



**Walsall Adoption and Permanency Service**

# **Statement of Purpose**

December 2016

*Safe, Happy and Learning Well*



**Walsall Council**



# Index

<b>Section</b>	<b>Information</b>	<b>Page</b>
	Executive Summary .....	4
1	Introduction .....	6
2	Aims and Objectives .....	7
3	The Management Structure of the Service .....	9
4	The Services Provided to Children .....	10
5	The Services Provided to Birth Families .....	14
6	The Recruitment of Prospective Adopters .....	15
7	Adoption Panel .....	23
8	Adoption Support .....	21
9	The Provision for the Evaluation and Monitoring of Service Delivery .....	22
10	Complaints and Representations .....	23
11	Contact details for further information .....	23
12	Contact details for Ofsted .....	24
13	Contact details for Children's Rights Director .....	24
14	Service Development .....	24

# Executive Summary

This statement of purpose sets out the key aims and objectives of Walsall Council Adoption and Permanency Service. It explains the range of services available to children, prospective adopters, adoptive parents, birth family members, adopted adults and special guardians. Walsall Children's Services aims to provide a service to all that is user friendly, welcoming and non discriminatory.

## Our Vision

Walsall Council believes that wherever possible, a child is best brought up within its own birth family. If a child is unable to live with their birth family, Walsall Council is committed to finding a permanent alternative family who can offer safe and stable care throughout the duration of a child's life and into adulthood as soon as possible.

## Values

We respect all children, young people and their families – by listening carefully to their views and acting on them wherever possible. We are open and trustworthy – by making decisions transparently, involving others and doing what we say we will. We believe in the potential of all children – by doing all we can to support their development and talents. We are caring and responsible – by acting as good corporate parents and going the 'extra mile' in our supportive approaches to all children. We will protect vulnerable children and young people – by taking firm urgent action when needed, sharing information and not tolerating oppressive behaviour. We engage with children and young people, helping to empower them through supporting their aspirations and giving them responsibility. We celebrate and support cultural diversity and children's sense of identity.

The nature of the work undertaken by the Adoption and Permanency Service is wide ranging and includes:

- providing a child/children/young person with a permanent family through adoption, special guardianship or alternative permanent placement, such as long term fostering
- the recruitment, assessment, training, preparation and support of a wide range of prospective adoptive parents to meet the placement needs of babies, children and young people, which recognises the lifelong implications of adoption for all those affected.
- providing counselling to pregnant women, their partners and extended family where possible, who are considering adoption for their unborn child
- counselling birth families who lose or are at risk of losing their children to adoption through the making of Care and Placement orders.
- providing counselling for adopted adults, their birth relatives and significant others affected by adoption in accordance with schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- Providing support to special guardians following the granting of a special guardianship order
- undertaking assessments and preparing reports for the court in step-parent, inter-country and other non-agency adoption proceedings.
- providing an advice and consultancy service to social work colleagues who are working with a child and its family where adoption is the plan



The service is working jointly with its partners as part of the Adoption in the Black Country consortium (ABC); these partners are Wolverhampton, Dudley, Sandwell and Adoption Focus, a voluntary adoption agency. ABC have service level agreements in place with Adoption UK and After Adoption as it is clear this combined approach is not only cost effective but also that it has benefits for Walsall adopters, Walsall children with a plan of adoption and Walsall residents who are in some way affected by adoption, such as birth parents.

All workers have monthly supervision and an annual appraisal. The service actively seeks feedback from those in receipt of a service, from those who attend training and from Panel members to inform service development and practice.

Walsall Council Adoption Service and Permanency Service will be inspected at a minimum every three years as part of the Inspection of Services for children in need of help and protection; children looked after and care leavers by Ofsted. The Adoption Service will be inspected according to the standards laid down in the Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2011, Adoption National Minimum Standards and other relevant or related Regulations, such as the updated Care Planning Regulations. All recommendations from any future Ofsted inspections will be completed without delay. Walsall Council Adoption Service was judged as 'Good' following the last Ofsted inspection in August 2010. The priority for the coming year will be preparation for the next Ofsted inspection.

# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Statement of Purpose for Walsall Council Adoption and Permanency Service is required under the Adoption Services: National Minimum Standards 2014.

Standard 18 states that:

“The adoption agency and adoption support agency has a clear statement of purpose which is available to and understood by staff, volunteers, children, birth parents and guardians, prospective adopters and adopters, and is reflected in any policies, procedures and guidance.”

“The aims and objectives of the Statement of Purpose should be outcome focussed and, for adoption agencies, show how the service will meet outcomes for children.”

“The adoption agency formally approves the statement of purpose and children’s guides, and reviews them at least annually.”

“The agency’s policies, procedures and any written guidance to staff and volunteers accurately reflect the statement of purpose.”

- 1.2 This Statement of Purpose is available on the Walsall Council adoption website.
- 1.3 This statement of purpose sets out the key aims and objectives of Walsall Council Adoption and Permanency Service. It explains the range of services available to children, prospective adopters, adoptive parents, special guardians, birth family members and adopted adults.
- 1.4 The principles in this statement will apply to all agency placements, including inter-agency placements and non agency placements such as inter-country adoptions.



## 2 Aims and Objectives

- 2.1 Walsall Children's Services aims to provide a service to all its customers that is user friendly, welcoming and non discriminatory.
- 2.2 The aims of the Adoption and Permanency Service are underpinned by and encompassed in the Children and Young People's Plan 2013 to 2016.

### 2.3 Our Vision

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### 2.4 Values

We respect all children, young people and their families – by listening carefully to their views and acting on them wherever possible. We are open and trustworthy – by making decisions transparently, involving others and doing what we say we will. We believe in the potential of all children – by doing all we can to support their development and talents. We are caring and responsible – by acting as good corporate parents and going the 'extra mile' in our supportive approaches to all children. We will protect vulnerable children and young people – by taking firm urgent action when needed, sharing information and not tolerating oppressive behaviour. We engage with children and young people, helping to empower them through supporting their aspirations and giving them responsibility. We celebrate and support cultural diversity and children's sense of identity.

- 2.5 To put this into practice the service strives to promote the following principles:
  - Choice and flexibility to ensure the service meets the individual needs of all children who are being looked after by the local authority and have a plan of adoption or for whom adoption has been requested by the birth parent/s.
  - A creative approach to service delivery and problem solving.
  - Planning based on clear processes and partnerships to maximise its effectiveness.
  - Commitment to ongoing improvement against National Standards, legislative framework and internal service standards.
  - Commitment to promoting a trained carer workforce and professional work force, whose skills are fully utilised and who are able to develop a sense of pride and achievement in their work.
  - Values of respect, quality and equality.

2.6 Based on these principles, Walsall's Adoption and Permanency Service aims to provide a comprehensive adoption service to all those who require or request it. The service offered is based on prescribed National Minimum Standards, Statutory Requirements, sound principles, and evidence informed practice and comprehensive policies and procedures.

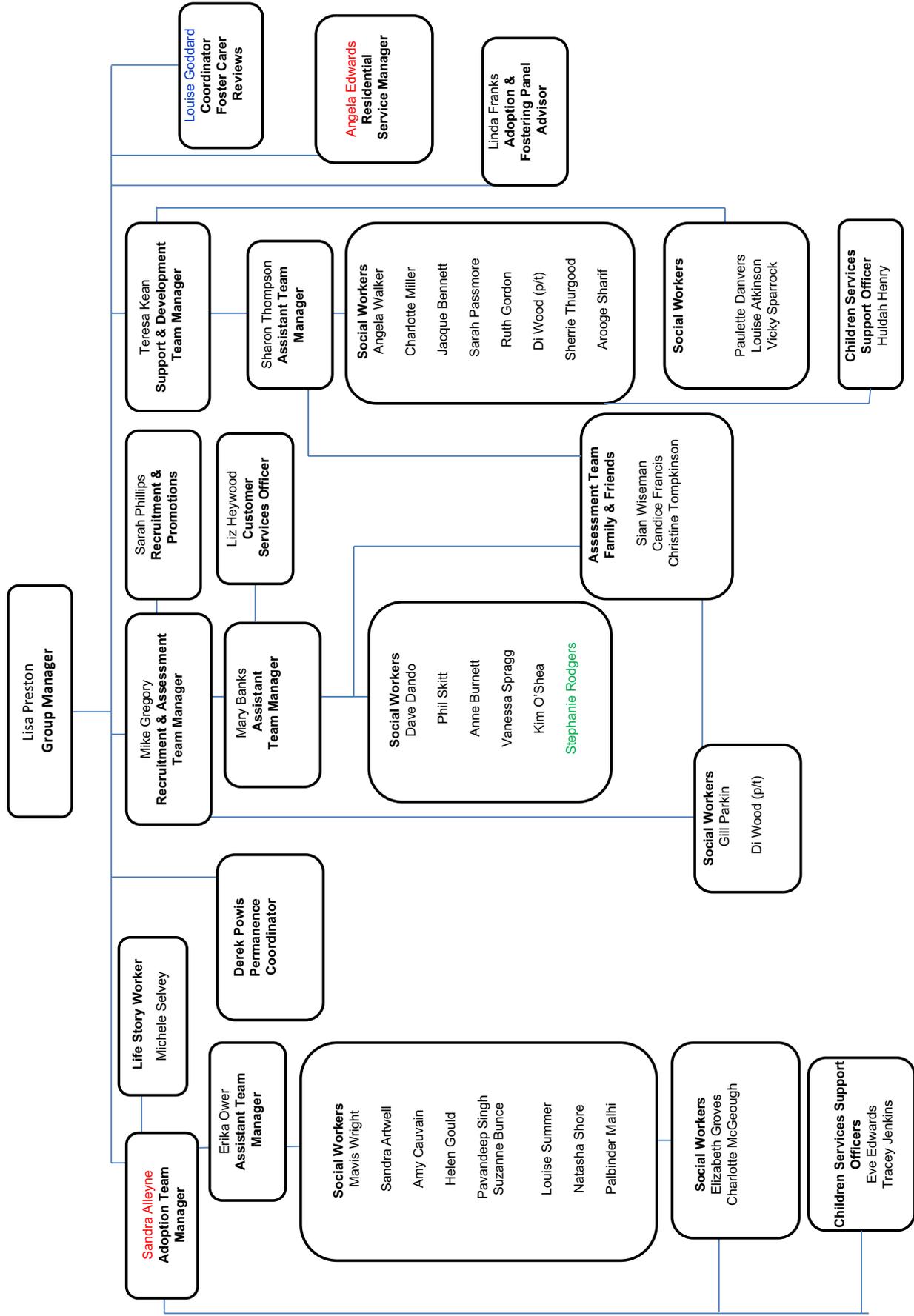
2.7 The nature of the work undertaken by the Adoption and permanency Service is as follows:-

- To provide a child/children/young person with a permanent family through adoption. This will meet the needs of that child/children/young person for stability, security and love into their adulthood and beyond or alternative permanence arrangement such as special guardianship or long term foster placement.
- Supporting the Agency Decision Maker in discharging their functions under Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012 and supporting statutory guidance re-issued in September 2012
- The recruitment, assessment, training, preparation and support of a wide range of prospective adoptive parents to meet the placement needs of babies, children and young people, which recognises the lifelong implications of adoption for all those affected.
- Counselling pregnant women and - wherever possible – their partners and extended families, where they wish to consider placing their baby for adoption
- Counselling birth families who lose or are at risk of losing their children to adoption through the making of Care and Placement orders.
- Providing counselling for adopted adults, their birth relatives and significant others affected by adoption in accordance with schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- Providing an advice and consultancy service to social work colleagues who are working with a child and its family where adoption is the plan.
- Undertaking assessments and preparing reports for the court in step-parent, inter-country and other non-agency adoption proceedings.
- Preparing reports for Walsall and other agencies' adoption panels and attending those panels to present cases. Reports are also prepared for the courts on all aspects of adoption work.
- Advising Walsall's adoption panel of all aspects of adoption work.
- Offering a comprehensive adoption support service to all those affected by adoption in line with the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2003 both prior to and after an adoption order has been made.
- Utilising resources for and from Adoption in the Black Country Consortium and Adoption West Midlands Consortium.
- Offering a comprehensive support service to special guardians in accordance with Special Guardianship Regulations 2005 and Special Guardianship (amendment) Regulation 2016

### **3 Management Structure**

- 3.1 Currently the Adoption and Permanence Service has twelve fulltime equivalent qualified social workers (including the team manager and assistant team manager) whose qualifications range from the the Diploma in Social Work and Support and Master of Science (Social Work). There are also two family support officer posts and one post for adoption life story work.
- 3.2 Social workers who are required to complete reports in relation to prospective adopters, adoption placement and any other reports that are required by the Adoption Service must have three years post qualifying experience in child care social work (including direct experience of adoption work). If they do not have this relevant experience, then they can undertake this work under the supervision of a worker who fulfils the above requirement.
- 3.3 Social workers in the Adoption and Permanence Service are also involved in the authority's programme for Post Qualification training. Some workers have other relevant qualifications, including the PQ (post qualifying) award and Practice Educators award. All social workers currently employed have a wide range of experience of working in the field of childcare and family placement and the Adoption Service benefits from a stable staff group. There has been considerable investment into the service to grow the provision to include support for special guardians and also family finding for permanence.
- 3.4 Through supervision and training, Walsall Council Children's Service ensures that all staff have the skills and knowledge to work effectively with adoption cases. The training available is reviewed regularly to make sure that it remains in line with practice and legal developments. Annual Appraisals are an integral part of staff development and progression. These can be reviewed on a six monthly basis if required.
- 3.5 The service ensures that appropriate written procedural and practice guidance is available to staff and that this is updated regularly in light of practice and legal changes. All policies and procedures pertaining to the delivery of Adoption Services are included in the Children's Services Procedures Manual. This is accessible by all staff via the intranet.
- 3.6 The Registered Manager for Walsall Council Adoption Agency is Lisa Preston, Group Manager, Provider Services.
- 3.7 The Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) is also Lisa Preston, Group Manager, Provider Services. Some of the tasks of the ASSA are sometimes delegated down to adoption support social workers.

# Provider Services



## 4 Services Provided for Children

- 4.1 Walsall Council Adoption and Permanency Service is committed to ensuring the best possible permanent outcome for a child. This will enhance life chances and promote a sense of safety, security and well-being.
- 4.2 The safety, security and well-being of children are an integral part of all care planning decisions.
- 4.3 The particular needs of disabled children and those with special needs will be fully recognised within the care planning process and in achieving permanency.
- 4.4 Adoption will be considered as a positive option for all Looked after Children who are unable to live with their birth family. This overarching approach to permanency is further explored in Walsall's 'Permanence Strategy'.
- 4.5 Once a child becomes looked after by the Local Authority, their plan for permanence must be considered by the time of their second statutory looked after review. Where it is clear that adoption is the plan, this can and must be agreed at the first Statutory Review.

In some situations, early permanence options for a child will need to be considered pre-birth. These cases will initially be considered by the Public Law Outline panel which is chaired by the Group Manager for Safeguarding and Family Support. Once the recommendation is made for the need to consider early permanence, a referral will be made to the adoption and permanency service.

- 4.6 The wishes and feelings of all children will be listened to and recorded. These wishes and feelings will be acted upon. Where it is not possible to act upon the wishes and feelings of a child, the reasons for not doing this will be clearly recorded on their file.
- 4.7 Birth family members will be encouraged to be involved in the care planning process for their child and their wishes and feelings will be listened to and acted upon. Where it is not possible to act upon the wishes and feelings of birth family members, the reasons for not doing this will be clearly recorded on their child's file.
- 4.8 The Child Permanence Report will provide a detailed and honest account as to why a child is unable to remain within their birth family. This document will be sensitive to the needs of the birth family. The report will be of a high standard to enable a decision to be made regarding a child's suitability to be placed for adoption, to facilitate the identification of a suitable match and ultimately provide the child with a clear and honest account of their birth family history and the circumstances of their adoption.
- 4.9 All children with a plan for Adoption will be given a 'Children's Guide to Adoption'. Walsall Adoption Service has two Children's Adoption Guides, one aimed at younger children and one aimed at slightly older children. The service has also produced a 'Children's Guide to Adoption Support'. Carers and social workers will be responsible for supporting the child in understanding the guides and in answering any questions they have about adoption.
- 4.10 Carers and significant others involved in a child's life will be encouraged to collect mementoes for a child from their past. These will be kept in the child's treasure box and given to adoptive parents to share with children as and when they are ready.
- 4.11 Existing carers who express an interest in adopting a child already in their care will always be considered and explored if appropriate.

- 4.12 All children moving onto adoption will have a Life Story Book which will explain to the child in a language they understand the reasons why they are being adopted. This will be provided to all children by the second Statutory Review of their adoption placement or at the very latest within 10 working days of their adoption ceremony.
- 4.13 All children moving onto adoption will have a Later Life Letter. This will be written by the child's social worker and is intended to be shared with children when they are old enough to fully understand their birth family history. This will be provided to all children by the second Statutory Review of their adoption placement or at the very latest within 10 working days of their adoption ceremony.
- 4.14 Children will have access to specialist help wherever needed to help them understand their journey and to help them make the transition to their permanent family. This help can be accessed for children already adopted, placed for adoption or for whom we are still trying to identify a family. This support will be provided by specially trained workers who have experience within the field of adoption.
- 4.15 When family finding for children, Walsall Council will endeavour to identify families who have been approved as suitable to adopt and who have satisfied all appropriate statutory clearances. Initially family finding social workers will consider any approved Walsall families that appear to be a possible match, immediately following this they will consider any approved families through Adoption in the Black Country Consortium, which includes Adoption Focus. If it is clear from the outset that no approved families are available locally to meet the needs of a child, they will immediately be referred to the National Adoption Register.
- 4.16 When family finding for children, all available resources will be utilised including the use of national adoption press, specific television or radio campaigns and also through more innovative techniques such as Adoption Activity Days. Children of sufficient age and understanding will be asked for their views on being advertised and wherever appropriate, they will be encouraged to participate.
- 4.17 Walsall Adoption Service will always wherever possible aim to keep siblings together and place them together for adoption. However, identifying families who can adopt siblings is a real challenge. The decision to separate any sibling group will only be made following the completion of a rigorous 'Together or Apart' assessment. This assessment must evidence that by not separating siblings the life chances of individual children will be adversely affected. It must evidence that the needs of individual children will not be met if they are placed together due to the complexity and combination of needs. Where decisions are made to separate siblings, the reasons for doing so must be clearly recorded on the children's adoption files.
- 4.18 When family finding for children every effort will be made to identify families who can meet the holistic needs of children, which includes identifying families who can meet a child's racial, cultural and religious heritage as well as any needs arising out of their complex birth family history. However, it is not Walsall's policy to 'wait' forever for a family who can meet all of a child's needs. Each family will be considered on their capacity or potential to meet the needs of an identified child. Where it is clear a family will need support in helping them to meet a particular need, this support will be provided by the Adoption Agency.
- 4.19 Once a suitable match has been identified and prior to information being shared with a child, the identified family will be provided with all relevant information about the child to

enable them to make an informed decision. For the majority of children, the identified family will be offered the opportunity to attend a 'Child Appreciation Day'. This will give families the opportunity to hear directly from the people who know the child best such as foster carers, teachers and health visitors. This forum enables the child to 'come to life'. 'Child Appreciation Days are done prior to attendance at Adoption panel wherever possible'

- 4.20 If all attempts to identify a suitable family are not successful, the care plan for the child will be reviewed initially 3 months following the making of a placement order and thereafter 6 monthly to determine whether a care plan of adoption is still appropriate.
- 4.21 All children placed for adoption will have an Adoption Support plan in place. This support plan will address the need for any on-going adoption support such as financial support or therapeutic intervention. The support plan will also detail the level of post adoption contact between birth family members, adopters and adopted children. The expectation is that letterbox arrangements will be in place for all children; these will be managed through Walsall's post adoption service. Some children will have direct contact either with a birth parent or birth relative. These arrangements will also be managed through the post adoption service. All Adoption Support plans are reviewed on an annual basis.
- 4.22 Once a child is adopted, Walsall Adoption Service will store children's Adoption files electronically. All original documents such as birth certificates, legal orders and letters from birth family members will be scanned onto the electronic file but will also be retained in paper form and kept in a secure storage facility. All records will be made available to adopted children once they reach 18 years of age at their request, or in some circumstances before, if an adoptive parent makes a particular approach on behalf of their child. Adoption files will be retained for 100 years.



## **5 The Services Provided to Birth Families**

- 5.1 Walsall Adoption Service will endeavour to support all birth family members affected by adoption. Through its arrangements with Adoption in the Black Country Consortium, the provision of support for birth family members is provided by 'After Adoption'. After Adoption provide independent support and counselling to birth family members where adoption is the plan for their child. Following the review decision that a child's care plan is now adoption, birth parents are automatically referred to After Adoption unless they specifically ask not to be referred.
- 5.2 The views of birth family members will always be sought regarding the plan of adoption particularly in relation to religion and also any future contact plans. These views should be recorded both on the Child's Permanence Report and the child's adoption file. Future contact plans will consider the importance of frequency of contact, who should be involved in the contact arrangements and also the review of any contact plans.
- 5.3 Birth parents will be advised they can seek support with writing letters to their birth child or any other adoption related matters either from "After Adoption" or from Walsall adoption support social workers. This support also extends to birth family members.
- 5.4 The child's social worker will make every effort to obtain clear and appropriate information about birth family members, family history and any hopes and aspirations they have for their child's future. They will also be asked to contribute to the child's life story through the provision of photographs, letters or mementoes.
- 5.5 Where appropriate, birth family members will also be offered the opportunity to meet with the child's family finding social worker to advise of their views regarding the adoption plan. Once an adoptive family has been identified they will be given limited information about them which must not in any way jeopardise the security of any future placement.
- 5.6 Where considered appropriate, birth parents will be given the opportunity to meet with the adopters prior to placement. Adoptive parents will be reminded of the importance of keeping safe any material provided by the birth parents or extended birth family members for the child to have in later life.
- 5.7 Walsall Adoption Service will give information to birth families about the Adoption Contact Register and the provision of intermediary services.
- 5.8 Birth family members have the right to make representations or complaints through Walsall Council's complaints procedure.

## 6 The Recruitment of Prospective Adopters

6.1 The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Adoption UK, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (CoramBAAF), and the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) consider that the following customer care and service standards represent good practice and encourage all agencies to observe them. Walsall is committed to delivering upon these customer care standards.

### 6.2 Overall aims:

- To ensure that there is a positive welcome for all who may be able to care for children in the care system.
- To increase the number of prospective adopters able to meet the needs of children in care.
- To speed up the process of adoption whilst ensuring that it is effective and supportive for children and adults.
- To embed best practice in customer service across the sector

### 6.3 Commitments:

- to respect and value you at all times
- to provide accurate and useful information
- to manage all information in line with the Data Protection Act
- to treat you with sensitivity and empathy
- to listen to you and take your feedback on board
- to be polite, courteous and professional
- to respond to your enquiries in a timely manner
- to respond to your enquiries clearly and accurately
- to ensure all services are accessible and easy to use
- to apologise when we get things wrong and work with you to put them right
- to offer the opportunity for you to explore/share experiences with those who have successfully adopted.

6.4 To ensure we are able to fulfil the above aims and commitments, Adoption in the Black Country operating on behalf of Walsall Council Adoption Service will always endeavour to;

- answer all telephone calls within four rings
- if it is not possible to answer a call, use voicemail and return calls within 1 working day
- respond to emails within 1 working day of receiving them

- send you information about adoption within 5 working days of your initial expression of interest
- use any comments to improve the information provided and to inform national planning and service provision
- ensure the accuracy of information provided by updating and using verified sources and by training staff and adopter volunteers
- if you are not satisfied, we will process your complaint in line with local procedures

6.5 Following the receipt of your Next Steps form, Walsall Council Adoption Service will always endeavour to do the following;

- Within 5 days of receiving your Next Steps form, we will contact you to arrange for you to speak to a social worker
- we will complete the Stage One assessment process within 2 months of you submitting the registration of interest and should this not be possible, will keep you informed of any reasons for delay
- we will complete the Stage Two assessment process within 4 months of you submitting an application for assessment (after Stage One) and should this not be possible, keep you informed
- to be sensitive to a time and approach that suits you
- before any link/match with any children is confirmed, we will discuss a post adoption support plan with you
- we have a duty to inform you of the post-adoption support provided locally. You are also entitled to an assessment of adoption support needs at any time
- once approved, if you have not been matched with a child/ren within 3 months, we will refer you to the National Adoption Register
- if for whatever reason, we are unable to assist you, we will refer you to First4Adoption for more information (0300 222 0022; [www.first4adoption.org.uk](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk))
- if you are not satisfied we will process your complaint in line with local procedures and, if unsuccessful after the Stage Two assessment, provide the details of the Independent Review Mechanism

6.6 Fuller detail on the agreed policies and procedures governing the functioning of the adoption service are included in the Children's Service Procedure Manual.

6.7 Applications from foster carers who already care for a child where the plan is adoption are welcomed. In such circumstances their assessment will progress straight through to Stage Two and their approval will be subject to a fast track assessment process, which should take 4 months. The fast track process will also apply to all second time adopters who have been approved since 2005. In all other cases the following will apply;

## Pre-Stage One Recruitment

- 6.8 Walsall's recruitment activity is undertaken by Adoption in the Black Country Consortium (ABC). This collaboration between Dudley, Wolverhampton, Sandwell, Walsall and Adoption Focus enables the agencies to share all marketing, recruitment and training activity. All those enquiring about adoption will have either been directed to ABC through First4Adoption or through their own enquiries with one of the Black Country Local Authorities.
- 6.9 Adoptive parents are recruited to provide permanent families for children with a wide range of needs, taking account of their gender, ethnicity, language, religion, background experiences and disability. Enquiries are welcomed from all sections of the community who may be able to meet the needs of Looked After children. Children needing adoptive families come from a wide variety of backgrounds and an infinite variety of needs. The agency therefore embraces the diversity of applicants who have differing life experiences and a range of skills. However, recruitment activity will be based on the needs of the children from within the Black Country region. Whilst recruitment activity can sometimes change, essentially we need families for single children of all ages, including babies but also for children aged 3 years and above. We especially need families for boys aged 2 and over, for sibling groups so that brothers and sisters can remain together, for black and mixed heritage children and for children with special needs. If from our initial contact, it seems unlikely we could use a family as a potential resource; enquirers will be told this and referred back to First4Adoption, who will try and put them in contact with an adoption agency that can help them.
- 6.10 A person or couple cannot apply to adopt unless they meet the eligibility criteria to apply for an adoption order. This eligibility criterion is that applicants have to be over 21 years of age, they have to be domiciled in the British Islands and have been habitually resident in the British Islands for at least a year before they can apply for an adoption order. Finally, no applicant or adult member of their household should have been convicted or cautioned in respect of a specified offence.
- 6.11 Further details of what constitutes a specified offence can be found in the Department for Education's Adoption Statutory Guidance and in Walsall's Children's Procedures Manual.
- 6.12 Whilst these are the legal requirements, there are a number of good practice considerations that Local Authorities will address. These are not applicable in all cases and every enquirer is considered on a case by case basis. However, some of these are as follows:
- there should be a bedroom available for each adopted child unless adopting a same sex sibling pair in which case they can share
  - prospective adopters should have lived in the same area for at least a year so that local support networks have been developed or begun to be developed
  - there should be no on-going major house renovations taking place or due to take place within the initial stages of the placement, this is because adopting a child can be hugely challenging task especially in the early stages of placement and therefore all other areas of potential stress such as house renovations should be avoided

- the same principle applies to significant debt issues, due to the associated stress in dealing with debt. The key is often about attitude to management of money. However, the onus is on the enquirer and later prospective adopter to evidence how they will incorporate the financial needs of an adopted child
- if an enquirer has a child under the age of two years in their care, we may ask them to consider waiting a little longer before we accept a Registration of Interest. This is because we want to ensure placement opportunities are maximised for all adopters.
- the issue of smoking and general life style factors is also important. Walsall follows BAAF guidance which is that if enquirers are looking to adopt a child under the age of 5 years they must have ceased smoking for at least a 6 month period. This is because of the associated health risks of passive smoking for children. Those wishing to adopt children over the age of 5 will be considered. However, because of the associated health risks for all children as a result of passive smoking we would urge all those wishing to adopt to seriously consider cessation programmes as this will significantly increase the chances of placement of a child. The use of E-cigarettes will be considered on a case by case basis.
- most local Authorities will expect that enquirers will not have had a child removed from their care because of child abuse allegations. This is because the vast majority of Looked After Children have already been removed from difficult and abusive situations and it would therefore not be appropriate to place any child within a similar setting again where the likelihood of significant harm being caused again is high
- enquirers who are still having investigations or treatment in the hope of achieving a pregnancy will need to be informed that we would not consider proceeding with any application until treatment has ended. It is essential that enquirers recognise and come to terms with their infertility before moving on to start the adoption process. The length of time needed between finishing treatment before moving onto adoption will be made on a base by case basis
- all children will have experienced loss; to help them recover they will need resilient and patient adopters. If an enquirer has experienced a recent loss or bereavement, they may be advised to wait a little longer until such time that they can fully support a child to come to terms with their loss and separation from birth family and significant others such as foster carers

6.13 Once ABC has received an adoption enquiry either through the telephone, internet, First4Adoption or a local Authority, they will make contact with the enquirer within 5 working days. ABC will send an adoption information pack and invite enquirers to attend the next available ABC information evening; these are held at least monthly. Those enquiring about adoption can also view significant amounts of information through First4Adoption website, ABC website and Adoption UK website.

6.14 During attendance at an ABC information evening, enquirers will be shown a promotional DVD and will receive verbal information about adoption through a short presentation. This will also include information on Fostering for Adoption. They will be offered the opportunity to have a more detailed discussion with a social worker. If, following this, the enquirer feels adoption is right for them, they will be asked to complete the Adoption in the Black Country 'Next Steps Form'.

6.15 The decision as to which Black Country Authority will progress prospective adopters through stages 1 and 2 of the adoption process will be made within 5 working days and enquirers will be notified in writing. Where a prospective adopter lives, works and has their connections alongside the current recruitment needs of the individual agency will often determine the decision as to which agency enquirers are referred to. To protect the confidentiality and safety of children and their adopters, those prospective adopters living in Walsall will not usually be assessed by Walsall as Walsall is unlikely to be able to place Walsall children within the Walsall area. This is the same for the other Black Country Authorities. It is therefore highly likely if a prospective adopter lives in Walsall, their 'Next Steps Form' will be sent to Dudley, Sandwell or Wolverhampton.

## **Stage One of the Adoption Process**

- 6.16 Following receipt of a Next Steps Form, you will be contacted to arrange for a social worker to visit you in your home. The visit will focus on the following areas;
- Whether Walsall can accept your Registration of Interest (ROI)
  - If we can accept a ROI, we will discuss the completion of the Stage One Plan
  - We will discuss the required statutory checks which will need to be completed; this will include DBS checks, Local Authority checks, medicals, employment references, personal references which includes one related family reference and two un-related references from people who know the applicants well. In some circumstances references from ex-partners will also be required
  - We will discuss the assessment process including details as required in the prospective adopters report and timescales for completion.
  - The on-line training requirements as part of Stage One and later Stage Two training requirements
  - We will tell you about the needs of children waiting for adoption
  - We will ask you to complete the 'Tell Us About You' booklet, which will give the assessing social worker valuable information about the history, experiences and values of those seeking to adopt. It will also provide some insight into the day to day life of prospective adopters and their motivation for choosing adoption
- 6.17 Following acceptance of a ROI, from this point onwards enquirers are referred to as 'Prospective Adopters'. This stage is intended to take no more than two months to complete. This stage is referred to as 'Adopter Led', which essentially means prospective adopters will be exploring the extent of their interest and capacity for adoption, prior to making a firm decision as to whether to proceed.
- 6.18 Prospective Adopters have two months in which to complete Stage One. Following the completion of Stage One the Adoption Service, acting on behalf of the adoption agency, will issue a Pre-Assessment Decision. This will either be that the prospective adopter can progress to Stage Two, that more time is needed to complete Stage One providing a full explanation as to the reasons why, or that the prospective adopter is not suitable to progress to Stage Two and is therefore not suitable to adopt a child. If the latter decision is reached, a full explanation will be given in writing including the process for representations to be made if required. During Stage One prospective adopters will only have access to the council complaints procedure; there is no access available to

the Independent Review Mechanism.

- 6.19 Once prospective adopters have received their pre-assessment decision to continue onto Stage Two, they have six months in which to notify the agency that they wish to proceed to Stage Two- the Assessment Stage. They must formally notify the agency in writing of their decision. If they do not notify of their wish to proceed within six months, they may be asked to repeat Stage One again.
- 6.20 Where there is an expression of interest in a particular child/children and the family are not approved adopters and live a considerable distance away, issues need to be considered with regard to the assessment, support and attendance at training. In such cases an initial visit to ascertain details and to check out the practicalities may be necessary to determine whether the Registration of Interest can be accepted.

## **Stage Two of the Adoption Process**

- 6.21 Following the formal notice of the prospective adopter's decision to proceed to Stage Two, they will be asked to sign the Stage Two Assessment Agreement. This details the expectations of the assessing social worker and adoption agency and the prospective adopter, timescales for completion of the assessment and any other matters which are considered relevant. It will also explain in some depth the purpose of the assessment.
- 6.22 Prospective adopters will be expected to complete a three day intensive adoption preparation training programme as close to the beginning of Stage Two as possible. This training is a joint programme offered through ABC; it is run monthly to ensure prospective adopters are not kept waiting for a training course to become available. This training will cover the aspects of adoption which were not covered in Stage One.
- 6.23 The assessment will be completed using the Prospective Adopters Report pro-forma, the completed contents of which will be shared with the prospective adopters, with the exception of the references, which remain confidential to the agency and the referee. The assessment is intended to be an in-depth analysis of an individual's ability or couple's ability to incorporate the needs of a Looked After Child. Some Looked After Children have complex needs and therefore an assessment is needed of a person's ability to meet those needs both immediately and for the duration of the child's journey into adulthood. The assessment will explore in detail the contents of the 'Tell Us About You Booklet'. It will, where required, ask sometimes difficult and challenging questions, all of which are intended to assess the resilience, commitment and motivation of prospective adopters.
- 6.24 During the assessment, if felt appropriate, discussion will take place regarding Fostering for Adoption. Essentially this means caring for a child with a plan of adoption on a fostering basis prior to the court granting the final placement order. Suitability to offer a foster to adopt placement will be addressed as part of the adoption assessment and if deemed suitable, those interested can be dual approved as an adopter and a foster carer following a recommendation by the Adoption and Permanence panel and a decision by the Agency Decision Maker. Some cases necessitate the approval of a child in a specific foster to adopt placement, in these situations the Agency Decision Maker can make an amendment to a carers approval and can also agree that a specific child can be placed with those carers.
- 6.25 Following completion of the Prospective Adopters Report, the prospective adopters will receive a copy of the report and are invited to forward their comments in writing

within 5 working days. The prospective adopters also sign the prospective adopters' report accordingly to confirm that they have read its contents. Once this has been completed the Prospective Adopters Report will be referred to the Adoption Panel for a recommendation regarding suitability to adopt. The recommendation from the panel will then be referred to the Adoption Agency Decision Maker who makes the decision regarding suitability to adopt.

- 6.26 Stage Two will end with the Agency Decision Maker's Decision as to whether a prospective adopter is suitable to adopt. The stage should take no longer than four months; reasons for any delays should be clearly recorded on the file.
- 6.27 If the Agency Decision Maker is minded not to recommend suitability to adopt a child, the prospective adopter can either choose to have their case referred to the Independent Review Mechanism or to complain through the council complaints process. Prospective adopters cannot choose both options.
- 6.28 If during the course of the assessment there are concerns about suitability to adopt, the adoption service can present a brief report to the adoption panel. The purpose of this report is to give a prospective adopter an opportunity for this application to be considered by the adoption panel. The adoption panel may advise to progress to a full assessment or to terminate an assessment. If this recommendation is agreed by the Agency Decision Maker, the prospective adopter can either ask to be referred to the Independent Review Mechanism or to complain through the council complaints process; they cannot choose both options.
- 6.29 Prospective adopters are invited to attend the Adoption Panel themselves in order to answer any questions and to meet with the members who will be making the recommendations with regard to their suitability to adopt. Not all applicants will wish to attend and they may waive their right to do this. Non attendance does not prejudice the making of a recommendation or decision that the prospective adopters are suitable to adopt.

## **Matching process for Approved Adopters**

- 6.30 All approved adopters will be issued with a matching plan following their approval. This plan will detail the expectations of the adoption agency and the adopters and will also provide information about how the matching process will work.
- 6.31 The first visit to discuss progress with family finding will happen within the first 4 weeks of adoption panel. Following this contact should be at least 6 weekly.
- 6.32 Matching will initially start locally in Walsall and if after three months a match has not been identified then within the Black Country. At the end of the 3 month period all approved adopters will be referred to the Adoption Register. If at the time of approval, the likelihood of an in-house match looks unlikely, the manager can decide to refer to the Adoption Register at an earlier stage.
- 6.33 Once a match has been identified, adopters will receive all written material, photographs and DVD of the child. Adopters will have the opportunity to meet key people involved in a child's life in order to try and bring the child to life. This is often done through the convening of a 'Child Appreciation Day', which gives adopters the opportunity to hear about a child from the people who know them best such as foster carers, teachers and health visitors. Following extensive consultation, if both the

adopter and the agency feel the match is right, it will be referred back to the Adoption Panel for a recommendation and then passed to the Agency Decision Maker who will either agree or not agree with the recommendation. If the decision is not to agree, the adopters can make representations through the council complaints process, they will not have access to the Independent Review Mechanism.

- 6.34 Once a placement has been made the child's social worker will be involved in supervising the child in placement as required by adoption legislation and regulations. The focus of the supervision is to promote secure attachments for the child and to ensure the needs of the child are being appropriately met. The social worker for the adoptive family will also visit to provide appropriate guidance and support to all members of the adoptive family.
- 6.35 Children placed for adoption are still looked after children and as such they will continue have statutory reviews to monitor their overall care plan until the final adoption order is granted. This process involves an Independent Reviewing officer (IRO) whose responsibility it is to ensure that all aspects of the child's welfare and future plans are progressing satisfactorily.
- 6.36 Where a placement for adoption ends in an unplanned way or there is an imminent risk of it doing so, the service will convene a meeting to consider what has happened and to help with planning for the future. Reports of placements that end in this way and the outcome of subsequent meetings will be considered by the Adoption Panel.
- 6.37 The Agency recognises the need to be flexible in arranging comprehensive support to adoption placements. In order to achieve this, an adoption support plan is compiled for each child placed. These plans consider what support needs the child and the adoptive family has and how these support needs can be met. Often these support needs can be met through existing networks within the family and from universally available services. However, sometimes more specialist support may be required such as from agencies specialising in supporting adoption placements, such as Adoption UK.

## **Inter-Country Adoptions**

- 6.38 The service undertakes assessments of people wishing to adopt a child from a country outside of the United Kingdom. In such cases a set charge is made for the work involved, which includes undertaking the assessment, consideration by Walsall Adoption Panel, following up references and statutory checks and all administration.
- 6.39 Where people are seeking to adopt a related child from overseas the set charge will also apply, although the Adoption Service may reduce or waive the fee in exceptional circumstances.
- 6.40 While it is recognised that the needs of most children will be served more effectively by adoption within the U.K it may in specific circumstances be appropriate to consider applicants not domiciled in the U.K to meet a child's particular needs with respect to race and culture.

## 7 Adoption Panel

- 7.1 Walsall's Adoption Panel and Adoption and Permanence Panel meet twice a month. During busy times, additional panels are scheduled
- 7.2 For decisions regarding the suitability of children for adoption, these are referred straight to the Adoption Agency Decision Maker. However, if the child is being relinquished for adoption by their birth parents the case will be referred to either the Adoption Panel or the Adoption and Permanence Panel prior to being presented to the Adoption Agency Decision Maker. The Agency Decision Maker meets with the Panel Advisor on a fortnightly basis.
- 7.3 The Agency Decision Maker for Walsall is the Assistant Director for Children's Specialist Services. The second Agency Decision Maker is the Head of Service for Safeguarding.
- 7.4 The Panels are independently chaired and there are vice-chair arrangements in place. The Adoption Agency Panel Advisor is employed by the council but is independent of any decision making within the adoption service. The role of the Agency Advisor is to quality assure all the paperwork being presented to panel and to address any quality issues with social workers and respective managers. They are also responsible for the management of the central list of Panel Members, which includes recruitment of members, training and annual appraisals.
- 7.5 The Adoption Panel Agency Advisor in conjunction with the panel chair and the manager of the adoption service is responsible for producing the Annual Adoption Service Report. This is provided to the executive side of the council and is made available for all staff and interested parties, such as adopters.
- 7.6 Anyone attending panel is provided with an evaluation form so that feedback on panel performance can be monitored. This feedback forms part of the Annual Adoption Service Report.
- 7.7 The panel receives monthly progress reports on all approved adopters and all placements until the final adoption order is achieved.



## 8 Adoption Support Services

- 8.1 Since October 2005, the Adoption Service has ensured that all new adoptive placements have an adoption support plan, which specifies Walsall's and other key agencies' future commitments to the placement in terms of practical and professional support, allowances, involvement in any contact arrangements, specialist medical or therapeutic inputs and general advice. The plan is subject to review every 12 months.
- 8.2 The service provides an Intermediary service to adopted adults and birth relatives in accordance with Section 98 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Adoption Information and Intermediary services (pre-commencement Adoptions) Regulations 2005.
- 8.3 Where families seek assistance after the adoption has taken place, the service will respond in a way that recognises the special circumstances of adoptive families. In circumstances where families are seeking specialist help for their children, this will be considered subject to an assessment unless it has already been agreed as part of the post adoption plan.
- 8.4 Walsall Adoption Service provides a 'letterbox' (indirect written contact) facility through which birth families and adoptive children and families can communicate as part of an agreed plan.
- 8.5 The service provides a counselling service for adult adoptees who wish to access their birth and adoption records in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Adoption Act 2002.
- 8.6 The service provides assistance and counselling to birth relatives who seek information about their adult adopted children in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Adoption Act 2002.
- 8.7 In line with the adoption support services regulations, the agency arranges regular peer support meetings; these meetings provide opportunities for adopters to meet both with adoption social workers and other adopters. These meetings are mainly informal, organised with other adopters, but should there be a need for a more focused meeting this is arranged. Every year the Adoption Service arranges a social event for adoptive families.
- 8.8 Walsall council is able to make applications to the national Adoption Support Fund to fund identified therapeutic needs of children who are either placed for adoption or who are adopted. In order to satisfy the requirements of fund, applications for funding can only be made following an adoption support assessment with a clear recommendation that therapeutic support is needed.

## **9 The System in place to monitor and evaluate the provision of services**

- 9.1 All workers have monthly supervision. This focuses on the completion of key tasks but also equally important the growth of the reflective practitioner through an individual workforce development plan. All workers also have an annual appraisal, which measures performance and outcomes for individual children and adopters and also provides a focus on the development of the reflective practitioner. Supervision and appraisal standards are closely monitored by the agency for compliance with national and service standards.
- 9.2 The adoption panel receives an annual report about its activity and performance. The panel takes a pro-active role on meeting its obligations to monitor the service's performance against the National Minimum Standards. To this effect, it receives routine information about whether time scales have been met for each individual case presented to it.
- 9.3 Adoption panel members all have an annual appraisal, which focuses on their overall development of their panel member role but also provides them with an opportunity to express their views on the overall function of the adoption agency.
- 9.4 Six monthly adoption service reports are presented to Cabinet in relation to the management and outcomes of the adoption service
- 9.5 All prospective adopters attend an adoption preparation course. Evaluation forms are provided at the end of every day which enables the trainers to monitor the effectiveness and quality of delivery of the training.
- 9.6 All enquirers are advised of the service's complaints procedure and encouraged to provide feedback of their experiences of the service. To this end, all enquirers who receive an initial visit are given a feedback form requesting their comments.
- 9.7 All prospective adoptive parents are asked to provide feedback regarding their attendance at adoption panel. The panel are provided with this feedback through the annual report.
- 9.8 We regularly ask panel members for their feedback on the process of the panel and evaluate this to continuously improve the effectiveness of the panel.
- 9.9 We seek the views of adopters through our attendance at adoption social events and also coffee mornings. These views are considered in the future delivery of adoption services.
- 9.10 We seek the views of adopted children through the same means as those gathered of adopters. We have also used some of our adopted children's views in the designs of our children's guides.
- 9.11 The adoption service works with the Performance and Outcomes Team to develop systems which monitor the quality of service provision to ensure continuous improvement.
- 9.12 Mechanisms are in place which regularly audits the delivery and development of the adoption service against National Minimum standards and the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

# 10 Complaints about the service

## Walsall Council Children's Services Complaints Procedure:

### Stage 1:

The expectation is that the majority of complaints should be considered (and resolved) at this stage. There is a 10 working day time limit for this part of the process and most Stage 1 complaints should ideally be concluded within this time limit.

Written acknowledgement of all complaints will be sent to the complainant or representative within five working days. Where we cannot provide a complete response within 10 working days we can implement a further 10 working days' extension.

The maximum amount of time that Stage 1 should take is 20 working days and in most cases the local manager responsible for the service will be able to resolve your complaint.

If necessary, to ensure that a young person who is making a complaint receives suitable support to do so, we may also suspend Stage 1 until an Advocate has been appointed.

### Stage 2:

If the person complaining is not satisfied with the response at this stage, they can ask for their complaint to be independently investigated

This investigation will be arranged by the Customer Care Team and carried out by an independent person - someone who is not directly involved with this service. This investigating officer will prepare a report which, after being considered by Children's Services, is provided to the complainant.

In some instances it may be more appropriate for a complaint to move straight to Stage Two of the procedure. The Customer Care Team can advise further on this.

### Stage 3

If anyone complaining is still unhappy then they have the right to ask for their complaint to be considered by the Complaints Review Panel. The Panel has three members, two of whom are local councillors and a third member who chairs the Panel and is entirely independent of Social Services and the Council.

If the complaint reaches this stage, the Customer Care Team will maintain contact with those making complaints.

### How long does it take?

An acknowledgement will be sent within 5 working days and a full reply within a further 15 working days depending upon the complexity of the issues raised. If the complaint is a complex one and needs more time to be investigated, this will be explained at an early stage, you will be told of any delay and advised of the timescale for provision of a full reply.. The Fostering Service is committed to learning from complaints and to use this learning to improve service delivery.

## **What if complainants are still not satisfied?**

This is as far as complaints can go within Children's Services, but if you remain dissatisfied, you can complain to the Local Government Ombudsman.

### **The Ombudsman looks into complaints about local councils.**

The Ombudsman looks into complaints about local councils.

The kinds of complaints they deal with are:

If the council;

- does something wrong
- does something they should not have done
- fails to do something it should have done

Contact the Customer Care Team who will send you a copy of the Ombudsman's leaflet "Complaint about the Council."

Contact details for Customer Care Team

Council House, Lichfield Street, Walsall WS1 1TW

Tel: 01922 650489 Fax: 01922 614210

## **11 Contact details for Customer Care Team**

Council House Lichfield Street Walsall WS1 1TW

Tel: 0800 085 6018

Fax: 01922 614210

Email: [customercareteamsocialcare@walsall.gov.uk](mailto:customercareteamsocialcare@walsall.gov.uk).

## **12 Contact details for further information**

Family Placement Service 106 Essington Road, New Invention,

Willenhall, West Midlands, WV12 5EX

Telephone: 08451112834

## **13 Contact details for Office of the Children's Commissioner**

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street London

SW1P 3B

## 14 Service Development

- 14.1 Walsall Council Adoption Service will be inspected as part of the Inspection of Services for children in need of help and protection; children looked after and care leavers by Ofsted. The Adoption Service will be inspected according to the standards laid down in the Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2011 and 2014 and other relevant Adoption Agency Regulations and also Adoption National Minimum Standards 2014. All recommendations from any future Ofsted inspections will be actioned without delay. Walsall Council Adoption Service is currently judged as 'Good' following the inspection in August 2010. The priority for the coming year will be preparation for the next Ofsted inspection.
- 14.2 The service is working jointly with other organisations and particularly with our Adoption in the Black Country partners to continue to develop services where it is clear that doing so will provide benefits for children requiring adoption in Walsall. The joining of Adoption Focus to the consortium has already produced more local matches for children, this trend is likely to continue as the new consortium embeds itself further. Consortium members are eager to continue to further develop Adoption in the Black Country through the formation of Adoption@heart, Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). The RAA is scheduled to go live in April 2018, work is underway with our partners, Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Dudley, Shropshire, Telford and voluntary partners Adoption Focus, After Adoption and Adoption UK to ensure that the RAA is able to fulfil the Government expectations of making adoption more accessible and successful for more children and for more adopter.
- 14.3 until the launch of Adoption@Heart, the priorities for the service are to continue to ensure an adequate supply of adoptive families for Walsall children requiring adoption, to strive for continuous improvement to key scorecard indicators, to continue to support and promote alternative permanence options for a broader range of children and to continue to support the reduction in the number of looked after children by increasing adoptions and by securing more Special Guardianship orders for looked after children.
- 14.4 The Adoption Service is now co-located with fostering colleagues and children's teams, it is hoped this will facilitate more joined up work, particularly in the area of early defensible decision making which facilitates permanency for a wider range of children and in embedding Fostering for Adoption across the council.
- 14.5 The Adoption panel advisor in consultation with the Group Manager for provider services will continue to provide bi-annual reports to Cabinet in relation to their role as corporate parents within the adoption service; this will include information about numbers of children waiting for adoption at different stages in the process, numbers of adopters who are approved and in the process of being approved and the likelihood of them being matched with Walsall children, the performance of adoption panel and also our performance in relation to our adoption scorecard.
- 14.6 The service will continue to identify how we can work more effectively for the benefit of children and young people and also adopters. We are always keen to hear of ways in which we can improve, we welcome feedback from anyone.







**Adoption Team**

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