

CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON C O U N C I L

ANNUAL ADOPTION AGENCY REPORT

APRIL 2017 – March 2018

AUTHORS: Dawn Deans SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER MANAGER (ADOPTION)

Lorna Carr PROFESSIONAL ADVISOR

Lynn Noble PROFESSIONAL ADVISOR

1. Introduction

This report provides the Corporate Parenting Board with the Adoption Agency's Annual Report for April 2017 to March 2018. The statutory regulations require that elected members should be informed of the Adoption Agency's activity on a regular basis. This annual report covers adoption performance during this period and provides an update on the work of the team.

This report also includes information about the progress made towards Wolverhampton forming a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

The report was presented to the Children in Care Council on 20 August 2018 and their comments are set out in Appendix two.

The Adoption Service is located within the People Directorate of the City of Wolverhampton Council. The Adoption Service is responsible for:

- The recruitment of a sufficient pool of adopters from a range of backgrounds, and the assessment and training of prospective adopters to meet the assessed needs of children
- The identification of children for whom the possible plan is adoption and to work alongside the children's social workers to match children with their adoptive families and ensure permanence is achieved without drift and delay;
- The provision of an effective and efficient Adoption Panel which is conducted in accordance with the regulations;
- The provision of a comprehensive range of support services to children, birth families and adoptive parents;
- The provision in the disclosure of information and facilitating contact for adopted adults and birth families.

2. Adoption Inspection and Improvement Journey

All Adoption Services became regulated in 2003, under the Care Standards Act 2000 and were subject to inspections against National Minimum Standards. The inspecting Authority is OFSTED.

In January 2017 Wolverhampton's Children's Services were subject to inspection under the revised Ofsted Single Inspection Framework. The outcome of this inspection was that Children's Services were rated Good with a sub judgement of Good for the Adoption Team.

In relation to adoption, Ofsted made the following recommendation: Ensure that once children are placed with adoptive families there is no unnecessary delay in applying for an adoption order.

The Children and Young People's (CYP) Action plan included actions to address the recommendation as follows:

- Adoption applications to be made 10 weeks after a child is placed in the prospective adoptive household (unless it is recorded on the child's file that there is a reason why this should not happen)
- Annex A's to be completed by the child's social worker and lodged with the court at the same time as the adopters lodge their adoption order application
- CareFirst activity to be utilised to ensure timescales are met
- Dip samples to take place to ensure adoption applications and Annex A's are being lodged at 10 weeks

There are circumstances where adoptive parents do not feel ready to lodge their adoption application at 10 weeks. Liaison takes place with the child's social worker to explore how the placement can be supported to enable the adopters to feel confident to lodge in a timely manner.

A process has been devised with the Court in relation to lodging the application for the Adoption Order and the Annex A at the same time. It is currently taking approximately three months from lodging the application to Court hearings. Many more birth parents are contesting the making of an Adoption Order and this is causing delay in the exit of children from the care of the Local Authority.

3. The National Agenda

In 2012, the Government launched an Adoption Reform Programme, it focused concern regarding the length of time taken for children to be placed for adoption. This resulted in a raft of reforms and measures being implemented to increase and speed up adoption these include:

- An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay, March 2012, which introduced the Adoption Scorecard
- Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes, January 2013 which introduced the National Adoption helpline; First4Adoption and a six months two stage process for assessing adopters
- The Adoption Leadership Board was launched in April 2014
- Children and Families Act 2014; includes the introduction of care proceedings limited to 26 weeks apart for exceptional cases, promotes Fostering for Adoption, repeal of due consideration to ethnicity in placing children in England, and adopter led matching with access to adoption registers.
- Regionalising Adoption, June 2015; outlined how the development of Regional Adoption Agencies will create a wider pool of adopters who could potentially meet the needs of child/ren for whom they were considering suitable for adoption and adoption support would be easily accessible, additionally the Government aspired to develop a system with a spirit of innovation and excellence at its heart

- Adoption: A Vision for Change policy paper 2016 identifies how the Government wants to invest in the workforce with plans to equip the workforce with the professional skills and knowledge to navigate complex assessment, analysis and decision making and enable adoptive families to access the right support
- The strategy also details how, by 2020, the government will: end delay for vulnerable children in care by providing larger local pools of approved adopters by making sure every single council is part of a regional adoption agency by 2020, backed by £14 million
- Transform support on offer for adoptive families by becoming the first country in the world to provide vital therapeutic services to all adopted young people up to the age of 21 - as well as the family and friends who care for them - backed by a new commitment totalling over £49 million
- The Education and Adoption Act 2016; measures in the Act allow the Government to require local authorities to decide for their adoption functions to be carried out by another adoption agency, allowing for regional approaches.
- The Children and Social Work Act 2017 which came into effect in May 2017 includes the following;
 - Improving decision making, and support for looked after and previously looked after children in England and Wales, including adopted children;
 - Enabling better learning about effective approaches to child protection and the wider provision of children's social care in England;
 - Enabling the establishment of a new regulatory regime specifically for social work profession in England.

The key changes in relation to services for adopted children is the Virtual School Head's charge to make advice and information available to parents. The act includes the provision for improving understanding among Designated Teachers in maintained schools and academies and any other person the authority considers appropriate, for promoting the educational achievement of relevant children.

4. Regionalising Adoption Agencies

The City of Wolverhampton along with Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council and Sandwell Children's Trust were accepted by the Department of Education as an early adopter project to work together to design and develop a new Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

Having considered Adoption@Heart design principles, feedback from stakeholder engagement workshops it is planned the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) will deliver services from function focused teams which will enable staff to focus on a specific area of work; Adopter Recruitment (adopter journey), Family Finding (child's journey) and Adoption support service.

The region covers a moderate geographical area, to maintain a locally accessible service presence it is envisaged a hub and spoke model will be planned. This model will include a hub centrally for the delivery of core services and various spoke

locations across the region which will offer workspaces; they will be co-located within children's services.

The RAA project board appointed a service transition group (STG) to oversee the project. The service transition group is comprised of strategic managers from the three local authorities and Children's Trust. The STG delegated responsibility to oversee the direction of the project to the Steering Group which consists of operational managers and incorporates staff engagement events and stakeholder engagement events. Work continues in all the significant strands of the project.

A decision was recently taken to proceed with a hosted model for the Regional Adoption Agency, a due diligence process was undertaken which resulted in an agreement that the City of Wolverhampton Council will host the RAA subject to Cabinet approval in November/December 2018.

5. Regional and local developments

Adoption Leadership Board

The West Midlands Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) is made up of senior leaders from the 14 local authorities that make up the West Midlands region.

The ALB is a national board with a remit to drive significant improvements in the performance of the adoption system in England. It has a focus on supporting and challenging the adoption system to maximise the likelihood that:

- Children for whom adoption is the best way of achieving permanence are adopted without unnecessary delay;
- There are enough prospective adopters to provide homes for all the children approved to be adopted;
- Adoptions do not breakdown through the right adoption support being readily available to all people who need it.

AdoptWestMids Consortium

AdoptWestMids (AWMs) consortium was established in 1997 and continues to remain a strong regional consortium. The core aims are to extend placement choice and support professional practice. Peer support meetings continue a bi monthly basis.

AWM's work continues to focus on commissioning & facilitating specialist training for both adoption/and children's workforce and runs training events for adopters.

AWMs funding has been agreed and a proposal for a wider Permanence Hub is being developed.

Adoption in the Black Country Consortium

Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) Consortium is made up of, Sandwell Children's Trust, and Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton local authorities (LA). It also included Adoption Focus, a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) for part of this reporting period, however due to the development of the RAA, Adoption Focus left the consortium arrangement in September 2017.

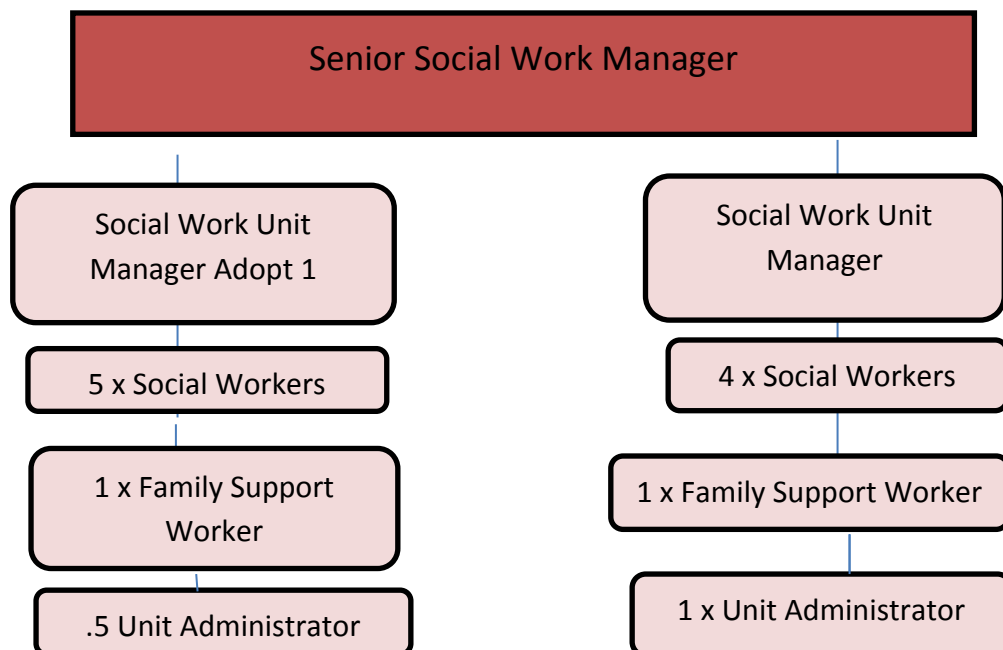
The original remit of Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) was to recruit adopters for the four LA's with specific marketing including targeting adopters for older children, sibling groups and those of black and minority ethnic groups. The enquiries are equally shared throughout the four local authorities. Joint adoption preparation training takes place throughout the year and enables training to be delivered monthly.

Joint family finding meetings take place monthly to explore links between approved adopters and children within the consortium, as a result interagency placement within the ABC consortium have improved.

Post approval training among the consortium offers training to local adopters on an annual basis and covers a wide range of activities (refer to adoption support section).

ABC Consortium members have continued to jointly purchase services from Voluntary Adoption Agencies to support in the delivery of adoption services. Adoption UK is an adopter led support service, the contract includes 12 monthly memberships for all approved adopters and access to support groups and After Adoption Charity undertakes birth record counselling.

Adoption Team structure



Since 2014 Wolverhampton Adoption Team has been configured into three units with a recruitment and assessment unit, a family finding and adoption support unit, and a Looked After Children adoption unit co-located in the Adoption Team.

This model improved the timeliness of placing children in adoptive placements and outcomes for children and improved the quality of the service. It developed a shared understanding about adoption among social workers including transitioning children to adoptive placements, therapeutic support, and supporting children's educational issues.

The Adoption Social Work Team ADOPT 2 functions of placing and monitoring children in adoptive placements is out of the scope of the RAA. In preparation for the transition to the RAA the unit transferred in January 2018 and is co-located in the Looked After Children (LAC) Service. This has enabled collaboration between the Adoption team and LAC team as the LAC managers integrate aspects of adoption.

All the adoption social workers are qualified, and experienced in adoption work, and registered with the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC). They are qualified under the Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005, as all have all been qualified for at least three years and have the required experience in adoption work.

Staff receive regular supervision and the Social Work Unit Managers sit alongside the team thereby being available for consultation and advice in between planned supervision sessions. Additionally, the Senior Social Work Manager is situated close by and has an open-door policy offering consultation and guidance as necessary.

6. Staff training

Staff have annual appraisals and their training needs are regularly reviewed and they are actively encouraged to undertake appropriate learning opportunities. Staff are expected to share learning outcomes to benefit the team and when relevant with social workers in the wider service.

Quarterly staff briefings and an annual joint children and adult social work conference plus mandatory training is part of a workforce development plan.

The current service design enables adoption staff to develop expertise regarding the impact of attachment, loss and separation and trauma for adopted children. Training events have included Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Therapeutic Life Story Work, Foetal Alcohol training and direct work training. Training by AWM has been offered to the wider Children and Young People (CYP) service to develop a greater understanding and whole service approach, for example writing Child Permanence Reports and Foetal Alcohol training.

Coram BAAF Senior practitioners and the Senior Social Work Manager delivered an early permanence seminar to CYP workers where the following were explored; development of early permanence, establishing the role of early permanence in permanence planning, exploring early permanence in Wolverhampton, policy,

procedures and practice and Coram's longitudinal Outcomes Study 2011. It was attended by staff across CYP including social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers, feedback was favourable and following the training there has been more enquiries about early permanence placements. The early permanence sufficiency strategy had a target of placing five children in early permanence placements in 2017-2018.

7. The Adoption service objectives

Recruitment and Assessment of adopters

Prospective adopters are recruited to meet the placement needs of children with a care plan of adoption. Adoption in the Black Country Consortium's (branded as Adoption@Heart since September 2017) recruitment strategy endeavours to recruit adopters for older children, who may have experienced neglect and or abuse and now need a permanent adoptive home; sibling groups and those of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups where children require adoptive parents who can reflect or promote their heritage. The enquiries were equally shared throughout the four local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agency while they remained in the consortium.

148 referrals were received by the ABC Consortium and Adoption Focus (AF) in total; this generated 36 referrals for the City of Wolverhampton Council for an initial assessment to be undertaken. This a similar figure to previous years. Additional money has been provided as part of the set up of the front door at Adoption@Heart in the latter part of this reporting period to expand the marketing and recruitment activities and establish the new Adoption@ Heart brand

During this period, ABC and AF retained brand awareness and retained levels of enquiries by tweaking the marketing plan and placing an emphasis on growing the market in previously unengaged geographic areas of the region.

In October 2017 the consortium launched a new format of adoption information events linked to a screen tool/portal on-line. This new format has automated part of the process and reduced the human resources needed at events as well as streaming the event for adopters. This change had been the pre-cursor and testing phase for new processes linking into the launch of Adoption@Heart. In February 2018 the new branding of the RAA Adoption@Heart was launched along with all new marketing collateral, website, social media and digital/printed marketing.

This year has seen:

The launch of the new format events which are smaller versions of information events giving an improved return on investment.

On-line automated booking and screening system for information sessions

1. Targeted activity to recruit from minority groups to meet the needs of the consortium.
2. Social media development conveying messages and building brand relationships with/to 97,032 targeted individuals in this period (including individualised campaigns such as #AdoptionInfoLive and video blogging).

3. Greater use of in-house exchange day.

Additionally, ABC continue to use media partners Free Radio using Freewind/Mid-morning and afternoons/early drive slots and Signal 107 plus traditional large outdoor poster billboards and smaller target poster sites have been used to support traditional press adverts (in a range of publications linked to the location of the Information Event e.g. Shropshire Star, Dudley News, Bromsgrove Observer, etc).

Adoption Recruitment and Assessment Unit

At the heart of the Government's adoption reform programme is a shorter two-stage approval process for prospective adopters. The aim of this process is to allow potential adopters first to learn more about adoption, and then to move quickly through the approval process. Whilst remaining rigorous, the approval process is time-bound and ensures that prospective adopters have a greater role in the process. There is also a fast-track process for some previous adopters and approved foster carers.

After completion of the initial pre-stage, prospective applicants who are likely to meet the needs of children needing an adoptive placement are invited to submit a 'Registration of Interest' and they begin Stage one of the adoption process. This stage is adopter led and should be completed in two months, however this is not always met because adopters may wish to take longer. During this period, it is a time for prospective adopters to complete DBS and medicals while statutory checks and references are taken. If all checks are satisfactory, applicants are advised that they are / are not able to move to stage two.

Stage two has required timescales of four months, applicants are engaged in the preparation training and assessment during this stage.

ABC jointly trains adopters via online training and three days group training. The programme has been jointly devised and includes early life trauma, loss, attachment, abuse, adoption parenting 'parenting plus', post adoption contact, post adoption support and guest speakers. The adopter's feedback on training is positive and they report feeling better prepared for the journey to adoption.

Wolverhampton utilised an Independent Agency Social Work Assessment Consultancy (SWACS) to complete Stage two Prospective Adopter Reports (PAR's). The adopters are also allocated a Wolverhampton Supervising Social Worker to support them during the assessment. The Independent agency outlined above ceased trading in March 2017 therefore assessors were recruited via YOO Recruitment Agency. The compliance for workers has proven problematic and has on occasion caused delay, however this has not impacted in allocation of cases.

During April 2017-2018 36 referrals were received from ABC; Initial visits are undertaken by a City of Wolverhampton Stage one worker, two of the 36 applicants had links with the City of Wolverhampton therefore the referrals were returned to ABC for distribution among the consortium. Additionally, a further two applicants enquired about adoption with ABC, other Local Authority's and

Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA) and decided to proceed with a VAA. This resulted in 32 referrals for City of Wolverhampton during April 2017-2018.

In the sufficiency strategy we identified that our target was to attract and support 25 new adopters through the entire process to approval stage and beyond.

12 adopter approvals were achieved during April 2017-2018 which equates to 37 percent. This is lower than the previous year.

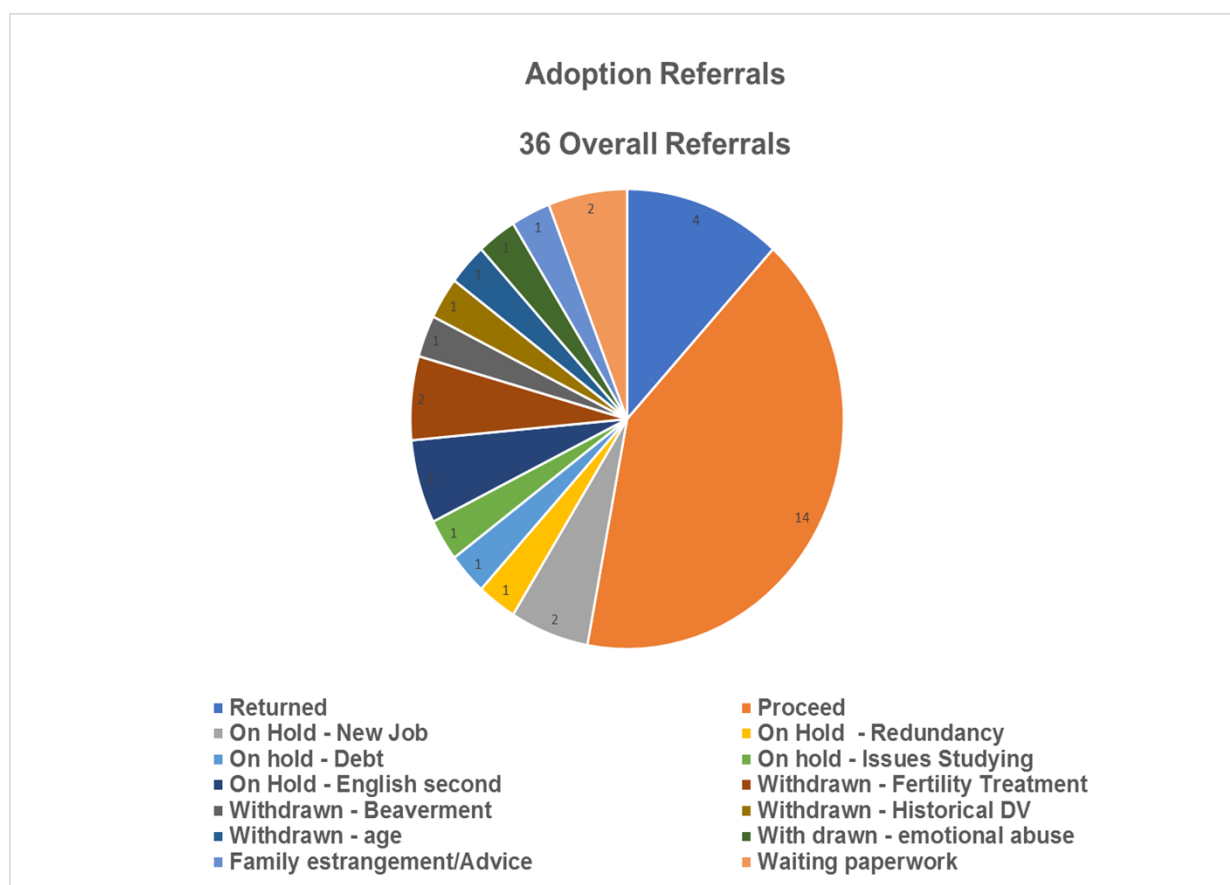
14 referrals, which equates to 38 percent are still progressing through the initial visit, stage one and stage two process. The referrals are at varying stages depending upon when they were referred during the year.

Eight of the referrals which equates to 22 percent were deferred for three or six months for a variety of reasons; including four who had or were about to start a new job and did not want employee reference checks undertaken as they had not informed their employer of their plan to adopt, additionally there were issues with debt and redundancy. Two applicants have English as their second language and were advised to seek opportunities to improve their English, so they could advocate on behalf of a child when required; one had limited childcare experience so was advised to seek experience with working with children and a final applicant was completing nursing training and deferred until completion of her studies.

All cases who do not immediately progress to stage one are allocated to the Recruitment and Assessment Social Work Unit Manager to monitor, and letters are sent asking the applicants to respond if they are able to proceed.

Eight applicants withdrew in between the information event and initial visit or following an initial visit equating to 22 percent for a variety of reasons.

The table below outlines the progress of referrals.



8. Former Foster Carers

During April 2017-2018 the process for approving finance for former foster carers was amended. The central principle is that financial support can be payable in accordance with the regulations to help secure a suitable Adoption, Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Order where such an arrangement cannot be readily made because of a financial obstacle. The process includes foster carers completing a Financial Support application form and providing evidence such as wage slips and P60 and is calculated by Welfare Rights Officers.

Former foster carers who adopt are eligible for transitional support. The transitional arrangement is the payment of the core fostering allowance for two years plus the means tested child's allowance.

We have had six foster carers during April 2017-2018 express an interest to adopt. The service will now consider the option of foster carers adopting via the notified route at court rather than assessing foster carers as prospective adopters. This is an alternative legal pathway to adoption which is considered where appropriate. There has been one foster carer to date who has applied to adopt via this route.

When Ofsted inspected the City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team in February 2017 the one recommendation was to secure children's permanence in a timely manner once children are placed in adoptive placements. Former foster carers can make an application for an adoption order application 10 days after the link at adoption panel and approved by the Agency Decision Maker.

As outlined the Government developed a fast-track process for some previous adopters and approved foster carers. In 2016-2017 there were eight foster carers who were assessed in this way, however during 2017-2018 there was one former foster carer who was assessed in the fast track process.

The Adoption Leadership Board identifies that nationally, adopter approvals timeliness is improving, however it highlights that adopter approvals have decreased over the last two years. There is a recognised shortfall now between the numbers of children for whom adoption is the plan and the numbers of available adopters. The national Adoption Leadership Board is considering ways of addressing this short fall.

Wolverhampton's recent experience of recruitment of suitable adopters is in line with the national picture, while there has been an increase in the overall number of enquiries, this has not converted into adopter approvals.

9. Early Permanence

Early Permanency Placements were an initiative subject to the Children and Families Act (2014).

Early permanence is an umbrella term which includes both Fostering for Adoption and Concurrent Planning placements. Both schemes enable a child in care to be placed with foster carers who are ready and willing to adopt them later if the courts decide they cannot live with their birth family. It is intended to speed up a child's journey through care and minimise the disruption of repeated moves to different families. This aims to enable children to experience a loving and secure home in which they feel safe and settled as quickly as possible. It is the adopters who hold the risk if the placement is not permanent. Early permanence placements can limit delay and secure good outcomes for children whether they are rehabilitated home, or they are adopted.

Wolverhampton remains ambitious about utilising early permanence placements, as outlined above they minimise the disruption of a further placement move and speed up permanency for children. Wolverhampton has made three early permanence placements via Foster for Adoption (FFA)/ or concurrency placements during April 2017-2018, this did not meet our sufficiency strategy of five placements for the year this is due to a low number of adopters willing to consider this option.

380 children (one percent) nationally were placed with a carer who is also an approved adopter (fostering for adoption), or where they were subject to concurrent planning.

In 2011 the first ever longitudinal study of families by Coram found that all children placed in concurrent planning were still in placement with no disruptions. In a sample of 57 children placed under concurrent planning, they found that:

- Parents remained deeply committed to their children and spoke of the love and joy their children had brought whatever the issues they had faced.
- Despite earliest placement (almost all under 6 months and many placed from hospital), one third of children still needed significant support as they grew up,

demonstrating the lasting impact of early adversity (Coram 2017-2018).

The study demonstrates that early adversity can have a life-long impact even when a child is placed in an early placement and the study outlined the dedication and stickability of adopters when experiencing challenges that all placements remain intact.

10. Permanency via Adoption

When children are placed in the care of the local authority it is imperative that they are placed in safe, permanent homes as quickly as possible. In most circumstances, children can be reunited with their families, but in some cases, children find homes with relatives or adoptive families.

To pursue permanence in a timely manner, permanence planning is embedded in practice and provides oversight and scrutiny in care planning options for children. There are a range of activities that support the policy; the Senior Social Work Manager for Adoption attends a weekly admission to care panel, this enables cases to be tracked and allocated as 'early alerts'. Family finders regularly attend permanency planning meetings that are coordinated where there is a potential care plan of adoption for a child. Monthly family finding meetings enable children's plans for adoption to be discussed and early inhouse matches proposed.

11. Family Finding

A Family Support Worker (FSW) assists in progressing family finding actions taking photographs, filming DVD's and completing a child's profile. Where we are unable to match children with Wolverhampton or ABC adopters or local VAA's the FSW refers the children to Adoption Match (Adoption Register) and Adoption Link (Link Maker) two web-based family finding services that approved adopters can view once a Placement Order is granted.

We continue to utilise five free places in Children Who Wait magazine published by Adoption UK for hard to place children, however this medium failed to produce any links during 2017-2018.

Wolverhampton Adoption Team attended five exchange events, two in London, one in Manchester and two with ABC/Adoption Focus (AF) consortium where we featured the profiles of children who are harder to place; over the age of three, sibling's groups and children of Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME). There was one link made at ABC/AF exchange event of a BAME child who was under 12 months old.

During 2017-2018 Wolverhampton attended three activity days held across the region where we took five children, three children aged five and older, one sibling group and one baby with health issues, two links were made using this medium.

Wolverhampton continues to be creative in family finding activity; permission was granted by senior leaders to work collaboratively with Ricochet production company working in partnership with Channel 4 who filmed a series of adoption activity events. Wolverhampton secured parental permission to feature two harder to place, older

children. There was one successful match and viewers witnessed the emerging relationship during the programme. Additionally, discussions took place between a social worker and adopters attending the event regarding a child that was not featured. The link was presented to the Adoption panel in February 2018.

There was positive social media coverage following the programme with lots of young people expressing a wish to adopt in the future. Although there may have been limited links made during the making of the programme it may leave a legacy with people considering adopting harder to place children in the future.

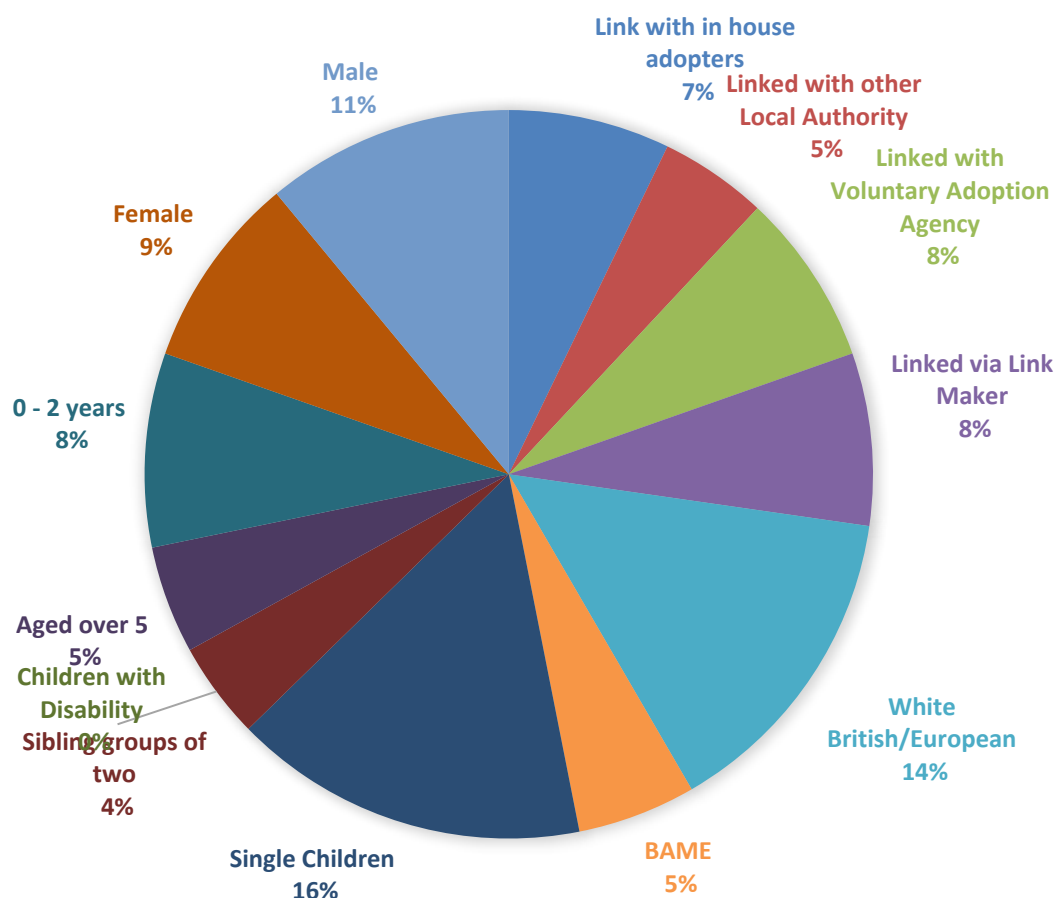
Ricochet Producers and Shelagh Beckett, Child Consultant were complimentary about working in partnership with Wolverhampton Adoption team and we were thrilled to be able to take part and raise the profile of adoption generally.

Prior to a family being identified, Family Support Workers (FSW's) begin 'moving on work' with older children, the work is child centred and individualised.

Wolverhampton linked 41 children for adoption during 2017-2018:

Linked with in house adopters	15
Linked with other Local Authority	10
Linked with Voluntary Adoption Agency	16
Linked via Link Maker	16
White British/ European	30
BAME	11
Single children	33
Sibling groups of two	9
Children with Disability	0
Aged over 5	10
0-2	18
Female	18
Male	23

ADOPTION MATCHING 2017/18



12. Adoption Scorecard

In 2017 the numbers of looked after children in England continued to increase. After small rises of 1% each year between 2014 and 2016, the rise in 2016 was 3%. At 31 March 2017 there were 72,670 looked after children in England, an increase of 2,220 on 2016, and an increase of 4,600 on 2013.

The number of looked after children ceasing to be looked after due to adoption increased between 2011 and 2015 from 3,100 to a peak of 5,360. In 2017 the number of looked after children adopted fell by 8% to 4,350.

Adoption Scorecards have been published by the Department for Education on an annual basis since 2012. They measure Local Authorities performance against two key indicators.

The **A1** indicator measures the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family for children who have been adopted. A low number of days represents a good performance.

The **A2** indicator measures the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family. A low number of days represents a good performance.

In 2014 a new indicator was introduced; **A10**. This measures the average time between a child entering care and being placed with their prospective adopters adjusted for foster carer adoptions (where times for children who are adopted by their foster carers are stopped at the date children were placed with their foster carers).

Wolverhampton's A1 Indicator equates to 624 days (this is a further year on year decrease of 48 days from 2013-2016) against a target of 426 days, against an English year average of 520. The three-year trend sees an improvement from 2013-2016 to 2014-2017 and the one-year trend sees an improvement from 2016 to 2017.

Furthermore, when the A1 timeliness is adjusted where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days) (2014-2017) it reduces to 504 days, as opposed to 435 English average.

Wolverhampton's A2 indicator is 225 days (a further year on year decrease of 18 days from 2013-2016) against a target of 121 days and an English average of 220. The three-year trend shows an improvement from 2013-2016 to 2014-2017 which was shorter than 2013-2016 and the one-year trend improvement from 2016 to 2017 was shorter than in 2016-2017.

Despite a significant improvement in performance year on year, Wolverhampton's adoption scorecard for 2014-2017 continues to be rated 'double red' for A1 and A2 indicators.

No local authority in England has met the over ambitious government 426-day target, therefore Wolverhampton is not an outlier in this area. The Adoption Leadership Board alongside CoramBAAF are canvassing central government and the Department for Education (DfE) regarding the 426-day target.

The average duration between entry into care and being adopted has continued to fall. It decreased by six months between 2013 and 2017, from a total duration of two years and six months in 2013 to two years and three months in 2015 and 2016. In 2017, it decreased further to two years.

Once a child has been matched with adopters, the time to adoption has remained stable. The improvements have been seen in the earlier stages of the process. The average time between entry to care and the decision the child should be adopted has decreased from 11 months in 2013 to 7 months 2017 and the average time between the decision the child should be placed for adoption and the child being matched to adopters has fallen from 10 months in 2013 to eight months in 2017.

There is a drive to eliminate delay in the family courts and to conclude care cases within 26 weeks, the average performance for City of Wolverhampton in the adoption scorecard 2017-2018 was 40 weeks. Taking 11 weeks longer than the national average to complete care proceedings can be expected to add 77 days, on average, to future adoption performance for the A1 indicator. As this indicator is a measure against adoptions completed in the last three years, the impact of this

performance will be felt when adoption begins to be achieved for some of these children and for the next three years as the adoption scorecard is a three-year average.

The City of Wolverhampton Council Adoption Team has always been ambitious about adoption. The use of a three-year average for the scorecard indicator presents a challenge for the authority, and Wolverhampton constantly balances the need for swift placement with not giving up on finding families for older children, and children with complex needs. There are occasions where timescales have been sacrificed in the interest of placing older children, sibling groups and children with complex needs.

Black children and children of mixed ethnicity appear to be slightly over-represented in the looked after children population. Children of Asian ethnicity are slightly under represented. In Wolverhampton 2014-2017, 40 children or 16 percent of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children leaving care were adopted compared to an England average of just 8 percent.

Wolverhampton continues to pursue adoption for children aged five years and older. In 2014-2017, 40 or 9 percent were adopted compared to an England average of 5 percent.

A yearly conversation with Ofsted explores the adoption scorecard and they recognise Wolverhampton's ambition and note the year on year improvement.

13. Interagency Placements

Five interagency placements were made with City of Wolverhampton adopters which included a sibling group of two children and three single children; resulting in £88,000 interagency fee being recouped. All five placements had links with children from the ABC consortium.

14. Disruption of Adoptive Placements

There has been one adoption disruption in 2017-2018 involving an older child. In 2014 Julia Selwyn undertook research called Beyond the Adoption Order and identified factors that are often associated with disruptions. These include child related factors such as older age at placement, child maltreatment and domestic violence, and system related factors such as delay, a number of these factors are featured in the child's history. A Disruption meeting has been held and learning identified and will be shared at joint Adoption panel training in September 2018.

15. Adoption Order

There were 40 adoption orders granted in 2017-2018. There were 163 adoptions in 2013-2016 compared to 160 (24%) 2014-2017 which shows a steady performance. The reduction in adoption orders this year is in part due to an increased number of birth parents contesting the adoption order which results in extending court timescales causing a number of adoption orders to be granted post March 2018.

The characteristics are set out below:

Single children	26
Sibling groups of two	7
Early permanence placements	3
Foster carers adopting	4
BAME	12
Aged over 5	14
0-2	14
Female	10
Male	30

Of the 40 adoption orders granted 22 passed the A1 indicator of 426 days and 26 passed the English average of 520 days.

In relation to the 40 children, 23 passed the A2 indicator of 121 and 33 passed the English average of 220.

16. Outliers

As outlined in the report there are a number of children who are deemed as hard to place due to their age, ethnicity, and health issues, for example. These children therefore do not always follow the pattern of those children that are deemed as easier to place and are successfully linked within A1 and A2 indicator timescales, they can be referred in statistical data as outliers. An outlier can be defined as a piece of data or observation that deviates drastically from the given norm or average of the data set. An outlier can cause serious problems in statistical analyses.

When considering the 2014-2017 adoption scorecard there are 33 children with 23 boys and 10 girls who we have identified as outliers for statistical purposes with A1 indicators over 900 days. They include two sibling groups of three, and nine sibling groups of two.

There are limited numbers of adopters willing and able to consider a sibling group of three, this can be exacerbated if they are an all-male sibling group of three as adopters invariably prefer a mixed gender group. A sibling group of three boys went on to be adopted by their foster carer after extensive family finding was unsuccessful. The A1 indicator was 1258 days and the A2 indicator was 952 days which was adjusted to zero when the foster carer adopted them.

A second sibling group of three had extensive family finding without success, the plan was to rescind the Placement Order however while completing paperwork a decision was made to remove the children from their foster placement due to safeguarding concerns and a subsequent sibling assessment recommended the youngest child was placed singularly. The sibling group of two and the remaining child were linked, and both sets of adopters applied for Adoption Orders and the Adoption Orders were granted the same day. The A1 indicator was 1355 days and the A2 indicator was 951 days. The adoptive placements are progressing well.

There are 16 children out of 23 aged five and over as part of a sibling group which equates to 69 percent. One sibling group A1 indicator is 1131 days and A2 indicator is 684 days; the adopters separated prior to the granting of the adoption order, a

further assessment was undertaken prior to the children being adopted which impacted on the A1 indicator.

Eight adoptive families took an average of two years to apply for the Adoption Order with all the placements requiring extensive therapeutic adoption support. For example, a male child aged over five years was adopted with a younger female sibling, their A1 indicator was 922 days and the A2 indicator was 475 days. There was considerable challenge to the adoptive placement and adoption support has been provided since the placement and continues following the granting of the adoption order.

There are 10 single children with nine boys and one girl. The characteristics includes a child aged two; a child of mixed White British and African Caribbean ethnicity who had a query re diagnosis of foetal alcohol, a three-year-old Black Caribbean female and two four-year-old White boys. The remaining six children were all over five years old.

Some examples as follows:

Child A White male four-year-old	A1 indicator 1681 days placed at home on a care order before returning to the care of the LA and being adopted.	A2 indicator 83 days placed internally
Child B Black female aged three	A1 indicator 1294 days	A2 indicator 160 days
Child C White male five-year-old	A1 indicator 1315 days Placed at home on a care order before returning to the care of the LA and being adopted.	A2 indicator 83 days
Child D Mixed ethnicity AC WB Aged six years old	A1 indicator 2255 days	A2 indicator 1612 days Extensive family finding was undertaken. He was featured during National Adoption Week in a newspaper publication. Prospective adopters were being assessed and had to withdraw due to family issues. Family finding recommenced.
Child E White British and African Caribbean ethnicity	A1 indicator 905 days	A2 indicator 641 days

		query re Foetal Alcohol which impacted family finding
Child F White male child four years old	A1 indicator 1335 days	A2 indicator 950 days Child Adolescent Mental Health Service recommended the child should not be adopted due to having experienced a number of placement moves and the relationship with the final foster carer, the child successfully transitioned after preparation work and the placement remains in tact

There are numerous reasons why pursuing permanency via adoption may be delayed the improvement in securing Placement Orders in a timely manner assists in improvement in the adoption scorecard works continues in improving in this area.

17.Children Awaiting Placement/Placement Orders at 31 March 2018

There were 23 children with placement orders at 31 March 2018 with one child in an early permanence placement, six awaiting rescinding of the placement order, six active matches, two awaiting conclusions following an expression of interest by their foster carers and seven children awaiting links which consists of three sibling groups, males aged six and five, males aged five and three and females aged five and four and one single male child aged eight years old.

18.Additional Functions of the Adoption Team

In addition to the functions outlined above, the Adoption Team continue to offer services;

- Support for birth family members - pre- adoption
- Notified adoption service, for e.g. step parents
- Inter-country adoption service
- Voluntary relinquishments

19. Adoption support services

Adoptive families, adopted adults or birth relatives can ask for an assessment of need at any time after the adoption.

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) was established by the Government in May 2015 as they became aware that access to therapeutic support following adoption was required. In January 2016, the government announced that the Adoption Support Fund could be used to provide therapeutic support for children from the point at which they are placed with their adoptive families and not just post order.

Children who require specialist assessments are now eligible for a separate amount up to £2,500. The level of demand for the ASF has been far higher than anticipated and so to address this the Department for Education introduced a fair access limit of £5,000 per child. Over 80 percent of applications to the fund fall within this limit. Since May 2015, the average spend per child has been around £3,500 for City of Wolverhampton ASF applications. Where a child has an exceptional need for therapeutic support over £5,000 and up to £30,000, funding is still possible on a 'match funding' arrangement with the relevant local authority to ensure families receive the support, in 2017-2018 Wolverhampton match funded £800.00. Amounts over £500 are approved by City of Wolverhampton Resource Allocation Panel.

The City of Wolverhampton Adoption Support Service has undertaken 26 post approvals Assessment of Need assessments during 2017-2018. We also undertake three-six monthly reviews and a final 12-month adoption support review. If the review assessment of need identifies further adoption support needs an additional ASF application can be made to ensure continuity of therapy. During this year the Adoption team has made 43 successful applications to the adoption support fund. The total approved funding is £127,000.

Additionally, we provide pre-adoption support and have supported 15 family's pre-adoption orders with adoption support therapy. Early adoption support assists adopters at the beginning of the placement when children may be grieving the loss of significant others and stabilises placements.

Therapy services have included filial therapy, Circle of Security therapeutic parenting course; therapeutic life story work and psychotherapy. Reviews are undertaken to identify family satisfaction and clinical outcomes. Adoption support social workers supported more than 70 children during 2017-2018.

The Adoption Team continue to offer a therapeutic parenting programme based on the Circle of Security model which runs for eight weeks and was attended by five adoptive parents and was very successful in extending their understanding regarding impact of abuse while developing greater awareness about attachment and barriers to implementing therapeutic parenting. The feedback from adopters was impressive, and all scored it highly. They welcomed the opportunity to share difficulties with other adopters in similar situations and they commented on how it not only assists in understanding their child but challenges their parenting. They would recommend it to other parents and one parent stated; 'it is not just helping. Lots of support to you [parent]'. The City of Wolverhampton Adoption service continues to run a monthly

adoption support group where adopters can share highlights and challenges of parenting in a safe reflective environment.

20. Post adoption contact

The post adoption contact (PAC) coordinator manages more than 400 post adoption contacts. Post adoption contact assists children in understanding their history and along with the life story book helps children to make sense of what happened in the past and to help them remember important people who were involved earlier in their lives. The following activity has been undertaken during this reporting period:

354 General reminder letters sent out to adopters

296 adopters responded with letters to birth family

442 contacts to birth family (multiple contacts) Re: Collection or to confirm address

Receipt of 125 birth parents' responses

Currently the service has 10 active direct contact arrangements including contact with birth parents and siblings

The PAC coordinator offers to support birth parents respond to post adoption contact with 12 birth parents accessing support

Six adopters were informed of a bereavement of birth family and three letters sent to the child to explain (child friendly) bereavement

Liaising with local authorities when adoptive placements have broken down and birth parents are requesting PACs

Liaising with local authorities when a sibling is adopted in another area.

21. Post Approval Training

ABC provide post approval training; this year training has included Education Issues for Adopted Children; The Impact of Childhood Trauma and Readiness for Learning. Talking about Adoption: Therapeutic Life Story Work. Sensory Integration: which included defining Sensory Integration and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) and exploring therapies which help children cope with SPD, Child to Parent Violence; for adoptive families struggling with violence in the home.

Each agency has five places. We always have more adopters interested in attending, and we utilise any spaces not taken up by other agencies. The feedback is generally very positive, and adopters talk about the benefit of learning new information with other adoptive parents as they are able to share challenges in a safe and supportive environment.

22. Commissioned Adoption Support Services

Additional adoption support services are commissioned from Adoption UK/PAC. Adoption UK run local support groups on a bi-monthly basis, the meetings schedule

speakers and presentations and a time to socialise. Adopters are also able to access Adoption UK training workshops and a lending library.

ABC has a Service Level Agreement with an Independent Adoption Agency (After Adoption) to provide an independent support service to birth relatives whose child is being placed for adoption or who has been adopted and to provide birth record counselling.

The service received 20 new referrals during April 2017 and March 2018 and dealt with 40 carried over cases which have subsequently been closed.

Service User Type	Allocations
Adopted person	8
Adopter	0
Adoptive family <18	1
Birth father (historical intermediary service)	0
Birth mother (historical intermediary service Current	7 2
Birth siblings historical intermediary service	3
Current birth father	0
birth mother – birth ties	3
Birth relative (current) birth ties	1
total	25

After Adoption continue to run 'Breaking the Cycle' (BtC). BtC provides intensive one-to-one and group support to birth mothers in the Black Country (Wolverhampton, Sandwell, Walsall, and Dudley) who have lost at least one child to adoption. Birth mothers receive an initial assessment. Following this there are six group work sessions focusing on change, concentrating on building self-esteem whilst supporting positive life choices to break repetitive cycles. For women who want to have future children there are further sessions on nurturing parenting. At the end of the programme birth mothers can continue to attend support groups with other women who have completed the programme. This year they have worked with three service users from Wolverhampton.

23. Adoption and Permanency Panel

City of Wolverhampton Council Adoption & Permanence Panel considers approvals of prospective adopters, Family and Friends carers and match /link of adoptive and long term fostering placements. This is working within the terms of Wolverhampton Permanence Policy. It will also consider Family and Friends fostering arrangements.

The Adoption & Permanence Panel complies with 2002 Children's Act, Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013; Fostering Regulations 2011; Care Planning, Placement & Case Review (England)(Miscellaneous)regulations 2013 and guidance relevant to both adoption and fostering. Panel members from the Central list with both adoption and fostering experience makes up the permanence panel.

During this financial year a decision was made to remove one Adoption and Permanence panel to use peoples time more effectively. However, this has had no impact on panels ability to deal with all the matters that have been presented.

24. Panel membership

The Panel continues to function well supported by its committed members and support staff. We currently have 21 panel members on the Central list who can sit on both the Adoption and the Fostering panels. There are two panel Chairs and four Vice Chairs. There is a further need to increase the number of men on the panel and other people who are representative of the community we serve. The increase in the Central list offers the opportunity to have a panel which reflects a lot of skill and knowledge and experience both from a professional perspective and that of adopters and foster carers.

25. Panel Training

In October 2017, a number of panel members attended the West Midlands panel members conference. Amongst the presentations was one from an adoptive parent who spoke of her battle to get her son correctly diagnosed with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). The afternoon session included a very informative presentation about FASD and for many members this reinforced the importance of having accurate information about Birth Mother's alcohol consumption during pregnancy in order that adopters can be given as much information as possible.

Panel members attended their second Away Day 29 January 2018. The feedback obtained was very positive. The presentation on FASD from the Panel Members Conference was adapted and shared with attendees. The day covered the following subject matters:

- Developmental feedback from the Regional Adoption Agencies programme
- The Challenges of Family Finding in Adoption
- Feedback from the Adoption Panel Members Conference – FASD
- The work of Panel Administrators
- The Agency Decision Maker and the relationships with panels
- Mock Panels – What do we look for in Children's Permanence Reports and Assessment reports for Adopters and Foster Carers
- Legal Update

Other training undertaken by the Panel members include:

- Achieving Early Permanence.
- Mandatory training.

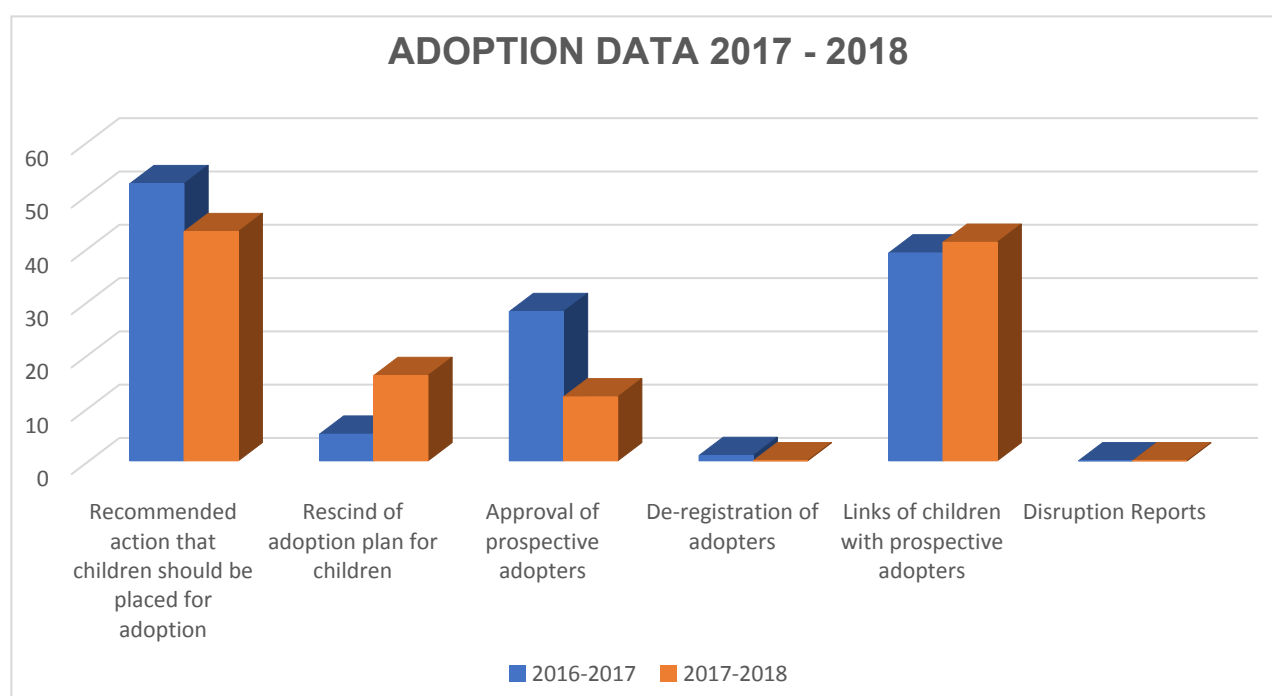
26. Panel Business

Panel met on 24 occasions during 2017-2018, with at least two opportunities a month for adoption matters to be heard. There is great flexibility within the panel system to

enable 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.

Children requiring a “Should Be Placed for Adoption Decision” continue to make a steady presence in the adoption arena. The Agency Decision Maker sits twice a month but is also able make emergency decisions as necessary and when required. Due to the increase in the demands for decisions the Director of Children’s Services, Emma Bennett who is the main Decision Maker; shares the responsibility with Dawn Williams, Head of Safeguarding.

The table below depicts the panel business for the year, with the previous years detailed in the graph for comparison.



There have been 2 business meetings during this period where members received the annual report, had an update on the RAA and discussed the quality of paperwork presented to panel and the weight to be given to a child’s religion particularly where parents’ have expressed a wish that their child be placed with a family who follow a specific faith.

27. Adopter approval

There have been 12 approvals of prospective adopters so far in this reporting period. This is considerably less than the previous year. Of this number, there was one concurrent carer, 1 connected person’s carer and one foster carer who adopted the children in their care.

There are currently 15 families waiting to be matched. Of those families two are foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care.

There is one Asian and one Lithuanian family currently waiting. One of the families are waiting to adopt a specific child from overseas.

28.Children’s decisions

There has been a slight decrease in the number of children for whom Wolverhampton is pursuing a plan of adoption.

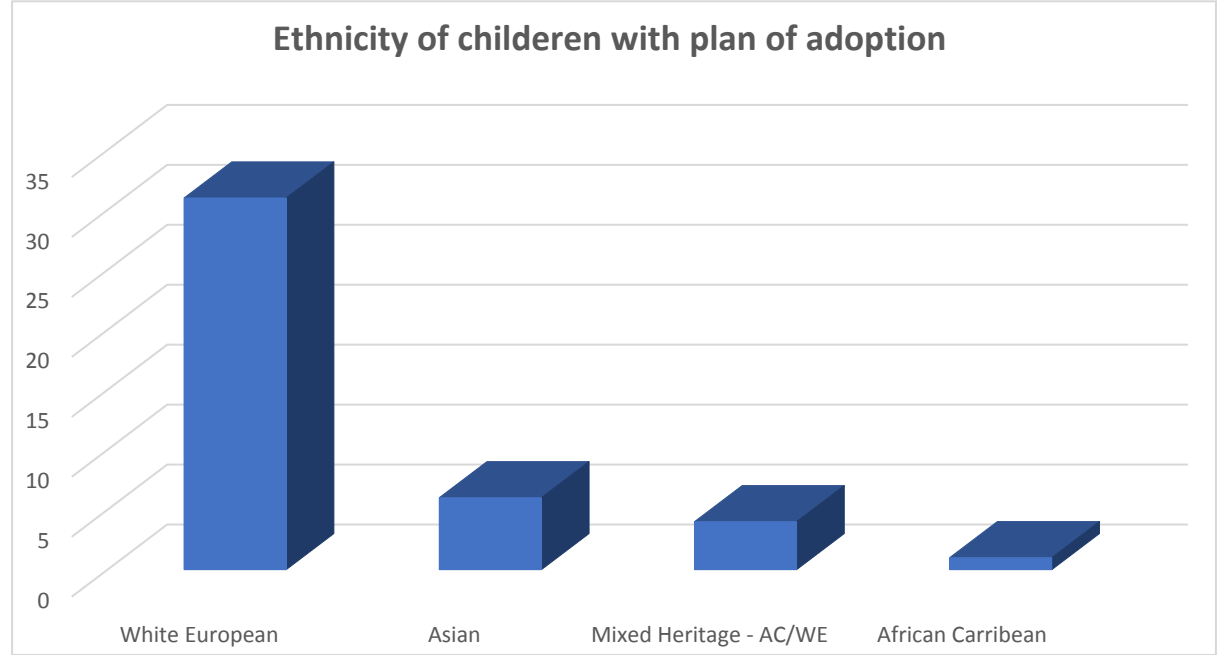
43 Children had Should Be Placed for Adoption decisions made:

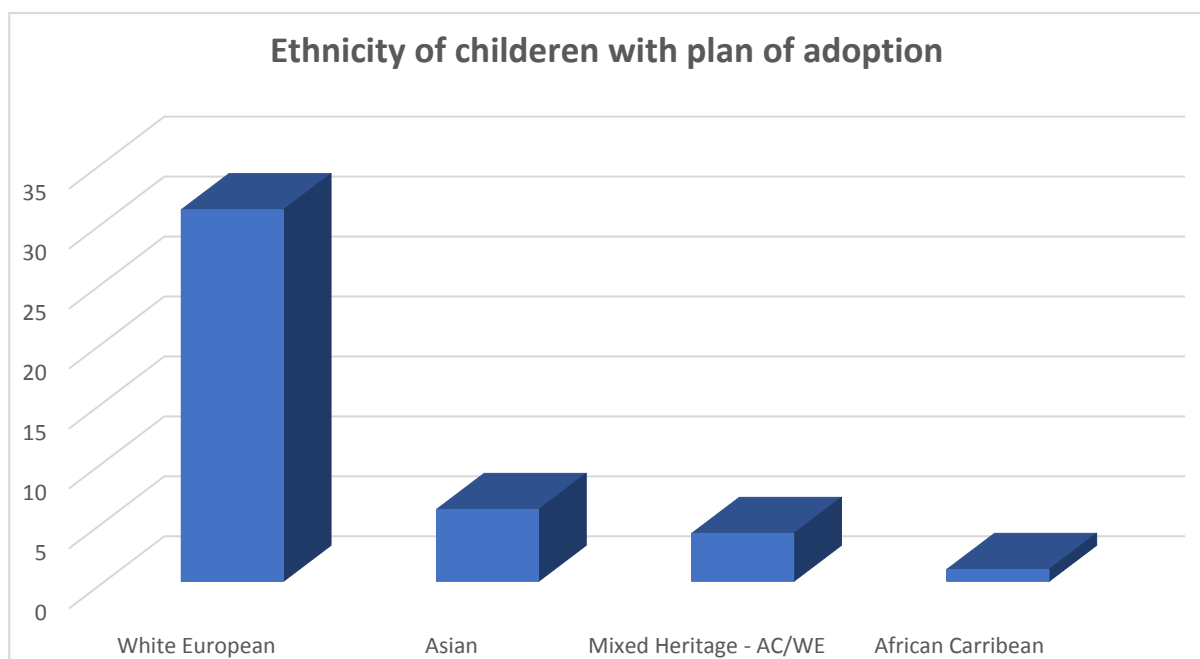
27 were in zero-two age range.

13 were in three – five age range

Two were six + age range

The table below gives a breakdown of the ethnicity of children with a plan of adoption for this reporting year. I am unable to give a comparative figure for 2017-2018.





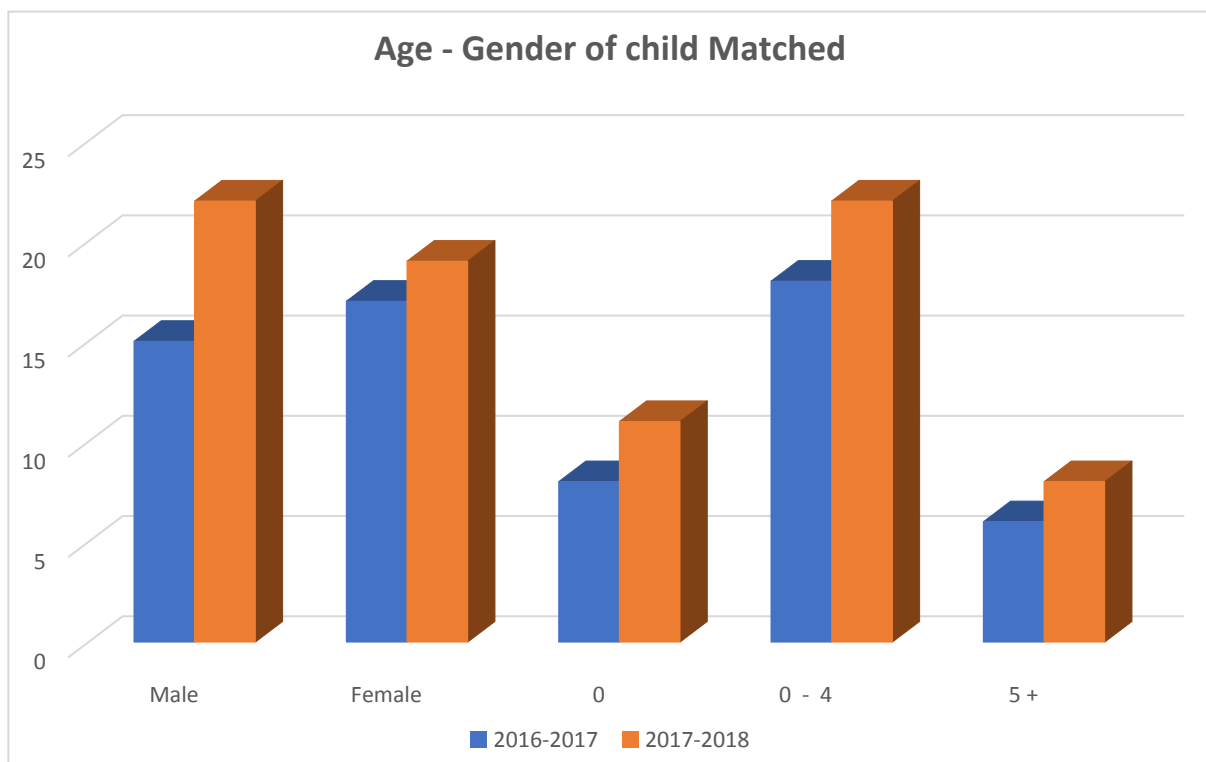
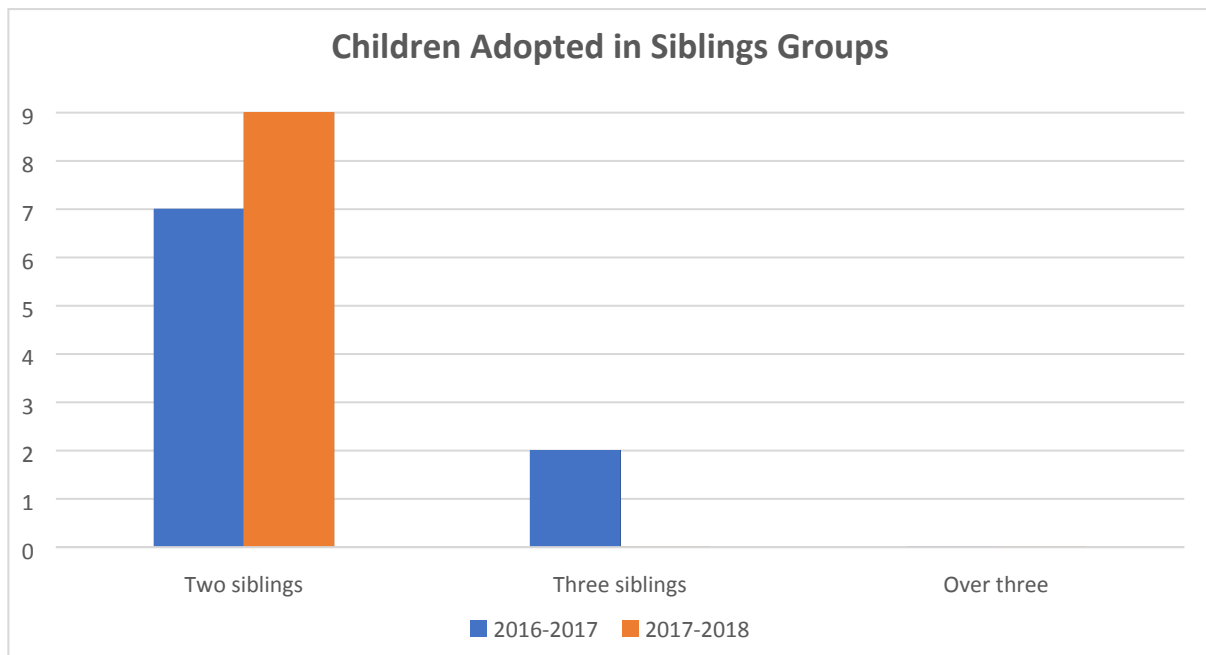
29. Rescinds

There have been 16 plans of adoption for this period rescinded. Six children have been placed with their birth families, under Placement with Parents Regulations. Five children had their plans rescinded in favour of long-term fostering arrangements. It is anticipated that the remaining children in this group will either return home or have a plan for long term fostering. This cohort is made up of older children, many of whom are to be placed as a sibling group, some with complex health needs. For all children who had become subject to placement order significant family finding had taken place prior to considering a change of plan. For most of those children a change of plan to permanent fostering enabled children to be permanently fostered with their current carers.

30. Matches of children with prospective adopters

During this reporting period April 2017 to March 2018. 41 children were matched with prospective adopters.

There has been great effort to keep sibling groups together. The placement of sibling groups is not without its challenges. However, we have managed to place nine sibling groups of two, with a slight decrease in the larger sibling groups in the last year.



31. Adoption Panel aims for the forthcoming year:

- To continue to work in partnership with other members of the RAA to affect the programme of assimilation/integration with our partners at Heart of England.
- To increase the number of social workers who can sit on the panel
- To continue with twice monthly panels until the RAA is established.

Issues preventing panels from achieving its overall objects

- Quality of many of the reports,
- Lateness of paperwork
- Availability of documents to panel members.
- iPad issues.

The electronic system has some advantages but for some applicants attending panel it is disconcerting when panel members are looking at iPads and laptops and not making eye contact. To minimise this, it is suggested that when applicants are in the room use of iPad/laptops should be avoided unless there is a requirement to check information in a document.

32. Complaints/compliments

Wolverhampton Adoption Team received nine complaints, plus five informal complaints that were dealt with at a service level.

Wolverhampton Adoption Team received 27 compliments during 2017-2018. Adopters complimented on the range of services provided.

33. Strategic issues and future service development

- To actively support the development of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). Regionalising the service is consistent with the Government agenda and will widen the pool of adopters for Wolverhampton's looked after children and will enable us to provide a regional adoption support service which will continue to be accessible and responsive to the needs of adopters.
- Increase the recruitment of adopters who can consider offering Early Permanence Placements to children either through concurrency or foster to adopt.
- Improve recruitment of adopters willing to adopt children deemed harder to place; including older children, children with disabilities and Black and minority ethnic children and boys.
- Fully utilise the adoption support fund to support families.
- Embed the culture of participation, ensuring feedback from service users is captured, analysed and used to inform service improvement