



Walsall Adoption Service

Statement of Purpose

January 2014

“Better together for children”



Walsall Council

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Executive Summary

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

The vision of Walsall Council Adoption Service mirrors the overriding vision contained in our Children and Young People's Plan 2013 to 2016 - http://www.childrenpartnership.walsall.org.uk/children_and_young_people__8217_s_plan_2013-2016.pdf Our vision of 'Better Together for Children', recognises that Walsall children face significant disadvantage during their early years, particularly in relation to financial hardship, high levels of child poverty, weak employment prospects and high infant mortality rates. It is for these reasons that a multi-agency approach is required in striving to achieve better outcomes for children.

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 Service is wide ranging and includes:

- providing a child/children/young person with a permanent family through adoption
- 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.
- 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 other organisations and particularly with the Black Country Authorities to develop services where it is clear that doing so will provide benefits for children requiring adoption in the Borough of Walsall.

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 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 and relevant Adoption Agency 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 Service is required under the Adoption Services: National Minimum Standards 2011.

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 website.
- 1.3 This statement of purpose sets out the key aims and objectives of Walsall Council Adoption Service. It explains the range of services available to children, prospective adopters, adoptive parents, 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 Service are underpinned by and encompassed in the Children and Young People's Plan 2013 to 2016.

2.3 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.

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 Children's Services aims to provide a comprehensive adoption service to all those who require or request it. The service

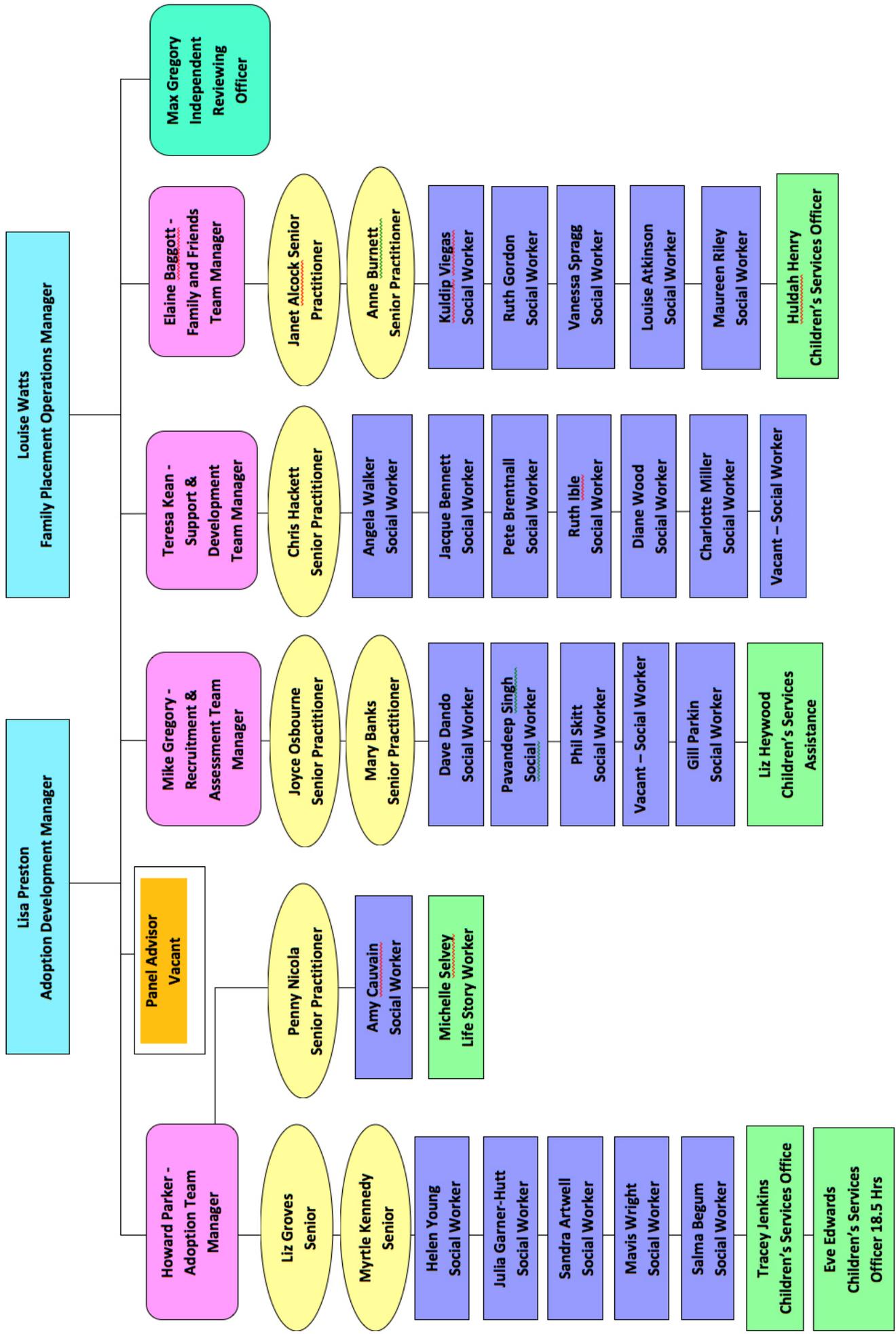
offered is based on prescribed National Minimum Standards, Statutory Requirements, sound principles, and evidence informed practice and comprehensive policies and procedures.

2.7 The nature of the work undertaken by the Adoption 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.
- 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.

3 Management Structure

- 3.1 Currently the Adoption Service has ten qualified social workers (including the team manager) whose qualifications range from the Certificate of Social Services to Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, 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 Service are also involved in the authority's programme for Post Qualification training. Some workers have other relevant qualifications, including the PQ (post qualifying) awards and the MA Child Care Law & Practice etc. 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.
- 3.4 In May 2013, the post of Adoption Development Manager was created. The purpose of this post is to provide a strategic lead on the implementation of all new reforms affecting adoption both locally and nationally. The post holder is also working on the implementation of the Family Justice Review proposals in ensuring court proceedings are conducted in a timely manner, which will significantly impact on reducing delay for Looked after Children and those subject to care proceedings whilst remaining in the care of their birth family.
- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 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.
- 3.7 The Registered Manager for Walsall Council Adoption Agency is Lisa Preston, Adoption Development Manager for the council.
- 3.8 The Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) is Louise Watts, Operational Manager for the Family Placement Service.



4 Services Provided for Children

- 4.1 Walsall Council Adoption 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 Permanency for all children will be carefully considered by the Statutory Review process. Where it is clear adoption is the plan, this will be agreed at the first Statutory Review. In all other cases a permanency plan must be considered at the second Statutory Review. Once adoption is being considered, consultation will take place with the adoption 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 guide 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 story. 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 and Adopt West Midlands Consortium. 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 as Walsall believes this gives the family the opportunity to carefully consider all available information before they commit to offering an adoptive placement to a child. If having heard all the information, a family decides the child is not an appropriate match, the burden is carried by the adults and not the child.

- 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 in a secure storage facility. They will be made available to adopted children once they reach 18 years of age 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 (BAAF), 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 Registration of Interest form, Walsall Council Adoption Service will always endeavour to do the following;
- Within 5 days of receiving your registration of interest 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)
 - 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 and Walsall enables the four authorities 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. 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
- 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. 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 will often determine the decision as to which local Authority an enquirer is 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. In some circumstances those interested can be dual approved as an adopter by the adoption panel and as a foster carer by the fostering panel. If prospective adopters express an interest in providing a fostering for adoption placement, further discussion regarding this will be had with them at the beginning of the Stage Two process.

- 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 have a Matching Plan. This will detail the expectations of the adoption worker and the adoption agency and the adopters. It will also detail timescales and anything else considered relevant.
- 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 and Adoption West Midlands consortium. 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 subject to statutory reviews under the Adoption Agencies' Regulations (amended 1997). This process involves an Independent Reviewing Officer to ensure that all aspects of the child's welfare and plans for his or her future 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, which details the support to be provided including financial support. Details of these arrangements are covered in Walsall's multi-agency adoption support strategy.

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 meets at least once 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 the Adoption 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 Panel is 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 Adoption 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.

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 our annual adoption social event 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:

In most cases the local manager responsible for the service will be able to resolve your complaint.

Stage 2:

If those complaining are not satisfied with the response at this stage, they can ask for their complaint to be formally investigated

This investigation will be carried out by an officer from the Customer Care Team who is not directly involved with this service. This officer will prepare a report and, after considering the facts, will provide the outcome in writing.

Those wishing to make complaints, can ask for a formal investigation of their complaint from the start.

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 Children's Services and the Council.

If the complaint reaches this stage, the Consumer Relations Officer 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. 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 when a full reply can be expected.

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 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

The Customer Care Team will send a copy of the Ombudsman's leaflet "Complaint about the Council" if this is required.

Contact details for Customer Care Team
Council House
Lichfield Street
Walsall WS1 1TW

Tel: 01922 650489

Fax: 01922 614210

11 Contact details for further information

The Adoption Service, the Registered Manger and the ASSA can be contacted at,
Adoption Service, Pinfold Health Centre, Field Road, Bloxwich, Walsall WS3 3JJ
Tel: 0845 111 2839

12 Contact details for Ofsted

Ofsted, Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester M1 2WD
Tel: 0300 123 1231 Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

13 Contact details for the Children's Rights Director

Dr Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director
Aviation House, 125 Kingsway, London WC2B 6SE
Tel: 0800 528 0731

14 Service Development

- 14.1 Walsall Council Adoption 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 and relevant Adoption Agency Regulations. All recommendations from any future Ofsted inspections will be completed without delay. Walsall Council Adoption Service is currently judged as 'Good' following the most recent 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 the Black Country Authorities to develop services where it is clear that doing so will provide benefits for children requiring adoption in the borough of Walsall. It is likely Adoption in the Black Country will grow its provision within the coming year to meet the requirements of the Government's Adoption Reform Agenda.
- 14.3 The Adoption Development Manager will be responsible for driving through the changes as a result of the Adoption Reform Agenda, this will done alongside the changes required as part of the review of the Family Justice System.
- 14.4 The priority for the Adoption Development Manager for the coming year will be on inspection readiness, ensuring continuing compliance with the new Public Law Outline and on introducing a 'Fostering4Adoption' provision within Walsall Council.
- 14.5 The Adoption Development Manager and the Operational Manager for Family Placement Service will continue to provide bi-annual reports to Cabinet in relation to their role as corporate parents within the adoption service including information about numbers of children waiting for adoption at different stages in the process.

Walsall Council Adoption Service
Pinfold Health Centre
Field Road
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Walsall
WS3 3JJ

Tel: 0845 111 2839
Web: www.walsall.gov.uk