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**Barnardo's  
Cymru**

**WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO  
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES  
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE  
INQUIRY INTO ADOPTION IN WALES**

**SUBMITTED BY:**

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## **BARNARDO'S CYMRU EVIDENCE TO INQUIRY ON ADOPTION IN WALES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

1. Barnardo's Cymru has been working with children, young people and families in Wales for over 100 years and is one of the largest children's charities working in the country. We currently run 88 diverse services across Wales, working in partnership with 20 of the 22 local authorities. Last year, we supported approximately 8,000 children, young people and families in Wales.

2. Barnardo's Cymru services in Wales include: care leavers and youth homelessness projects, young carers' schemes, specialist fostering and adoption schemes, family centres and family support, parenting support, community development projects, short breaks and inclusive services for disabled children and young people, assessment and treatment for young people who exhibit sexually harmful or concerning behaviour and specialist services for children and young people at risk of, or abused through, child sexual exploitation.

3. Every Barnardo's Cymru service is different but each believes that every child and young person deserves the best start in life, no matter who they are, what they have done or what they have been through. We use the knowledge gained from our direct work with children to campaign for better childcare policy and to champion the rights of every child. We believe that with the right help, committed support and a little belief, even the most vulnerable children can turn their lives around.

### **BARNARDO'S AND ADOPTION**

4. Barnardo's has been a registered Adoption Agency since 1947. Our main office for Adoption Agency Registration is in Newcastle and it supports branches across England and Wales. Barnardo's also provides adoption services in Scotland. Barnardo's Cymru currently has two main service bases for its adoption and fostering work in Wales – one in North Wales (Caernarfon) and one in South Wales (Cardiff).

5. The Barnardo's Cymru Adoption Service has been operational in Wales since 1980 and we are currently one of only two voluntary organisations, based in Wales, providing adoption services.

6. The service recruits and assesses prospective adopters and then links with local authorities which need adoptive placements for children who are 'Looked After'. Service managers are actively involved in both the South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium (SWAAC) and the North Wales Adoption Service (NWAS). We are keen to work as closely as

possible with local authorities to support the best possible match between adoptive families and children needing stable families and homes. In addition, we work closely with BAAF and Adoption UK in Wales and have jointly presented our work at the National Assembly.

7. We work to influence good practice in adoption services and, on occasions, we have seconded staff into a local authority Adoption Service to provide specialist support and advice. Our Adoption Service aims, objectives and service provision can be provided on request.

## **EVIDENCE TO INQUIRY**

8. Barnardo's Cymru welcomes the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Committee's Inquiry into Adoption in Wales and we would also be keen to provide oral evidence, if required.

9. We have framed our evidence within the questions set in the Committee letter of 9 December 2011, which invited evidence to the Inquiry. Our responses are informed by our extensive practice experience in adoption across both Wales and the rest of the UK.

### **Question one: How effectively are prospective parents supported throughout the adoption process, particularly through the assessment and approval process?**

10. From the first point of contact with the Barnardo's Cymru Adoption Services, prospective adopters are given positive and accurate information about the service, the assessment process and the expected timescales involved.

11. If the decision is made to invite an application, the support will continue, whereby a social worker is allocated to undertake the assessment through to approval. The social worker is the main point of contact but we provide a 'whole team' approach too, so that office staff and all team members are able to provide back up and support in the context of their particular role.

12. If a decision has to be made to not continue with the assessment (or where approval is turned down), we provide applicants with counselling and support (including honest and accurate information) to help them come to terms with why such a decision has been reached. We are aware of the importance of ensuring that those who may be able to offer an adoptive family are not deterred by an unwelcoming or protracted response. Barnardo's is currently represented on the Ministerial Advisory Group in England where there is particular attention being paid to improving the recruitment and experience of prospective adopters. We were also actively involved in the consultation on the

revisions to the adoption law in Scotland and the subsequent training of staff. Barnardo's is committed to an involvement with the Government to contribute to policy initiatives that will improve the opportunities for more Looked After Children to achieve stability and positive outcomes.

**Question two: What action is needed to encourage prospective parents to pursue adoption as a route?**

13. In our view, more people possess the qualities for adopting children than are currently coming forward. Given the number of children who could be adopted, we therefore see it as our duty to cherish prospective adopters and we need to ensure that the system is open and flexible so that a wide range of people feel able to come forward to adopt.

14. We face a shortage in the availability of adopters at a time when the numbers of children needing placements in Wales is on the increase. In particular, we feel there should be a renewed focus on recruiting adopters willing to take older children, sibling groups, BME children and children with behavioural problems.

15. In Wales, we are currently planning a targeted recruitment campaign to raise the profile of adoption in Wales and, more specifically, our Barnardo's Cymru Adoption Service. The issue of delays in the adoption process has plagued the work for far too long and is now embedded in the public consciousness. We have to counter this negativity by promoting the fantastic differences and improvements adoption can make to children's lives – and how adoption can transform children's life chances.

16. We provide prospective adopters with accurate information throughout the assessment process, along with detailed information on the nature of the needs of children and young people who are likely to need adoptive families. We feel it is important to explain to prospective adopters what 'complex needs' may mean in respect of some children and what support we can provide them with in their new parental role. We also use 'real' case studies to enable us to explore issues further and we always accentuate the many positives that stable and secure placements can provide for a child.

17. In our view, making adoptive placements is made difficult by the financial pressures on both statutory and voluntary agencies alike. Barnardo's Cymru believes we need a system which allows for investment to recruit more families and provides options to make them available across Wales without financial constraints.

18. It is important that there is a clearer recognition in local authorities of the true cost of recruiting and placing children for adoption. There is

also increasing research which illustrates the significant social return on investing in the early placement of children for adoption from Barnado's Cymru

**Question three: 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?**

19. It is the view of Barnardo's Cymru that there should be a much greater emphasis on adoption support. Adoption should not be seen simply as a 'happy ever after' option as, in reality, it is a lifelong process which requires comprehensive and continued support for it to work effectively.

20. The complex needs of many children who are adopted mean that continuing support for the family and child during and after adoption can be vital in keeping the placement going, including therapeutic multi agency services. Children who are adopted have often spent a significant amount of their lives in the care system and will have had the structure of support and monitoring around them that the Looked After Children (LAC) system provides. Their needs still remain high once they are placed in an adoptive family and, sometimes, the adopters can fear that the support levels will drop significantly after the Adoption Order is made – in stark comparison to the support within the LAC system – and that this is detrimental to the child. A further complication is also added when negotiations about post adoption support can then delay the adoption application.

21. In our experience, elements of support which contribute to more secure and successful placements include:

- High quality assessments which include detailed information to make sure that the best possible match is made.
- Access to training and support for adoptive parents.
- A flexible and responsible adoption service which is able to provide quick and meaningful support when required: this support to be ongoing as the child grows up.
- Established links between adoptive families and generic support services (eg health, education, leisure, etc) and with specialist support services (eg CAMHS, post abuse therapeutic services, etc).

**Question four: What improvements could be made to the support given to adoptive parents?**

22. In our view, local authorities must match the resources available for the child pre adoption to those provided post adoption if, and when, required. Placing a child in an adoptive family should not automatically

be assumed to be a cheaper option than keeping the child in the care system. The assumption, particularly for older children, is that the adopters and child may require ongoing support, training and specialist advice for years after the adoption and that these resources should, therefore, be available throughout the child's life, through to adulthood.

23. It is vital that the ongoing needs of both the child and the adoptive parents are regularly assessed so that they can be met in the most appropriate way. In our experience, there is great variation across Wales in post adoption support in particular, but it cannot be right that the offer of support be determined by a 'postcode lottery', or as a result of 'who shouts the loudest'. We need to provide a greater and more consistent level of support to adoptive families both pre and post adoption.

24. There should be a greater and more coherent level of support provided by specialist services, such as CAMHS, when required, so that the specific needs of adopters and adoptees can be met. More resources are needed for this. In our view, it is no good driving up numbers of adoptions if there is no consistent and appropriate support available when it is needed. Inadequate support can often leave adoptive parents feeling isolated and vulnerable – and this, in turn, can lead to placements breaking down.

### **Question five: Do the current arrangements for adoption adequately reflect the rights of the child?**

25. Barnardo's is of the unequivocal view that the rights of the child should be the primary consideration in any adoption process/proceedings. It follows, therefore, that we see adoption as one part of an overall child protection and care system which needs to be more focussed on the needs of the child and more flexible to work in children's best interests. In our view, only by focussing on children's long term needs and taking a whole system approach will the adoption process improve and for more children.

26. There needs to be a seamless planning process for children's long term permanency which starts at the earliest opportunity – from supporting families to stay together (care may be part of this process) to swift removal of children when it is clear they cannot be adequately cared for.

27. There are undoubtedly times in the adoption process where the rights of birth parents can conflict with the rights of the child – and this most often arises within the court/legal arena. Although the 1989 Children Act states that 'the court shall have regard to the general principle that any delay in determining the question is likely to prejudice

the welfare of the child', it is unfortunately fairly routine to have protracted court cases whereby lengthy delay periods are incurred. These delays are frequently, and obviously, not in the best interests of the child. Tackling delays in the court process would be a significant step in improving and speeding up the adoption process overall. In all cases, children's best interests must be at the heart of the process and urgent actions is therefore needed to address the causes of delay and ensure that cases are managed effectively. This planning process must be acutely conscious that delay is a safeguarding issue in terms of the developmental wellbeing of the child which has to be regarded as paramount.

28. There are recommendations in the Family Justice Review Final Report (November 2011) in relation to children's rights which Barnardo's Cymru strongly supports. They include:

- 'Children and young people should be given age appropriate information to explain what is happening when they are involved in public and private law cases'.
- 'Children and young people should, as early as possible in a case, be supported to be able to make their views known and older children should be offered a menu of options, to lay out the ways in which they could – if they wish – do this'.

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

29. We believe this to be an important area and, in our experience, both the quality and the amount of resources dedicated to post adoption support are extremely variable across Wales. Where the support is good, support is available and there is co-ordinated help from both generic and specialist services built in. All too often, however, resources for post adoption support are limited and the adoptive parents and adopted child are too frequently not getting the help and direction they need.

30. Because of the complex needs of many children who are being adopted and the therapeutic dimensions of the parenting needed to support them, the input and 'buy in' of both mainstream and specialist services is essential if the placement is to succeed. For example, schools need to have an improved understanding into the needs of children who may have experienced trauma/abuse and who have certainly experienced hugely difficult life changes, leading to loss and attachment difficulties. These experiences can have a huge impact on childhood development and academic performance in school.

31. As referred to earlier in this evidence, without post adoption support, there is a risk some adoptive parents are left to wonder when things get difficult. Without providing a reliable and consistent source of support for children with complex needs, we run the very real risk of placement breakdown which further damages the child's life prospects.

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

32. The uncertainty and instability caused by delay can have long term and irreversible consequences for a child's development by damaging the ability to form positive attachments. This often results in multiple problems in adolescence and later life. It is essential, therefore, that all agencies/services/courts involved in the adoption process work coherently to keep delays to the absolute minimum.

33. Unfortunately, in our experience, there is considerable local variation impacting upon delays which is why, we believe, a 'whole system' approach needs to be developed. In any given area, a number of factors can lead to delay including:

- Poor decision making which affects the complexities and issues children have when they are identified for adoption, eg delay in removing children from a neglectful environment influences the level of need/support; difficulties placing children with prospective adopters; level of support needed and stability of the adoption.
- Adoption teams becoming involved often only after poor planning and delay has already occurred.
- Demographics (ie size of Looked After Children population in a given area).
- Processes and decision making on adoption panels.
- Processes and decision making in the Family Justice System (see reference to the Family Justice Review below).
- Adoption medicals.
- Duplication of care planning decisions (adoption panels and courts).

34. The final report of the Family Justice Review was issued in November 2011 and Barnardo's supports a number of its recommendations which are designed to tackle delay. These include:

- The proposed time limit of six months for completion of care proceedings. This is a welcome step to address the wholly unacceptable level of delays in the court system which affects the outcomes for vulnerable children. The report states:  
'Cases take far too long. With care and supervision cases now taking on average 56 weeks the life chances of already damaged



children are further undermined by the very system that is supposed to protect them'.

- That 'Judges must set firm timetables for cases. Timetabling and case management decisions must be child focussed and made with explicit reference to the child's needs and timescales'.
- The avoidance of duplicated effort regarding scrutiny of permanence plans by both adoption panels and the court. The Review proposes that to avoid delay caused by this duplication 'the requirements that local authority adoption panels should consider the suitability for adoption of a child whose case is before the court should be removed'. We agree with the Review that 'The court's detailed scrutiny of these cases should be sufficient'.
- That delays caused by the calling of expert witnesses be addressed. We agree with the Review that 'in commissioning an expert's report, regard must be had to the impact of delay on the welfare of the child' and that 'expert testimony should be commissioned only where necessary to resolve the case'. We also agree that 'the court should seek material from an expert witness only when that information is not available, and cannot properly be made available, from parties already involved in proceedings.

35. In our view, permanency planning systems within local authorities must be robust to ensure that permanence plans are in place at the second review. If the plan involves adoption, then referrals to the adoption service have to be timely at that point. In England, we are currently funded by the DFE to work with a number of local authorities in a diagnostic analysis of their permanency planning and to work with them on a strategy to decrease the delay and increase the percentage of Looked After Children adopted.

36. As some authorities experience significant increases in the numbers of children they are working with, access to adoption medical appointments are becoming harder and waiting lists are in place. Late referrals to the Adoption Agency can often mean that the adoption medical is delayed even further – which, in turn, delays the adoption decision because it cannot be made until a full medical has been undertaken.

37. Barnardo's Cymru supports the approach of 'Concurrent Planning' as a potential means of reducing delay should a child not be able to stay with its birth family. However, we believe there should be clearer definition and guidance on Concurrent Planning which would need to explain the difference between parallel/twin tracking and concurrent placements. Evaluation of Concurrent Planning services has found that there is confusion amongst social workers about what Concurrent Planning means and how it operates. We would, therefore, like to see strong leadership and commitment in local authority senior management to promoting the

use of Concurrent Planning and a greater understanding of the process within social work teams, local authority legal departments, Barnardo's Cymru and the courts. In England, we are currently developing a concurrent placement service in one of our adoption branches and are working closely with Coram, the voluntary agency, with 15 years' experience of such placements. We then intend to share the learning from this development across all our UK Adoption Services.

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

38. A combination of all of the factors we have already referenced earlier. We would repeat our view that a whole system approach is needed to improve the adoption process which includes early and clear decision making on the need to remove children from their birth parents and be placed for adoption; the need to apply Concurrent Planning to reduce delay; the need for efficient adoption panels; the need to reduce delays in the family justice system and the need to provide consistent and comprehensive support to adoptive families and adopted children both during and after the adoption process.

39. In particular, Barnardo's Cymru is aware of the evidence that early adoption provides the best possible outcomes for children and, for very young children, it should be identified early and decisive action should be taken. We acknowledge that there are clearly resource implications when increasing the rate of adoptions (particularly with regards to levels of support). However, we believe attention should be given to the potential cost benefit of increasing adoptions. Early adoption is a cost effective option compared to frequent and unstable placements and demand on other services during a lifetime in care.

40. Barnardo's Cymru offers adoption placements for those children and young people who are considered 'difficult to place'. We would like to see greater joint working between local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies so that we can be consulted early in the adoption process to help advise on the likelihood of placing a child with us and on agreeing timescales, etc. We would also be keen to be involved at an early stage in child specific recruitment and family preparation.

**Question nine: How effective has the Welsh Government been at monitoring adoptions and tracking the progress for the child and parents?**

41. In our view, there is a danger that monitoring is based around numbers and statistics and that these do not take into account the 'real life' outcomes for adoption. Adoption is a lifelong process and does not end once a child is adopted. More qualitative measures should therefore

be developed to accurately reflect the adoptive experience for both adoptive parents and adopted children.

42. We also believe there should be greater analysis and scrutiny of the number and nature of adoption breakdowns in Wales – why they happen and how they could be prevented. If we do not learn from these, then we run the risk of increased numbers of breakdowns as the numbers of adoptions increase.

**Question ten: Do you have any specific examples of good practice in the delivery of adoption services, and/or examples of where action is needed to remove barriers to adoption?**

43. Barnardo's Cymru's Adoption Service has a successful record in undertaking specific recruitment of adopters for Muslim children, adoptions of children with same sex couples and adoption with single applicants. We can provide further written information (or provide examples via oral evidence) if required by the Committee.

44. In addition to the above, our Adoption Service:

- Can offer prospective applicants information and assessments through the medium of Welsh.
- Provides excellent support to our carers (as confirmed in our CSSIW inspection reports).
- Provides excellent post adoption support to families and children (including life-story work and providing information on the Barnardo's ESCAPE programme which supports parents of teenagers).
- Provides an 'open-door' policy which adopters tell us they really value.

**The creation of a National Adoption Agency for Wales**

45. Barnardo's Cymru cautiously welcomes the Welsh Government's National Adoption Agency for Wales, but obviously we await the detail with interest. We would particularly want this new approach to be mindful of the importance of not losing the expertise and experience that exists across the voluntary sector. We would see the potential positives as including:

- An opportunity to harmonise practice across Wales and ensure that services for adopters are available no matter where they live. (At the moment access to CAMHS, etc, can depend very much on where you live – but one agency should be able to ensure that all adopters in Wales have the same access to the same level of services and support).

- An improved process which would enable children to be matched with the best possible adoptive families. Evidence from Barnado's Cymru
- A better co-ordinated approach to the provision of post adoptive support (both in range and availability).
- An increased level of resourcing to provide the necessary support and status to this vital area of social work.
- An opportunity to provide more consistent processes and improved standards of practice across Wales.