

Wolverhampton City Council



ANNUAL ADOPTION AGENCY REPORT APRIL 2013 – MARCH 2014

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ADOPTION PANEL REPORT 2013-2014

1. Introduction

This report details the work of Wolverhampton City Council Adoption Service in the year April 2013 to March 2014.

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.

2. Legislation

There have been some significant changes to regulations and further proposals for change are planned under the Adoption Reform Agenda and the Children and Families Act 2014 – this Act received Royal Assent in March 2014 and will be rolled out in 12 – 24 months

At the latter part of 2011 and beginning of 2012, the government formed an expert working group to look at Adoption Processes with a specific remit of identifying how more children can be adopted, how this can be done in a more timely way: and how more adopters can be approved in a much more timely way.

Amended Adoption Agency Regulations issued in June 2012, which took effect in September 2012, saw a change in how decisions that children should be placed for adoption are made. This had a significant impact on the Panel process and in effect Panels were withdrawn from making such recommendations to the Decision Maker. From September 2012 decisions as to whether children should be placed for adoption go directly to the Agency Decision Maker. The only exception to this is when children's plans are not being considered as part of care proceedings, when parents are giving their consent. Children whose parents are consenting to adoption are still being considered by Panel.

In January 2013 we saw the launch of the government paper 'Further Action in Adoption – Finding More Loving Homes' which introduced the National Gateway – First 4 Adoption and amongst other initiatives. Greater opportunity for adopter led family finding was introduced. Local authorities are required to make their adoption support services publically available to adopters – The local adoption support passport.

i. Adoption Reform Agenda

The government's interest in adoption is being driven by the Adoption Reform Agenda. This year has seen an extension of government interest in adoption which has been supported by grants to local authorities to aid improvements to adoption services. The ultimate aim is to ensure adoption is a realistic

outcome for all children where appropriate by nationally increasing the number of children adopted in a more timely fashion, and increasing the number of adopters approved – again in a timelier manner.

Wolverhampton received an Adoption Reform Grant. It was agreed by Senior Officers and members that this would be spent on adoption services both internally and through Adoption in the Black Country (ABC). This increased resources and has enabled development of the service with opportunities for innovation and pilot projects.

From the statistics, included in this report, it is evident that the increased resources has enabled the Adoption Service to approve more adopters, place more children with prospective adoptive families and ultimately ensure more children are adopted in Wolverhampton.

In Wolverhampton part of the grant was utilised to extend staffing resources. This included front line staff undertaking family finding, and support to the increased number of adopters we have approved. In addition an early permanence Social Worker was recruited to carry a caseload of children who had been identified, pre-birth, that their care plan was likely to be adoption. All of these unborn children were children of parents who had previous children placed for adoption.

This Social Worker held a caseload of 5 children. Two have returned to parents on care orders and the other three have a plan of adoption. Two children were placed with their adopters within 5 months and the third is 6 months. Moving forward all of these children would have potentially been suitable to have a plan of concurrency had we had concurrent carers approved at the time of planning.

For 2014/15 it is anticipated that we will work closely with CIN/CP Service to place children in similar circumstances with approved concurrent carers.

A Social Worker was also appointed to carry a caseload of children with a plan of adoption. This post was extremely effective allowing the Social Worker to focus entirely on progressing plans for adoption. Based upon the success of this post the new LAC restructure has incorporated a children's social work team within the adoption service to manage all adoption cases post placement order.

A life journey worker was also appointed for a year to support social workers in the production of life story work for children placed for adoption. This followed an OFSTED inspection recommendation. Additional staffing resources were utilised to support 18.5 hours backfill in the adoption team to enable Senior Social Worker – Nicilda Bond to lead on development of concurrency planning; and to provide an additional Practice Manager to lead on the adoption reform agenda and utilisation of the grant.

Further financial support was provided to support prospective adopters by paying for their medicals; commissioning of After Adoption to provide Safe Base support to approved adopters with children placed, and training for social

care workers in photography skills to enhance the quality of children's profiles used for family finding.

In addition the grant has enabled the purchase of iPad's for our independent panel members to increase efficiency and decrease cost in copying/disseminating paperwork.

Finally with support of the ARG Wolverhampton has updated its CareFirst electronic recording system to include all adoption and fostering assessments and processes. This will enable enhanced monitoring of performance management and supported the move towards electronic care records.

Part B of the ARG was utilised on increased capacity for inter-agency placements, given the introduction of the equalisation of the fee which has increased to £27,000 per single placement; and to support the development of a 5th ABC team which will be documented later in the report.

ii. Changes to Adopter Approval

On 1st July 2013 new Adoption Guidance was implemented with the introduction of the stage 1 and stage 2 adopter approval process. The guidance introduced reduced timescales for completion of adoption applications.

Following an adoption enquiry, enquirers may register their interest in adoption with an adoption agency. Once the adoption agency accepts the Registration of Interest, prospective adopters enter Stage One of the approval process which is expected to take two months. During this time, the prospective adopters start to contribute to the assessment by collecting information about themselves alongside undertaking Stage One on-line preparation training. Simultaneously the adoption agency will request the DBS, relevant checks and arrange for the prospective adopters to have their adoption medical.

Following completion of Stage One prospective adopters will immediately move into Stage Two of the assessment process. This stage is expected to be completed within 4 months and ends at the decision made by the agency decision maker that the prospective adopters are suitable to adopt.

Prospective adopters can ask for a deferment between Stage One and Stage Two of up to 6 months if circumstances require this. If the time lapse between Stage One and Stage Two is any greater than this the prospective adopters must start the process again at Registration of Interest.

iii. Preparation Training

During this reporting period there has been major change to the way adoption preparation is delivered in order to support the guidance and regulations relating to perspective adopter approval.

In line with the reform agenda Wolverhampton along with its ABC partners has developed an on-line training module which all prospective adopters must complete in Stage One.

The preparation training has been revised and condensed to a three day training programme delivered in Stage Two of the assessment process. This training is now delivered on a monthly basis by ABC. It was previously delivered over 5 days on a bi-monthly schedule.

A subsequent module regarding fostering for adoption and concurrency is being developed and will be completed shortly.

iv. Concurrent Planning/Fostering for Adoption

An additional aspect of the reform agenda is the development of early permanency models including concurrent planning and fostering for adoption; these options enable children with a plan of adoption to be placed with their potential prospective adopters earlier than previous legislation and guidance has allowed.

Wolverhampton has developed, with the support of a partnership with Coram Adoption Agency, a concurrency model.

Fostering for Adoption arrangements have also been implemented.

During this period there have been 3 approvals of concurrent carers and one approval of fostering for adoption carers.

One child has been placed under fostering for adoption arrangements, and one placed concurrently.

This development led work will continue with Nicilda Bond continuing as the lead practitioner.

3. Adoption Support Services

We continue to ensure our service reflects the Adoption Support Regulations 2005, having the equivalent of 1.5 members of staff who hold adoption support posts.

There is a dedicated part time post from the adoption team establishment which co-ordinates all of the post adoption contacts both direct and indirect.

The service facilitates the exchange of all indirect contact and also arranges many of the direct contacts. Support and guidance are offered to all parties involved including birth family members, adopted children and their adoptive parents.

Wolverhampton City 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 U.K., unless they choose to opt out of this. All prospective adopters will be offered the support of a buddy (adoptive parent mentor or parent consultant) who reflects their own situation. This support will be offered either at the point of being linked to a child or at any point during placement.

All prospective adopters will be invited to attend the Adoption Support Group run by Adoption U.K. on a bi-monthly basis. Adoption U.K. are keen to ensure the success of this support group and have structured the meetings more formally to include speakers and presentations. 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.

In addition to this, the Black Country Consortium has implemented a post approval training programme. This now consists of four/five workshops each year. The workshops are available to approved adopters who are either waiting for a placement, those who have had a child placed, or those who have adopted. The workshops for this year were: Introducing Theraplay, Attachment, Helping Adopters to tell their adopted children of their adoption and background, Social Networking Implications for Adopters and Understanding the Impact of Early Trauma.

The second Black Country partnership arrangement is with the organisation After Adoption, again in conjunction with the Black Country agencies.

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 offers independent counselling to all birth parents where the plan is adoption for their child.

In partnership with ABC After Adoption is commissioned to deliver two cases per year of Safebase. This is a parenting programme which includes an initial MIMS assessment. The feedback from adopters who have attended is very positive.

In addition Wolverhampton has also been able to offer our adopters the opportunity to attend a “Circle of Security Programme” which helps develop good secure attachments between children and their adoptive parents. This is led by a trained member of the Adoptive Service – Dawn Deans.

Wolverhampton has also been part of a national pilot for delivery of Adopt, another ABC initiative. The second 16 week programme is due to be delivered across the summer. Nicilda Bond, adoption support social worker has been trained on the national programme and will co-facilitate this group with colleagues from Dudley and Sandwell.

The first group was received very positively by adopters who feel the model offers good practical support enabling them to utilise their understanding in the parenting of their adopted children.

The government are currently trialling a national adoption support fund which will allow adopters to access personal budgets for therapeutic services. Following the trial which is due to end Spring 2015 it is anticipated that the Adoption Support Fund will be rolled out nationally in 2015. Local authorities will be required to contribute to the fund. An amount has not yet been announced.

4. Family Finding

The data included in this report will include how the performance relating to family finding is improving. As a reflection of the national trend, Wolverhampton is considering a greater number of much younger children for adoption, many of whom are part of sibling groups to be placed together. This poses increased challenges to the team in terms of increased numbers of children with a plan of adoption.

With the government emphasis on improving the timeliness of children to be placed for adoption, this is an area which has to be given priority within the team. We are conscious of our need to improve performance in this area. To this effect we now hold bi monthly family finding meetings with individual family finders to monitor and action family finding activity. We hold adoption tracking panels with Team managers from the LAC service to monitor children’s’ progress where they have a care plan of adoption. In addition we are utilising our social care officers to support the family finding roles by producing profiles, photographs, DVD’s and following up potential links for the Consortium or Register to enable a prompt exchange of paperwork. Wolverhampton Social Care Workers in the adoption team have attended a photography course at Wolverhampton College to enhance the quality of photographs and DVD’s of our children which are used when publishing both internally and externally. In addition with the support of the adoption reform grant a new digital camera has been purchased to support the improved quality of photographs.

Wolverhampton attends all Adoption Register exchange days across England and Wales and features’ our harder to place children at those events.

In July 2013 in partnership with BAAF, ABC hosted an Adoption Activity Day. This is an event where children and approved adopters take time to enjoy each other's company having fun at a planned activity day. The event was successful and adopters, foster carers, children and social workers all enjoyed a sunny activity day. The day produced a number of links for children across the Black Country. For Wolverhampton the day secured two links for two of our children in attendance. Wolverhampton will feature six children at three activity days in 2014 facilitated by Adoption West Midlands. A further activity day is planned for 2015 in conjunction with Adoption West Midlands and BAAF.

The statistics produced in this report will evidence how increased focus on and resources in family finding has improved the number of children placed for adoption and the number of adoption orders granted.

5. Adoption Scorecard

The publication of the National Scorecard in January 2014 for the period 2010/13 led to further discussions with the Department of Education given Wolverhampton's performance in it's timeliness of placing children for adoption over the period 2010/13 had not improved from the previous year.

A dedicated analysis of the scorecard was produced and was sent to the DfE along with the adoption improvement plan. A telephone conference took place in March 2013 with the DfE to discuss the position. (Appendix 1)

Although there was an acknowledgement that performance did not appear to be improving, Wolverhampton were keen to demonstrate that we were clear about where we needed to improve and how we intended to do this. In addition we were able to draw to the attention of DfE our very positive performance compared to England's averages of placing older children and those of BME backgrounds. In addition our percentage of children leaving care due to an adoption order being granted, remains high compared to many other local authorities.

The analysis demonstrated that when looking at Wolverhampton's most recent children with a placement order granted since 2011 the performance in placing those children for adoption is well below the expected target. Although Wolverhampton's scorecard performance continues to being impacted by children who have previously taken longer place due to complexity of need, we still remain optimistic in our plans of adoption and acknowledge that those children may take a little longer to place.

Wolverhampton remains focused on the positives of adoption as a permanence plan, and remains optimistic in planning adoption for children who it is acknowledged maybe regarded as hard to place.

6. 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.

7. Regional and Local Developments

i) Black Country Consortium (Adoption in the Black Country) 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.

We have continued to jointly purchase services from both Adoption U.K. and from After Adoption, as detailed above.

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.

During this 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.

Having given consideration to the options available, the consortium members favoured an opportunity to expand ABC by adding a 5th partner from the voluntary adoption agency sector. At the time of writing this report, a successful bid for an innovation grant of £300, 000 has been made to Adoption Focus who will work with ABC as the fifth partner. Adoption Focus and ABC will jointly recruit, train and support prospective adopters with a view to increasing Adoption Focus adopter approval by 30 families in 2014/15. These families will have Black Country children placed with them.

In 2013/14 ABC were able to develop a 5th team with the primary focus of recruiting an extra 24 families across the Black Country, and support to the implementation of the Stage One and Stage Two approvals process.

The virtual team consisted of a Team Manager and Administrator employed on a full time basis. Assessments of prospective adopters were commissioned to be completed by independent social workers, either directly or via an agency. This resulted in an extra 22 approvals

across the Black Country with families having Black Country children placed with them.

In addition all prospective adopters are now supported via their online training in Stage One and can attend a Stage Two preparation training group run by ABC on a monthly basis. For a cost of approximately £200,000 – 22 families were approved. To have purchased these families at a minimum of £27,000 each, this would have cost £540,000 across the Black Country.

During this period ABC has continued to increase its recruitment activities and spread with new offices in Telford and Birmingham. Its marketing has become more focussed in meeting specific needs of Black Country children. The marketing strategy is based upon recruitment strategy for all 4 local authorities. The adopter referral across the consortium has increased as an average in 2013/14 by 54% compared to 2012/13.

ii) 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. A new website has been developed over the last 12 months, which offers information about adoption across the region.

8. Panel Membership

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

The appointment of an independent professional advisor, Lorna Carr, has enabled further development not only of the adoption panel but also a permanence panel established to consider the suitability of concurrent cases. Lorna has increased panel membership with the establishment of a central list of panel members.

9. Panel Business

The Panel met on 18 occasions during this period. It has become increasingly apparent that in order to agenda the increased number of prospective adopter approvals and links, then two panels per month are required. This has been evident since October 2013

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

For the purpose of this report I will include children's decisions in this figure even though these go straight to the Agency Decision Maker.

Recommendation that children should be placed for adoption	Rescinding of adoption plan for children	Approval of prospective adopters	De-registration of adopters	Links of children with prospective adopters	Disruption reports
85 (63)	29 (15)	30 (14)	2 (0)	49 (43)	0 (2)

Previous year in brackets

- i) The numbers of children who should be placed for adoption considered at Panel or by the Agency Decision Maker this year is 85 compared to 63 last year. The number considered was 53 boys and 32 girls.

Of the 85 children, 51 were White British and 34 were of BME backgrounds. This represents a confirmed change from the previous year's 14% were of BME background in 2011/12 last year the figure rose to 32%, and this year this figure is 59%

This is an alarming figure as it is a massive over representation of BME children compared to both the looked after children population and the population of Wolverhampton. Further analysis of this area will be undertaken.

Given it is always significantly harder to place children of BME background; this is likely to impact upon the timelines of placing children for adoption in Wolverhampton.

It is also helpful to look at the number of sibling groups included in this chart. 48% of the children were to be placed as part of a sibling group. This figure matches the national picture of 49%.

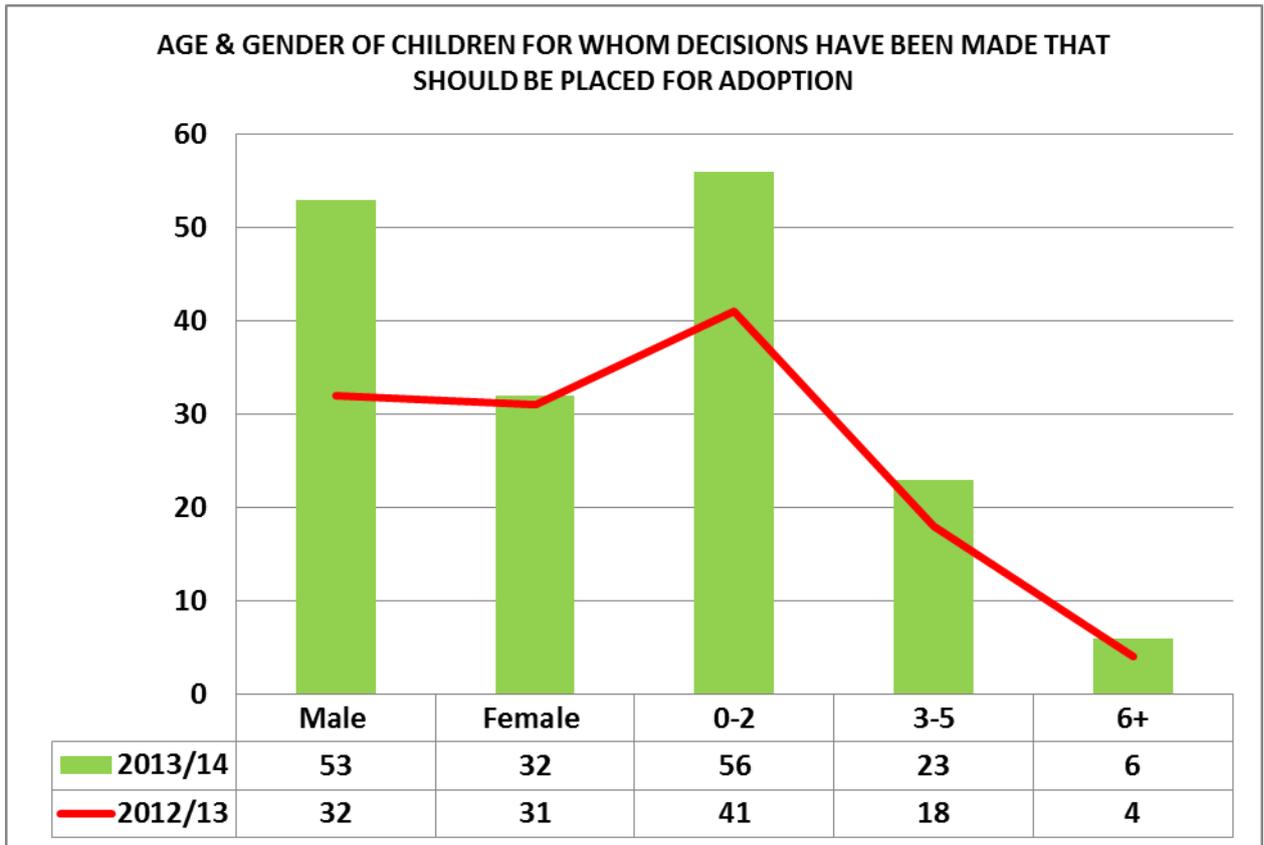
Of these children there were:-

- 1 sibling group of 4
- 3 sibling groups of 3
- 14 sibling groups of 2

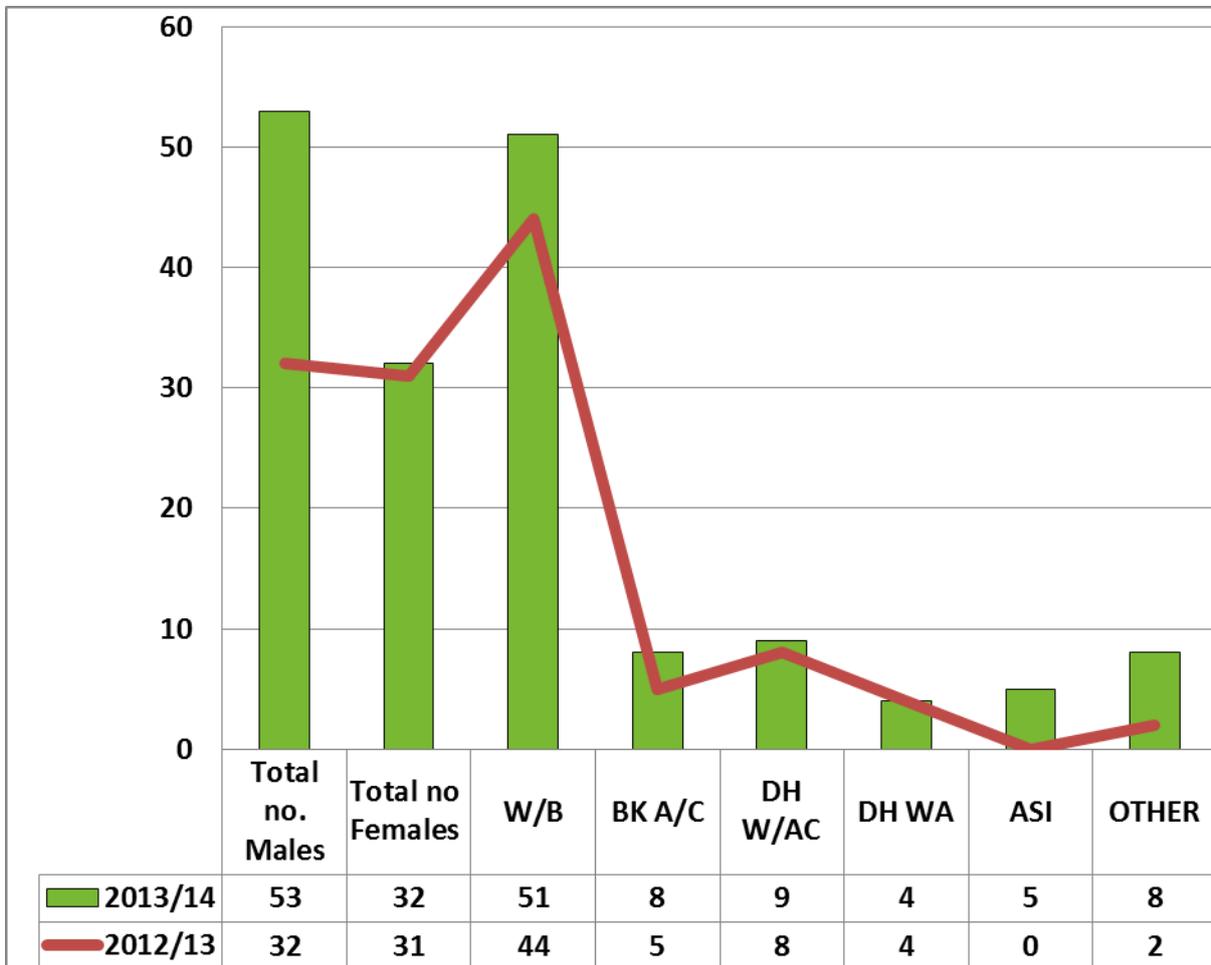
In addition a significantly larger group of children have had their plans changed from adoption this year compared to last reporting period. These children are children for whom the local authority has not been able to secure an adoption placement and an alternative plan of permanence has been agreed. This cohort is made up predominantly of older children, many of whom are to be placed as a sibling group, the majority of which are male children. For all children significant family finding has taken place prior to considering a change of plan and for the majority of those children a change of plan to permanent fostering will enable children to be placed on a permanent fostering with their current carers.

Recommendations that children should be placed for adoption

Total = 85



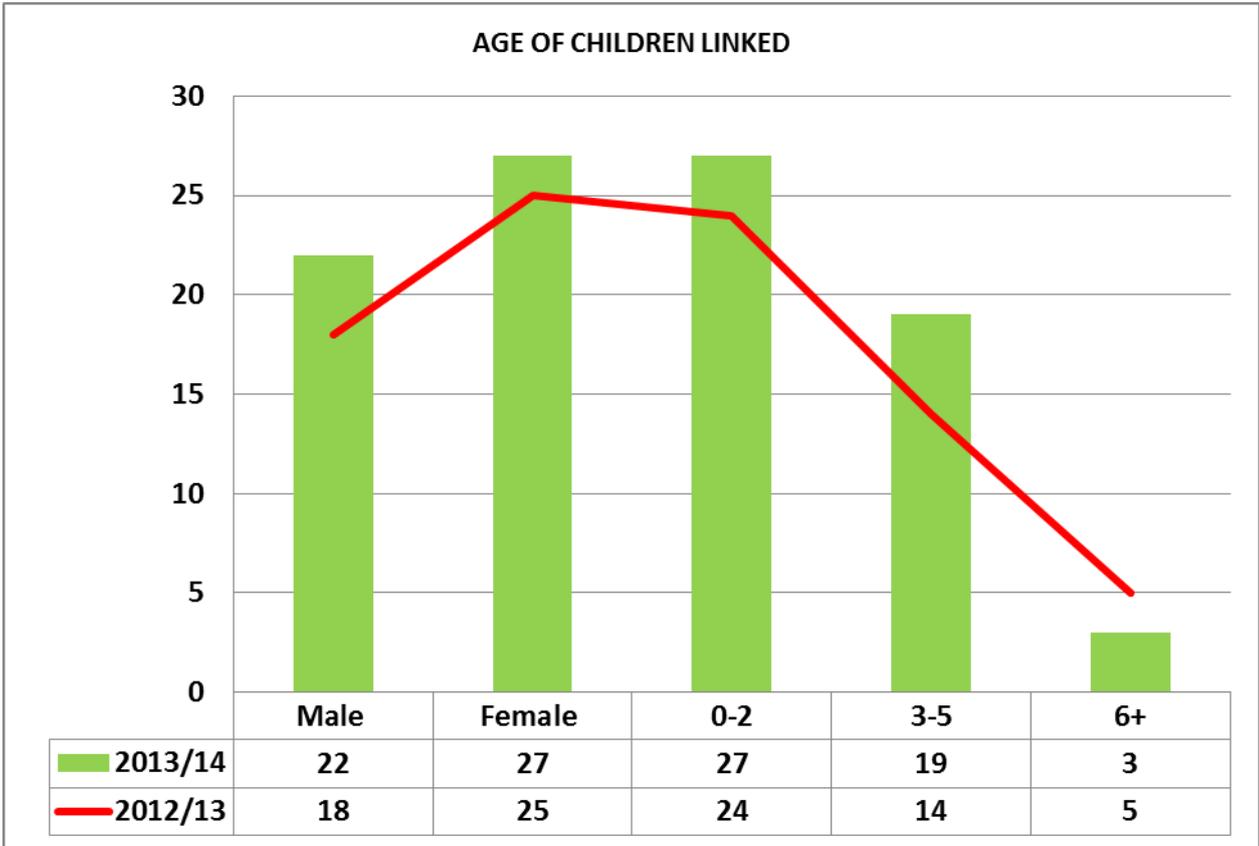
**ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN FOR WHOM A DECISION HAS BEEN MADE
THAT SHOULD BE PLACED FOR ADOPTION**



ii) Children linked to prospective adopters

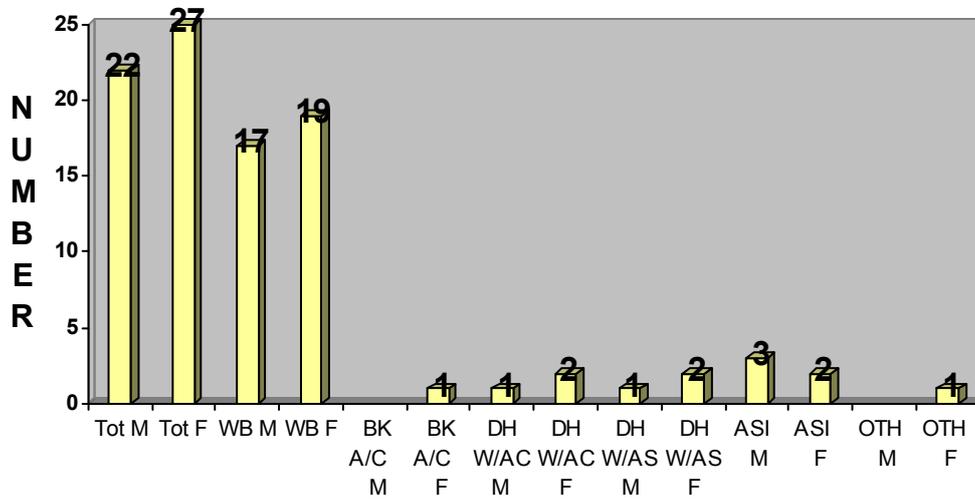
Panel recommended that 49 children should be linked to prospective adopters during the period, all of which were ratified by the Decision Maker. This is an increase from 43 children the previous year, and 20 children the year before that.

Of the 49 children linked at panel, 12 were to be placed as part of sibling groups of 2.

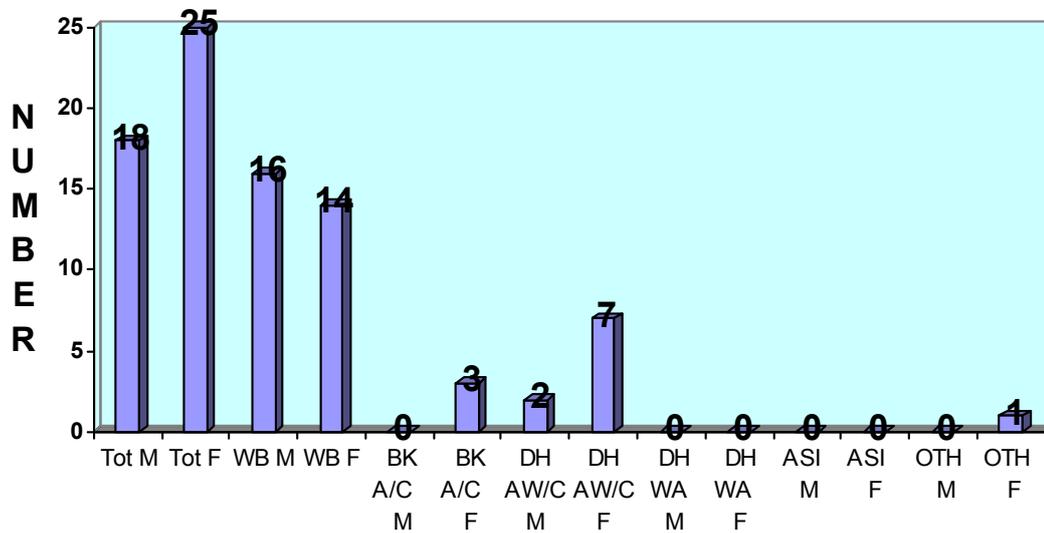


When considering the ethnicity of the children LINKED, 13 of the 43 children were of BME background. This equates to 30% of our children, evidencing that we are performing well in placing BME children.

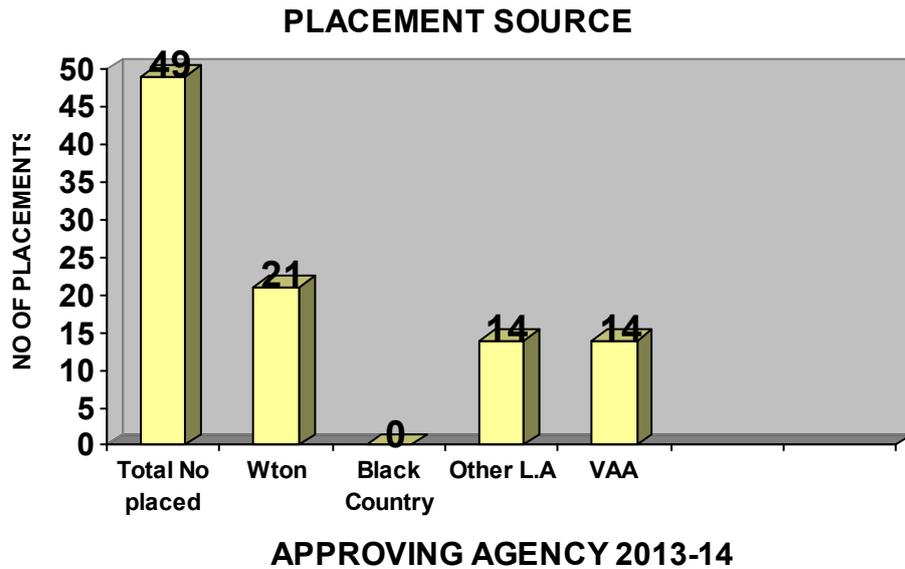
GENDER AND ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN LINKED



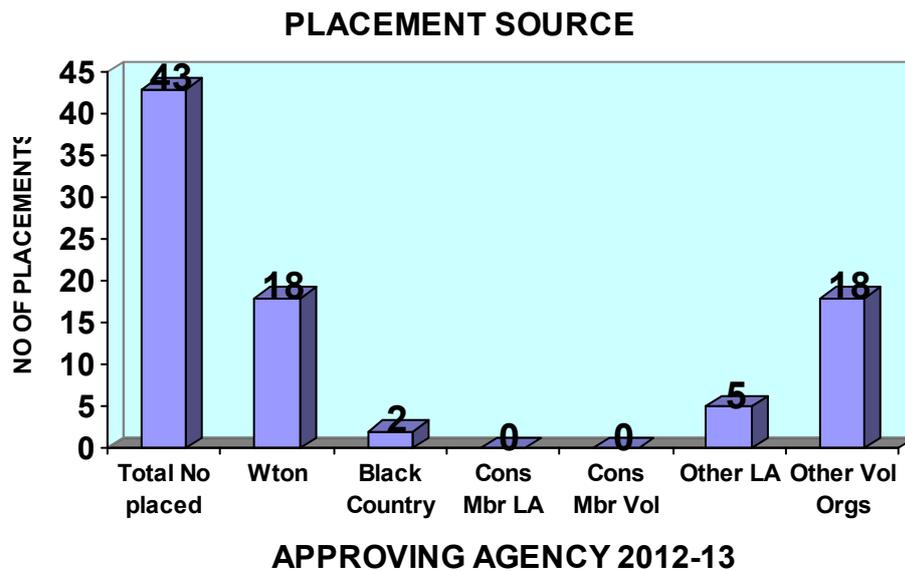
GENDER AND ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN LINKED



This year has seen an equalisation of the inter-agency fees meaning that all adoption agencies charge the same for providing a prospective adoption placement. For one child the cost is £27,000. The increased resources from the ARG has supported opportunities for increased inter-agency placements.



COMPARISON GRAPH FROM PREVIOUS REPORTING PERIOD BELOW



iii) Approval of prospective adopters

There were 30 approvals of prospective adoptive families during this period, including 3 approvals of concurrent carers. This is an increase of over 100% compared to the previous reporting period.

Our priority remains to assess prospective adopters who can meet the diverse needs of the children of Wolverhampton has waiting. However, as an adoption agency Wolverhampton is very aware of the children nationally that have a plan of adoption, and given the introduction of the equalisation of the inter agency fee to £27,000 for a single placement, with available resources, for approval, Wolverhampton may be able to offer prospective adoptive

families to other Local Authority's children bringing in additional resources to support the placement of Wolverhampton children.

ABC continues to experience a growth in numbers of enquiries and subsequent referrals. The number of referrals are exceeding projected figures showing the continued success of ABC (see Annex – Adoption in the Black Country end of year figures April 2013 – March 2014).

10. Number of children adopted and timeliness of children placed for adoption

There were 50 children adopted in this period, an increase from 35 last year and 20 the year before.

As part of the OFSTED Inspection Framework adoption agencies are required to report on the timeliness of children placed for adoption i.e. of those children adopted during this year – how many were placed with prospective adopters within 12 months of the ADM decision that they should be placed for adoption.

The target for this indicator is 75%. Wolverhampton is continuing to aim to ensure that this target is attained and have had an improvement plan in place to support this action. This year 68% of children adopted were placed with prospective adopters within 12 months of their decision that they should be placed for adoption, an improvement from 49% last year. When analysing the data, it remains apparent that Wolverhampton continues to be successful in placing harder to place children and it has to be acknowledged that this may take a while longer, but the outcome for the children is positive. Of the cohort of 50 children adopted during this period, 36% of the children were of BME backgrounds, compared to 29% last year.

What is also worthy to note is that 71% of children who have been adopted between January 2014 and March 2014 were placed within 12 months of the ADM decision. Of the four children whose timescales were well above the 12 month target in this period, 3 were of BME backgrounds, 2 were placed as a sibling group with their foster carers, 1 child had very complex needs and one had significant mental health complexities in her background.

Although Wolverhampton is keen to ensure we continue to improve performance so that children are placed in a timely fashion it has to be acknowledged that these four children would be expected to take a little longer to secure adoptive placements for.

11. Complaints

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

12. 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.

13. Summary of further developments

- i) The iPad's for all independent panel members have been purchased and are currently being set up with the appropriate programmes. It is anticipated that panel will be paperless by July 2014.
- ii) The LAC Service will be implementing a restructure in June 2014. The Adoption Service will deliver its services across three social work units each managed by a Consultant Social Worker. The service will be managed by a Senior Consultant Social Worker. A significant change in delivering this new model is that social work units will hold case responsibility for all children with a plan for adoption post the making of a Placement Order. It is envisaged this model will culture to support the improvements planned.

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