

Cabinet – 15 March 2017

Adoption Service 6 monthly Progress Report 1st April 2016-30th September 2016

Portfolio: Councillor Rose Burley

Related portfolios: N/A

Service: Adoption Service – Specialist Children’s Services

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary

1.1 The requirement to report on the progress of the Adoption Service is contained within the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2014 and Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014 as follows:

National Minimum Standards 2014 **Standard 25.6**

1.2 The executive side of the Local Authority should:

- Receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months
- Monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and or service users
- Satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration

Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014:

The agency should monitor its performance and provide 6 monthly updates to the executive side of the council. These updates should cover all children who are in the care of their local authority and include:

- the number, type and age of the children waiting for an adoptive placement and length of time they have been waiting;
- the local authority’s performance against the adoption scorecards;
- progress in the recruitment of suitable adoptive families;

- the number of children placed for adoption and adopted since the last report; and the number of children whose placement has disrupted or where there has been a change of plan and the child is no longer to be placed for adoption;
- whether the child's need for a permanent home has been addressed and a permanence plan made by the four month review;
- whether the adoption panel is receiving all the necessary information from the agency within six weeks of the completion of the child's permanence report;
- whether the adoption panel's recommendation that the child should be placed for adoption is being made within two months of a review where adoption has been identified as the permanence plan.

The report contained in **Appendix A** is the Adoption Service 6 monthly Progress Report for the period 1st April 2016 to the 30th September 2016.

The report details the work of Walsall Council's Adoption Service during this period. It contains commentary with regard to Walsall's adoption performance and how we compare nationally, it will comment on adoption panel and agency decision maker activity and also the key areas identified for future service developments.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the contents of this report are accepted as an accurate reflection of how Walsall council is meeting its statutory duties in relation to delivery of adoption services.

3. Report detail

Please see the report in **Appendix A**. The headlines from this report are as follows:

- 3.1 The number of children approved as suitable for adoption within this 6 month period is lower than the previous year. The reasons for this are the lower number of sibling groups presented so far this year compared to last year which inflated the 2015-16 half year numbers and also some plans that have been delayed due to issues with care planning, for example further assessment of family members.
- 3.2 The figure for children being placed with adopters is much higher than for the same period last year which is a result of the higher number of plans made during 2015-16. Whilst use of internal provision for these children has been good, there has been a significant increase in external placement use, mostly using our partner Voluntary Adoption Agency-Adoption Focus.
- 3.3 The total number of children adopted during this period is 16 which is one less than for the same period last year.
- 3.4 This period has seen significant momentum of our establishment of Adoption@Heart, Regional Adoption Agenda. It is hoped the decision on the

chosen delivery model will be made in the next few months. Following this, work will commence on consulting with staff and with other key stakeholders such as adopters.

- 3.5 Two out of the three key performance indicators for adoption performance have shown significant improvement and the third has remained fairly steady.

4. Council priorities

- 4.1 **Children are safe from harm, happy and learning well with self-belief, aspiration and support to be their best:** For those children where it is decided adoption is the most appropriate plan; this plan should be implemented without delay. Walsall should as part of care planning, ensure that permanency for all children is considered at the earliest opportunity. The priority for progressing adoption plans will be met through effective and targeted recruitment of prospective adopters who are able to meet a diverse range of needs.

5. Risk management

- 5.1 In order to monitor compliance with required statutory duties it is important that cabinet is made aware of service priorities, developments and resource implications.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 None

7. Legal implications

- 7.1 Legal services have been consulted and no legal implications were identified.

8. Property implications

- 8.1 None

9. Health and wellbeing implications

- 9.1 None

10. Staffing implications

- 10.1 In order to support the key service priority of supporting permanence for as many children as possible, additional posts were created last year to support permanence. These posts have now been recruited to and work is underway on securing permanence for a wider range of children.

11. Equality implications

- 11.1 None identified.

12. Consultation

Lynn Levesley – Legal Services Manager.
Nilu Ghai – Senior HR consultant.
Ross Hutchinson – Senior Accountant

Background papers - None

Author

Linda Franks

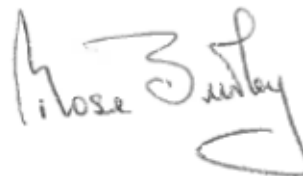
Professional Advisor for Adoption & Fostering

☎ 01922 650834

✉ franksl@walsall.gov.uk

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Haley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'D' and 'H'.

David Haley
Executive Director
6 March 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rose Burley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'R' and 'B'.

Councillor Rose Burley
Portfolio holder
6 March 2017

Appendix A

Walsall Children's Services- Adoption Service Six Month Report

April 2016– September 2016

Introduction

This report will outline the activity of Walsall Children's Adoption Service for the six month period from April, to September, 2016. The report will cover the following areas:

1. The Adoption Team.
2. The Adoption Panel
3. Agency Decision Maker
4. Analysis of the work undertaken
5. The role of Adoption in the Black Country, impact of the Adoption Leadership Board and the plans for Regionalising Adoption Agencies
6. Walsall's Performance and the Adoption Scorecard

1. The Adoption and Permanence Team

The Adoption and Permanence Team is based at Essington Lodge and is co-located with the fostering service and the safeguarding and family support teams. Having the services together offers a more effective and streamlined family placement service.

From the 1st April 2016, the team comprised of the following: one team manager, one assistant team manager, nine qualified social workers which includes social workers specialising in adoption support, special guardianship support (SGO) and family finding for permanence. There are three non qualified workers to undertake life story work, direct work with children and placement support. The team is fortunate to benefit from a stable staff group, with the remaining vacant post for family finding for permanence now under offer to an external appointee.

The Adoption Team's work involves initial visits to applicants, staffing of information evenings as part of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) and Adoption Focus (AF), hosting adoption preparation courses, conducting assessments of adopters, family finding for children with an adoption plan, provision of post adoption support and completion of step parent adoption and inter-agency adoption applications. Specialist workers assist children in preparation to move on to their adoptive placements and also in the provision of Life Story Work. The team also provides a support provision to Special Guardians.

The team continues to work collaboratively with the Consortium and regular meetings take place between Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus

(ABC) (AF) management team and sub groups, such as training sub group and adoption support sub group.

ABC and AF jointly run adoption information events; these are usually once and most often twice a month. ABC authorities run monthly adoption preparation training events. This ensures there is a steady flow of prospective adopters to be referred onto the members of ABC to assess. Adoption Focus continues to focus on the provision of families for harder to place children, the use of Adoption Focus families for Walsall children has significantly grown during this period and has meant Walsall has placed an additional 8 children for adoption with this partner agency compared to the same time in the previous year. However, the total number of children placed during this period is double that of the same period last year and is similar to the high numbers placed during 2014-15. This is partly attributable to a high proportion of sibling groups requiring placements which automatically inflates the numbers.

The growth in use of Adoption Focus families has mainly been as a result of them recently appointing a family finder who keeps a data base of all children waiting for adoption in the Black Country, all children in the pipeline in the Black Country and all adopters available in ABC and Adoption Focus. The role of this family finder is to ensure that links are made quickly within the consortium. This has already resulted in more matches being made within the consortium. The role of the family finder/permanency worker is a model which most ABC authorities are now considering and this model will form part of the new Regional Adoption Agency so that early identification of suitable placement options are considered.

Prospective adopter Enquiries: There were 12 enquiries during the 6 month period which ranged from 1 enquiry in May up to 4 in September. There were a total of 10 enquiries wishing to progress to the next stage. All of the enquiries originate from the ABC Consortium and although the numbers are lower than last year the quality of those going forward are of a high standard and are more likely therefore to result in a conversion to an approved adopter.

2. The Adoption Panel

During this period 25 panel members were on the central list .Councillor Tina Jukes commenced her attendance at panel in September 2015 and continues her commitment to this part of the service. Gordon Robertson, panel member left and Max Gregory joined as an independent social work member; he previously worked as a reviewing officer for Walsall council.

12 panel meetings occurred during this period. All matters were dealt with at panel.

Applicants are encouraged to attend panel meetings for approval and matching with children. Panel members welcome their attendance as this assists them to ask questions to them directly and it also adds another dimension to the written assessment.

Panel members are asked to fill in feedback forms regarding how panel functions. Whilst this process is in place, not everyone is fulfilling the quality assurance role of panel in a formalised manner. This is an area for development in the coming months.

Panel is well supported by the Adoption Panel administrators, Rebecca Jeffery and Rebecca Evans.

Panel members were invited to a training event on the 8 and 15 July 2016, presented internally on the 'Solihull approach'. Also offered on the 16 August 2016 was an internal presentation on 'FOSTERING, LOOKED-AFTER, & ADOPTION SUPPORTING HUB' (FLASH) service.

This year has seen the launch of the ADOPTION and PERMANENCE PANEL; this enables the panel to consider long-term matches of children requiring long term fostering and foster to adopt cases and is in addition to the already established adoption Panel. Due to the increased numbers of long –term matches an extra panel has been added each month.

Recommendation: It will be beneficial for the Panel and ADM to meet on a six monthly basis to share views and receive feedback on how the changes both in legislation and practice are impacting on the decision maker and panel's recommendations in order for continued improvement on practice. (Note: This will be incorporated into the Training /development days for panel members)

3. Agency Decision Maker

Mary Deborah Carter (Assistant Director, Children's Services) acted as the Agency Decision Maker during this period. In her absence Carol Boughton covered these duties.

ADM decisions are made within recommended timescales following panel meetings. The decision maker meets with the Panel Adviser when making decisions in order to seek clarification or gain further information pertaining to the items presented at panels.

4. Analysis of the Work undertaken from April 1st 2016 – September 30th 2016

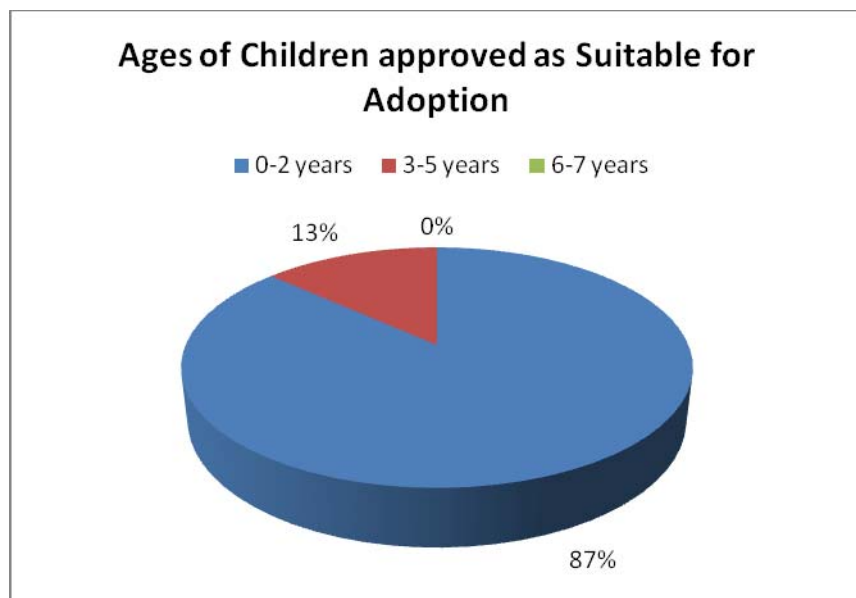
Children suitable for adoption

During this period 15 children were presented to the ADM for an adoption decision compared to 33 for the first 6 months of 2015. This year's lower number is partly due to lower number of sibling groups which inflated the 2015-16 overall number and also because some plans which were due to be presented for ADM in the first half of

the year were delayed and will be presented in the latter part of the year. In order to address the drift and delay with regard to adoption plans being progressed, Walsall has now appointed a permanency coordinator and is in the process of appointing a case progression officer. Both of these posts will take responsibility for early identification of permanence plans and the tracking of these cases until permanence has been achieved. Full analysis of this cohort will be made available in the annual adoption report for the full accounting period.

Social worker feedback indicates that 14 of these children had their permanence plan considered and agreed at their 4 month statutory review, and 1 was delayed due to a late adoption medical. This would indicate a 93.3 % completion rate. When analysing the data, it remains apparent that Walsall continues to be successful in placing children in a timely manner.

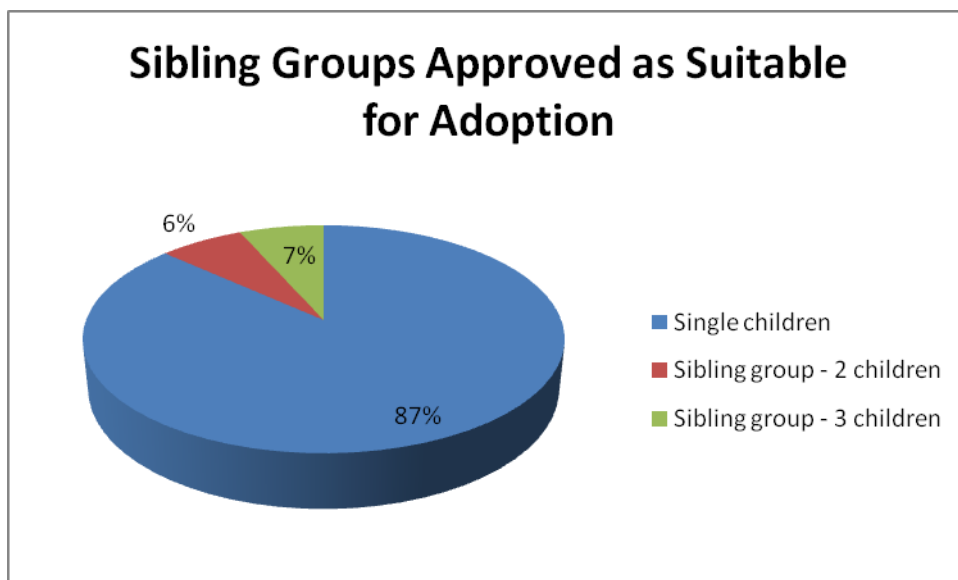
As can be seen the vast majority of children are younger than 3 years, which is consistent with previous years and is evidence of Walsall's efforts to achieve early permanence for children.



0-2 years	13
3-5 years	2
6-7 years	0

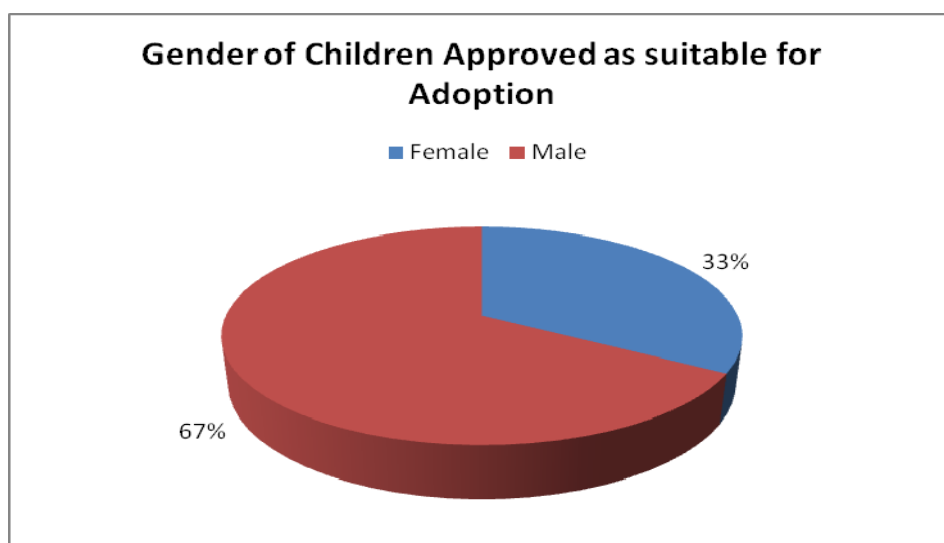
This period has seen a decrease in the number of siblings groups, for the same period last year. Family finding for sibling groups of three and above can be problematic as the likelihood of finding an adoptive family who can manage the

needs of three children is small. However, at the time of writing this report, I am pleased to say that a match for the sibling group of three and the sibling group of two has been achieved.



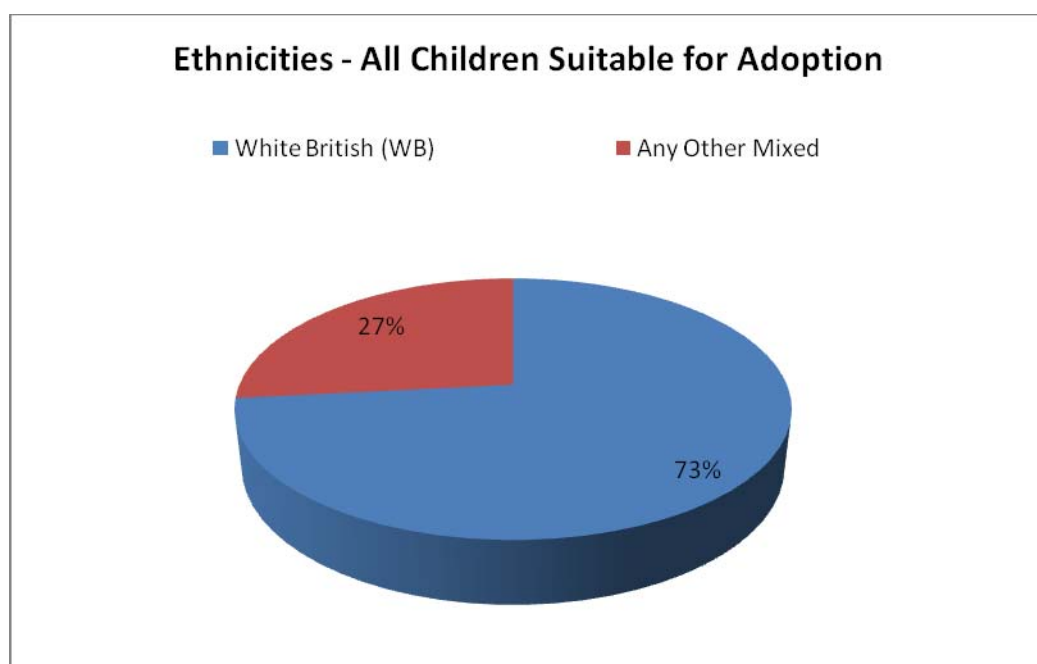
Single children	13
Sibling group - 2 children	1
Sibling group - 3 children	1

Similar to previous years, more boys than girls were presented for an adoption decision. This continues to reflect the national picture of the gender profile within the care system, 56% (39,670) of children looked after on 31st March 2016 were male and 44% (30,780) were female



Female	5
Male	10

There continues to be a high number of young white British children requiring adoption, the majority of whom can be placed internally as there isn't usually a shortage of adoptive families for young white British children. However the supply of internal adopters has depleted due to the high numbers of children requiring placements which has resulted in a higher use of external provision. Walsall tends to recruit a broad diverse range of adoptive families although during this period, the majority of families were White British. It is likely that a match for children of any other mixed heritage will be sought from our consortia arrangements.

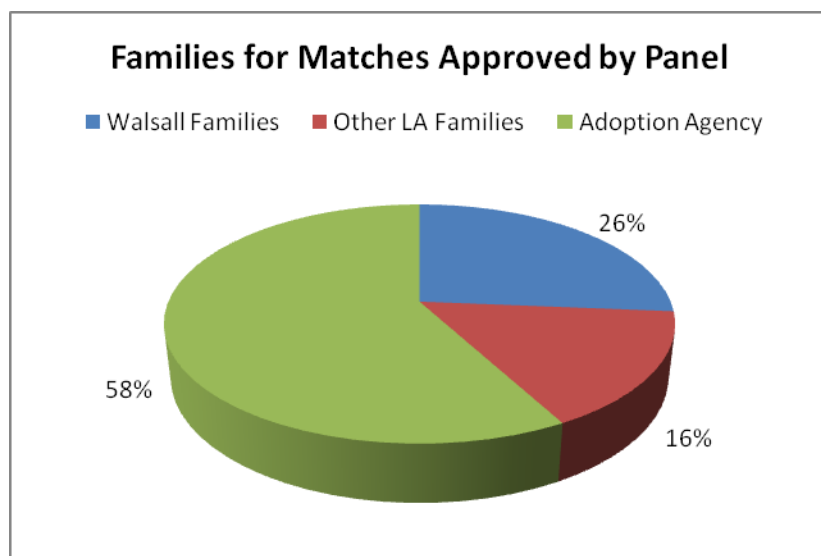


White British (WB)	11
Any Other Mixed	4

Matches of children with approved adoptive families

Walsall has made matches with 19 adoptive families offering placements to 19 children, 5 of which were with Walsall approved families and a high number with Adoption Focus, demonstrating good use of ABC and AF collaborative arrangement. Sadly, one of the matches whilst being agreed at panel did not proceed to a

placement as the adopters pulled out during introductions. The child has remained in their foster placement and family finding for her continues.

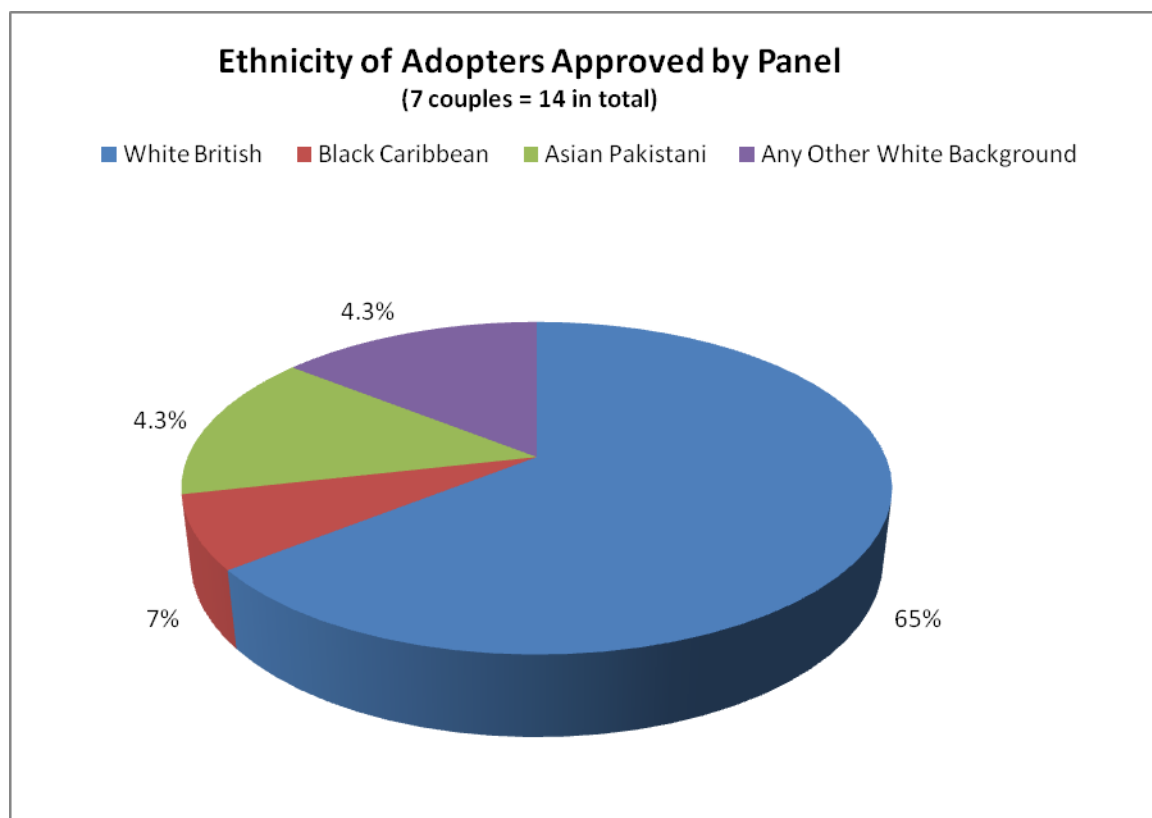


Walsall Families	5
Other LA Families	3
Adoption Agency	11

Of the 19 children matched, 7 had a proposed placement identified within 6 months of their adoption decision. The remaining 12 were subject to delay due to their underlying complex medical needs and no suitable adopters available when the initial search was undertaken and the difficulties trying to find a family for children of a sibling group.

Numbers of approved adopters

During this period, 7 adoptive families were approved; this is three more than the same period last year.



White British	9
Black Caribbean	1
Asian Pakistani	2
Any Other White Background	2

Number of approved inter country adopters: None.

5. Adoption in the Black Country, the Adoption Leadership Board and the Regionalising Adoption agenda

Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus (ABC and AF) continue to move forward with their consortia working arrangements. Initially the use of Adoption Focus families was slow to get started. However, this has now improved and Walsall family finders are automatically considering Adoption Focus families if there are no Walsall approved families available.

For the period April to September, ABC and AF hosted 12 information events across the region.

226 enquiries were received into ABC and AF in total, this generated 60 referrals which were passed to ABC members and AF and of these 12 were passed onto Walsall for an initial assessment to be undertaken. These are similar figures to

previous years. Despite a significantly reduced budget (due to the removal of the Adoption Reform Grant) during this period, ABC and AF have been able to retain brand awareness and retain levels of enquiries by tweaking the marketing plan and placing an emphasis on growing the market in previously unengaged geographic areas of the region.

.ABC and AF continue to strive for sector leading improvement; this year has seen:

- Launch of the new Information Surgery events which are smaller bespoke versions of info events giving an increased number of registrations of interest.
- An on-line automated booking and screening system for information sessions
- Social media development conveying messages and building brand relationships with/to 97,032 targeted individuals in this period
- Greater use of in-house exchange day hosted by Adoption Focus

6. Adoption Leadership Board

Adoption Leadership Boards were introduced by central government during the latter part of 2014, as a way of providing a clear focus across regional areas on improvements needed to the adoption system. The board is chaired by the DCS from Dudley and membership consists of Assistant Directors and Heads of Service from local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and Coram BAAF. The board continues to meet quarterly. All local authorities report on their data on a quarterly basis, the board then produces a data pack which gives an indication of how each local authority is performing against the Adoption Scorecard measures. The board also monitors the regions use of the Adoption Support Fund and will also be instrumental in the Government's Regionalising Adoption Agenda.

7. Regionalising Adoption Agenda

In June 2015, the Government published their 'Regionalising Adoption' agenda. Essentially, this invited expressions of interest from Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies to join together with the intention of providing more adoption placements for more children. Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus submitted a bid for government funding to enable the creation of a standalone adoption agency. However, in July 2015, the consortium was approached by Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire asking if they could also join the consortium and all six local authorities and Adoption Focus to become one Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

Plans for the RAA have been progressing steadily, individual work streams such as HR, finance and service design are now up and running and Walsall is well represented in all areas of work. Whilst the Government are providing some set up costs, the onus is on the Local Authorities to decide upon a delivery model and ongoing funding of the RAA. The models under consideration are 1.) LA host model-essentially meaning all adoption activity is centralised within one Local Authority 2.) Local Authority Trading Company (LATC)-essentially meaning the RAA becomes a standalone agency that is co-owned by all Local Authorities.

The primary objectives of RAA's is to ensure that more children are considered for and subsequently placed for adoption in a timely way and that more adoptive families are available to consider placements of these children. From Walsall's perspective, the RAA will offer our children more placement choice from a broader range of available families

Given the governments ongoing adoption reform agenda, the push to consider adoption for more children will continue and until the go live date of the RAA, Walsall will continue to recruit, assess and approve adopters who will most likely take the placements of the younger children with an adoption decision.

The final decision on the chosen delivery model will be presented to respective cabinets later in 2017, with a view to going live with the new RAA Adoption @Heart in the spring or summer of 2018.



The current total budget in scope for the RAA project is £1.085m (associated with Adoption services and a proportion of children's administrative service) and includes £239k associated with Inter-agency adoption fees. The current outturn position for this service is currently a forecast overspend of £22k however there remains a significant financial risk associated for a further £265k of interagency fees being generated should those children currently seeking an adoption be placed during the financial year (fees are incurred and recognised at the point a child is placed). This could increase the overspend for the year to £287k and is as a result of the higher number of children currently being supported along with changes to the reimbursement criteria set by the DfE.


8. Adoption Scorecard - April 1st 2016 to September 30th 2016

The Adoption Scorecard uses performance data to evidence how swiftly Local Authorities implement adoption plans for children. It compares Walsall with neighbouring authorities and England and is shown as a year three year average.

From the data below, we can see that at the end of September 2016, two of the three key performance measures A1 and A3 were showing a significant improvement, the third is still considerably better than the England average and compared to March 2015, the number of days has only increased by a marginal amount. Walsall is also performing better than the England average for those children discharged from the care system who are adopted.

There are a number of factors contributing to the improving picture, including the continued impact of the 26 week timeframe for care proceedings, the early identification process of children requiring adoption, the introduction of 'Adoption Link', a new family finding tool which all local authorities are now using and also our partnership working with Adoption Focus in identifying families for some of our more complex children. The third indicator, whilst positive and showing a relatively stable move in the right direction can easily be affected by cases whereby adoption family finding is protracted. This is often the case for our complex children, BME children, boys over three years and for those in sibling groups. Walsall will continue to put every effort into family finding for all children requiring adoption, this could affect this indicator and show an increase in days overall. However, this is the right thing to do for those children and as long as we can explain the story behind the figures, we will continue to achieve positive outcomes for all children requiring adoption.

Adoption		Outturn Mar-15 England	Outturn Mar-16 Walsall	YTD Sep-16 Walsall
1,2	Number of children Adopted	4,690*	32	16
1,2	 Of those adopted, Average time from Entering Care to moving in with adopted family (Days) (A1) (3-year average)(SB)	593	532	513
1,2	 Of those adopted, Average time between receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to a family (Days) (A2) (3 year average) (SB)	223	202	210
	Children who wait less than 16 months* between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (%) (A3) (3- year average) (BB)	47	51.2	53.6

1,2		Adoptions from care (% leaving care who are adopted) 2014-17 (A4) (3-year average) (BB)	17	17	19
		Number of children for whom permanence decisions has changed away from adoption (3-year average) (A5)	14	14	23
		Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (% of BME children leaving care who are adopted) (3-year average) (A6)	2,230 (9%)	28 (14.9%)	22 (14.6%)
		Adoptions of children aged five or over (% of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted) (3-year average) (A7)	3,010 (5%)	28 (7.9%)	20 (7.1%)
		Average length of care proceedings locally (weeks) (3 year average) (A8)	39	36	28
		Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March) (A9)	4,600	49	33
		Of those adopted, Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, adjusted for foster care adoptions (3-year average) (A10)	490	494	487
		Number of approved adoptive families at snapshot date (A11)	2780	5	6
		Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child in the year who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child (A12)	63	50	100
		Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March (A13)	2660	19	25
		Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2015) (A14)	3060	40	26
		Number of new ADM decisions in year (A15)	4310	53	12
		Number of new placement orders granted in year (A16)		57	10

Conclusions

The Adoption and Permanence Team is now almost fully staffed with all workers having considerable experience as adoption and child protection practitioners. The amalgamation of family finding for permanence into this team has meant more consistent and robust approach to family finding for all children who are unable to remain with their birth family.

The adoption and permanence panel has been busy in the first 6 months of operation and more than 20 children have been permanently matched with their existing carers. The team has worked hard to push through on placing children for adoption and as a result an additional 13 children have been placed for adoption compared to the same time period last year.

The Regionalising Adoption Agenda has gained significant momentum during the past 6 months; we are now at the point of selecting a delivery model. Once this has been agreed, work will commence on consulting with staff about the transfer of service to the new delivery model.

This report gives a brief analysis of our improvements against national Adoption Scorecard indicators for a 6 month period. Further robust analysis will be undertaken at the end of the financial year, this is where trends can be spotted more easily and progress in the whole arena of adoption and permanence can more easily be identified.

Linda Franks

(Adoption and Fostering Panels Advisor)

(12/01/2016)

Appendix A

Walsall Children's Services- Adoption Service Six Month Report

April 2016– September 2016

Introduction

This report will outline the activity of Walsall Children's Adoption Service for the six month period from April, to September, 2016. The report will cover the following areas:

1. The Adoption Team.
2. The Adoption Panel
3. Agency Decision Maker
4. Analysis of the work undertaken
5. The role of Adoption in the Black Country, impact of the Adoption Leadership Board and the plans for Regionalising Adoption Agencies
6. Walsall's Performance and the Adoption Scorecard

1. The Adoption and Permanence Team

The Adoption and Permanence Team is based at Essington Lodge and is co-located with the fostering service and the safeguarding and family support teams. Having the services together offers a more effective and streamlined family placement service.

From the 1st April 2016, the team comprised of the following: one team manager, one assistant team manager, nine qualified social workers which includes social workers specialising in adoption support, special guardianship support (SGO) and family finding for permanence. There are three non qualified workers to undertake life story work, direct work with children and placement support. The team is fortunate to benefit from a stable staff group, with the remaining vacant post for family finding for permanence now under offer to an external appointee.

The Adoption Team's work involves initial visits to applicants, staffing of information evenings as part of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) and Adoption Focus (AF), hosting adoption preparation courses, conducting assessments of adopters, family finding for children with an adoption plan, provision of post adoption support and completion of step parent adoption and inter-agency adoption applications. Specialist workers assist children in preparation to move on to their adoptive placements and also in the provision of Life Story Work. The team also provides a support provision to Special Guardians.

The team continues to work collaboratively with the Consortium and regular meetings take place between Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus

(ABC) (AF) management team and sub groups, such as training sub group and adoption support sub group.

ABC and AF jointly run adoption information events; these are usually once and most often twice a month. ABC authorities run monthly adoption preparation training events. This ensures there is a steady flow of prospective adopters to be referred onto the members of ABC to assess. Adoption Focus continues to focus on the provision of families for harder to place children, the use of Adoption Focus families for Walsall children has significantly grown during this period and has meant Walsall has placed an additional 8 children for adoption with this partner agency compared to the same time in the previous year. However, the total number of children placed during this period is double that of the same period last year and is similar to the high numbers placed during 2014-15. This is partly attributable to a high proportion of sibling groups requiring placements which automatically inflates the numbers.

The growth in use of Adoption Focus families has mainly been as a result of them recently appointing a family finder who keeps a data base of all children waiting for adoption in the Black Country, all children in the pipeline in the Black Country and all adopters available in ABC and Adoption Focus. The role of this family finder is to ensure that links are made quickly within the consortium. This has already resulted in more matches being made within the consortium. The role of the family finder/permanency worker is a model which most ABC authorities are now considering and this model will form part of the new Regional Adoption Agency so that early identification of suitable placement options are considered.

Prospective adopter Enquiries: There were 12 enquiries during the 6 month period which ranged from 1 enquiry in May up to 4 in September. There were a total of 10 enquiries wishing to progress to the next stage. All of the enquiries originate from the ABC Consortium and although the numbers are lower than last year the quality of those going forward are of a high standard and are more likely therefore to result in a conversion to an approved adopter.

2. The Adoption Panel

During this period 25 panel members were on the central list .Councillor Tina Jukes commenced her attendance at panel in September 2015 and continues her commitment to this part of the service. Gordon Robertson, panel member left and Max Gregory joined as an independent social work member; he previously worked as a reviewing officer for Walsall council.

12 panel meetings occurred during this period. All matters were dealt with at panel.

Applicants are encouraged to attend panel meetings for approval and matching with children. Panel members welcome their attendance as this assists them to ask questions to them directly and it also adds another dimension to the written assessment.

Panel members are asked to fill in feedback forms regarding how panel functions. Whilst this process is in place, not everyone is fulfilling the quality assurance role of panel in a formalised manner. This is an area for development in the coming months.

Panel is well supported by the Adoption Panel administrators, Rebecca Jeffery and Rebecca Evans.

Panel members were invited to a training event on the 8 and 15 July 2016, presented internally on the 'Solihull approach'. Also offered on the 16 August 2016 was an internal presentation on 'FOSTERING, LOOKED-AFTER, & ADOPTION SUPPORTING HUB' (FLASH) service.

This year has seen the launch of the ADOPTION and PERMANENCE PANEL; this enables the panel to consider long-term matches of children requiring long term fostering and foster to adopt cases and is in addition to the already established adoption Panel. Due to the increased numbers of long –term matches an extra panel has been added each month.

Recommendation: It will be beneficial for the Panel and ADM to meet on a six monthly basis to share views and receive feedback on how the changes both in legislation and practice are impacting on the decision maker and panel's recommendations in order for continued improvement on practice. (Note: This will be incorporated into the Training /development days for panel members)

3. Agency Decision Maker

Mary Deborah Carter (Assistant Director, Children's Services) acted as the Agency Decision Maker during this period. In her absence Carol Boughton covered these duties.

ADM decisions are made within recommended timescales following panel meetings. The decision maker meets with the Panel Adviser when making decisions in order to seek clarification or gain further information pertaining to the items presented at panels.

4. Analysis of the Work undertaken from April 1st 2016 – September 30th 2016

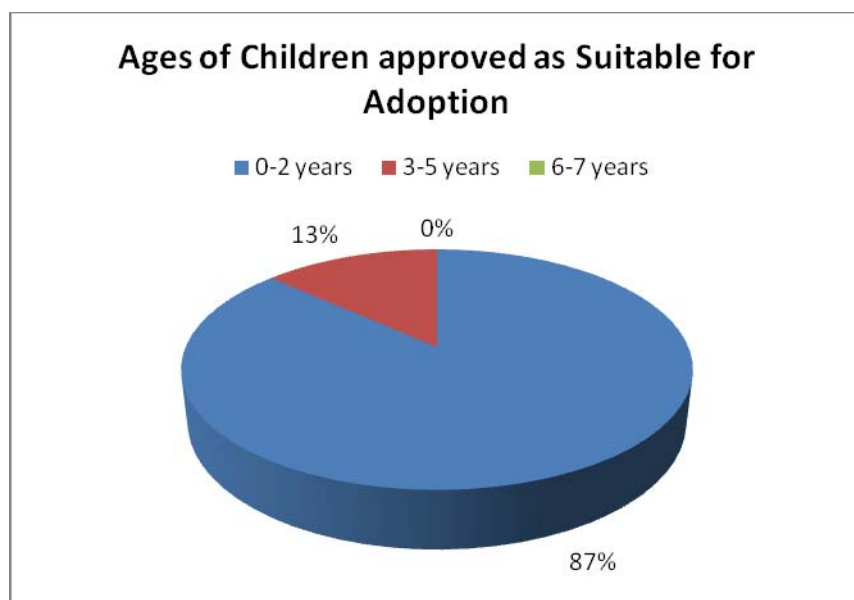
Children suitable for adoption

During this period 15 children were presented to the ADM for an adoption decision compared to 33 for the first 6 months of 2015. This year's lower number is partly due to lower number of sibling groups which inflated the 2015-16 overall number and also because some plans which were due to be presented for ADM in the first half of

the year were delayed and will be presented in the latter part of the year. In order to address the drift and delay with regard to adoption plans being progressed, Walsall has now appointed a permanency coordinator and is in the process of appointing a case progression officer. Both of these posts will take responsibility for early identification of permanence plans and the tracking of these cases until permanence has been achieved. Full analysis of this cohort will be made available in the annual adoption report for the full accounting period.

Social worker feedback indicates that 14 of these children had their permanence plan considered and agreed at their 4 month statutory review, and 1 was delayed due to a late adoption medical. This would indicate a 93.3 % completion rate. When analysing the data, it remains apparent that Walsall continues to be successful in placing children in a timely manner.

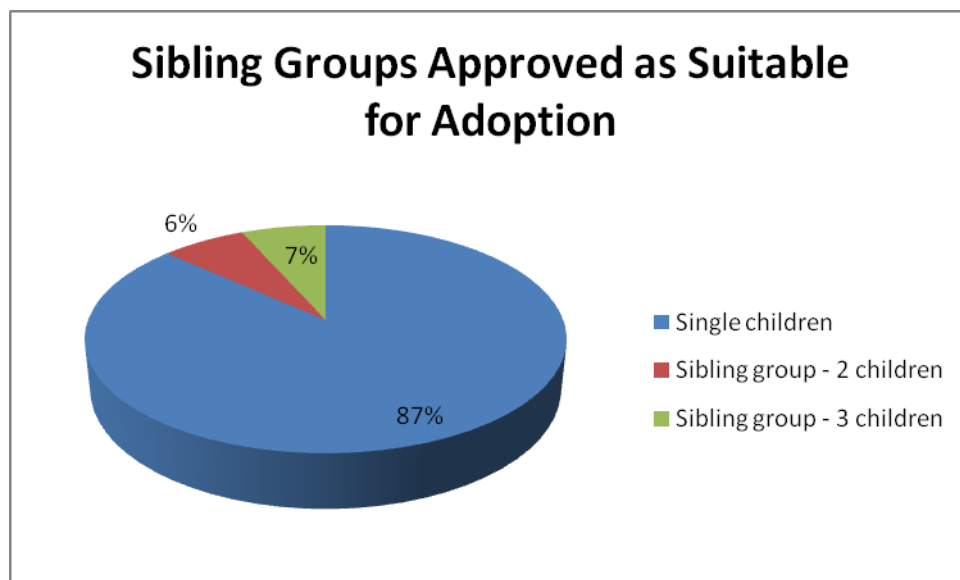
As can be seen the vast majority of children are younger than 3 years, which is consistent with previous years and is evidence of Walsall's efforts to achieve early permanence for children.



0-2 years	13
3-5 years	2
6-7 years	0

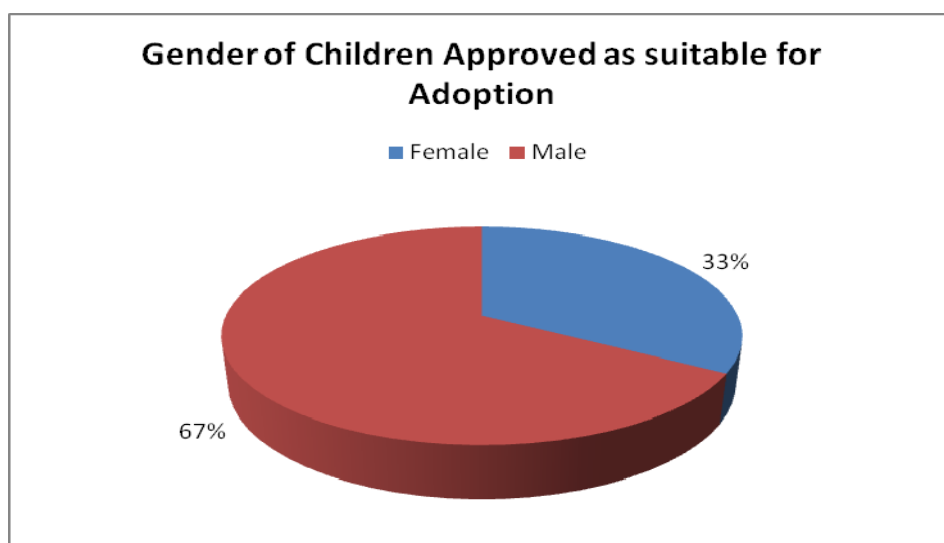
This period has seen a decrease in the number of siblings groups, for the same period last year. Family finding for sibling groups of three and above can be problematic as the likelihood of finding an adoptive family who can manage the

needs of three children is small. However, at the time of writing this report, I am pleased to say that a match for the sibling group of three and the sibling group of two has been achieved.



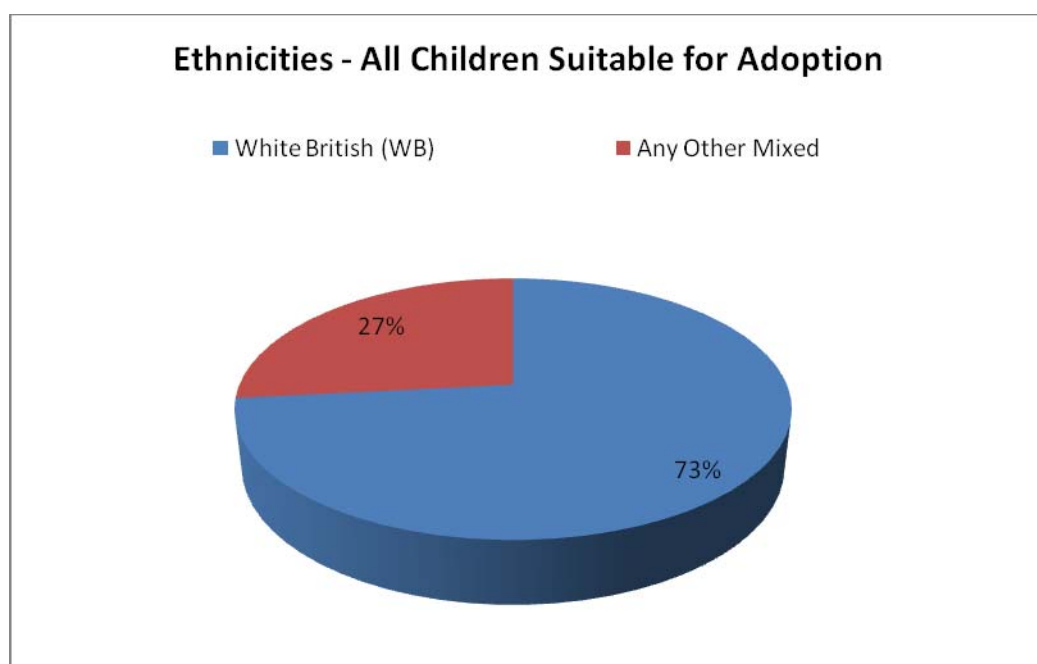
Single children	13
Sibling group - 2 children	1
Sibling group - 3 children	1

Similar to previous years, more boys than girls were presented for an adoption decision. This continues to reflect the national picture of the gender profile within the care system, 56% (39,670) of children looked after on 31st March 2016 were male and 44% (30,780) were female



Female	5
Male	10

There continues to be a high number of young white British children requiring adoption, the majority of whom can be placed internally as there isn't usually a shortage of adoptive families for young white British children. However the supply of internal adopters has depleted due to the high numbers of children requiring placements which has resulted in a higher use of external provision. Walsall tends to recruit a broad diverse range of adoptive families although during this period, the majority of families were White British. It is likely that a match for children of any other mixed heritage will be sought from our consortia arrangements.

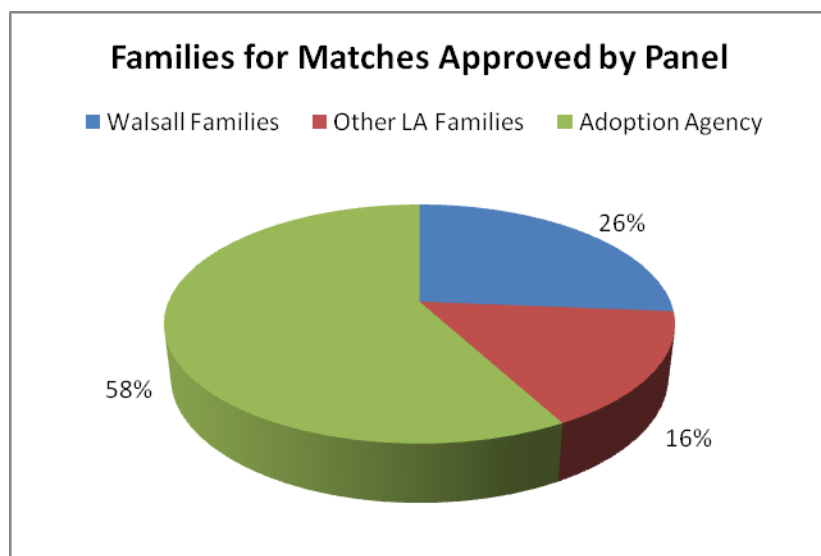


White British (WB)	11
Any Other Mixed	4

Matches of children with approved adoptive families

Walsall has made matches with 19 adoptive families offering placements to 19 children, 5 of which were with Walsall approved families and a high number with Adoption Focus, demonstrating good use of ABC and AF collaborative arrangement. Sadly, one of the matches whilst being agreed at panel did not proceed to a

placement as the adopters pulled out during introductions. The child has remained in their foster placement and family finding for her continues.

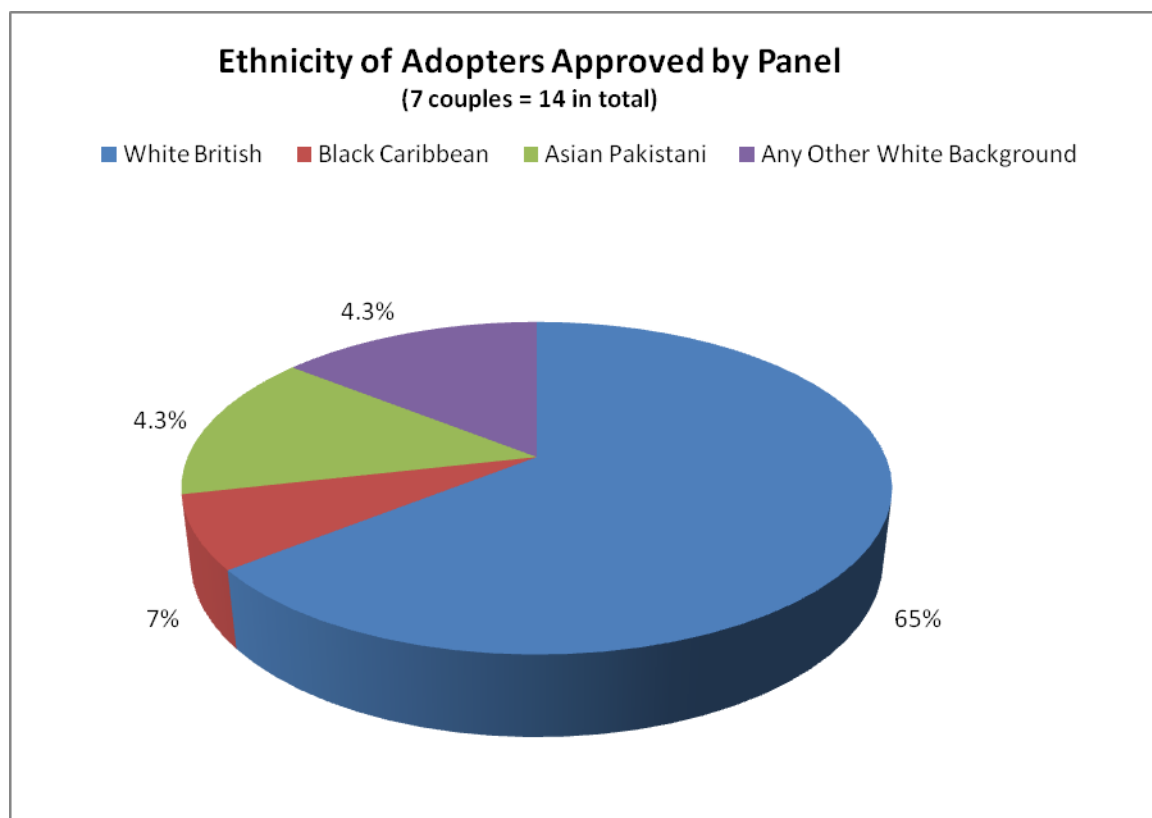


Walsall Families	5
Other LA Families	3
Adoption Agency	11

Of the 19 children matched, 7 had a proposed placement identified within 6 months of their adoption decision. The remaining 12 were subject to delay due to their underlying complex medical needs and no suitable adopters available when the initial search was undertaken and the difficulties trying to find a family for children of a sibling group.

Numbers of approved adopters

During this period, 7 adoptive families were approved; this is three more than the same period last year.



White British	9
Black Caribbean	1
Asian Pakistani	2
Any Other White Background	2

Number of approved inter country adopters: None.

5. Adoption in the Black Country, the Adoption Leadership Board and the Regionalising Adoption agenda

Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus (ABC and AF) continue to move forward with their consortia working arrangements. Initially the use of Adoption Focus families was slow to get started. However, this has now improved and Walsall family finders are automatically considering Adoption Focus families if there are no Walsall approved families available.

For the period April to September, ABC and AF hosted 12 information events across the region.

226 enquiries were received into ABC and AF in total, this generated 60 referrals which were passed to ABC members and AF and of these 12 were passed onto Walsall for an initial assessment to be undertaken. These are similar figures to

previous years. Despite a significantly reduced budget (due to the removal of the Adoption Reform Grant) during this period, ABC and AF have been able to retain brand awareness and retain levels of enquiries by tweaking the marketing plan and placing an emphasis on growing the market in previously unengaged geographic areas of the region.

.ABC and AF continue to strive for sector leading improvement; this year has seen:

- Launch of the new Information Surgery events which are smaller bespoke versions of info events giving an increased number of registrations of interest.
- An on-line automated booking and screening system for information sessions
- Social media development conveying messages and building brand relationships with/to 97,032 targeted individuals in this period
- Greater use of in-house exchange day hosted by Adoption Focus

6. Adoption Leadership Board

Adoption Leadership Boards were introduced by central government during the latter part of 2014, as a way of providing a clear focus across regional areas on improvements needed to the adoption system. The board is chaired by the DCS from Dudley and membership consists of Assistant Directors and Heads of Service from local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and Coram BAAF. The board continues to meet quarterly. All local authorities report on their data on a quarterly basis, the board then produces a data pack which gives an indication of how each local authority is performing against the Adoption Scorecard measures. The board also monitors the regions use of the Adoption Support Fund and will also be instrumental in the Government's Regionalising Adoption Agenda.

7. Regionalising Adoption Agenda

In June 2015, the Government published their 'Regionalising Adoption' agenda. Essentially, this invited expressions of interest from Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies to join together with the intention of providing more adoption placements for more children. Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus submitted a bid for government funding to enable the creation of a standalone adoption agency. However, in July 2015, the consortium was approached by Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire asking if they could also join the consortium and all six local authorities and Adoption Focus to become one Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

Plans for the RAA have been progressing steadily, individual work streams such as HR, finance and service design are now up and running and Walsall is well represented in all areas of work. Whilst the Government are providing some set up costs, the onus is on the Local Authorities to decide upon a delivery model and ongoing funding of the RAA. The models under consideration are 1.) LA host model-essentially meaning all adoption activity is centralised within one Local Authority 2.) Local Authority Trading Company (LATC)-essentially meaning the RAA becomes a standalone agency that is co-owned by all Local Authorities.

The primary objectives of RAA's is to ensure that more children are considered for and subsequently placed for adoption in a timely way and that more adoptive families are available to consider placements of these children. From Walsall's perspective, the RAA will offer our children more placement choice from a broader range of available families

Given the governments ongoing adoption reform agenda, the push to consider adoption for more children will continue and until the go live date of the RAA, Walsall will continue to recruit, assess and approve adopters who will most likely take the placements of the younger children with an adoption decision.

The final decision on the chosen delivery model will be presented to respective cabinets later in 2017, with a view to going live with the new RAA Adoption @Heart in the spring or summer of 2018.



The current total budget in scope for the RAA project is £1.085m (associated with Adoption services and a proportion of children's administrative service) and includes £239k associated with Inter-agency adoption fees. The current outturn position for this service is currently a forecast overspend of £22k however there remains a significant financial risk associated for a further £265k of interagency fees being generated should those children currently seeking an adoption be placed during the financial year (fees are incurred and recognised at the point a child is placed). This could increase the overspend for the year to £287k and is as a result of the higher number of children currently being supported along with changes to the reimbursement criteria set by the DfE.


8. Adoption Scorecard - April 1st 2016 to September 30th 2016

The Adoption Scorecard uses performance data to evidence how swiftly Local Authorities implement adoption plans for children. It compares Walsall with neighbouring authorities and England and is shown as a year three year average.

From the data below, we can see that at the end of September 2016, two of the three key performance measures A1 and A3 were showing a significant improvement, the third is still considerably better than the England average and compared to March 2015, the number of days has only increased by a marginal amount. Walsall is also performing better than the England average for those children discharged from the care system who are adopted.

There are a number of factors contributing to the improving picture, including the continued impact of the 26 week timeframe for care proceedings, the early identification process of children requiring adoption, the introduction of 'Adoption Link', a new family finding tool which all local authorities are now using and also our partnership working with Adoption Focus in identifying families for some of our more complex children. The third indicator, whilst positive and showing a relatively stable move in the right direction can easily be affected by cases whereby adoption family finding is protracted. This is often the case for our complex children, BME children, boys over three years and for those in sibling groups. Walsall will continue to put every effort into family finding for all children requiring adoption, this could affect this indicator and show an increase in days overall. However, this is the right thing to do for those children and as long as we can explain the story behind the figures, we will continue to achieve positive outcomes for all children requiring adoption.

Adoption		Outturn Mar-15 England	Outturn Mar-16 Walsall	YTD Sep-16 Walsall
1,2	Number of children Adopted	4,690*	32	16
1,2	 Of those adopted, Average time from Entering Care to moving in with adopted family (Days) (A1) (3-year average)(SB)	593	532	513
1,2	 Of those adopted, Average time between receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to a family (Days) (A2) (3 year average) (SB)	223	202	210
	Children who wait less than 16 months* between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (%) (A3) (3- year average) (BB)	47	51.2	53.6

1,2		Adoptions from care (% leaving care who are adopted) 2014-17 (A4) (3-year average) (BB)	17	17	19
		Number of children for whom permanence decisions has changed away from adoption (3-year average) (A5)	14	14	23
		Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (% of BME children leaving care who are adopted) (3-year average) (A6)	2,230 (9%)	28 (14.9%)	22 (14.6%)
		Adoptions of children aged five or over (% of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted) (3-year average) (A7)	3,010 (5%)	28 (7.9%)	20 (7.1%)
		Average length of care proceedings locally (weeks) (3 year average) (A8)	39	36	28
		Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March) (A9)	4,600	49	33
		Of those adopted, Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, adjusted for foster care adoptions (3-year average) (A10)	490	494	487
		Number of approved adoptive families at snapshot date (A11)	2780	5	6
		Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child in the year who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child (A12)	63	50	100
		Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March (A13)	2660	19	25
		Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2015) (A14)	3060	40	26
		Number of new ADM decisions in year (A15)	4310	53	12
		Number of new placement orders granted in year (A16)		57	10

Conclusions

The Adoption and Permanence Team is now almost fully staffed with all workers having considerable experience as adoption and child protection practitioners. The amalgamation of family finding for permanence into this team has meant more consistent and robust approach to family finding for all children who are unable to remain with their birth family.

The adoption and permanence panel has been busy in the first 6 months of operation and more than 20 children have been permanently matched with their existing carers. The team has worked hard to push through on placing children for adoption and as a result an additional 13 children have been placed for adoption compared to the same time period last year.

The Regionalising Adoption Agenda has gained significant momentum during the past 6 months; we are now at the point of selecting a delivery model. Once this has been agreed, work will commence on consulting with staff about the transfer of service to the new delivery model.

This report gives a brief analysis of our improvements against national Adoption Scorecard indicators for a 6 month period. Further robust analysis will be undertaken at the end of the financial year, this is where trends can be spotted more easily and progress in the whole arena of adoption and permanence can more easily be identified.

Linda Franks

(Adoption and Fostering Panels Advisor)

(12/01/2016)