

Inquiry into Adoption

NORTH WALES ADOPTION SERVICE **Response to the National Assembly for Wales and Young People** **Committee inquiry into Adoption. 3rd February 2012**

This report has been produced by Mandy Humphries manager of the North Wales Adoption Service (NWAS) following consultation with staff members, prospective and adoptive parents.

The North Wales Adoption Service provides an adoption service covering the North Wales area. The amalgamation of adoption services from Ynys Mon, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Wrexham, Gwynedd and Conwy became operational on 1 April 2010.

The host authority is Wrexham County Borough Council' and staff are seconded to the service by their appointing local authority, who remain the employer. The service consists of twenty two staff including social workers, Training Officer, Recruitment Officer, administrative staff, Team Manager and two Deputy Team Managers located in various offices across the region.

Requests for comments were sent to over 80 adopters and the following responses have been received to date. Key areas raised by the adopters have been highlighted under the appropriate headings:

1. Prospective parents:

How effectively are prospective parents supported throughout the adoption process, particularly through the assessment and approval process?

Adopters Responses:

- From our own personal experience as adoptive parents we received excellent support and professional guidance from our social worker throughout the assessment process
- We firmly believe that the approval and assessment process needs to be very vigorous; however, the length of the process can dissuade prospective adopters. Appointing more social workers to the process would shorten the time prospective adopters would have to wait for approval
- Social worker support has been good throughout the assessment. Delays by management in taking assessment to panel – meant the assessment took nearly 12 months to complete. Suggest less time for assessment– feel there is no need to go into such detail on information about childhood.
- Once a social worker is appointed the support is currently very good through social worker involvement/contact. Improved communication and updates required on the process up to this point.
- I feel single people wishing to adopt should have more of a chance instead of being overlooked time after time as they generally have a great deal to offer a child (NWAS have approved several single adopters and successfully placed children with them)
- Also, I feel that 3 people (single or couples) being considered for one child seems a

little unfair as people are obviously going to be disappointed and may consequently withdraw from the adoption process. (NWAS – would this limit the options for a child with less rigorous matching procedures)

- The support provided to us as prospective adopters has been very good, any questions we have raised have been answered honestly and information given to us has been reassuring. (Due to go to Panel)
- The adoption process in our opinion is too long and surely processes could be implemented to speed things up.
- Once the assessment had commenced the support was very good, we had a long wait between training and the start of the assessment. No contact or information from the agency.
- Assessment and approval support has been good.
- Cut length of time prospective adopters have to wait to be assessed and/or keep prospective adopters informed when assessment will commence.
- We are pre-panel-We have found encouragement from one initial phone call making enquiries.
- Very useful/information on adoption training.
- I think as assessment is very intrusive (which I can understand why) may be worth reminding prospective adopters why this is – as children already in care system, it is needed.
- While we need support, need to remember we will be adopting a child who has been in taken into care because of some kind of abuse whether physical abuse or neglect, so would a leaflet be handy for friends and family potential grandparents explaining the problems a child may have.
- We feel we have had great support from the beginning of our adoption journey. Our adoption social worker has been really helpful and extremely knowledgeable, to our benefit.
- We have been supported very well through a very difficult adoption.
- Adopters are put off by long periods of inaction due to lack of staff for assessments.
- The end to end time for adoptions to be made needs to dramatically shorten
- Social worker's time needs to be used more effectively, which may mean using different resources for some elements of the process,
- developing a culture of 'don't put off until tomorrow what can be done today'
- Prospective Adopters need some independent support outside the social work network, a sort of 'buddy' to bounce thoughts and feelings off without having them taken into consideration in the processes. Former Foster Carers, current foster carers, previous adopters or former social workers would all make great 'buddies'. Not enough is done to introduce Prospective Adopters to the wide network of people who have been there and done it before. (NWAS – this adopter was made aware of the adoption support at the beginning of the process group and has been invited to attend)

- In short, not well at all. To me there are several phases to this process and each is very different:
- **Enquiry** When I enquired, I was promptly passed to the right person and an initial interview arranged. The questions asked at this meeting seemed reasonable and sensible and I was invited to join a 4-day Training Course.
- **Pre-assessment (Pre- North Wales Adoption Service)**
- The training was delivered in 2 sets of 2 days which I felt was a good idea. It accommodated work and other commitments and it allowed some thinking and reading time between the sessions – there is a lot of information to assimilate. Unfortunately at the time, the local authority were only running 2 sessions per annum and so there was a delay of several months. (Pre NWAS) I am certain courses could be run more frequently if local authorities worked together on their boundaries, or they were outsourced to an adoption agency (NWAS comments – NWAS has provided pre-approval training on a monthly basis since September 2011 following the recruitment of a training officer).
- Primarily, I feel those sessions are about delivering information and opening prospective parent's eyes to the stark and unpleasant realities of adoption in the modern day and allowing prospective adopters to self select moving forward or opting out. I question how much value the social workers derive from being there – in my opinion there were too many there, they weren't doing much I could see and could more usefully use those 4 days to reduce the overall length of the adoption process.
- (NWAS has 1 identified trainer – other social workers are there to observe and support group work)
- For me this starts with training, during which we know there is a degree of assessment going on. At our session there were around 7-11 prospective adopters which was a good size group. The content of the course was pretty good and eye opening – what I felt would add to the power of the session (I have seen some since) are DVDs of real adopted children recounting their experiences and feelings – hugely powerful.
- The course changed my view of adoption and made me think hard about whether I was really up to the job and I think that is critically important. However, what I needed here was a little time to express concerns and worries honestly, safely and confidentially, without being judged or having anything held against me in the subsequent process. That means, I needed some time with people who understood adoption (adoption agency staff, counsellors, experience foster carers/adopters) in an environment where anything could be said and nothing would be reported back. There was a shared fear amongst all the prospective adopters at training that they may say something that jeopardised their chances. In the training, some disturbing content is raised and I feel prospective adopters need to be able to openly talk about it without being judged. (NWAS comment: Open discussion is encouraged in training and an essential part of the overall process of assessing the needs and identifying issues to be considered in the following assessment of prospective adopters)
- Eventually after repeated chiding I think I got on everyone's nerves sufficiently and I was allocated a social worker who has been superb throughout. I know how lucky I was to be allocated a social worker I have very genuine rapport with and who is down to earth and realistic.
- **Assessment**
In my opinion my assessment was quite thorough and I felt I spent the right amount of time 1-1 with my social worker so she knew me well by the end of the process. Also through the process I felt I learned too. However this process could and in my opinion should, be speeded up by shortening the time between sessions. We had a session

every week or 2 weeks. You could easily do 2 sessions per week and shorten the time. (NWAS comment – this will depend on the number of assessments being undertaken by adoption social workers and the availability of adopters – most adopters value the time in between to consider the issues discussed and prepare for the next session)

- Throughout assessment many topics arose that I felt the need to research and understand more about. My social worker encouraged this and on some occasions directed me to do a piece of work e.g. think about a child presenting with eating issues. I think this Research and Review exercise is incredibly valuable as it forces you to think about and understand things much more deeply e.g. attachment disorders and challenge your thinking on the type of child you can and can't support. I personally feel the Research and Review exercise should be more formally done. Maybe a series of 'Training Bytes' – I'm certain an online training provider could help deliver this for you. It also could provide a forum for adopters, foster carers and prospective adopters to share thoughts, concerns, questions etc.
- Once a match is agreed by numerous social workers, it is referred to panel to be signed off by lots of people and then on to an agency decision maker to be signed off. I'm told the agency decision maker almost never overturns a panel decision. (NWAS comment – this is because issues are raised and dealt with satisfactorily prior to proceeding to panel) If this is the case, what is the value in the agency decision maker's decision? It doesn't appear to add anything to the quality of the process and just creates another delay. I would also question how many times the panel contradict a decision the social workers have made and if they do, do we really think the panel have more insight than the social workers on individual cases? (Panel has a scrutiny role in ensuring adopters have been assessed appropriately to safeguard children)
- I also feel this point in the process in when Prospective parents needs some more of that independent support from a 'buddy' type person (former foster carer, current foster carer, adopter, former social worker). I envisage a group of volunteers who can act as sounding boards at this time. (NWAS comment: adopter made aware of support group at the start of the process).
- The process is painfully slow until a match is approved and then it moves at lightning speed.
- The hardest part for me was making a commitment to a description on a piece of paper, a child I'd never seen let alone met. I was being asked to commit the rest of my life to this collection of words. Only now that I've met her can I say I'm making the commitment with both my heart and my head. (Comment: this is related to confidentiality requirement – should a match not proceed)
- The speed with which we have been asked to move from match signed off by agency decision maker (Friday) and transition planning meeting and first introduction to child (Mon) surprised me. Launching straight in leaves little time for the practicalities of giving notice to employers, ordering car seats, cots, stair gates etc and getting them all assembled as well as sorting out a room. Just like any expectant Mum, you want everything to be perfect. I don't want to knock a bit of pace in the process, I welcome it, but I don't think the needs of the adoptive parents are considered much here. (NWAS comment – adopters are always given the opportunity to delay the process at every stage – in most cases adopters tend to want to move forward very quickly and are often advised to adhere to the plan – as per guidance 1 week for every year of the child)

What action is needed to encourage prospective parents to pursue adoption as a route?

Adopters Responses:

- Could you put info re: adoption in schools, health centres, fertility clinics. (NWS recruitment officer already does this)
- A better national campaign, especially for older adopters about the timescales as it is not as long now as we were led to believe before we looked into adoption.
- One area of change for us- we feel that the referees' assessment on ourselves is too complex and possibly not entirely necessary for them (stipulated in guidance).
- If you want more people to become adopters the whole system must be fast tracked which would allow younger babies to be adopted whilst they are still babies.
- Every person I have every spoken to about adoption, irrespective of whether they know anyone who has done it or not seems to have the same reaction "oh good luck, I hear it's a really hard". In my view, we need to:
 1. Make the purpose of adoption and the rewards everyone's focus NOT the process itself
 2. Improve the process, speed it up, reduce the age at which children are placed – make it straightforward not hard
 3. Use Adopters to 'recruit' potential adopters – so many people have said to me "we've considered it but....". If I sat down and spoke to them, I could remove the 'but' for many.
 4. Target primary schools – primary school parents are bursting with enthusiasm for children and are a close knit community of parents, there is so much interest amongst these people in adoption and fostering.
 5. Remove social worker's personal prejudices
 6. Adoption now is not only socially acceptable but is almost trendy and definitely respected. Capitalise on that with some good marketing

Professionals Responses:

- effective recruitment campaigns/possibly funded nationally
- more positive image of adoption from the media and government

Adoptive parents and families:

In terms of the support provided for adoptive families, what has been most important in helping to secure the permanence of adoptions and to help ensure the success of the placement?

Adopters Responses:

- The support of our designated social worker and the child's social worker. The support of our Adoption Support Group in arranging speakers, family outings and social events.
- The training offered to us as prospective adopters was extremely useful.

- In the relatively short period that a child has been placed with us the support has been good through weekly visits from both our own social worker and the child's social worker. Also contact by health visitor was prompt who also provided advice and support. Helpline also discussed.
- The support given by Flintshire and Wrexham has been excellent.
- Disappointed in the "settling in grant" as I did not have receipts for second hand goods bought – would prefer a lump sum (NWAS comment: adopters are currently offered 5 x boarding out weekly allowance to purchase essential items – however, we are considering limiting this amount as adopters should be financially secure enough to provide the necessary equipment required for children they adopt)
- As foster carers we already have the child we are to adopt and so our adoption process has been slightly different. We were very pleased to see the level of information given around attachment.
- More workers are needed to assess adopters and speed up the process.
- I have no complaints as regards to the support received from the social worker through the assessment and approval process despite the approval process being a very daunting experience.
- Does there really need to be 15 people sitting on the panel before which the prospective adopter must appear! Three members would be a more appropriate number; the other panel members could be consulted with regards the report prepared by the social worker and the panel members rotated.
- My issue is with the length of time the whole process takes. It has been two years from my application (enquiry) to being approved, which is far too long and I don't know how long it is going to be before I actually become a parent. (Generally there various reasons for delay including issues with checks and references, the need to prioritise assessments in order to meet the needs of children waiting e.g. Sibling groups and older children).

What improvements could be made to the support given to adoptive parents?

Adopters Responses:

- Improvements in the system of support for adopted children within Education, when LAC status has finished.
- Ensure the continuation Adoption Support Groups
- An additional stage in the process – prospective parent's research and review – perhaps alongside Assessment. This needs to be done in a formal and structured way.
- It is my opinion every child that is adopted needs some ongoing support. To my mind, toddlers, young children and older children and their new families can all benefit from some therapeutic support to help build attachments and bring out emotions and concerns. With so many placement breakdowns, this would seem like a potentially beneficial approach and potentially cost effective.
- Communication needs to improve,
- More training and structured preparation later in the process when you really need to boost your confidence and feel prepared e.g. training on transition techniques, ways to build attachment, what to expect in the first few months etc

Adopted children:

Do the current arrangements for adoption adequately reflect the rights of the child?

Adopters Responses:

- The current arrangements for adoption reflect the rights of the child adequately however where possible every effort should be made to ensure that children considered for adoption are kept in foster placements for as short a period as possible to ensure an easier/smoothen transition to adoptive home.
- I think the children's rights are very well catered for.

How effective is the support given to adopted children post adoption, particularly for children who have complex needs?

Adopters Responses:

- Potentially there is room for improvement as the support offered to adoptive parents is far less broad than the support offered to LAC children.
- I feel that children who are adopted and their parents would benefit from a long term service based around attachment issues that would be available and not put on a 3 month waiting list.

Professionals working with adopted children/ families:

What action is needed to ensure that delays in the adoption process can be kept to a minimum?

- Difficult to identify which aspects of the assessment process could be eliminated without increasing an element of risk. The adoption process has been adapted and improved over many years in line with recommendations from inquiries.
- adequate staffing levels of adoption agencies are essential
- sufficient funding to run the service and comply with legislation and regulations
- contingency plans when adoption social workers are on long term sickness
- adequate funding and staffing to provide regular (bi monthly) pre approval training.
- Identified key adoption consultant worker in childcare teams to provide support and guidance to staff undertaking cases leading to adoption and liaise with the adoption family finding service. As many social workers only come across adoption cases on occasions it is often unlikely that they are able to build up a vast amount of experience and expertise in the child care teams.
- Court process to be streamlined, even though there is the PLO in many cases delays are widespread
- Use of "expert witnesses" in court proceedings should be limited and more stringent timescales applied
- The continuous requests for expert/independent assessments delays the process for the child – these assessments are often undertaken by people who meet the child on a couple of occasions and the social workers' assessments are undermined despite the fact that social workers are now members of a professional body.
- The need to include several and lengthy expert/independent assessments increase the workload of the panel

- Court process at present is "birth parent" led and children's needs are secondary.
- Use of Barristers and expensive solicitors fuels the possibility for delay for financial gain
- adoption panel process, regulations and panel membership should be reviewed to ensure they are not a cause of delay within the process
- Court advisers should have a minimum post qualifying experience of 5 years front line social work.
- Contact issues - both within legal proceedings and after the adoption order is made - again this is heavily tilted towards the needs of the birth parents and in many cases at the cost of the child and identifying adopters willing to undertake complicated.
- large sibling groups - it has to be accepted that finding adopters who will consider adopting a sibling group of 3 and above are very rare. Whilst we recognise the research as to why this is positive for the children, we must balance the longer term consequences of the children remaining in the LAC system. It may be more beneficial to separate the siblings but ensure (even by legal order) that regular contact should take place between the siblings and their specific adopters.
- separate funding should be made available to support adopters who will adopt any sibling group.
- review of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 specifically looking at placement orders and how birth parents can contest the adoption after the making of the order. It is becoming more evident that this process is delaying adoption orders in many cases despite the fact that children may have been placed for adoption sometimes up to twelve months birth parents continue to have the right to delay this process. This situation gives some birth parents unrealistic hopes for the return of their child, causes anxiety for adopters and further delay for children. It seems unreasonable for this option to be offered in cases where lengthy court procedures have recently been finalised and placement orders are in place.
- Where adoption statistics are quoted in the media and by government officials they need to be explained in more detail. The fact that children may have waited 3 years to be adopted gives the general public the wrong impression as adopters believe this is to do with the assessment process and does not highlight the delays in the court process which needs to be completed before matches can be considered and confirmed.
- Timescales from placement order to placement date would be more realistic for the adopters and the length of court proceedings identified separately.
- foster carer's should receive mandatory training on "how to move children on for adoption".
- positive media coverage about the positives of adoption
- certain charities involved in adoption should be less critical of Local Authority Adoption Agencies and their practice, especially within the media. These charities are such vast organisations employing thousands of people who rely on "winning tenders" to deliver services who ruthlessly criticise LA adoption agencies in the hope the government will decide to "out source Adoption Services" and thus secure funding for employing staff.
- Negative media coverage particular from the government during adoption week is most destructive to recruitment
- Awareness that independent agencies do not have children to place for adoption and that local authorities will end up having to fund costly placements should independent agencies take over the role of adoption agencies.
- In light of the financial climate review of the 'financial support' legislation and more clarity/equity across Wales
- Welsh minister to consider giving LA' the power to charge for Partner of Parent

adoptions as these detract from the core activity of assessing general adopters for children in the care system. New adoption legislation has made the process easier for step parents and the potential for additional applications. Court insistence on seeking birth parents who have had no contact with the child from birth or even for a number of years also increase the input required by the assessing social worker.

- The management of contact is becoming increasingly complicated and time consuming as well as delaying matches as adopters continue to be wary of direct contact with birth parents.
- ICS formats are repetitive and not reader friendly – need to be revamped.

What action is needed to increase the number of successful outcomes once children are considered for adoption?

- effective recruitment policies supported by positive media coverage
- specialist life story workers should be employed to undertake this as it has to be recognised that many social workers due to vast amounts of paperwork and court cases do not have the capacity to undertake this specialist piece of work.
- no child should be placed for adoption unless they have undertaken life journey work and have a record of this for future.
- More responsibility to NHS/CAMHS to provide therapeutic adoption support services
- Timescales for children born following subsequent pregnancies where children have been adopted and circumstances have not changed should be considerably shorter
- Easier access to CAMHS/Support services – therapeutic services not readily available and limits placement choice