

**CITY OF  
WOLVERHAMPTON  
C O U N C I L**

**ANNUAL ADOPTION AGENCY REPORT  
APRIL 2015 – March 2016**

**AUTHOR: SHIRLEY GOUNDER – SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER  
MANAGER (INTERIM FOSTERING & ADOPTION)**

## **Introduction**

This report details the work of City of Wolverhampton Council Adoption Service in the year April 2015 to March 2016.

The report also aims to give updated information in relation to adoption both nationally and locally. It includes legislative and practice changes, and how these have impacted on those affected by adoption in Wolverhampton.

## **Legislation**

There have been some significant changes to regulations under the Adoption Reform Agenda and the Children and Families Act 2014 – this Act received Royal Assent in March 2014.

The key areas addressed in this legislation were

1. Contact between prescribed persons and adopted person's relatives.
  - a. This provision allows for relatives of adoptees to access the adoption records of a deceased relative and undertake a search for birth relatives. The adoption team have thus far received one request of this nature from the daughter of an adoptee.
2. Placement of looked after children with prospective adopters.
  - a. This places a duty on the local authority to consider placing a child with foster to adopt carers in cases where the child's plan is likely to become one of permanence.

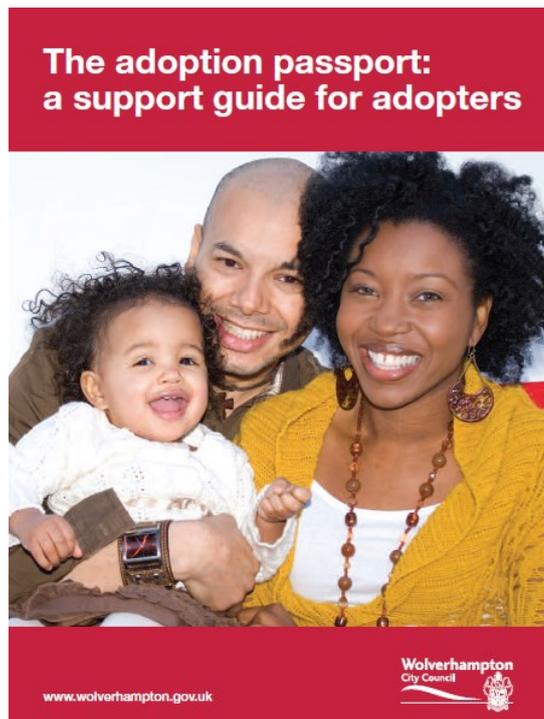
Workshops have been delivered to Social Work Unit Managers explaining this duty in the context of permanency planning. In 2014/2015 two concurrent placements were made. From this the adoption team have gained experience around supporting concurrent/foster to adopt carers through the uncertainties of the court process successfully.

3. Repeal of requirement to give due consideration to ethnicity: England.
4. Recruitment, assessment and approval of prospective adopters.
  - a. This allows the Secretary of State to direct local authorities to make arrangements for the recruitment, assessment and approval of prospective adopters to be carried out on their behalf by one or more adoption agencies.
5. Adoption support services: personal budgets.
  - a. Where adoption support services are agreed the local authority must make provision for the payment of personal budgets if asked to do so by the recipient of the services. Wolverhampton has not yet received any requests for personal budgets.

6. Adoption support services: duty to provide information.

- a. This places a duty to provide information about adoption support services to any family who has or is interested in adopting a child.

Wolverhampton continues to use its unique adoption passport that contains all required information and is given to prospective adopters on all initial visits.



7. The Adoption and Children Act Register.

- a. This made the provision for approved prospective adopters to be able to search the adoption register themselves in order to identify possible matches.

The National Adoption Register does not yet have the functionality to allow adopters to search. This is still in development.

8. Contact: post-adoption.

- a. This strengthened the rights of birth relative, adoptees, adopters and other significant individual's to obtain a contact order from the courts after an adoption order has been made.

The adoption team is not aware of any applications being made to the court for a contact order in respect of children who were placed by Wolverhampton Local Authority

A further piece of legislation is currently proposed within the Education and Adoption Bill 2015. This would enact powers, for the Secretary of

State to direct one or more local authorities in England to make arrangements for all or some of their functions to be carried out by one of those local authorities, or through one or more other adoption agencies.

## **Case Law**

In 2014 a judgement was passed by Mr Justice Munby (President of the Family Division of the High Court of England and Wales) that significantly changed the adoption landscape across the country. Re B (June 2013) and B-S (Sept 2013) challenged the robust nature of adoption plans and decision making both in relation to social work reports and court judgments. As a direct result local authorities began to see the numbers of placement order being granted decreases and by November 2014 it was reported that nationally placement orders had decreased by 54%.

Mr Justice Munby has since has emphasised in other court judgements Re CW (Nov 2014) and Re R (Dec 2014) the importance of adoption. Mr Justice Munby stated that "Where adoption is in the child's best interests, local authorities must not shy away from seeking, nor courts from making, care orders with a plan for adoption, placement orders and adoption orders.

## **Adoption Reform Agenda**

The adoption reform agenda has been on-going since the latter part of 2011 and as well as introducing new legislation two papers have been released.

An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay, March 2012

Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes, January 2013

The Adoption Leadership Board was launched in April 2014

The Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) is a new national board with a remit to drive significant improvements in the performance of the adoption system in England. It has a particular 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; and
- Adoptions do not break down through the right adoption support being readily available to all people who need it. (ALB Core brief 2014)

The ALB was chaired by Sir Martin Narey. Its members include senior figures from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the Local Government Association, the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption

Agencies, University of Bristol – Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies and Adoption UK.

Following this Regional Adoption Leadership Boards were launched. More about the regional adoption leadership board's role is outlined later in this report.

### **Regionalising Adoption, June 2015**

The latter is the most recent and outlines the Government's agenda to reduce the number of adoption agencies across England. It is argued that fewer adoption agencies would achieve more economies of scale and would allow quicker matching for children. It is anticipated that local authorities will have a wider pool of adopters who could potentially meet the needs of a child for whom they were considering adoption.

Wolverhampton is currently talking with the other agencies that make up Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus and other Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA's) to discuss how the partnership can be strengthened to meet the requirements of the regionalisation agenda.

### **Regional and local developments**

#### Adoption Leadership Boards

The West Midlands Adoption Leadership Board is chaired by Tony Oakman (Strategic Director People Services at Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council). The board is made up of senior leaders from the 14 local authorities that make up the west Midlands region.

#### Adopt West Mids

Adopt West Mids remains a strong regional consortium, which offers mentors, training, peer learning and development, a database exchange for children and families, and regional recruitment. Adopt West Mids has also facilitated 5 Activity days in conjunction with BAAF during this reporting period.

Adopt West Mids is made up of adoption operational managers, it's role and purpose is however in flux , Adopt West Mids is likely to be viewed and utilised as the delivery arm of the regional ALB.

#### Black Country Consortium (Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption focus) ABC

Wolverhampton continues to be a part of this consortium looking at joint initiatives in adoption. This consortium has continued to work collaboratively over the last twelve months.

ABC has continued to jointly purchase services from both Adoption U.K. and from After Adoption, as detailed below.

The original remit of ABC was to recruit adopters for older children, sibling groups and those of minority ethnic groups. However, although all promotional materials and campaigns still reflect this, enquiries are also accepted from potential adopters who fall outside this category. The enquiries are equally shared throughout the four local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agency.

During the previous reporting period a scoping exercise was commissioned by the ABC. This piece of work was undertaken by Core Assets and BAAF following a tendering process; with a view to considering future development of the ABC Consortium.

The purpose of this partnership was to further increase the pool of adopters available to children in the Black Country. Adoption Focus and ABC now jointly recruit, train and support prospective adopters with a view to increasing Adoption Focus adopter approval. These families will have Black Country children placed with them.

Adoption Focus have recently appointed 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.

As stated above, ABC and Adoption Focus along with other local authorities in the area is currently considering how it might change to meet the requirements of the regionalising adoption agenda.

## **Team structure**

<b>SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER MANAGER</b>
-------------------------------------

<b><u>Family Finding &amp; Adoption Support</u> Social Worker Unit Manager</b>
--

<b>Social Workers x 5</b>
---------------------------

<b>Family Support Worker x 2</b>
----------------------------------

<b><u>Adoption Social Work Team</u> Social Worker Unit Manager</b>
--

**Social Worker x 5**  
**Family Support Worker x 1**

**Recruitment and Assessment**  
**Social Worker Unit Manager**  
**Social Worker x 4**

**Unit Administrators x 2**

**Adoption Panel Advisor x 1**

Adoption Panel members include an independent chairperson, independent vice chair, medical advisor, 3 independent members one independent social work, an adopter, a foster carer and an ex LA/adoptive young person. There are a range of other people who form a central list who sit on the adoption panel.

As part of a wider restructure in June 2014 the adoption team was reconfigured into three units. A recruitment and assessment unit, a family finding and adoption support unit, and a children's unit for children with a plan of adoption. This placed all of the professionals involved in placing children for adoption and supporting those placements within the same team. As a result we have been able to improve efficiency and place children for adoption in shorter timescales. We have also been able to provide adoption specific training to all social workers involved in this process. This has led to a more co-ordinated response to adoption support with all social workers involved working more closely together and sharing the same approach. As a result we have found that adopters have valued the support offered by the service and have been confident to make their adoption applications earlier.

### **Family Finding**

Achieving permanence, via whichever route, for a Wolverhampton child is uppermost in the agency's priorities. To help achieve timeliness early identification of children who are likely to have a plan of adoption commences; by attendance at a weekly admission to care panel which is attended by an adoption manager. Cases are identified as early alerts and a family finder allocated. Family Finders attendance at permanency planning meetings prior to a second LAC review ensures that statutory guidance of the 2002 Act is enacted to ensure that each looked after child has a plan of permanence that is achieved promptly.

The data contained in this report will highlight family finding performance. In 2015/2016 Wolverhampton linked 39 children for adoption, which included six sibling groups; two comprising sibling groups of three, eight children aged five and over and six children of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.

With the government emphasis in improving the timeliness of children to be placed for adoption, this is an area which has been given priority within the team. We hold monthly family finding meetings to monitor and track family finding activity. Within these meetings the adopters likely to be approved within the next eight weeks are discussed. Adopters who are likely to be approved have the opportunity to view profiles of children prior to their approval to seize opportunities for early matching. The introduction of pre-approval adopter profiles has also helped to support family finders gain a sense of the adopters likely to become available for children waiting or coming through.

Additionally six weekly care planning tracking meetings take place to ensure that plans are progressed for children with a plan of adoption. Permanency planning meetings are coordinated with cases where there is a possibility of a care plan of adoption and there is on-going liaison with Child Protection/Children in Need teams to increase the uptake of these in order to improve timeliness.

A Family Support Worker (FSW) assists in progressing family finding actions taking photographs, filming DVD's and completing a profile of a child who could have a plan of adoption. The FSW also follows up potential links from ABC and AF Consortium, Adoption Register and Adoption Link (Link Maker) which is a web based family finding service that approved adopters can view. The advent of Link Maker has resulted in Wolverhampton Adoption Team linking harder to place children. Additionally we have continued to use Children Who Wait magazine publicised by Adoption UK for hard to place children.

Wolverhampton Adoption Team attended five Adoption Register exchange events throughout 2015/2016 in London, Leeds, Manchester and Walsall. An Adoption Exchange Day is an event for approved prospective adopters looking for a child and adoption agencies who are trying to find a family for a child or sibling group. The aim of these days is to try and ensure children don't have to wait unnecessarily for a suitable adoptive family.

Exchange days tend to feature the profiles of children who have been waiting for a lengthy period or who are likely to prove more difficult to find a family for. These events are unlikely to feature single, white children under the age of three years who have no special needs. There were no links made at these events during 2015/2016.

Wolverhampton attended three ABC and AF exchange events held in Birmingham where a single child was linked and interest expressed in an older child with a plan of open adoption.

During 2015/2016 Wolverhampton Adoption team attended three activity days held across the region where we took seven children. Adoption Activity Days allow prospective adopters to meet a range of children who are waiting to be adopted in a prepared, supported, safe and fun environment, they allow adopters to interact with children through activities, such as arts and crafts, sports and games. Adoption Activity Days are an addition to the existing range of family finding and matching practices, and are particularly helpful for children who have to wait much longer for permanence.

Adoption Activity Days are entirely child-centred; predominantly an activity day for children and the most important factor is that the children have a fun and exciting day. Family support workers help prepare the children and their foster carer for the event. Wolverhampton has utilised the events to give prospective adopters who have already expressed an interest in a child or children with more complex needs the opportunity to meet the child or children in question. This has often reassured adopters with regards to their ability to meet the child's needs and a link has been progressed to panel. This year three children; a single child and a sibling group who had a pre-link were successfully matched following an Activity event.

With our partnership with ABC and AF this enables children to be placed locally without the risk of being placed in the local authority in which they were born. There are significant advantages for children and families as adoption support can be delivered locally by teams that know the children and families. To date we have placed seven children in a timely manner with ABC and AF adopters.

Prior to a family being identified our Family Support workers begin working with older children who have a plan of adoption. The work considers the child's relationship with their biological parents, helps them to understand they are not in foster care because they were bad, helps the child understand the difference between foster care and adoption, explore different types of families and takes into consideration the type of family the child wants and seriously considers the child's wishes. The work has proven to be very successful and to date all placements of older children remain intact. The feedback from Independent Reviewing Officer's and external agencies has been very positive with a request by one agency for the programme we devised. During 2015/2016 Family Support Workers worked with 14 single children and four sibling groups.

Adoption Support consultations are undertaken with prospective adopters where children are aged three and over, those that have complex needs and sibling groups. Consultations include exploring a child's past

experiences, consider how they communicate anxiety and distress, and explore the adopters understanding of attachment based parenting. This has also contributed to a significant amount of older children being placed in adoptive placements that remain intact. During 2015/2016 Post Adoption social worker's worked with five single children and three sibling groups totalling 12 children.

In August 2015 the Government made a grant available to local authorities in England for the purposes of reimbursing eligible expenditure under the Adoption Inter-Agency Fee Grant, for hard to place children whose plan is for adoption. Eligibility criteria includes children who have been waiting for 18 months or more since coming into care at the time of placement, who are aged five or over at the time of placement, who are in a sibling group of two or more and placed as siblings at the time of placement, children who are from a BME background and children who are disabled.

Wolverhampton has placed over 50% of children through inter agency placements for a number of years. The fund however, has allowed the City of Wolverhampton Council to continue to make these placements in financially challenging times. During 2015/2016 Wolverhampton has claimed £184,000 for the interagency fee grant. The Government has recently informed local authorities that the grant will continue until October 2016.

During 2015/2016 62 Adoption Orders

### **Functions of the adoption team**

In addition to the functions outlined above, the Adoption Team continue to offer services in all areas of adoption with the main functions being, approval and support of prospective adopters through to adoption orders being granted, notified adoptions, voluntary relinquishments and inter country adoptions and family finding.

### **Adoption scorecard**

The DfE releases the Adoption Scorecard every December. This reviews performance against a range of comparative data used to measure timeliness for children with a plan of adoption over a three year period. The data released each December relates to the year end of the previous 31 March.

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.

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.

These are the two headline indicators used when evaluating the LA's performance in regards to timeliness of adoptions. The data released in December 2015 related to the three year period April 2012 to March 2015. Internally Insight and Performance are able to produce initial figures of what we expect to be released in the scorecard in December from the data submitted in the quarterly ALB returns. Below documents

	2011/14		% of Target	2012/15		% of Target	2013/16 Provisional	Target	% of Target
A1	873	547	159.60%	734	487	150.72%	671	428	156.78%
A2	294	152	193.42%	263	121	217.36%	252	121	208.26%

Wolverhampton's recent performance and predictions for the upcoming Adoption Scorecard release.

Average days for the A1 indicator have decreased year on year significantly however this is against a target which is also declining. It is estimated the average days for 2012-2015 is 671 more than 200 lower than in 2011-2014 however the percentage over target remains similar.

It was detailed in the scorecard analysis that the adoption team were making improvements year on year. It also highlighted some areas of good practice against the other indicators.

In 2014 the A10 indicator was introduced. 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). In 2013-2016 it is predicted Wolverhampton's A10 indicator will be 509 days down from 522 days in 2012-2015.

Wolverhampton remains committed to supporting foster carers to adopt children who have been in their care for a significant amount of time and where this is in the child's best interests.

Average days for the A2 indicator have also decreased although not at the same rate as the A1 indicator. Due to falling targets Wolverhampton are now on average taking twice as long for the A2 indicator than the target.

There were 135 adoptions in 2012-2015 compared to 163 in 2013-2016. This is another large increase that shows that whilst the time taken for a child to be adopted decreases the number of children being adopted have increased.

In Wolverhampton 2012-2015 15% of BME children leaving care were adopted compared to an England average of just 9%.

Over the past three years great efforts have been taken to place children who have been waiting to be adopted for a long time. Wolverhampton constantly balances the need for swift placement with not giving up on finding families for older children and children with complex needs. Last year there were 17 children aged five and over who were adopted and eight children aged five and over whom were placed for adoption. This has meant A1, A2 and A10 indicators have been increased due to long term LAC adoptions. In the Adoptions Scorecard these children will be counted in averages for three years. To show improvement within the service Wolverhampton also looks at their performance year on year.

During 2015/2016, 62 children were adopted, the most in any year and a 22% increase on 2014/2015 figures where 51 children were adopted.

The average time taken to place children as measured by the A1 indicator was 652 days. Although this is an improvement on our three year average time, this is considerably higher than the scorecard reducing target of 428 days. The A10 indicator was 518 days.

The average time taken to place children as measured by the A2 indicator was 238 days. Again this is an improvement on previous years however remains, above the reduced scorecard target of 121 days. This data shows that although improvements are being made that averages are still considerably higher than national targets.

### **Adoption support services**

The impact on a child, and their family, of being adopted is life changing and lifelong. Wolverhampton Adoption Team recognises that adopted children and their families need to be able to access appropriate and sensitive adoption support at any time in their lives.

The Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 specify a range of services that Wolverhampton adoption team provide. We have the equivalent of one and a half social workers dedicated to adoption support work and one part time post adoption contact co-ordinator. Increasing the number of children adopted is our aim; however, this must be balanced alongside the need to provide good adoption support.

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. The adoption support fund is a sum of money that is held centrally. Local authorities can make applications to the fund on behalf of adopters for a range of therapeutic services following an adoption support assessment.

Wolverhampton has undertaken 28 Assessment of Need assessments and applied for 18 therapeutic packages. Services have included Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service Assessment, therapeutic parenting courses; therapeutic life story work and psychotherapy. Three monthly reviews are undertaken to identify family satisfaction and clinical outcomes.

A number of pre-order adoptive placements with children deemed hard to place due to their age and history of trauma and maltreatment had been receiving psychotherapy. With the advent of the ASF pre-order funding, finance has been secured for 12 months resulting in adopters feeling confident to apply for the adoption order.

Adoption support social workers continue to support adoptive families and we currently have 46 cases that are open to adoption support workers. Support to teenagers and their families can be a challenge. Julia Selwyn's research *Beyond the Adoption Order* outlined the difficulties families can experience where they remain intact while experiencing great difficulties that impact on child and parents relationship, health and well-being. It is no different for families in Wolverhampton that remain intact yet experience numerous challenges. The evidence of good adoption support in Wolverhampton is highlighted by the very low disruption rate. During 2015/2016 there was just one disruption.

The Adoption Team is currently able to offer a therapeutic parenting programme and Theraplay internally. The Adoption Team has invested heavily in providing access to therapeutic parenting programmes. One adoption support social worker attended four day training for Non-violent resistance (NVR offers a child-focused approach that rebuilds the relationship through de-escalation, acceptance and reconciliation, allowing the child's needs to be met through the love and care of unconditional positive regard) and another social worker attended a four day DDP (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy- integrative method of psychotherapy developed for the treatment of children and young people who manifest serious psychological problems associated with complex trauma and serious failure to establish secure patterns of attachment).

Additionally three social workers attended a one day DDP course and three social workers attended 'Why can't my child behave' training.

The post adoption contact (PAC) coordinator manages in excess of 389 letter box exchange arrangements and provides support to birth families in writing and reading letters to provide good written contact for children.

Maintaining contact with siblings is reported by children to be one of their highest priorities. Sibling contact can help a child maintain their identity and promote self-esteem. With that in mind the PAC coordinator is developing setting up contact between siblings adopted by different adoptive parents.

Wolverhampton has provided an annual newsletter informing adopters about pupil premium, access to consortium training, the adoption support fund and the Governments plans for Regional Adoption Agencies. The aim is to provide quarterly newsletters, this will enable us to notify adopters about further training and inform them about the latest adoption themes and topics.

City of Wolverhampton Council continues to work in partnership with the other Black Country Authorities i.e. Walsall, Sandwell and Dudley to purchase adoption support packages from Adoption U.K. and After Adoption enabling us to work in partnership with these organisations. These support packages provide services to adopters, adopted children, adopted adults and birth family members.

In relation to Adoption U.K. the partnership agreement has been reviewed within this period to ensure we are purchasing an effective support package which meets the needs of approved adopters and prospective adopters.

All prospective adopters continue to receive 12 months free membership to Adoption UK, unless they choose to opt out of this. Prospective adopters were offered the support of a buddy (adoptive parent mentor or parent consultant) who reflects their own situation. This support was offered either at the point of being linked to a child or at any point during placement.

All prospective adopters are invited to attend the Adoption Support Group run by Adoption UK on a bi-monthly basis. Adoption UK is keen to ensure the success of this support group and have structured the meetings more formally to include speakers and presentations that are pre planned. This has been helpful and social workers can encourage adopters to attend relevant support groups. These meetings are held at in Walsall and Halesowen. This offers adopters the opportunity of meeting with other adopters at a group run by adopters themselves. Adopters are also able to access Adoption UK training workshops.

After Adoption continues to provide services on behalf of ABC. The first is an existing service which provides support to adopted adults, adopted children and birth relatives. The organisation supports intermediary

services, counselling, and helping adopted adults to trace their birth family.

After Adoption also offer independent counselling to all birth parents where the plan is adoption for their child.

After Adoption continue to run 'Breaking the Cycle'. Breaking the Cycle 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.

In partnership with ABC 'After Adoption' is commissioned to deliver 'Safebase' twice per year within the Black Country. This is a parenting programme which includes an initial MIMS assessment. The feedback from adopters who have attended is positive. After Adoption deliver Safebase across the country and Wolverhampton can access these courses for the prospective adopters of children who are placed out of the area, we can utilise a total of five places locally or nationally. Additionally we commissioned a further four places for adopters residing in various areas of the country. This has worked particularly well and has enabled the adoption team to be confident that prospective adopters caring for Wolverhampton children with more complex needs have a basic knowledge of attachment and therapeutic parenting.

In addition to this, ABC and AF have a post approval training programme. This consists of four/five workshops each year. The workshops are available to approved adopters who are waiting for a placement, those who have had a child placed, or those who have adopted. The workshops include: Education workshop for adopters and sensory integration.

### **Panel Membership**

The Panel continues to function well supported by its committed members and support staff.

The professional advisor to panel has continued to increase panel membership with the establishment of a central list of panel members. The professional advisor to panel has also further developed the permanency panel to incorporate general and adoption matters once a month. This has increased panel availability for both fostering and adoption.

### **Panel Business**

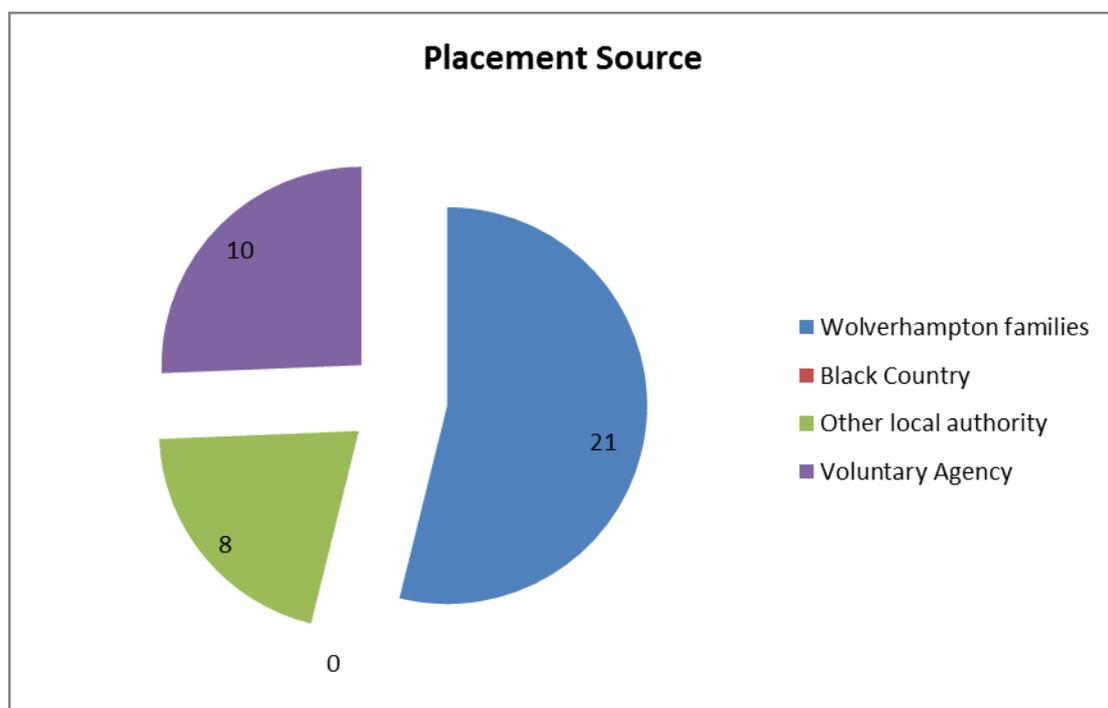
Panel met on 18 occasions 2015/2016. It was apparent that two panels would be required most months in order to service the needs of the adoption team due to the increased numbers of matches and adopter approvals.

There are also procedures in place for convening emergency Panels when required.

Children requiring a "should be placed for adoption decision" are not presented to panel as they proceed straight to the Agency Decision Maker. The Agency Decision Maker sits twice a month but is also able to make emergency decisions when required.

See below a table depicting the panel business for the year.

<b>Recommendation that children should be placed for adoption</b>	<b>Rescinding of adoption plan for children</b>	<b>Approval of prospective adopters</b>	<b>De-registration of adopters</b>	<b>Links of children with prospective adopters</b>	<b>Disruption reports</b>
<b>52</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>0</b>



# Hello!

## Thinking about adoption?

**Come along to your  
local information event:**

Monday 4th July  
The Copthorne Hotel  
Level Street, Merry Hill, Dudley,  
DY5 1UR

No need to register,  
just arrive at 6pm.



Freephone  
**0800 073 0597**

[www.adoptionblackcountry.co.uk](http://www.adoptionblackcountry.co.uk)  
[info@adoptionblackcountry.co.uk](mailto:info@adoptionblackcountry.co.uk)



ABC continues to experience a growth in numbers of enquiries and subsequent referrals. In this period ABC held 33 information evenings meaning that adopters on average waited no longer than 11 days to attend an event. At each event a presentation about adoption is led by a senior manager and adopters have the chance to speak one to one with a social worker and decide whether they would like to progress to a home visit. Each agency has a social worker present at the events. In the last financial year Wolverhampton received 29 referrals for home visits from ABC information evenings.

ABC marketing activity continued to be strong and through regular contact with the adoption managers within the consortium targeted to specific needs of the five organisations. Specific highlights for the year have included:

A targeted sibling's campaign utilising outdoor media at Intu/Westfields Merry Hill Centre. For a period of one month we were able to brand all lift access point driving footfall to a specific sibling's information event held at an adjacent hotel. The visuals (some of which are below) showed siblings being separated as the lift doors open with a clear 'call to action' to 'adopt and keep the siblings together'.



Our media partners Free Radio continue to offer strong support and one of our most successful recruitment mediums. This year we have been fortunate enough to sponsor premium programs such as Freewind/Mid-morning for three months, afternoons/early drive for three months and take a tailored Breakfast and Drive sponsorship package for two weeks per months for three months. This has been on top of our structured 40 second and 10 second recruitment marketing campaign.

Free Radio advertising has been supported with other radio stations to ensure regional and demographic coverage. These have notably been through presenter lead endorsement on Signal 107 and very fortunately we have been one of the first three organisations in the UK to utilise Instreaming Radio Advertising (the others being MGM James Bond and PC World). Instreaming delivered through Absolute Radio allows those individuals listening through PC, tablet or Phone to see a visual animated advert as a pop-up as the radio advert plays. For the first time ever this

gives radio advertising an instant 'call to action' as by clicking the pop-up links to the Adoption in The Black Country website. Those not listening on such a device hear a traditional adapted radio advert.

Traditional 48 sheet poster billboards, digital motorway screens and smaller target poster sites have been used to support traditional press adverts (in a range of publications linked to the location of the Info Event e.g. Shropshire Star, Dudley News, Bromsgrove Observer, etc.)

Minority publications have also been utilised (e.g. The Phoenix newspaper) to support specific target info events for the BME community and also publications such as The Zone to increase adopter awareness in same sex partnerships.

Social Media continues to play a significant and growing part in our marketing strategy, offering a more relaxed conversation approach to recruitment marketing and information sharing. An average organic communication on Facebook goes out to 700 individuals and via Twitter we reach roughly 4000 individuals per month. These are supported by targeted paid-for social media advertising delivered by ABC and AF and through third parties e.g. Birmingham Post.

We continue to optimise our website to ensure the highest of ranking relating to search fields and support this with keyword Pay-Per-Click advertising.

These activities are in addition to our normal marketing recruitment activity such as Press Releases, Blogs, etc.

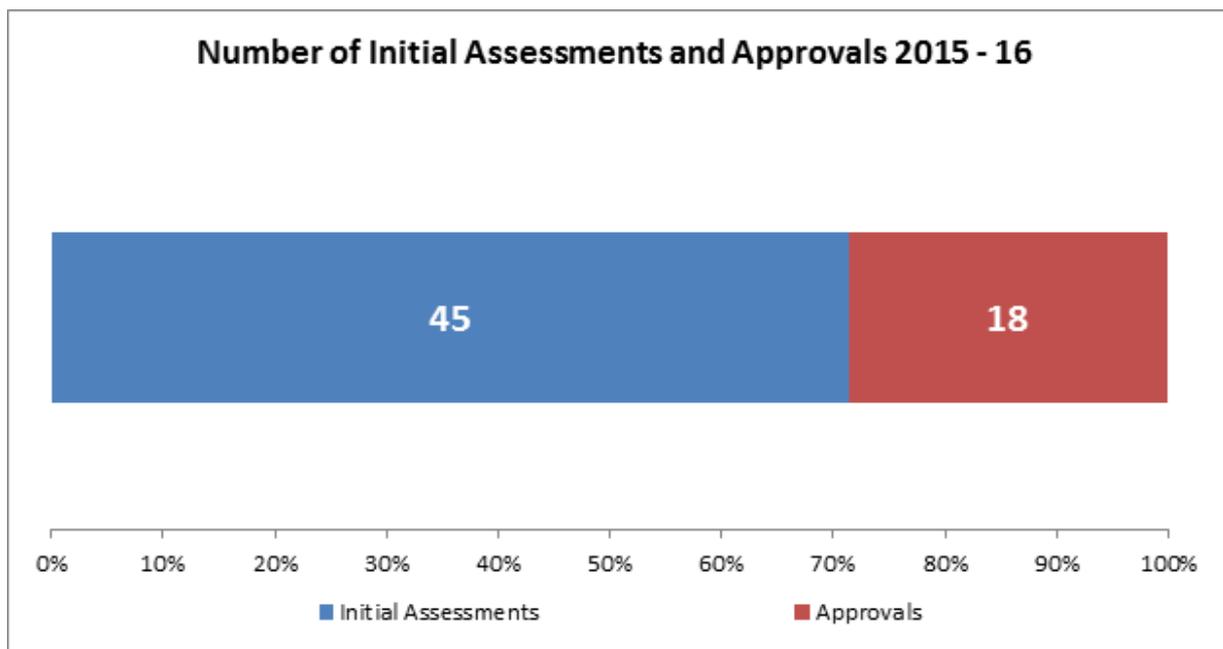
### **Adoption Recruitment and Assessment Unit**

Wolverhampton also jointly trains adopters via online training and three days of classroom, group training. The program 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 very positive and they feel it has given them a foundation to complete further reading and research. Adopters report feeling better prepared for the journey to adoption. Wolverhampton asks adopters to complete training in Stage One in order for them to consider whether adoption is the right journey for them and give time for reflection in readiness for their Stage two assessment.

The two stage process of assessment has been embedded by Wolverhampton and is being tracked in terms of impact and timeliness. Wolverhampton recognises that within the period the Stage One process caused delay in our overall timeliness of approval. Wolverhampton has

been unable to recruit a permanent manager for the recruitment and assessment team due to the uncertainty of moving towards a Regional Adoption Agency. This has resulted in several agency managers being appointed. The tracking of data and the integration with the councils Care First System has been improved within the period. Adopters continue to struggle to gain appointments with their GP to obtain medicals. In this financial year Wolverhampton is developing guidance for GP with the agency medical advisor to improve timeliness of appointments being provided.

Wolverhampton utilises an Independent Agency, Social Work Assessment Consultancy (SWACS) to complete its Stage two Prospective Adopter Reports. The adopters continue to receive a Supervising Social Worker within the authority who visits them three times during the assessment and attends panel. Adopter feedback on SWAC's has been very positive and has ensured that good quality reports are provided to panel consistently and that the Stage two timescales are met. The Supervising Social Worker within the team is able to focus on early matching and supports the adopters during matching, introductions and when children are placed until Adoption Order.



Within the period 45 Initial Assessments were completed, 24 Prospective Adopter Reports were completed and 18 adopters were approved for domestic children. 22 were for mainstream adopters. Two were awaiting ADM at the end of the period. Two were for inter-country adopters. A couple were assessed as not suitable to adopt, and was not approved at panel. The case went to IRM who agreed with the positive determination commending the Local Authority's evidence and presentation at IRM panel. There is one couple who were assessed as not suitable, however

the case went on hold to investigate the couples wish to access 3<sup>rd</sup> party references. This couple will be presented to panel in 2016/2017.

Wolverhampton ensures that adopters are provided with a one year subscription to Adoption UK funded by the Local Authority. Adopter's profiles are placed on the ABC's own work share system. Adopters are encouraged to register on Adoption Link (Link Maker) and within the period eight adopters utilised this and pursued links. Adopters who have waited longer than three months are also placed on the Adoption Register. In 2015/16 seven sets of adopters were placed on the Adoption Register.

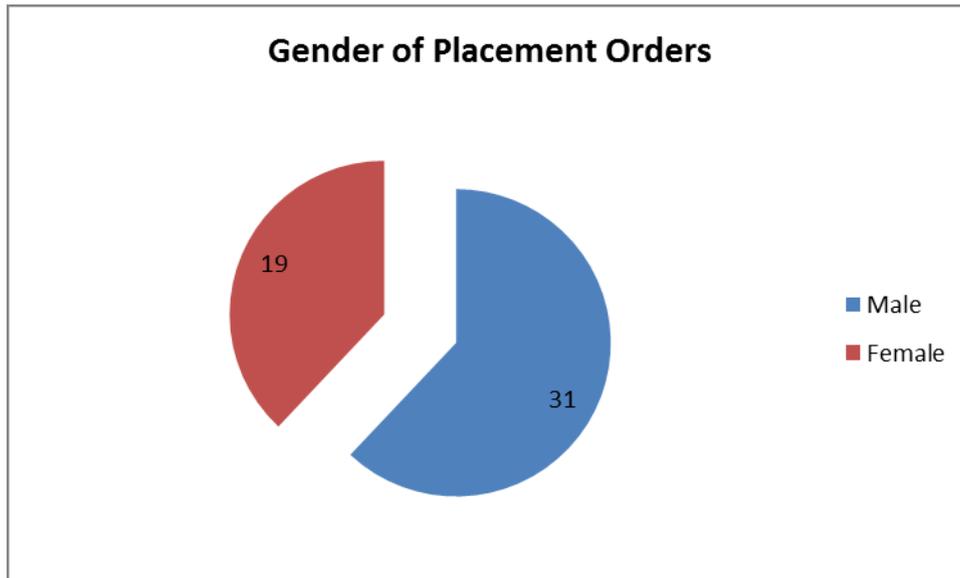
Within the period there were two White British couples waiting to be matched with children. These couples have been registered on Adoption Link and have been invited to Exchange Days.

Five Indian and one dual heritage (White British / Indian) families are currently waiting. One Indian couple had a child placed under foster to adopt arrangements. There were no further children of Indian or Indian dual heritage background who have become subject to a plan of adoption in Wolverhampton. As a result these families have waited longer than anticipated for a link. A number of the families would only consider an Indian or Indian and white British child. They would not feel able to consider a child where one or both of the parents were from a 'Muslim' heritage family. This includes children of Pakistani / Bangladeshi / Middle Eastern countries for example. Family finding has been active on their behalf and they have been advised to attend national exchange days. They have also been featured at National Exchange Days, are on the Adoption Register and Adoption Links which is a national adoption data base.

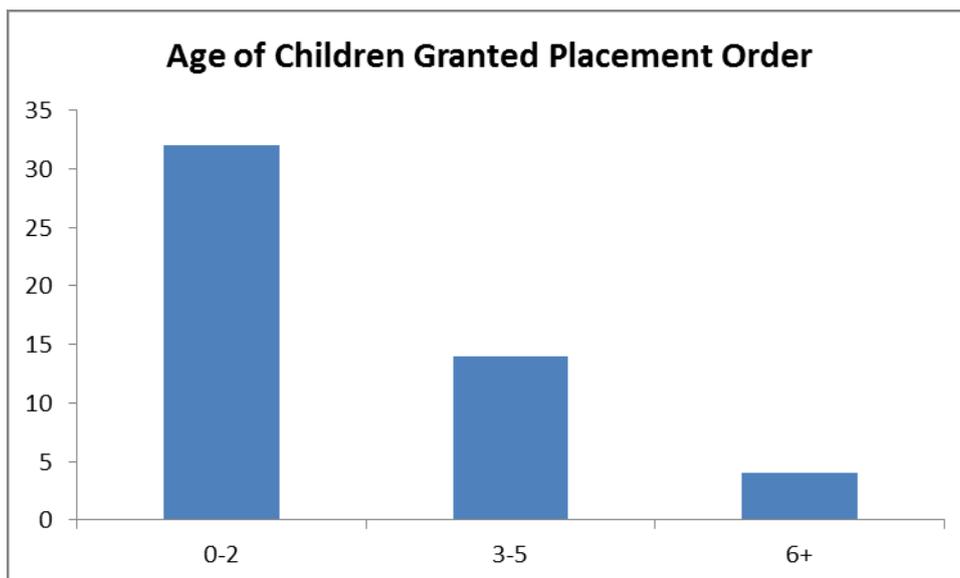
## Children's decisions

There has been a dip in the number of children for whom Wolverhampton is pursuing a plan of adoption. It is however acknowledged that the number of children for whom SBPFA decisions were made 2014/2015 was unusually high.

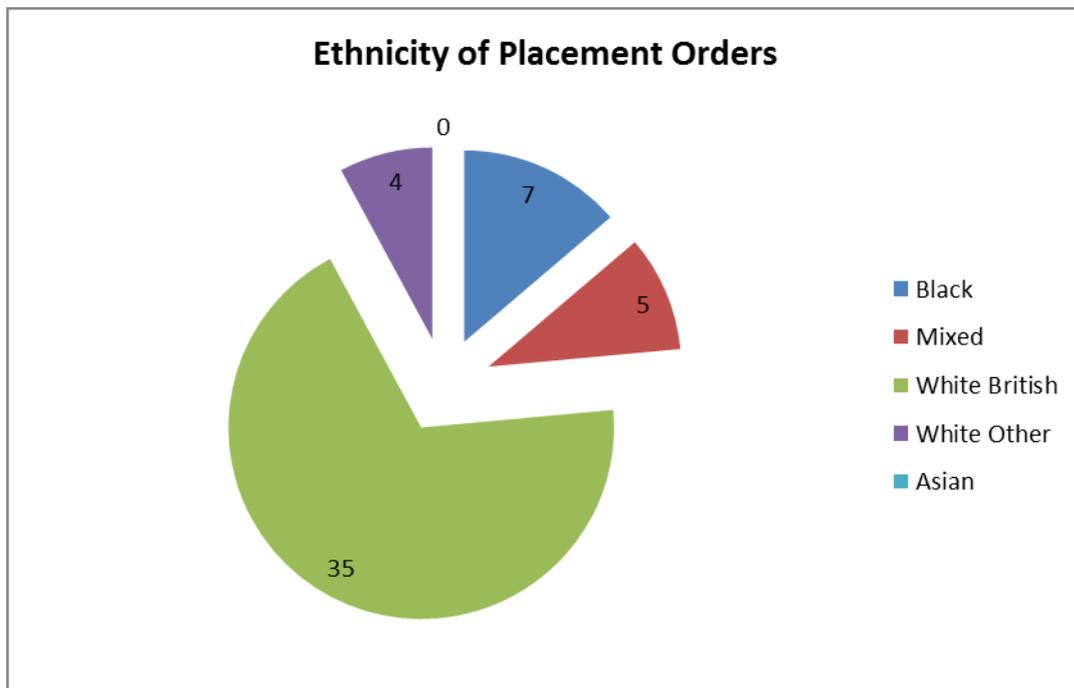
Of the 50 Placement Orders Granted in 2015/16, 19 were for females and 31 for males.



In terms of age 32 children were aged 0-2, 14 children were aged 3-5 and four children were six or above.

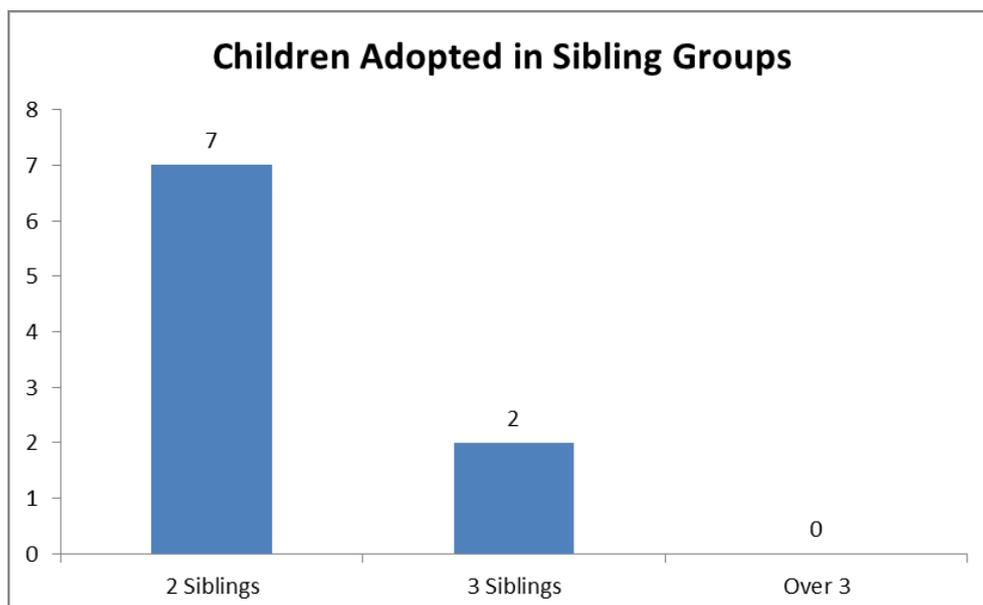


Of the 51 children 35 children were White British, seven were black, five were of dual heritage, and four were White Other. No children were Asian.



It is also helpful to look at the number of sibling groups included in this chart. 41% of the children were to be placed as part of a sibling group. This figure is slightly below the national picture of 49%. Of these children there were:-

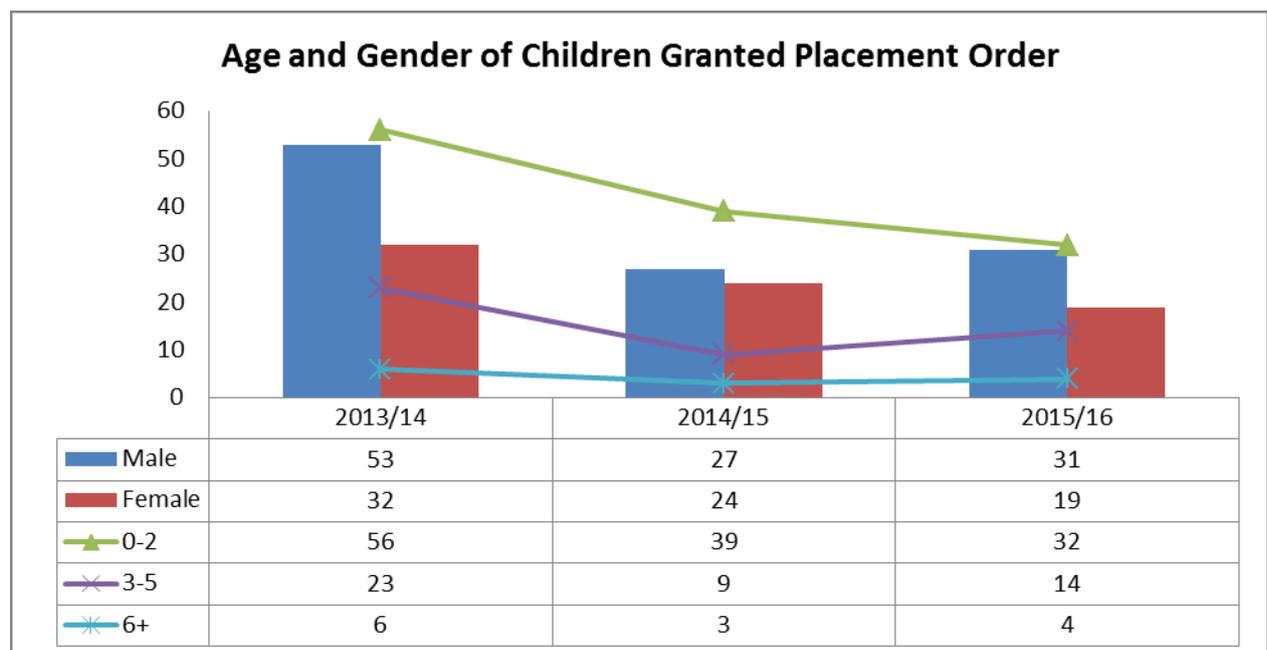
- Two sibling groups of three
- Seven sibling groups of two
- It was planned for three children to join older siblings in adoptive placements.



Given it is often harder to place children who are older, part of sibling groups and children who are of a BME background, the decrease in these figures should result in further improvements in timeliness for children with a plan of adoption in 2015/2016.

## Rescinds

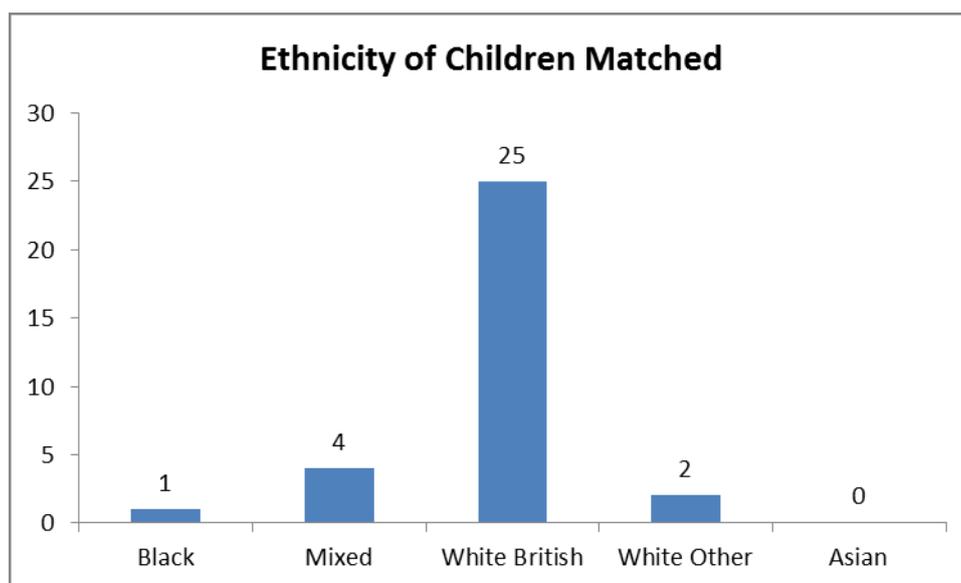
In addition a significantly larger group of children continued to have had their plans changed from adoption this year. This was partly due to the large numbers of children for whom placement orders were not granted between 2013 and 2015. Some of these children were children for whom the local authority had not been able to secure an adoption placement and an alternative plan of permanence was been agreed. This cohort is made up predominantly of older children, many of whom are to be placed as a sibling group, and 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 the majority of those children a change of plan to permanent fostering enabled children to be permanently fostered with their current carers.



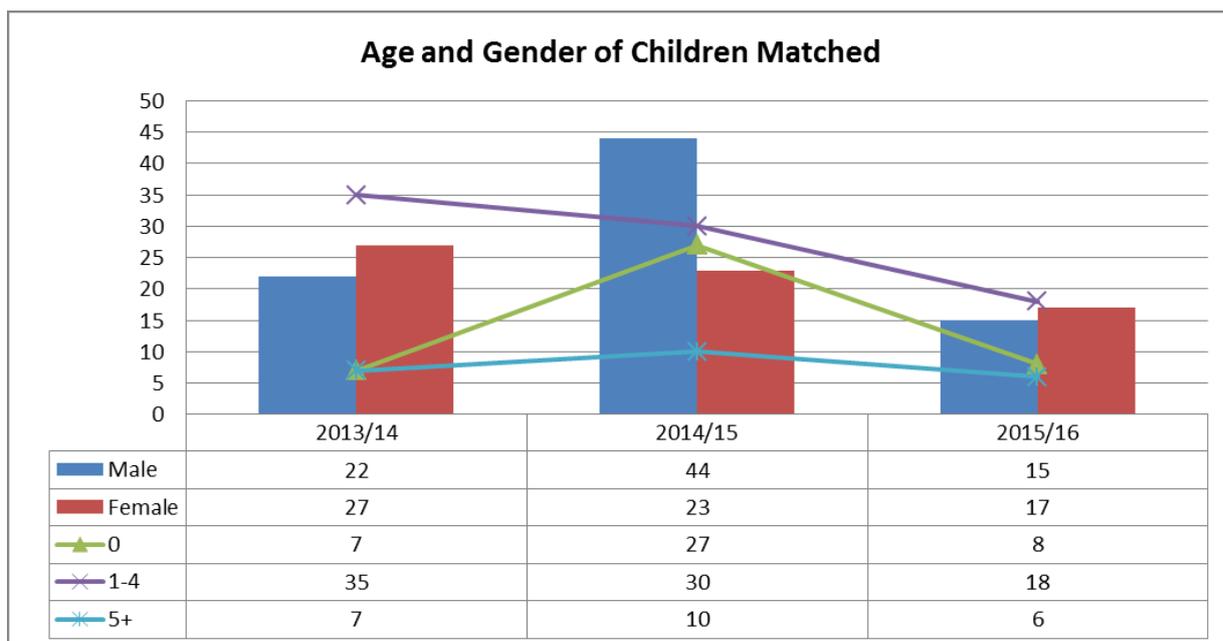
## Matches of children with prospective adopters

During this reporting period April 2015 to March 2016, 32 children were matched with prospective adopters compared with 67 in the preceding year.

Six of the 32 children were of BME (black and minority ethnic) background. This equates to 18% of children matched. Of these children 3% were Black and none were Asian.



Of the 32 children 22 were matched before the age of two. There are well documented benefits to placing children as young as possible including less chance of adoption breakdown and increased emotional wellbeing for children. Wolverhampton has taken a number of steps to increase the possibility of children being placed with adopters early when they cannot be care for within their birth family. This has included the development of systems to enable tracking of and subsequently early family finding for children who become subject to a plan of adoption.



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.

The current target is four months for next year. 20 of the 32 children were placed within four months of a placement order (A2) indicator. This equated to 62.5%. This has partly been achieved through the extra resources provided to the family finding unit in the form of two social workers funded by the adoption reform grant 2015 to 2016 has seen the adoption service experience even more success with placing both sibling groups and older children. This may be a result of both the national media coverage of adoption and localised targeted recruitment for adopters of sibling groups and older children.

The Adoption Team has therefore been able to place all of the children for whom adoption was deemed to remain appropriate and had been waiting 12 months or more in this reporting period. Of the children waiting with an active plan of adoption at the end of this reporting period there were just four for whom placements had not been identified.

### **Adopter approval**

There were 18 approvals of prospective adopters in this reporting period. This is less than the previous year. A further two families were taken to panel before the end of March. Of these approvals two families were approved as concurrent carers and one family wished to be considered as foster to adopt carers if an appropriate match became available. Within the period a family decided to retrospectively be approved as foster to adopt for a specific child

## **Complaints**

Wolverhampton Adoption Team has received four complaints. Two complaints were related to one case where birth relatives were unhappy with the ruling of a placement order. One complaint was related to post adoption contact and the fourth related to delay in responding/commissioning post adoption support services.

There have been no complaints received by Panel during this period.

## **Adoption Inspection**

The Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted in October 2012. The inspectors were impressed with the overall improvements to the service in Wolverhampton and rated the local authority as Good.

Due to change in inspection framework the Adoption Agency will no longer be inspected separately, but as part of a Children's Services Inspection. A separate rating will be issued, as part of this overall inspection.

## **Strategic issues and forward plans**

Wolverhampton remains committed to adoption as a positive permanence choice for children who cannot be care for by their birth relatives. The service has welcomed the governments challenge around timeliness for children who have a plan of adoption, it is well accepted that age at placement is one predictors impacting on positive outcomes for children who are placed for adoption. Wolverhampton is therefore committed to continuing to improve timeliness for children.

The Adoption Team have begun to strengthen relations and offer support to locality teams resulting in earlier family finding for children. It is hoped that as new processes are further imbedded, this will provide opportunities for closer working during pre-birth assessments to ensure options for early permanence are fully explored where this is appropriate. In June 2016, the fostering and adoption service will hold permanency clinics on a regular basis so children's social workers can book a time slot to discuss the available permanency options which also includes connected persons /special guardianship order carers.

As part of the workforce strategy the adoption service will ensure that staffs have access to training and development to ensure that the government Vision for Adoption is fully implemented.

A key feature of the Adoption Team's improvement plan is to increase the recruitment of adopters who can consider offering early permanence options to children either through concurrent planning or foster to adopt. The target for adoption recruitment for 2016/2017 is 25 approvals.

The Adoption Team have demonstrated the ability to embrace new ways of working in order to improve outcomes for children. It is expected that

closer working within the region as described at the beginning of this report will lend itself to ensuring that children are matched without delay with adopters who are able to meet their long term needs.

As the regionalising agenda is progressed it will be important to ensure that the team continues to build on previous success. This will include further improving timeliness, recruiting more adopters who will consider concurrency and foster to adopt and remaining ambitious for harder to place children to ensure they are offered the opportunities they deserve.

**Shirley Gounder**

Interim Senior Social Work Manager for Wolverhampton Adoption Service.

August 2016