placed for adoption with in house Placements compared to Inter-agency Placements:

|   | Wolverhampton | Dudley | Sandwell | Walsall | Total |
|---|---------------|--------|----------|---------|-------|
| Number of In - House Placements                       | 8             | 9      | 11       | 9       | 37    |
| Number of External (Interagency Placements)           | 13            | 12     | 10       | 27      | 62    |
| Nine children placed suffered disruptions in 2023/24* |               |        |          |         | 99    |

The total number of in-house matches stands at 37, 37%, with external matches totaling 62, 63%. This is a significant change from the end data for the previous year. Not so much in terms of the overall number of children placed, but regarding the increase in the number of children placed with external agencies: See Table below –

### Number of Children placed for adoption within House Placements compared to Inter-agency Placements from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

|   | Wolverhampton | Dudley | Sandwell | Walsall | Total           |
|---|---------------|--------|----------|---------|-----------------|
| Number of In - House Placements             | 7             | 15     | 18       | 20      | 60              |
| Number of External (Interagency Placements) | 2             | 1      | 7        | 21      | 31              |
|   |               |        |          |         | <b>Total 91</b> |

In year 2022/2023 - Inter-agency usage was 34%, and 66% of children were placed in house. Thus, there has been a reverse of the trend over the last couple of years – where the use of inter-agency placements has risen significantly.



## Children Placed Foster for Adopt 2023/2024

| LA/Trust      | FFA In House | FFA Interagency | Total     |
|---------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Dudley        | 3            | 2               | 5         |
| Sandwell      | 5            | 0               | 5         |
| Walsall       | 3            | 6               | 9         |
| Wolverhampton | 1            | 1               | 2         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>12</b>    | <b>9</b>        | <b>20</b> |

Out of the 90 children placed in 2023/24, 20 children were placed in Early Permanence placements via Reg 25A (FFA arrangements), with a rolling figure of 2 that currently remain in Care Proceedings, thus showing an ongoing commitment to early permanence where possible.

In Comparison to last year, the data appears relatively similar despite a slight drop in the overall number of Children placed in EP arrangements. There too, like the total number of children placed, has been an increase in Inter agency usage for Early Permanence placements (see table below for 2022/23 data).

## Children Placed Foster for Adopt 2022/2023

| LA/Trust      | FFA Inhouse | FFA Interagency | Total     |
|---------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Dudley        | 4           | 0               | 4         |
| Sandwell      | 4           | 2               | 6         |
| Walsall       | 9           | 2               | 11        |
| Wolverhampton | 3           | 0               | 3         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>20</b>   | <b>4</b>        | <b>24</b> |

In year 2022/2023 - Inter-agency usage was 34%, thus 66% of children were placed in house. Thus, there has been almost a reverse of the trend over the last couple of years – where the use of inter-agency placements has risen significantly.

## Analysis – Children Placed

The number of children matched and moving to live with their adoptive families during 2023/24 was 99, although this figure has been adjusted to 90 to reflect the six children whose placements had been disrupted. This figure is very similar to the number of children placed in 2022/23, being 91. This is lower number of children placed, compared to 2021/22 which was 103.

The total number of in-house matches stands at 37, 37%, with external matches totalling 62, 63%. In comparison to the previous year there has been a significant shift and increase in inter-agency usage. At 31st March 2023 - 34% of children placed, were placed inter-agency. The spread of children placed/matched across the four partners has continued in a similar manner to last year.

It is positive that 20 children have been placed via Foster for Adoption (although this represents a drop from the 24 children placed in the previous year) and similarly to the overall, number of children placed an increase in inter-agency usage. Overall, the demand for Early Permanence placements is increasing as practice is becoming become more embedded, despite this year's drop in numbers. Whilst this is positive, the lower number of adopter approvals has meant there were fewer adopters available for placements in 2023/24 and more inter-agency placements were necessary. Inter-agency usage ensured children's adoption plans continued to be expedited with families approved by other RAA's and VAA's.

## Reduction of Interagency Usage:

To try and reduce the use of inter-agency placements, we have explored potential matches for children waiting with families going through the assessment process. Whilst there are admittedly concerns around the inter-agency usage, we were aware of this trajectory this time last year. It has at least, ensured that we have continued to place children in a timely way with approved adopters.

The agreement to inter-agency placement searches has been monitored and reviewed regularly by the management team, during the year monthly meetings were chaired by the Head of Service. Part of this was to ensure that should there be a need to expedite an external search sooner, the Head of Service could agree. Its other key function was to also ensure that internal resources have been thoroughly explored, and sometimes re-visited before going external is agreed.

We have now set up an Interagency Agreement Panel and process, whereby Family Finders present a case for external permission. The Panel sits on the second Monday each month. This revised process aims to balance the managed reduction of Inter-agency placements, with a more efficient, transparent, and child-focused decision-making framework.

## Changes in Practice within The Family Finding Team

The Family Finding Team consists of a Team Manager, a Senior Social Worker and nine Family Finding Social Workers. In addition, there are five Family Support Workers to provide support across the team. More recently, we have introduced a new Operational Model. Some of the changes in practice now means that all children with a plan that includes adoption will have an allocated family finding social worker (effectively this means tracking from the point of the initial Stage 1 notification to the granting of the adoption order).

The team manager is responsible for having an overview of all the children open to Adoption@Heart. This should be done via monthly tracking meetings with each partner. The senior practitioner, will case hold, get involved when things are complex, and lead on practice standards and development.

## What's Next

- Investigate and address the reasons behind prolonged waiting times, especially for children waiting over 6 months.
- Share best practices from Walsall's adoption and matching processes with other LA's.
- Focus on increasing FFA placements to ensure children find stability sooner.

# Adoption Support



## The Team

The team continues to provide all aspects of pre and post order adoption support on behalf of each of the three local authorities and Children's Trust, and supports families pre and post order. The team commissions therapeutic services via applications to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, Keep in Touch arrangements, Access to Records and Birth Parent Support. The team has the following structure:

1 Team Manager, 1 Senior Social Worker, 1 Senior Therapist

Adoption Support:

5 Full-Time Adoption Support Social Workers

1 Part-Time Adoption Support Social Worker

Adult Adoptee/Birth Parent Support:

1 Part-Time Access to Records/Birth Parent Support Social Worker

1 Part-Time Access to Records/Birth Parent Family Support Worker

Keep in Touch Team:

3 Full-Time Family Support Workers (Keep in Touch Team) – one team member is on extended maternity leave, so her role is being back-filled by the Access to Records/Birth Parent Family Support Worker.

# Adoption Support

It is recognised that early life adversity impacts children developmentally, emotionally, cognitively and socially and requires therapeutic support for children to thrive. Adoption@Heart operates a graduated approach, offering universal access to an adoption training programme and support groups delivered by staff; enhanced support includes an assessment of need and parenting support, individually or in groups, and targeted support includes commissioning of specialist therapeutic intervention. We utilise the service of a Senior Adoption Support Therapist employed by Adoption@Heart, as well as commissioning private and independent therapeutic services.

The starting point for accessing the Adoption Support Service is an Assessment of Need. The team worked with the following numbers of children in the twelve-month period. This is a significant overall increase (119 additional children) in the number of assessments of need, this is becoming a growing demand and continues to evidence the lifelong nature and complexity of adoption. There is an increasing waiting list for allocation for support due to significant capacity issues within the team.

|               |     |
|---------------|-----|
| Dudley        | 125 |
| Sandwell      | 68  |
| Walsall       | 79  |
| Wolverhampton | 94  |
| Total         | 366 |

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund was established in 2015 by the Government to help adoptive families access support and settle into their new lives following adoption. The Government committed ongoing funding for the 2023-24 financial year in advance of the spending review settlement. There has been a significant increase in the number of ASGSF applications (compared to 234 in 22-23) which again evidences the need for on-going support within the adoption arena.

## ASGSF Applications completed in the year

|               |     |
|---------------|-----|
| Sandwell      | 60  |
| Walsall       | 79  |
| Dudley        | 122 |
| Wolverhampton | 78  |
| Total         | 339 |

### Access to Records

The provision of birth records counselling and access to information is of vital importance in enabling adopted adults to understand the circumstances of their adoption and enhance their sense of identity. Unfortunately, there has been a decrease in the number of requests that we have been able to support in the twelve-month period due to ongoing capacity challenges. The figures for referrals allocated to be supported are below ("Unknown LA" relates to referrals where we are required to check whether any information is held, but the Appropriate Adoption Agency is not named on the referral):

|               |    |
|---------------|----|
| Dudley        | 16 |
| Sandwell      | 10 |
| Walsall       | 8  |
| Wolverhampton | 14 |
| Unknown LA:   | 5  |
| Total         | 53 |

### Birth Parent Support

The team also provides support to birth parents affected by adoption and the following numbers were supported by the service in the twelve-month period; the number of requests that could be supported remains low due to capacity challenges:

|               |    |
|---------------|----|
| Dudley        | 2  |
| Sandwell      | 6  |
| Walsall       | 9  |
| Wolverhampton | 7  |
| Total         | 24 |

### Keep in Touch

Adoption@Heart is responsible for Keep in Touch arrangements on behalf of City of Wolverhampton Council, Walsall Council, Dudley Council and Sandwell Children's Trust. There are three full-time Family Support Workers who are responsible for administering the service. They offer support to adoptive parents and birth relatives. There is a consistently high workload within the team which has impacted on some aspects of service delivery and a full breakdown of Keep in Touch exchanges by Local Authority/Children's Trust is therefore not available.

The total number of communications facilitated by the team from January – December 2023 was 10,744; this includes duty calls, letter exchanges, supported letter writing and supported Family Time sessions.



# Adoption Panels



During the year 2023-2024 all adoption panels were conducted virtually, and consideration has been given to panels using a hybrid approach. At this time, it was felt that due to the panel processes i.e., applicants and social workers joining at different times for items, this option was not suitable, however ongoing discussions are taking place about the possibility of having some face-to-face panels for some items in the near future.

Feedback continues to show similar views that applicants feel more relaxed joining panels online via Microsoft Teams from their home. Social workers report that working in this way allows them to work effectively and efficiently whilst managing their workloads. Medical Advisors who attend as Panel Members have reported similar views about being able to complete their work at the hospital around panel commitments.

The Panel continues to function with the support of the Panel Team including the Panel Advisors, Panel Co-Ordinator, and Panel Administrators. On the central list there are currently in total 43 Panel Members. It is made up of 16 Independent Panel Members and 17 Social Work Panel Member representatives. There are four Independent Panel Chairs, six Medical Advisors for the three Local Authorities and the Children's Trust.



## Diversity of Members

The central list offers a good representation of members who have either been adopted or have adopted and this is seen as very positive in terms of the different perspectives they bring. There has been a change in the membership and activity to recruit new members with the aim of increasing the diversity and representation at panel in terms of gender, race, disability and lived experiences. However, it is acknowledged that more needs to be done to recruit males, same sex couples and single adopters. All of these attempts will be to increase panel capacity for panel diversity and is an ongoing activity.

Figures provided for an Ofsted Inspection in December 2022 showing the diversity of panel from the start of the RAA 1st April 2019 to December 2023. (Data was not available for 2020/2021 but has been collected and monitored annually from 2023)

**The figures from 2022/2023 are from 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023**

|               | 2019  | 2020 | 2021 | 2022   | 2023   |
|---------------|---|------|------|--|--|
| Panel Members | 37  |      |      | 47   | 43   |
| Gender        |   |      |      |  |  |
|               | 7 Male  |      |      | 6 Male   | 5 Male   |
|               | 1 Medical Advisor 6 Independent                   |      |      | 1 Chair 1 Medical Advisor 2 Independent 2 Social Workers | 1 Chair 1 Medical Advisor 2 Independent 1 Social Workers |
| Ethnicity     |   |      |      |  |  |
|               | 8 Asian   |      |      | 11 Asian   | 11 Asian   |
|               | 5 Medical Advisors 1 Independent 2 Social workers |      |      | 5 Medical Advisors 1 Independent 5 Social Workers        | 5 Medical Advisors 1 Independent 5 Social Workers        |
|               | 1 Black   |      |      | 6 Black  | 4 Black  |
|               | 1 Social Worker                                   |      |      | 1 Independent 5 Social Workers                           | 1 Independent 3 Social Workers                           |
|               | 2 Dual Heritage                                   |      |      | 3 Dual Heritage  | 3 Dual Heritage  |
|               | 1 Medical Advisor 1 Social Worker                 |      |      | 1 Medical Advisor 2 Social Workers                       | 1 Medical Advisor 1 Independent 1 Social Worker          |
| Disability    |   |      |      |  | 1 Independent  |

## Panel Training

In the period 2023-2024 Panel Members have had the opportunity to attend the following training events:

Adoption@Heart Panel Development Day which took place on 25/10/2023. This is an annual event which looked at the following areas, A@H Performance, Panel Team updates, Post Panel Feedback from Social Workers and Adopters, Learning from Disruptions, Marketing, Recruitment & Assessment challenges, and A@H Ongoing training including Trans racial placements. There were 49 people who attended this training and there is a lot of sharing of information, updates and interesting discussions on the day. Feedback from attendees was that training and topics were relevant to the Panel Member role. The case studies were very useful and provided members with a good understanding.

Thematic training is regularly offered to Panel Members to develop their effectiveness on panel following themes and topic areas identified in their annual appraisals. Take up of this can be variable depending on previous knowledge and experience. Training is scheduled for 2024-2025 to include Keeping In Touch (KIT) and an Adult Adoptee experience and perspective.

The Panel Advisors, Independent Chairs, Medical Advisors, and the ADMs also have the opportunity to attend forums set up for specific roles at Panels during the year and some are held jointly for Panel Advisors and Independent Chairs. These are organised and facilitated by Coram BAAF. This ensures that Panel Members are kept up to date with the latest research and developments.

## Panel Business

Panel met on 49 occasions during 2023-2024. There is also flexibility within the panel system allowing for extra and additional panels to be arranged in order to hear the additional cases and emergency matters to be heard, as and when directed by the courts. This means that children do not wait, and matters are dealt with in a timely manner. In March 2023, an extra panel was scheduled to hear approvals which had been completed and waiting to be presented to panel. This was to ensure families were approved and ready to be considered for children needing adoptive families.

The Adoption@Heart Head of Service undertakes all approval decisions as ADM. The SHOBPA decisions remain in the three Local Authorities and the Trust, except in the case of Consensual Adoptions previously known as relinquishment for adoption which remain with Adoption@Heart. Agency Decision Makers are very flexible regarding early decisions in relation to both approvals and matches, in order to enable transitions that work best for the child/ren.

There are quarterly meetings for the Independent Panel Chairs to meet with each other, Panel Advisors, Panel Coordinator, Service Manager and Head of Service. There are also bi-annual Panel Chair and ADM meetings. This supports the communication between the partner agencies and strengthens the working relationships between the local authorities and the Children's Trust.

### Consensual Adoptions

There were 4 Consensual Adoptions heard at panel during the period, two Sandwell children, one Wolverhampton and one Walsall child.

### Approvals

Adoption@Heart is welcoming of adopters from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, those in same sex relationships, single applicants, those with disabilities and where English is not the first language.

66 Approvals were considered at Panel. 65 adopters were approved in this reporting period. There was one approval which was deferred at panel, it is hoped the item will be approved in 2024/2025.

# Feedback from Adopters About Their Experience at Panel

*Thank you for a really positive experience - felt super welcomed and felt like I was really listened too!!!*

*The chair was personable which made us feel at ease. They were all very encouraging and positive and put across advice well and all was relevant.*

*We had a positive experience of the panel we were treated fairly and made to feel valued.*

*A good experience - we felt that the panel gave us fair and ample opportunity to talk about our skills and merits.*

# Independent Review Mechanism

Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM):

There has been no referral to the IRM in the period.

## Disruptions

A disruption is the premature ending of a placement of a child that has been placed for adoption. A placement can disrupt by being requested by the adoptive parents, by the placing authority or the child.

Disruptions do not happen overnight. There is usually a process leading to a disruption and all parties involved, the prospective adopters, child's Social Worker and adoption support Social Worker will have been working together so all reasonable attempts will have been made to support the situation.

There is often a fine line between a desperate cry for help and a plea for closure. Families under pressure will ask for more of everything in an attempt to make it come out right. The adopters can become more despondent, the children more disturbed and the Social Workers more anxious.

There were six adoption disruptions during the period April 2023- March 2024. Four disruptions relate to single children with the youngest being three years old and the eldest eight years old. One of the factors in each adoption was the relationship between an adopted child and a birth child already in the family. Adoption@Heart practice has been reviewed to ensure that there is improved consideration of the lived experience of other children in an adoptive household. The voice of the child/ren in the household is sought at regular points in the assessment and placement as it is not only the prospective adopters who adopt a child – it is the whole family.

Accordingly, Adoption@Heart is providing additional training to applicants wishing to adopt who have a birth or adopted child placed, so they are better prepared in meeting the needs of all of the children.



In addition, there was a further disruption which involved a sibling group of two who were removed following a safeguarding allegation. The local authority made a decision in March 2023 to end the adoptive placement and a disruption meeting is scheduled for June 2024.

The learning from the disruptions is cascaded to the service and shared in the panel development day and changes, where necessary have been implemented. For example.

- Adoption Panels to consider the appropriateness of providing prospective adopters with exact questions prior to their attendance to Adoption panel. This has been implemented.
- Reflect on how families with a birth child may need additional support. Training has been developed to address this and Adoption Support is explored prior to panel.
- There was much acceptance placed upon narrative provided by the adopters of their ability to parent and the articulation of their knowledge base which had not really tested. This is explored within the assessment and triangulated in referee visits.
- The disruption report to be shared with the IRO service who did not attend or contribute to the meeting. IRO's are invited to contribute either in person or by providing a report and disruption reports are shared with IRO's.

There have been no disruptions in Dudley in this reporting period.

During the reporting period, there have been six disruptions, which included Walsall Council, the City of Wolverhampton Council, and Sandwell Children's Trust.

To ensure we carry forward lessons learned from each disruption, time is allocated during both panel and staff development days to disseminate these lessons and implement changes in practice.



## Complaints

There were eight formal complaints about the service during the twelve-month period 01.04.23 – 31.03.24.

- Complaint about an adoption decision (NB) which related to Adoption Focus adopters who were due to be matched with Sandwell children.
- Complaint about an A@H Social Worker about misplaced documents, time keeping and poor communication (IB).
- Complaint about an adoption decision (TR).
- Complaint about the adoption process and support (CJ) – Sandwell complaint.
- Complaint about letter box contact (ER).
- Complaint about the A@H process, lack of information and post adoption support (JM).
- Complaint about an A@H SSW, lack of communication when requesting therapy for adopted son (LS).
- Complaint about letter box contact (KA-W).

Learning from complaints is a key feature of the service, management and team meetings are used to explore learning and the business plan and team plans are used to implement learning from complaints.

# Inspections



## Ofsted Inspection Summary

Ofsted carried out a series of adoption thematic inspections between October and December 2023. 6 RAA's across variety of geography/models/ sizes were chosen, the focus was the effectiveness of the RAA's recruitment, assessment, family-finding & matching practice.

Although Adoption@Heart was not one of the RAA's inspected, the head of service has benchmarked the findings from the series of inspections and the final report against Adoption@Heart to identify the parallels. This summary outlines the strengths, areas for development, and focus points.

Inspections of adoption services in local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies have consistently identified adoption practice as a strength. The move to regionalisation, therefore, built on a sound, established base. The evidence from this thematic inspection indicates that, overall, day-to-day practice remains generally strong. However, despite this good practice, some of the challenges that led to regionalisation remain unresolved. Recruitment, assessment, family-finding, and matching remained consistently strong. Agencies supported prospective adopters well through a thorough assessment process, which included good preparation training. However, despite the regional approach, there remained a shortage of adopters, particularly for those children who were more likely to wait longer than their peers to be linked with adopters.



## Inspections

Leadership of the RAAs was stable, which meant that leaders had a good understanding of their agencies' strengths and weaknesses. Partner local authorities relied heavily on self-reporting by RAAs to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the services provided on their behalf. A lack of partner audit or independent scrutiny meant that some were unaware of significant shortfalls in the experiences of adopters, children, adopted adults or birth parents. In addition, the collective views of those with lived experience of adoption, particularly children, had limited influence on service planning and development.

- Recruitment, assessment, family-finding, and matching, when carried out by the RAA, were consistently strong. This was in line with our wider inspection findings on adoption services. Prospective adopters felt welcomed and supported through a detailed assessment process, with effective preparation training to prepare for adoption.
- In some RAAs, regionalisation has contributed to an increase in local matches for some children and adopters. However, this was not always the case. Some local authorities continued to experience an increase in the number of children placed through other adoption services.
- There were not always enough staff to assess prospective adopters. This resulted in delays in assessment.
- The profile of children who are more likely to wait longer than their peers to be linked with an adoptive family remained unchanged. This included siblings and children with more complex needs.

- The availability of adoption support varied significantly across the RAAs visited. For some local authorities, regionalisation had increased and strengthened the services available. However, the need for adoption support often exceeded the available resources. This meant that some families waited a long time to receive the support that they needed. It left some families in an extended state of crisis, at times risking family breakdown.
- Where families received the right adoption support for their family, they were positive about its impact.
- As RAA arrangements are still relatively new, the lack of history with adopters has limited RAAs' ability to predict future need and resources.
- RAA leaders have been creative in developing services that make best use of resources with the widest reach.
- Limitations in the way the ASGSF was applied sometimes prevented a holistic consideration of children's needs in complex situations. Funding is time-limited, which increased adopters' anxiety and was a barrier to setting up long-term approaches to supporting families.

The provision of the right adoption support at the right time was often powerful, helping families to remain living together.

However, this was not the experience of all families. Five RAAs reported challenges in providing adoption support services directly. Some had made more progress in addressing these than others. The issue of not having enough staff was also apparent in adoption support.

Some people seeking adoption support experienced extensive delays in obtaining an assessment of need, or any form of support. These families were often in crisis at the time they reached out, and the impact was highly detrimental. This was primarily a capacity issue within the RAAs. However, it was compounded for adopters by the complexities of changing geographical area and not understanding how to access support, or of being misinformed about their entitlements or the services available to them.

In one RAA, the lack of contact between RAA staff and families waiting for assessment or support meant that staff did not always have an up-to-date understanding of risk in families. In one RAA, an expectation that adopters must update RAA staff about their situation was unrealistic and failed to recognise families' lived experiences. Inspectors heard from five families where children had either become the subject of child in need plans or had become looked after while the family tried to access or were accessing adoption support. In two cases, children were wrongly denied access to adoption support, as RAA staff believed that their involvement with other specialist teams made them ineligible. Another adopter spoke of 'tick-box' procedures. They experienced a rigid approach to form-filling rather than an empathic response when they asked for support. For families already in a heightened emotional state, this was traumatic.

No partner Local Authority or Children's Trust received an ILAC inspection, other any other type of inspection impacting on adoption during this period.



## Governance Arrangements

Adoption@Heart has been well supported and challenged by its management board during this period. The consistency and continuity of board members mean that there is a well-rounded understanding of the strengths and weaknesses.

Karen Graham at Dudley Council, Steven Gauntley at Sandwell Children's Trust, Lisa Preston at City of Wolverhampton Council and Rita Homer at Walsall Council have all represented their respective LA/Trust throughout the year, with attendance being at 100%. Slight amendments were made to the governance arrangements to remove duplicates. The board now meets quarterly, with two additional meetings that include the DCS group. All meetings for next year have been scheduled and agendas set.

# Service Development



Whilst there has been significant focus on Ofsted activity, the management team have also focused on the re-write of key policies and procedures and the formulation of an overarching business plan which identifies key service development priorities.

For the coming year, 2024-25, the business plan identifies the following as areas for ongoing development:

- Embed early permanence from both a child and adopter perspective.
- Focus recruitment activity on recruiting adopters for children who wait the longest.
- Improve on timeliness of adoption assessments and matching.
- Improve on adopter and child voice.
- There is a need to embed a quality assurance framework within the service, which includes the need for regular themed audit activity across all aspects of the service and the collation of service user experience across all parts of the adoption journey.

# Budget

## 2023-2024

The final position is breakeven for A@H in 2023-2024, however this includes:

- Reductions in partner contributions of £233,522 as per the year-end outturn report relating to underspends in 2022-2023.
- Utilising the £150,000 reserves originally approved during Budget setting for 2023-2024.
- Utilising all of the £357,000 reserves agreed in 2023-2024, funded from prior year underspends, to offset additional in year pressures.
- Of the £250,000 reserves remaining, £87,897 has been transferred to reserves leaving a balance of £337,897.

Reserve movement from Q3 reported is £260,000 reduction relating to lower expenditure projected and expenditure previously forecast against the inter-agency budget.



### Use of Reserves 2023-2024 | £000

#### Total Reserve at start of 2023-2024.

990 £

#### Committed as part of original 23-24 budget.

150 £

#### Agreed at Q1 to cover in year increases costs

357 £

#### Reduction to contributions of partners as advised.

233 £

#### Transfer to Reserves

-87 £

#### Reserves remaining

338 £

The table below shows a detailed budget and the main reasons for the budget variances are detailed below the table.

|   | Budget 2023-24 | Final 2023-24 | Variance |
|---|----------------|---------------|----------|
| Staffing  | 3,468,127      | 3,083,431     | -384,696 |
| Agency  | 0              | 224,521       | 224,521  |
| CRB Checks                                      | 13,607         | 0             | -13,607  |
| Training  | 10,404         | 19,273        | 8,869    |
| Public Transport                                | 10,200         | 3,732         | -6,468   |
| Car Allowances                                  | 30,600         | 12,389        | -18,211  |
| Furniture                                       | 5,100          | 0             | -5,100   |
| Professional Fees                               | 51,000         | 29,306        | -21,694  |
| Postage   | 10,200         | 4,279         | -5,921   |
| Subsistence, Stationery & General running costs | 10,200         | 24,537        | 14,337   |
| Conference expenses                             | 5,100          | 55            | -5,045   |
| Licences & Subscriptions                        | 82,620         | 92,418        | 9798     |
| Accommodation Costs                             | 13,260         | 14,245        | 985      |
| Marketing                                       | 40,700         | 24,710        | -15990   |
| Computing – Equipment & Maintenance Agreement   | 18,360         | 18,000        | -360     |
| Inter-Agency placement expenditure              | 1,302,472      | 1,686,941     | 384,469  |
| Service Level Agreements                        | 277,193        | 259,408       | -17785   |
| Total Expenditure                               | 5,349,143      | 5,497,245     | 148,102  |
| Adoption Support Fund                           | -75,000        | 0             | 75,000   |
| Inter-agency Placement Income                   | -100,000       | -54,000       | 46,000   |
| Use of Reserves                                 | -150,000       | -652,624      | -502,624 |
| Total before contributions                      | 5,024,143      | 4,790,621     | -233,522 |
| Partner Contributions                           | -5,024,143     | -4,790,621    | 233,522  |
| Total   | 0              | 0             | 0        |

## Inter-Agency

There is a projected forecast overspend of £384,469 against the budget for inter-agency placements.

The budget was based on 35% of 120 places. Q3 forecast was based on 62 placements. Final out turn was 62 inter-agency placed. 37 were placed internally giving a 63% inter-agency placements.

Improved authorisation, tracking and information sharing systems between finance and the service has been implemented by the HoS, to ensure accurate external placement projections going forward.

To date there have been two inter agency placements 'sold' to other organisations for £54,000 income in 2023-2024.

The inter-agency variation is partially offset by a forecast under spend of £85,000 against Staffing and Agency expenditure due to in year staffing vacancies, and an under spend of £76,000 against other non-staffing budgets.

There is currently no income forecast for adoption support fund, linked to the still vacant post of Clinical psychologist. Further work will be undertaken over the coming months to ensure this income stream is being maximised.

## Partner Contributions 2023-2024

| Partner Authority             | 23-24 Agreed contribution. | Reduction to contributions from underspends in 22-23 | Potential revised contribution |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Dudley MBC                    | 1,173,517                  | 55,784   | 1,117,732                      |
| Sandwell MBC                  | 1,392,800                  | 63,712   | 1,329,088                      |
| Walsall MBC                   | 1,210,582                  | 55,998   | 1,154,584                      |
| City of Wolverhampton Council | 1,247,244                  | 58,028   | 1,189,216                      |
| Total to be funded 23/24      | 5,024,143                  | 233,522  | 4,790,621                      |



APPENDIX\*\*

# All Four Partners

## Headline Data

|                         | 2023/24 |          |         |               |
|-------------------------|---------|----------|---------|---------------|
|                         | Dudley  | Sandwell | Walsall | Wolverhampton |
| Best Interest Decisions | 34      | 28       | 55      | 34            |
| Placement Orders        | 25      | 24       | 48      | 22            |
| Matches                 | 19      | 22       | 27      | 25            |
| Placements              | 19      | 20       | 23      | 25            |
| Adoption Orders         | 14      | 18       | 28      | 19            |

|  | 2023/24 |          |         |               |
|--|---------|----------|---------|---------------|
|  | Dudley  | Sandwell | Walsall | Wolverhampton |
| Children in care numbers end of March 2024                       | 575     | 808      | 664     | 519           |
| Children in care rate (per 10,000 – 0-17years) end of March 2024 | 83.2    | 94.1     | 97.3    | 82.3          |

|     | 2023/24  |          |          |               | 2022/23    |                 |
|-----|----------|----------|----------|---------------|------------|-----------------|
|     | Dudley   | Sandwell | Walsall  | Wolverhampton | WM Average | England Average |
| A2  | 178 days | 468 days | 145 days | 182 days      | 196 days   | 197 days        |
| A10 | 553 days | 519 days | 397 days | 504 days      | 510 days   | 480 days        |

## APPENDIX\*\*

# Child Level Information for City of Wolverhampton Council

At the end of March 2024 there were 519 children in care at a rate of 83.8 per 10,000 children.

Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision

Throughout 2023/24 34 children received an ADM BID decision.

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 10            | 3             | 16            | 5             | 34               |

At the end of March 2024 there were 35 children with an ADM BID waiting.

Children made subject to Placement Orders

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 22 placement orders:

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 7             | 3             | 6             | 6             | 22               |

At the end of March there were 21 children with a Placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 15 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since their placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- 18 (85.7%) are aged under 5 years.
- 12 (57.1%) are male
- 3 (14.3%) are an ethnic minority group.
- 4 (19.0%) are disabled
- 5 (23.8%) are part of a sibling group
- 13 (61.9%) are harder to place.

The 21 children have been waiting an average of 543 days since becoming looked after.

| Time since becoming<br>Looked After | Number of<br>children | Cohort<br>Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Over 2 years                        | 6                     | 28.6%                |
| 18 – 24 Months                      | 1                     | 4.8%                 |
| 14 – 18 Months                      | 3                     | 14.3%                |
| 12 – 14 Months                      | 6                     | 28.6%                |
| Less than One Year                  | 5                     | 23.8%                |

Children Matched and Placed

25 children have been both matched and placed throughout 2023/24.

|            | 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | Total<br>2023/24 |
|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| Placements | 7             | 7             | 5             | 6             | 25               |
| Matches    | 6             | 11            | 8             | 0             | 25               |

## APPENDIX\*\*

12 children were placed with in house adopters.

13 children were placed interagency: six with other LA/RAA adopters and seven with voluntary adoption agencies.

A further five children were placed in an FFA or CP placement during 2023/24.

#### Adoption Orders

15 adoption orders were granted during 2023/24:

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 4             | 2             | 2             | 7             | 15               |

Ten fewer than the previous year, which was 19 fewer than in 2021/22.

| 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 43      | 44      | 21      | 44      | 25      |

#### Of the children adopted throughout 2023/24:

- 12 (80%) were aged under five years old.
- 10 (66.7%) were male.
- 4 (26.7%) were an ethnic minority group.
- 1 (6.67%) was disabled.
- 7 (46.67%) were part of a sibling group.
- 11 (73.3%) were harder to place.

Eight children have had a change of plan throughout 2023/24 where adoption is no longer the viable decision.

#### Adoption Timeliness

Wolverhampton's timeliness for 2023/24 indicators are as follows:

A2: Average time from placement to matching decision **182 days** (2022/23 figure 219 days).

A10: Time from entry to care to placement for adoption **504 days** (2022/23 figure 550 days).

At the end of 2022/23 the National figure (based on all Local Authorities in England) for A2 was 197 days and A10 was 480 days. The regional figure for A2 was 196 days and A10 510 days.

## APPENDIX\*\*

# Child Level Information for Dudley Council

Child Level Information for Dudley Council:

At the end of March 2024 there were 571 children in care at a rate of 83.2 per 10,000 children.

Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision.

Throughout 2023/24 34 children received an ADM BID decision.

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 11            | 5             | 3             | 12            | 34               |

At the end of March 2024 there were 39 children with an ADM BID waiting.

Children made subject to Placement Orders

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 25 placement orders:

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 7             | 7             | 5             | 6             | 25               |

At the end of March there were 26 children with a Placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 20 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since their placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- 26 (100%) are aged under 5 years.
- 14 (53.8%) are male
- 5 (19.2%) are an ethnic minority group.
- None are disabled.
- 14 (53.8%) are part of a sibling group
- 17 (65.4%) are harder to place.

The 26 children have been waiting an average of 579 days since becoming looked after.

| Time since becoming<br>Looked After | Number of<br>children | Cohort<br>Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Over 2 years                        | 4                     | 15.4%                |
| 18 – 24 Months                      | 8                     | 30.8%                |
| 14 – 18 Months                      | 8                     | 30.8%                |
| 12 – 14 Months                      | 2                     | 7.6%                 |
| Less than One Year                  | 4                     | 15.4%                |

## Children Matched and Placed

19 children have been both matched and placed throughout 2023/24.

## APPENDIX\*\*

## Children Matched and Placed

19 children have been both matched and placed throughout 2023/24.

|            | 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | Total<br>2023/24 |
|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| Placements | 5             | 5             | 4             | 5             | 19               |
| Matches    | 5             | 5             | 4             | 5             | 19               |

11 children were placed with in house adopters.

Eight children were placed interagency: two with other LA/RAA adopters and six with voluntary adoption agencies.

A further three children were placed in an FFA or CP placement during 2023/24.

## Adoption Orders

14 adoption orders were granted during 2023/24.

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 4             | 6             | 2             | 2             | 14               |

Three fewer than the previous year, and nine fewer than in 2021/22.

| 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 36      | 34      | 8       | 23      | 17      |

Of the children adopted throughout 2023/24:

- 11 (78.6%) were aged under five years old.
- 7 (50%) were male.
- 3(21.4%) were an ethnic minority group.
- None were disabled.
- 4 (28.6%) were part of a sibling group.
- 7 (50%) were harder to place.

Three children have had a change of plan throughout 2023/24 where adoption is no longer the viable decision.

## Adoption Timeliness

Dudley's timeliness for 2023/24 indicators are as follows:

A2: Average time from placement to matching decision **178 days** (2022/23 figure 269 days).

A10: Time from entry to care to placement for adoption **553 days** (2022/23 figure 518 days).

At the end of 2022/23 the National figure (based on all Local Authorities in England) for A2 was 197 days and A10 was 480 days. The regional figure for A2 was **196 days** and A10 510 days.

## APPENDIX\*\*

# Child Level Information for Sandwell Council

## Child Level Information for Sandwell Council:

At the end of March 2024 there were 808 children in care at a rate of 94.1 per 10,000 children.  
Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision  
Throughout 2023/24 28 children received an ADM BID decision.

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 7             | 4             | 9             | 8             | 28               |

At the end of March 2024 there were 48 children with an ADM BID waiting.

Children made subject to Placement Orders

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 24 placement orders:

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 9             | 4             | 7             | 4             | 24               |

At the end of March there were 31 children with a Placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 27 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since their placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- 19 (61.3%) are aged under 5 years.
- 22 (71.0%) are male
- 16 (51.6%) are an ethnic minority group.
- 2 (6.5%) are disabled
- 16 (51.6%) are part of a sibling group
- 23 (74.2%) are harder to place.

The 31 children have been waiting an average of 996 days since becoming looked after.

| Time since becoming<br>Looked After | Number of<br>children | Cohort<br>Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Over 2 years                        | 18                    | 58.1%                |
| 18 – 24 Months                      | 5                     | 16.1%                |
| 14 – 18 Months                      | 6                     | 19.4%                |
| 12 – 14 Months                      | 1                     | 3.2%                 |
| Less than One Year                  | 1                     | 3.2%                 |



## APPENDIX\*\*

**Children Matched and Placed**

22 children have been matched and 20 children placed throughout 2023/24.

|            | 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | Total<br>2023/24 |
|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| Placements | 4             | 7             | 3             | 6             | 20               |
| Matches    | 3             | 8             | 2             | 9             | 22               |

At the end of March there were 31 children with a Placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 27 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since their placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- 19 (61.3%) are aged under 5 years.
- 22 (71.0%) are male
- 16 (51.6%) are an ethnic minority group.
- 2 (6.5%) are disabled
- 16 (51.6%) are part of a sibling group
- 23 (74.2%) are harder to place.

The 31 children have been waiting an average of 996 days since becoming looked after.

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 4             | 2             | 9             | 3             | 18               |

16 fewer than the previous two years.

| 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 28      | 30      | 35      | 34      | 34      |

**Of the children adopted throughout 2023/24:**

- 16 (88.9%) were aged under five years old.
- 7 (38.9%) were male.
- 5 (27.8%) were an ethnic minority group.
- 1 (5.6%) was disabled.
- 5 (27.8%) were part of a sibling group.
- 11 (61.1%) were harder to place.

14 children have had a change of plan throughout 2023/24 where adoption is no longer the viable decision.

**Adoption Timeliness**

Sandwell's timeliness for 2023/24 indicators are as follows:

A2: Average time from placement to matching decision 468 days (2022/23 figure 195 days).

A10: Time from entry to care to placement for adoption 519 days (2022/23 figure 465 days).

At the end of 2022/23 the National figure (based on all Local Authorities in England) for A2 was 197 days and A10 was 480 days. The regional figure for A2 was 196 days and A10 510 days.

## APPENDIX\*\*

# Child Level Information for Walsall Council

## Child Level Information for Walsall Council:

At the end of March 2024 there were 664 children in care at a rate of 97.3 per 10,000 children.  
Children with an ADM Best Interest Date (BID) decision  
Throughout 2023/24 55 children received an ADM BID decision.

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 19            | 16            | 14            | 6             | 55               |

At the end of March 2024 there were 57 children with an ADM BID waiting.  
Children made subject to Placement Orders

Throughout 2023/24 there have been 48 placement orders:

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 6             | 15            | 16            | 11            | 48               |

At the end of March there were 48 children with a Placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 37 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since their placement order.

Of the children waiting:

- 34 (70.8%) are aged under 5 years.
- 22 (45.8%) are male
- 9 (18.8%) are an ethnic minority group.
- None are disabled.
- 34 (70.8%) are part of a sibling group
- 35 (72.9%) are harder to place.

The 48 children have been waiting an average of 728 days since becoming looked after.

| Time since becoming<br>Looked After | Number of<br>children | Cohort<br>Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Over 2 years                        | 16                    | 33.3%                |
| 18 – 24 Months                      | 12                    | 25%                  |
| 14 – 18 Months                      | 11                    | 22.9%                |
| 12 – 14 Months                      | 1                     | 2.1%                 |
| Less than One Year                  | 8                     | 16.7%                |

## APPENDIX\*\*

**Children Matched and Placed**

27 children have been matched and 23 children placed throughout 2023/24.

|            | 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | Total<br>2023/24 |
|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| Placements | 5             | 12            | 3             | 3             | 23               |
| Matches    | 3             | 12            | 3             | 9             | 27               |

All children were placed with in house adopters.

A further nine children were placed in an FFA or CP placement during 2023/24.

**Adoption Orders**

28 adoption orders were granted during 2023/24.

| 2023/24<br>Q1 | 2023/24<br>Q2 | 2023/24<br>Q3 | 2023/24<br>Q4 | 2023/24<br>Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 10            | 7             | 8             | 3             | 28               |

28 is comparable to the previous two years.

| 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 32      | 16      | 19      | 29      | 27      |

**Of the children adopted throughout 2023/24:**

- 21 (75%) were aged under five years old.
- 10 (35.7%) were male.
- 3 (10.7%) were an ethnic minority group.
- None were disabled.
- 15 (53.6%) were part of a sibling group.
- 19 (39.6%) were harder to place.

Eight children have had a change of plan throughout 2023/24 where adoption is no longer the viable decision.

**Adoption Timeliness**

Walsall's timeliness for 2023/24 indicators are as follows:

A2: Average time from placement to matching decision 145 days (2022/23 figure 124 days).

A10: Time from entry to care to placement for adoption 397 days (2022/23 figure 445 days).

At the end of 2022/23 the National figure (based on all Local Authorities in England) for A2 was 197 days and A10 was 480 days. The regional figure for A2 was 196 days and A10 510 days.

# Contact Details

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"Just wanted to drop a message to say a huge thank you to yourself and your team for the support and welcome on Saturday you all offered. Was great chatting with you all, and you're all a credit to the company for making a hard experience; relaxing, welcoming and being there. So once again thank you all."

Adopter, May 2024



## **1. Context (or background)**

- 1.1 This report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.
- 1.2 Walsall Council is committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, children are supported to live with their birth parents. Where this has not been possible and children become a child in our care, it is preferable that they are live within a family setting. It is the aim of the council that wherever possible this will be with foster carer/s home approved by Walsall rather than through commissioning an external home. Through guidance on delegated authority, there is a recognition that foster carers should be empowered to take on the day-to-day tasks of parenting in the same way as any good parent would.
- 1.3 Foster care is subject to legislative and regulatory guidance through, The Children Act 1989, The Fostering Regulations 2011 and the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. It is further regulated through the Care Planning, Placement and Case Regulations 2010. The regulatory framework for fostering sets out the minimum standards expected to ensure that the care provided by foster carers is adequate to ensure that those children living within fostering homes are well cared for and achieve good outcomes.
- 1.4 Fostering homes are referred to as either Mainstream or Connected Persons. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative. Mainstream Foster Care refers to a range of households who apply to become foster carers for children not known to them. Mainstream Foster Carers include those offering both long-and short-term care and those who provide respite care. Mainstream Foster Carers can be approved to care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and can care for children of different ages.
- 1.5 Walsall Fostering Service is located within the Children's Services Directorate of Walsall Council. The aim of the Fostering Service is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of registered foster carers who can meet the needs of children. Fostering and family-based care are our first-choice option for the Children in Care of Walsall.
- 1.6 The Fostering Service is managed by the Group Manager, and they report to the Head of Service for Provider Services. The primary objective for role of Group Manager is the responsibility for the service planning and management of all local authority Fostering Services.
- 1.7 There are 6 teams in the Fostering Service. Whilst they cover different areas of the fostering task, the overall purpose is to assess, support and develop foster carers and special guardians and to help secure permanency for children via long-term fostering and special guardianship. The Teams are:



- Recruitment & Assessment
  - Support & Stability (based in R&A Team)
  - Support & Development 1
  - Support & Development 2 (Mockingbird)
  - Connected Persons
  - SGO Support Hub (based in CP Team)
- 1.8 Also working across the service is a Practice Improvement Manager and an Independent Fostering Reviewing Officer. The Practice Improvement Manager takes responsibility for the arrangements and operation of the Fostering Panel.
- 1.9 During this reporting period, the Fostering Service recruited to the following new posts:
- Senior Practitioner for the SGO Support Hub
  - Social Worker for the SGO Support Hub
  - 2 Child & Family Support Worker posts for the SGO Support Hub

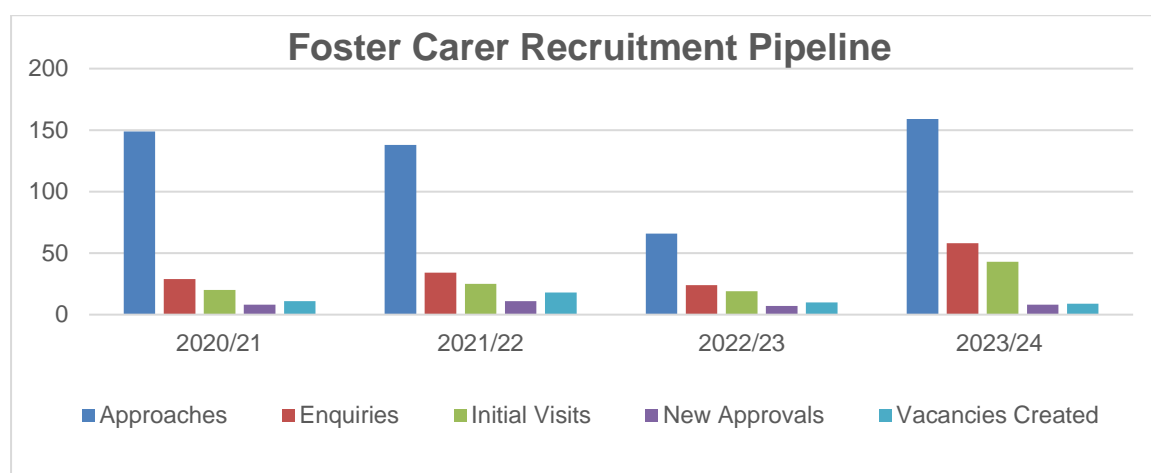
## **2. Overview of Achievements in 2023/24:**

- Sustained workforce stability and reduced reliance on agency workers in the Fostering Service
- Introduced the New Horizon Fostering Scheme
- Launched the SGO Support Hub
- Updated the policy for Financial Support for Permanence Arrangements
- Received a positive report from DfE Fosterlink Diagnostic Initiative
- Maintained the Foster Carer Out of Hours Telephone Support Line
- Increased weekly fostering allowances and additional allowances by 4%
- Introduced the Council Tax Exemption Scheme for Walsall Foster Carers living in Walsall
- Held a Foster Carer Celebration Event
- Collaborated with other LAs to produce the film 'Any of Us'
- Increased the number of enquiries from prospective fostering households
- Recruited, assessed and approved **8** Mainstream Fostering Households
- Recruited, assessed and approved **19** Connected Fostering Households
- Foster Panel rated **93%** of work to be Good (**28%**) or Outstanding (**65%**)
- Case File Auditing rated **89%** of work to be Good or Outstanding
- Extended our partnership working arrangements with the charity Kinship
- Securing permanence for children through SGO
- Maintained the quality & timeliness of connected person assessments
- Commissioned Theraplay Level 1 Training for 27 employees
- Continued our journey for Foster Carers to access Foundation to Attachment Training before progressing to Nurture & Attachment Training
- Continued to produce regular newsletters to both Foster Carers and SGO Carers

### **2.1 Recruitment & Retention of Foster Carers – National & Local Picture:**

- 2.2 Walsall's Fostering Service is operating in a highly competitive marketplace and the recruitment & retention of mainstream foster carers continues to be a significant challenge, both nationally and locally.
- 2.3 Ofsted National Statistics for Fostering in England 2022/23 noted that at the end of March 2023, there were around 43,400 fostering households in England. This total has remained fairly stable over the last 5 years, but the make-up has altered. Since 2019, the number of mainstream LA households has fallen by **11%**, and the number of family and friends households has increased by **21%**. The number of IFA households has not changed substantially. The largest subset of fostering households continues to be mainstream LA households, which currently account for **46%** of the total.
- 2.4 At the end of March 2023, Connected Fostering households (sometimes known as kinship foster care) accounted for **19%** of all active fostering households, an increase from **16%** in 2019.
- 2.5 Since 2019, the number of approved mainstream fostering households has fallen by **7%**. There was no substantial change until 2021 to 2022, when the number decreased in both the LA and IFA sectors. In 2022/23 there has been a **5%** decrease in the number of LA households, and very little change in the number of IFA households.
- 2.6 The IFA sector now accounts for **43%** of mainstream fostering households, up from **40%** in 2019. In 2019, IFAs accounted for **42%** of all filled mainstream fostering places. In 2023, this had risen to **47%**.
- 2.7 The number of applications received from prospective fostering households in 2022 to 2023 was around 8,000. This is the lowest number in several years and is **18%** lower than 2018 to 2019. This year, the proportion of approved applications has returned to its previous level after dropping last year. Similarly, the proportion of withdrawn applications has returned to its previous level. At the end of March 2023, there were around 3,800 newly approved mainstream households. This represented a **26%** decrease compared with 2019.
- 2.8 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were around 72,800 approved mainstream fostering places. Since 2019, the number of vacant mainstream places has decreased by **25%**. The most substantial decrease in vacant fostering places over this period has been in the LA sector, where the number has fallen by **29%**.
- 2.9 In May 2023, the Fostering Network published a report on Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention in England (Key Research Findings and Recommendations). The research suggests that when applying to foster, individuals get in touch with multiple fostering services to find out more about the role and the support available. Each fostering service takes a different approach to defining and counting enquiries (e.g. interactions on Facebook, phone calls, or visits), and an individual can enquire to various agencies or make multiple enquiries to the same agency. This can make the number of enquiries to foster appear higher and does not accurately reflect the number of individuals interested in fostering.

- 2.10 Given the challenges to recruiting new foster carers, the Fostering Network Report argues that the 'best recruitment strategy is good retention of foster carers', this was explicitly expressed in the research. It contests that 'it does not matter how many new foster carers are recruited if they cannot provide quality care to meet the needs of children in care, or if those who can provide the quality care are not retained.'
- 2.11 A further challenge to the sufficiency of internal Foster Care Homes is when our Foster Carers go on to secure a Special Guardianship Order for a child(ren) who they have cared for as a Foster Carer. Albeit a positive outcome for our Children in Care, this impacts on the number of available homes/ vacancies for children
- 2.12 The table below sets out the Foster Carer Recruitment Pipeline. The total number of approaches, enquiries and home visits for 2023/24 are the highest they have been in 4-year period and the conversion rate from Enquiry to Approval was **14%**.



- 2.13 In 2023/24, **23** prospective mainstream fostering households withdrew or were withdrawn from the assessment process. Of the **23** withdrawn applications, **8** were withdrawn by the applicant and **15** were ended/ withdrawn by the service.

### 3. New Horizon Fostering Scheme

- 3.1 In May 2023, the New Horizon Fostering Scheme was launched. The aim of this scheme was to recruit foster carers who had the skill set and experience to care for children moving on from living in a Children's Home. On 31<sup>st</sup> March there were **2** New Horizon Fostering Households and both had a child living with them. Whilst this new fostering initiative is very much about children having more options to live in a family environment, it also results in cost avoidance for Children's Services.

### 4. Walsall Children Living with Foster Carers

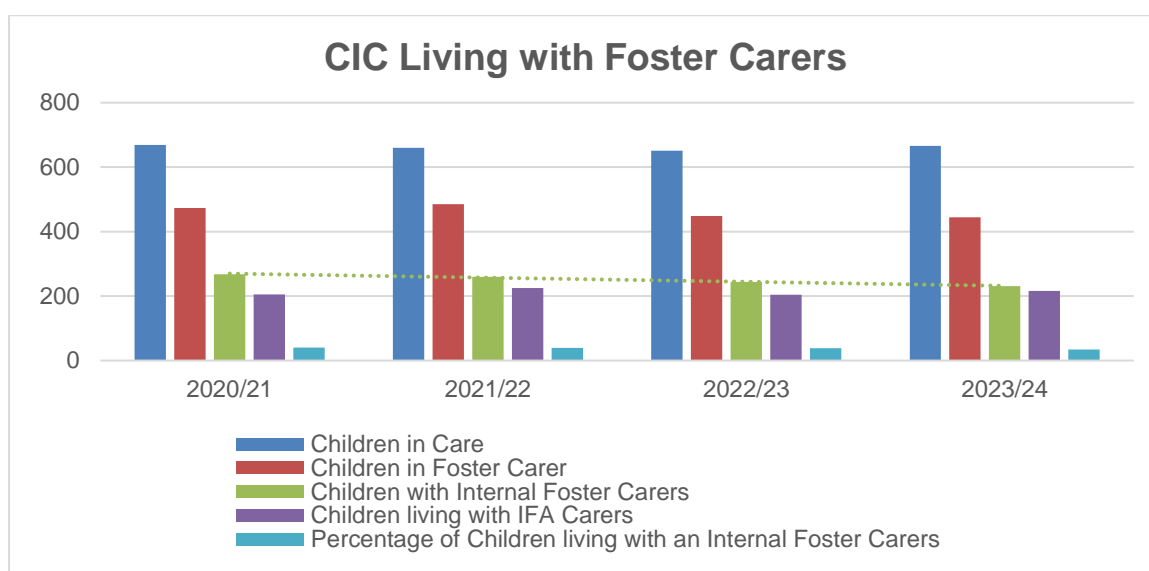
- 4.1 At the end of March 2024, of the **666** Children in our Care, **444 (67%)** were living with Foster Carers of which **231 (34%)** were living with Walsall Foster Carers compared with **244 (37%)** at the end of March 2023.

4.2 As for Children in Care living with an IFA Foster Carer, on 31/3/24, there were **216** children living with an independent fostering agency (IFA) Foster Carer. This is an increase from **204** in 2022/23.

4.3 On 31st March 2024, there were **176** approved internal fostering households (figure includes both mainstream & connected carers).

4.4 The breakdown of these households per category was:

- Mainstream Carers: 101
- Connected Carers: 74
- Foster for Adoption: 1
- Total – 176



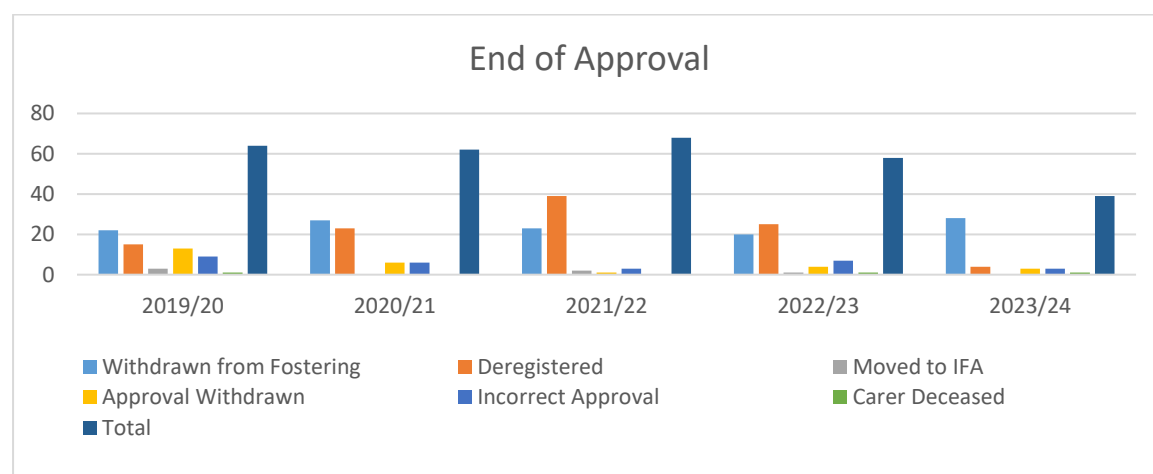
## 5. End of Foster Carer Approval:

5.1 There are a wide range of reasons as to why a Foster Carer's approval ends. These can range from their fostering career naturally coming to end, a change to family circumstances, concerns about the ongoing suitability, moving to become a Special Guardian and of course transferring to an IFA. The table below covers all of these scenarios and captures data for both Mainstream and Connected Foster Carers.

5.2 In terms of the retention of Mainstream Foster Carers, a previous area of concern was the number of Walsall Foster Carers transferring to an Independent Fostering Agency. Based on the table below, in the previous **5** years, **6** Foster Carers have opted to transfer. No Foster Carers have transferred to an IFA in 2023/24 and the Foster Carer who opted to transfer in 2022/23 did so for financial reasons. They initiated the process in May 2022, and they transferred in November 2022.

5.3 The number of approvals ending in 2023/24 is the lowest in a 5-year period and represents a **32%** reduction on the previous year. Of the 39 approvals ending, **9**

of these relating to Fostering for Adoption carers and **8** related to carers moving to be Special Guardians.

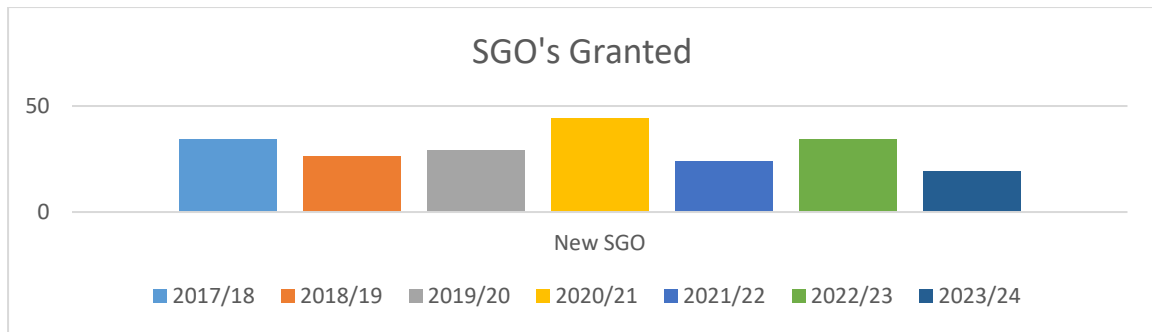


## 6. Connected Foster Care

- 6.1 As noted elsewhere in this report, as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 there were **74** approved Connected Fostering households. In 2023/24, **19** Connected Fostering households were approved at Fostering Panel which is slightly more than in 2022/23 (**18**) and is greater than the **8** in 2021/22.
- 6.2 Connected Fostering arrangements are often very complex situations with families struggling to come to terms with the reasons why children have become children in care. Connected Foster Carers receive the same level of supervision as mainstream carers, and they have access to Skills to Foster training which has been tailored specifically for Connected Persons carers.

## 7. Special Guardianship and other Kinship Arrangements

- 7.1 Many Connected Foster Carers are assessed and approved on the basis that they will go on to apply to be the child's Special Guardian. Unless the Connected Foster Carer or Mainstream Foster Carer are also caring for another Connected Child in Care, on the making of an SGO, they will be deregistered as a Foster Carer; this is a positive as Children's Services actively promote legal permanence through Special Guardianship for children for whom this is the preferred outcome.
- 7.2 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, there were **359** children supported by their Special Guardians. This represents a **12.2%** increase to that of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. All Special Guardianship Assessments are completed by the Fostering Service.



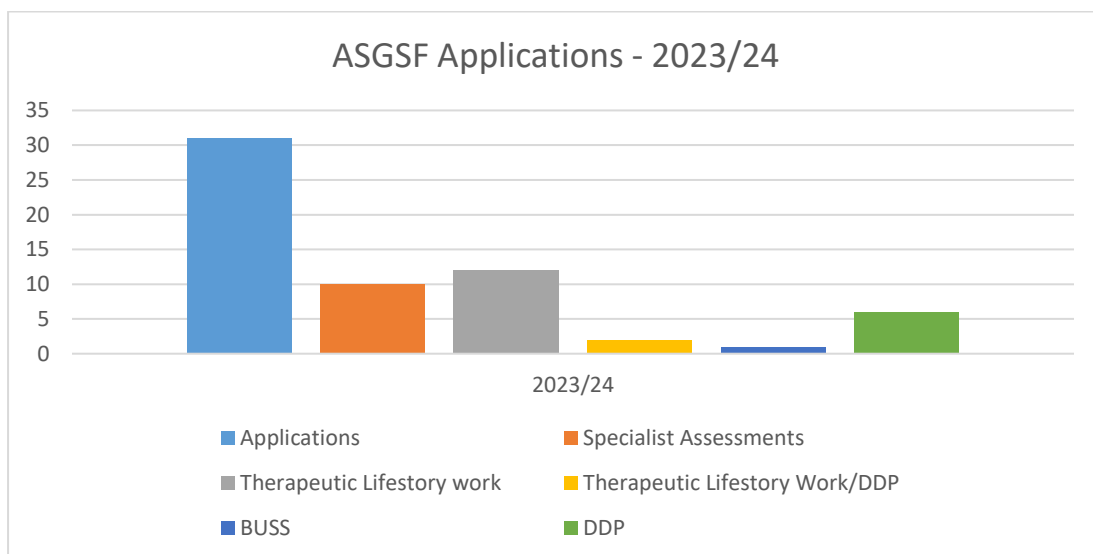
7.3 To respond to this growing area of work, the SGO Support Hub was created and launched; this coincided with Kinship Care Week in October 2023. This service development puts Children's Services in a better position to respond to any requirements outlined in the recently launched Kinship Care Strategy (2023); importantly it has increased capacity in the service to support Special Guardians and other Kinship Arrangements.

7.4 In May 2023, the Directorate Management Team (DMT) agreed to an investment which would bring about an improved offer of financial support to Special Guardians and other Kinship Arrangements. The policy that determines this support has been refreshed and is now operational.

7.5 In 2023/24, **31** applications were made to the Adoption & Special Guardian Support Fund (ASGSF). The ASGSF provides funds to local authorities and regional adoption agencies (RAAs) to pay for essential therapeutic services for eligible adoptive, special guardianship order (SGO) and child arrangement order (CAO) families. Until the end of March 2025, the ASGSF will have 2 fair access limits:

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

7.6 The work commissioned via ASGSF is set out in the chart below:





7.7 In addition to the support on offer from the SGO Support Hub, the Fostering Service have recommissioned support from Kinship (Kinship are the leading kinship charity in England & Wales). Walsall have recommissioned the Kinship Connected element of support which is a tried and tested model helping local authorities improve outcomes for special guardians and other kinship carers through intensive one-to-one support and peer support groups. It is designed on an asset-based approach, which views the skills, knowledge and resources available in individuals and communities as a means of finding solutions to the issues people face. The model also supports the concept of social action - building local resilience through peer-to-peer volunteering led by kinship carers. Kinship carers are supported over a 26-week period by a project worker during which both 1:1 and peer support is available.

## **8. Impower & Fosterlink:**

8.1 In 2024, the Fostering Service have worked with two external organisations who have undertaken a deep dive audit and a diagnostic inspection to examine how the Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers.

8.2 The first organisation, Impower, completed a 'deep dive' audit. They produced a report which has been shared with members of the Senior Leadership Team and the Group Manager for Fostering. The report highlights existing key strengths of the Fostering Service as:

- Mockingbird (with a 6th Hub soon to be launched)
- New Horizon Fostering Scheme
- Out of hours support line
- Support is available from a stable workforce that is growing in confidence.

8.3 The second organisation, Fosterlink, is the new diagnostic service to support local authority (LA) fostering recruitment and approval services funded by the Department for Education. They will be working with up to 40 LAs on this over the next six months. In the first year, they will work with a Fostering Service to review and examine current processes and help identify areas for service and practice improvements. In year two, they will work with all local authorities by developing and sharing promising and good practice. This includes disseminating examples of effective fostering recruitment practices, facilitating peer-to-peer support and creating networking opportunities.

8.4 The Fosterlink report noted that:

- Walsall's Fostering Service is a well-established, experienced service.
- Walsall has maintained a stable workforce, with staff and foster carers both loyal and proud to be part of the Fostering Service: this came across strongly during my onsite visits and in meetings with focus groups.
- Walsall was the first local authority in the West Midlands to be part of the Mockingbird extended family model. There are five fully operational Mockingbird constellations in Walsall with a sixth hub launching in 2024.

- Walsall has implemented the New Horizon's Fostering Scheme, which is a specialist fostering scheme aimed at helping children and young people who are currently living in Residential Provision to return to the area and live with foster carers.
- Foster Carers talked positively of their working relationship with the Home Finding Lead and getting regular communication. They felt that careful matching is actively practiced and in a lot of cases spoke about having the opportunity for introductions before a placement is made.
- Walsall Council are a Fostering Friendly Employer (Fostering Network).
- Where accommodation is a barrier to foster carers meeting the needs of children in their care, they have implemented a Capital Grant Scheme to fund adaptations to foster carers' homes so that they can care or continue to care for children.
- Foster Carers talked positively of their working relationship with the Placement Lead and getting regular communication. They felt that careful matching is actively practiced and in a lot of cases spoke about having the opportunity for introductions before a placement is made.
- Foster Carers feel part of a strong fostering community.

8.5 The Fostering Service have examined the findings and learning from these respective reports and are making use of relevant recommendations to improve service delivery.

## **9. Supervision, Support, Training & Development**

- 9.1 The Fostering Service delivers effective regular supervision to all Foster Carers in line with their need for support, supervision and personal development, as detailed in the policy for foster carer supervision.
- 9.2 To establish a consistent approach to practice that is rooted in nurture, attachment, and recognises the impact of trauma, in 2021/22, the Fostering Service began the ambitious journey for the whole workforce to complete Dyadic Development Practice Training (DDP). DDP is 'a therapy, parenting approach and model for practice that uses what we know about attachment and developmental trauma to help children and families with their relationships.'
- 9.3 The whole workforce has completed DDP1, and a smaller cohort have completed DDP2. This smaller cohort have also completed the 'train the trainer' sessions for Foundation to Attachment and they now deliver Foundation to Attachment Training to Foster Carers. By 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, The Fostering Service had supported **111** foster carers to complete this training, with **54** foster carers completing this in 2023/2024.

- 9.4 Preparation and training groups (Skills to Foster Training) have been held for all prospective mainstream foster carers. This training is also offered separately to Connected Person Foster Carers. Further Foster Carer Training is **provided** through the Council's Children's Workforce Development Team. This includes both mandatory courses ensuring that foster carers have the training necessary to undertake their role and more in-depth training for those carers who want to develop particular specialisms or a deeper knowledge of a subject area.
- 9.5 The Mockingbird Family Model continues to be a popular with Foster Carers. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were **5** live Mockingbird Constellations. The 6<sup>th</sup> Hub was launched during Foster Carer Fortnight in May 2024.
- 9.6 The Fostering Service continue to produce and share regular, separate newsletters with Foster Carers and SGO Carers. In addition to this, all foster carers approved by Walsall Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network.

## **10. Fostering Service Practice Improvement Annual Report 2023/24**

- 10.1 The Practice Improvement Manager completes an Annual Report on activity undertaken as part of the Fostering Service Practice Improvement Framework which incorporates 4 areas of Practice Quality Assurance within the Fostering Service, these are:
- Case File Audits
  - Fostering Panel Feedback
  - Themed Case File Audits
  - Learning Reviews
- 10.2 These activities help the Fostering Service to pause and reflect on the work we do, acknowledging our achievements but also highlighting the areas where we need to develop our practice. Not only to improve the service we offer to our foster carers but also to achieve our overall goal which is to improve outcomes for children and young people. These activities form part of learning cycle which over time will embedded themselves into our service and become part of our learning culture.
- 10.3 As the full Annual Report for 2023/24 runs to 19 slides, what follows are some key points:
- **49** Case File Audits (CFA) were completed, of which, **15** were themed audits
  - **77%** were rated as 'Good' and **12%** were rated as 'Outstanding'
- 10.4 The Fostering Panel Feedback Loop was introduced in the Fostering Service in March 2022. This involves the Fostering Panel providing Feedback on the quality of reports that are presented to Panel. Panel members are asked to comment on the strengths areas of development for the social worker. They then rate the

overall quality of the reports using an OFSTED style rating system (Requires Improvement, Good or Outstanding).

- 10.5 Feedback forms are then sent to the workers Team Manager to discuss during supervision. Social workers can also provide some feedback to Panel on their experience at Panel and Foster Carers/Applicants are also able to comment on their experience at fostering panel.
- 10.6 In 2023/24, **61** items requiring feedback were presented to the Fostering Panel. **40%** of these items were Connected Person Assessments and **44%** were Annual Reviews.
- 10.7 **65%** were rated by Panel as 'Outstanding' compared to **30%** the previous year. This is a **35%** rise in paperwork rated as 'Outstanding' showing a large improvement in the quality of work overall. **28%** were rated by Panel as 'Good'.
- 10.8 Themed Audits were completed on:
- Training & Development
  - Panel & ADM
  - Staff Supervision
  - Disruption Meetings
  - The Recruitment & Retention of a small cohort of Foster Carers.
- 10.9 The themes and learning from the range of activity mentioned above are considered at the Practice Improvement Workstream which is led by the Practice Improvement Manager and Senior Practitioners within the Fostering Service. They meet monthly to implement actions from the Quarterly Practice Improvement Reports and support the service in delivering change to practice.

## **11. Marketing & Promotional Activity**

- 11.1 Without attracting additional Foster Carers and retaining existing ones, Walsall will not have a sufficient number of homes for existing Children in our Care with locally based Foster Carers. Aligned to the strategy to have the right children living with right people at the right time, the aim of the Fostering Service's Transformation Plans is to have more children living with Walsall Foster Carers.
- 11.2 The Fostering Service have updated the Marketing Plan & Communication Plan for 2023/24 and this is used to inform our targeted marketing activities. The Fostering Service have undertaken the following activities:
- Used paid social media advertising
  - Included Fostering leaflet in all letters for Council Tax Bills
  - Extended the radio campaign (January – December 2024)
  - Fostering Information Mailshot to Walsall residents
  - Refreshed the lamppost banners across Walsall
  - Placed physical advertising boards on local traffic roundabouts
  - Advertising campaign on rear of local buses

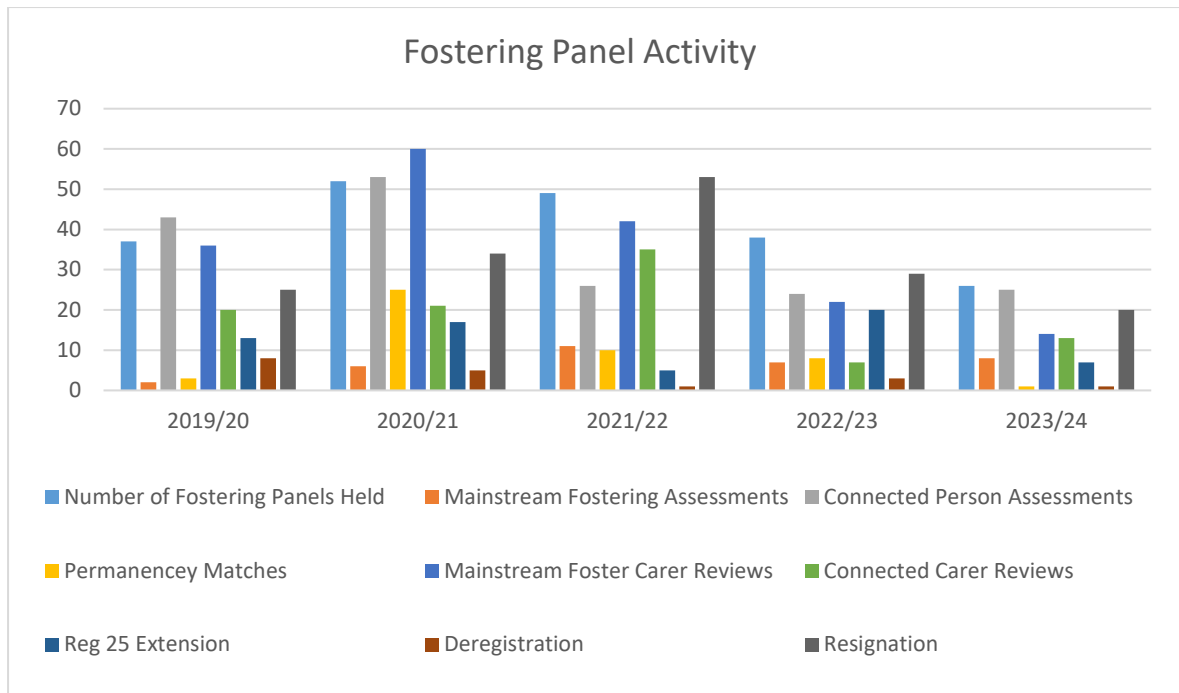
- Use of digital advertising in local bus shelters
- Regular posts on social media accounts
- Held monthly online information webinars
- Contributed to the award winning 'Any of Us' film
- Takeover of Inside Walsall during Foster Carer Fortnight

11.3 In addition to the above, as face to face events are an effective way of connecting to the wider community, in 2023/24, the Fostering Service have attended and/or set up an Information stand at the following events/ venues with a view to generating interest and enquiries from prospective foster carers:

- Tesco, Walsall
- Libraries – Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills,
- Pelsall Carnival
- Big Impact Event, Palfrey Park
- Residents R Us Summer Fete
- The Unity Festival
- Bloxwich Lego Club
- Tri It – Pleck Park (Healthy Spaces)
- Kings Hill Park (Healthy Spaces)
- Birchill's Mosque Fun Day
- Walsall Pride
- Walsall Works (Walsall College)
- Manor Hopital (now attending fortnightly)
- Early Years Event - Manor Farm
- Guru Nanak Gurdwara Sahib (two occasions)
- Walsall Art Gallery (three occasions)
- Residents R Us Christmas Fete
- Bloxwich Leisure Centre
- Pelsall Cricket & Sports Club
- Asda (Darlestone)
- Walsall College Hub
- Dunelm store
- The Civic Centre
- Willenhall Chart Community Hub
- Attended/ information stand at Ikea
- Attended/ information stand at Asda, Darlaston (two occasions)
- Attended/ information stand at Walsall Works Expo

## **12. Fostering Panel**

- 12.1 Lisa Cawthorn has continued in her role as Chair of Fostering Panel and the Vice Chair is Sue Partoon.
- 12.2 Fostering Panel activity continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on **26** occasions. Panel was quorate on each occasion. The table below outlines the range of work discussed at Fostering Panel.



12.3 The Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) is a review process that prospective or existing foster carers can access when they do not agree with the qualifying determination letter sent to them by their Fostering Service Provider Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The review process is conducted by an IRM review panel which is independent of your fostering service provider. A “Qualifying Determination” is a proposed decision made by a fostering service provider that it does not consider someone suitable to foster. A qualifying determination is issued after either a brief or full report has been presented to the fostering service providers Panel. A qualifying determination can also be issued if the fostering service provider proposes to terminate, or change the terms of approval, of an existing fostering carer.

12.4 In 2023/24 **3** prospective foster carers made a referral to the IRM to appeal the decision of Fostering Panel/ ADM. Of the **3** referrals, 2 have not been heard/ concluded and **1** was not upheld.

### 13. Service Priorities and Developments – 2024/25

13.1 As the Annual Report is produced after the Ofsted Dataset is returned in June of the following financial year, by the time the report is completed and ready to be shared, it can be making use of and commenting on activity approaching 12-18 months old; as such, the next section is an attempt to outline the range of work that has taken place or is planned to take place in 2024/25, this includes:

- Completed first refresh of the Fostering Website
- Commenced using Impower’s Valuing Care Tool for Foster Carers
- Started to work with the Behavioural Insight Team to improve our promotional material and messaging for the recruitment & retention of foster carers
- Started to explore the use of Digital Marketing to generate more viable enquires from prospective foster carers



- Held a Foster Carer Thank You Event
- Launched 6<sup>th</sup> Mockingbird Hub
- Approved 3<sup>rd</sup> New Horizon Foster Carer
- Recruited a part time Training & Development Officer to improve offer of training for foster carers and workforce
- Recruiting an additional Customer Service Officer to improve capacity to respond to prospective foster carers enquiries and increase promotional activity
- Aiming to launch an Emergency Foster Carer Scheme

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DRAFT

**2 September 2024**

**Placement Sufficiency Strategy Update**

**Ward(s):** All

**Portfolios: Children's Social Care**

**1. Aim**

- 1.1 This report will give an update to Corporate Parenting Board regarding the progress of delivering the outcomes within the Placement Sufficiency Strategy. Offering reassurance that the statutory duties the Council has regarding this are met.
- 1.2 The Local Authority has a duty, under Section 22 of Children Act 1989 to, as far as is reasonably practicable, to secure sufficient accommodation within the authority's area, which meets the needs of children that the Local Authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is local.
- 1.3 In September 2021, the law changed to require that children aged under 16 years who are placed in registered care settings which includes foster care, residential care or other care setting, must be placed in a Ofsted registered setting. From the end of October 2023, all supported accommodation providers to children in care must be registered with Ofsted or have made an application to do so.
- 1.4 The quality of care strongly relates to children and young people 'doing well' and having stability in our care. It is our aspiration to provide the best possible home, accommodation and support provision for our children and young people in our care. Securing sufficient accommodation and support that meets the needs of children in our care and those leaving care is important in delivering improved outcomes.
- 1.5 Walsall has an ambitious Placement Sufficiency Strategy setting out our intention on how to fulfil these duties and meet the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people.

**2. Recommendations**

The Board members review the update within this report of the Placement Sufficiency Strategy (2003 – 2026) and are asked to consider and comment on progress to date.

**3. Consultation with Young People**

Consultation with children and young people is focused on key areas of delivery of the strategy, such as tenders for accommodation or service design, involvement in the development of new homes. The Children in Care Council has continued to meet regularly and be consulted on a wide range of issues. The voice of the young person is at the heart of the assessment process ensuring that their wishes and feelings are included. Whenever possible children and young people can give their views when homes are being found for them. Advocacy is available to support children and young people in this process. As contracts and placements are monitored for effectiveness and quality children are asked to give their views on where they are placed and the experience of living there.

#### **4. Report detail – know**

4.1 At 30<sup>th</sup> July there were 637 children in our care which is at a rate of 92.6 per 10,000. The number of children in care has reduced over the last 3 months (as at 31/03/21 the number of children in care was 665). This reduction is due to several factors including the number of children returning to the care of their parents due to the discharging of a care order, special guardianship and or adoption order being granted.

4.2 The table below sets out where our children in care live as at end of July 2024.

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Children living with their parents/family   | 45  |
| Children living in residential settings<br>(children's homes, supported accommodation, parent and child residential assessment centres and secure children's homes) | 138 |
| Children living in foster care  | 425 |
| Children living with adopters   | 28  |
| Children living independently   | 1   |
| Total   | 637 |

#### **Valuing Care Approach**

4.3 We are currently implementing the Valuing Care Needs Assessment tool, an approach which allows the team around the child, commissioners and leaders to identify, articulate and track a child's (or a cohort of children's) needs and outcomes. It will also enable a more effective match with foster carers, by understanding the needs of the young person. On an individual level it provides a holistic, nuanced picture of needs and strengths and at a population level, provides an understanding of needs for all children/cohorts.

4.4 Valuing Care is an approach to practice and commissioning which embeds a focus on children's needs, strengths, aspirations and outcomes to enable more effective conversations around how care can best meet individual children's needs. The aim

of Valuing Care is to better match needs with homes wherever possible and maximise the efficiency of spending.

- 4.5 Valuing Care will in due course provide an analysis of data on needs and cost across our children and young people in care. This will support a better understanding of the impact of care on the needs of children and young people overall, and by different demographic features. It will provide an improved understanding of the connection between needs of children and young people and the costs.
- 4.6 There is a comprehensive work plan with 4 clear areas of focus which involves the working with our social work teams to embed the Valuing Care approach in planning for children in our care, the Home Finding Team's ways of working, the Commissioning Team's responsibilities in working with providers to build relationships to meet our needs and applying this approach in the recruitment, assessment and understanding the capabilities and confidence of our foster carers.

### **Fostering**

- 4.7 Our vision is for all children in foster care to have stable placements, establish trusted relationships, to feel cared for and to benefit from high quality foster care for as long as they need it. At the end of July the majority of our Children in Care were living in foster care (66.7%) either with In-house foster carer or through commissioned Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's). Of all the children living in foster care 50% live with internal foster carers.

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Children living with in-house foster carers  | 211 |
| Children living in independent foster carers | 214 |

- 4.8 A key priority for us is to increase our internal sufficiency of foster carers. There remains an intense focus on our recruitment and retention strategy. We know that for us the majority of our enquires come from our promotional work in the community by engaging prospective foster carers in a conversation about fostering. In 2023/24 we approved 8 new Mainstream Fostering Households. To date in 24/25 we have approved 5 new households and a further 2 will be approved by the end of September 2024. There are a further 18 households in the early stages of the recruitment journey
- 4.9 We launched the New Horizon Fostering Scheme to enable more children to live in a family environment. The scheme attracts foster carers with the skills and experience to enable children to move from residential care to a foster family. To date 3 children now live with their New Horizon foster carers.
- 4.10 The Fostering Marketing Strategy is updated dynamically to reflect on changes required to generate enquiries. We have increased our marketing budget to enable us to undertake a more diverse range of marketing activity including community events; engaging faith groups; a radio campaign; advertising in bus shelters, buses, banners and on lampposts; and roundabout signage. We have also updated our website to improve the user experience.

- 4.11 We have improved our support and financial offer to foster carers and retention of foster carers remains a priority and this includes:
- Fees and allowances for foster carers have been significantly enhanced to bring them in line with Department for Education (DfE) rates.
  - 100% Council Tax relief is provided to all foster carers living in Walsall.
  - A capital grant scheme offer is available to fund adaptations to foster carers' homes so that they can care or continue to care for children.
  - Support and Stability Team works with internal foster carers to provide bespoke interventions to support foster carers to overcome challenges and prevent placement breakdown.
  - We offer a 24-hour support line for foster carers.
  - Foster carers are supported by therapeutically trained social workers using the Dyadic Development Psychotherapy (DDP) model at level 1. A further 25% of the workforce is trained at DDP2.
  - We have appointed a training officer to enhance and strengthen the training offer for our foster carers.
- 4.12 In early 2024 a deep dive was undertaken by Impower, and a diagnostic of the Fostering Service also undertaken was undertaken by Fosterlink (DfE), which identified strengths within the service as well as further improvements which is informing our recruitment and retention activity for 2024/25, We are implementing the recommendations of the 2 reviews with oversight of the Regulated Management Board. The recommendations have focused on enhancing our performance information and improving our digital marketing footprint that targets our recruitment across a wide range of social media platforms. In addition we are working with behavioural scientists to improve our recruitment material and enhance staffing skills to ensure that we make every contact count based on specific behaviours and values.
- 4.13 In July 2024 we commenced using the Valuing Care approach with our foster carers and over the next 12 months will be incrementally applying this approach in our foster carer assessments to inform family-finding. We will be aiming to use Valuing Care with newly approved foster carers and newly placed children. We are keen to use the analysis of which will be provided by Valuing Care population level data to shape foster-carer recruitment and foster carer training which is focused on specific skills to develop/ targeted areas to support carers and children and shapes the annual workforce development plan.

## **Children's Residential Services**

- 4.14 For some children and young people, depending on their individual needs and circumstances, a residential children's home will be the best placement for them. However, we believe that all children and young people have the right to grow up in a family environment, and that this is best for them and their life chances.
- 4.15 The key priority for our service has been to provide children with good and outstanding care and to reduce the need for children to be placed in unregistered accommodation. Walsall maintains five internal children's homes, including specialist short breaks respite support for disabled young people. In addition, we commission provision through the West Midlands Residential Framework or bespoke packages for each young person. All five Homes are judged to be Good

by Ofsted and offer places for up to 13 children. We have maintained over 90% of occupancy levels in our homes over the last 6 months.

- 4.16 Our new home has enabled us care for 3 children who were either previously in unregistered children's homes or at risk of entering unregistered provision. In addition, a further 5 children have returned to internal provision from external residential homes where their needs were not being met. Our children are progressing well and achieving significantly improved outcomes and children are better connected to their communities.
- 4.17 Our support and training offer is improving staff retention and we are beginning to see good progression planning to develop future managers for our children's homes. Our Homes are embedding a trauma informed PACE approach to caring for our children. All staff have undertaken 4-day PACE training. Four children's homes are supported by clinical supervision from a psychologist from CAMHS. We have embedded robust quality assurance and monitoring of our internal residential children's homes to support them to achieve good or outstanding outcomes for our children as well as meeting Ofsted requirements.
- 4.18 Recruitment and retention of staff requires a relentless focus. We have established senior Residential Child Care Worker roles, and we have reviewed management arrangements, establishing assistant managers in each of our homes. We are developing a career progression pathway to attract experienced registered managers, retain staff and develop future managers.
- 4.19 A sixth children's home will be established In 2024/25 for up to three children in Walsall which increases internal sufficiency to 16 children. A residential sufficiency review is currently underway to consider our future needs and demands and this will be concluded in October 2024.

### **Supported Accommodation**

- 4.20 Supported Accommodation is secured through West Midlands Supported Accommodation Framework. However, there has been a shift toward spot contracting to identify suitable supported accommodation for those children who have more complex needs and where registered accommodation is not available.
- 4.21 Ofsted is regulating provision for 16/17-year-olds from 28th October 2023 which will come under a quality standards framework. We welcome the new regulations framework and dedicated work is underway to ensure that we continue to work closely to support independent providers currently providing accommodation for 16 and 17-year-olds to register accommodation under the new regulations' framework.
- 4.22 We are currently working with 16 providers and of these 4 are now registered with Ofsted, 3 have been inspected and are awaiting the outcome of the inspection visit and 9 providers have submitted their applications and awaiting an inspection visit. We track all Supported Accommodation providers to ensure that the have applied to Ofsted to register and their application process is tracked.
- 4.23 We capitalise on collaborations regionally to address specific gaps in provision by working with our local market and with the regional commissioning framework to



ensure that provision is meeting the needs of our children through the West Midlands Framework providers. We expect some fluctuations in provision because of the new regulations. We aim to undertake a short review of Supported Accommodation sufficiency once Ofsted inspections have been completed to assess the quality and quantity of providers in Walsall and The Black Country and where these are meeting our sufficiency needs..

## **5. *Financial information***

There are resource implications associated with the delivery of the strategy. The proposals within the strategy will manage the cost of accommodation for Children's Services. The placements budget for 2024/25 set out in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, is £47.25 million. Commissioning strategies should include where relevant plans for meeting the sufficiency duty. Appropriate procurement legislation and process will need to be followed.

## **6. *Reducing Inequalities***

Successful delivery of a strategy to improve outcomes for children in care and care leavers will have a significantly positive impact on the outcomes of one of the most vulnerable groups. The Strategy will ensure that the directorate delivers inclusive services that meet the needs of our diverse communities, through the commissioning of a diverse range of accommodation, co-producing and developing models with our children and families.

## **7. *Decide***

The report provides an update on the progress against the key areas of delivery.

The Board members are asked to consider and comment on progress to update within this report of the Placement Sufficiency Strategy (2003 – 2026).

## **8. *Respond***

The progress of the Placement Sufficiency strategy will mean that children will be provided with homes locally and at controlled cost. There is continued focus on understanding the needs of children requiring our support in order that we can target need at the earliest possible opportunity

## **9. *Review***

The delivery of the strategy is monitored through the Corporate Parenting Board and progress against its action plan is reports to the Regulated Board which is chaired by the Director of Sosial Work.

We continue to implement and deliver on our strategic priorities that are underpinned by our WR4C vision:

- Getting the basics right for children and reducing the number of children requiring our care.
- Strong leadership informed by 'what works' to set our strategic direction and developing strong partnerships.

- Understanding the lives and challenges of real families and implementing evidence-based changes that work for Walsall children and families.
- Prioritising the stability of children in all aspects of their life.
- Creating a skilled and stable workforce and developing a culture of being proud of what we achieve with relentless drive to improve quality, impact and outcomes.

## **Background papers**

Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2026 approved by the Corporate Parenting Board  
- 4<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Placement Sufficiency Strategy Update Report – 12 February 2024

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| Committee Meeting                     | Agenda item  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> July 2024             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of work programme</li> <li>• Quarterly performance report</li> <li>• Events and engagement with young people</li> <li>• Resource pack LGA</li> <li>• Walsall Care Leavers joint protocol</li> </ul> |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> September 2024        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adoption annual report</li> <li>• Fostering annual report including practice improvement framework annual report</li> <li>• Placement Sufficiency Strategy Update</li> </ul>                                      |
| 11 <sup>th</sup> November 2024<br>TLC | <p>Engagement Session with an update on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• House project</li> <li>• CIC and Care leavers alliance work</li> </ul>   |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> January 2025          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care Leaver Strategy (potentially confirm with ZM)</li> <li>• Virtual school Annual report</li> <li>• Independent Reviewing Officer Annual report</li> <li>• CAMHS</li> <li>• Health annual report</li> </ul>     |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> February 2025        | <p>Engagement Session focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NEET</li> <li>• Apprenticeships</li> </ul>  |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> April 2025            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CPB annual report</li> <li>• Participation and engagement report</li> <li>• CPB strategy and pledges update</li> </ul>  |