

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Gwaith dilynol ar Ymchwiliad y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg i Wasanaethau Mabwysiadu yng Nghymru | Follow-up to Children, Young People and Education Committee's Inquiry into Adoption Services in Wales

AS 10

Ymateb gan : Gwasanaeth Mabwysiadu Cenedlaethol
Response from : National Adoption Service for Wales

Overview Question

What are your views in the Welsh Government's progress in respect of the 16 recommendations and the 25 'detailed actions' set out on pages 5-11 of the [Committee's report](#).

Considerable progress has been made by virtue of the fact that the National Adoption Service for Wales (NAS) has been established, being launched on November 5th 2014 and becoming fully operational in January 2015. Whilst Welsh Government did not accept all the Committee's recommendations, many were accepted in principle only, a consistent theme was the view that the creation of the National Adoption Service in whatever form that would eventually be, would be the vehicle for the reform of adoption services in Wales that the Committee advocated.

Inevitably the focus has been on the overall change rather than some of the individual actions of the enquiry but almost all of the recommendations and detailed actions of the original enquiry report that were accepted by Welsh Government have been achieved. Additionally many of those accepted in principle have either been achieved, are work in progress or are included in current plans.

The scale of change that has occurred is considerable and should not be underestimated; this is not to deny the fact that the National Adoption Service acknowledges that further change is necessary.

The three tier model that underpins the National Adoption Service, and is now enshrined in the regulations, was created through collaborative working involving

local government, Welsh Government and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) and was supported by all sectors. It comprises of the following:

- ✚ At **local level** all 22 local authorities in Wales remain responsible for identifying and meeting needs of children for whom adoption is the most appropriate plan.
- ✚ At **regional level** the 22 local authorities collaborate within 5 regional collaborations to deliver a range of adoption functions e.g. recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters, adoption support services and will, over time, have the main operational links with the voluntary adoption services (VAA's) in Wales. The regulations allow for variation in the range of services delivered regionally and there is variation in this across Wales.
- ✚ **Nationally** the 22 local authorities collaborate to establish the post of Director of Operations and a small team to drive improvement and consistency, alongside maintaining and developing strong strategic and planning links with the voluntary adoption services and managing the new Performance Measurement Framework.

The statutory basis for the National Adoption Service lies in the direction making powers provided for under section 3A of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015 (known as the Directions Powers). Fundamentally the duties on Local Authorities to directly provide or commission an adoption service have not changed; what has changed is that all LA's in Wales are now directed to deliver a range of services through regional collaborations on a set footprint alongside collaborating on an 'all Wales' basis to provide overall oversight and direction, although not direct management, through the Director of Operations.

The five regional collaborations are as follows:

North Wales Adoption Service (NWAS) – Ynys Mon, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham [lead authority].

South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) – Caerphilly, Torfaen, Monmouthshire, Newport and Blaenau Gwent [lead authority]

Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Service (VVC) – Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan [lead authority].

Western Bay Adoption Service (WBAS) – Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot and Swansea [lead authority]

Mid & West Wales Adoption Service (MWAS) – Powys, Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire [lead authority].

The **central team** comprises of:

- ❖ The Director of Operations
- ❖ Policy and Practice Officer
- ❖ Business and Performance Manager
- ❖ Admin Assistant (p/t)

The aims of the national Adoption Service are set out in the Directions Powers and specify the following:

- the consistent delivery of high quality adoption services throughout Wales;
- keeping delay to a minimum in the placement of children for adoption;
- ensuring the widest choice possible of placements for adoption for children;
- ensuring that high quality and timely training and assessment for prospective adopters is consistently available;
- improving the process of matching children with prospective adopters;
- the streamlining of adoption processes and ensuring improved liaison between social workers involved in adoption cases;
- keeping adoption breakdown to a minimum by the provision of comprehensive adoption support services according to assessed need; and
- collaborative working between local authorities, registered adoption societies, NHS Trusts and education services.

The service is led by Local Government in Wales and is now fully funded by local government having been assisted with 'seed' funding from Welsh Government during 2014/15.

The service was, however, developed through a wider partnership with many agencies and services; it has been a priority for the National Adoption Service to embed and further develop this. The National Adoption Service governance arrangements are a key mechanism for doing this structurally while both formal and informal meetings enhance this.

These arrangements nationally consist of a local government council member led Governance Board which provides political ownership and leadership but also includes key stakeholders. This is complemented by an independently chaired and professionally led Advisory Group which includes a wide range of senior professionals in organisations that have a lead role or interest in providing, supporting, developing and improving adoption services in Wales. These fora have enabled strategic issues/concerns to be debated and discussed sector wide on a national basis and for actions to emerge to address them. Much of the 'work' of the National Adoption Service is being undertaken through a small number of subgroups all of which have wide cross sector representation according to their remit.

The relationships with the Health Service and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Wales are worthy of note in that both are represented by three 'seats' on the Advisory Group. The current vice chair of the Advisory Group is a manager in one of the voluntary adoption agencies. The Voluntary Adoption Agencies are also represented on the Governance Board by two agencies sharing the role.

This is replicated at regional level where these agencies are also included in the membership of the partnership or management board for each regional collaborative although it is acknowledged that these relationships at regional level are less well established currently and need to develop over time to maximise the impact on service delivery.

Although not launched until the autumn of 2014, some elements of the National Adoption Service had been in place from an earlier point; some of the regional collaboratives were already fully or partially operational for example and the Performance Measurement Framework procured by Welsh Government became operational from April 1st 2014. For this reason a decision was taken to produce an annual report for 2014/15, the inaugural year of the National Adoption Service. The report outlines achievements, comments on the emerging messages from performance alongside setting out priorities and an initial plan for 2015/16. The full and easy read version of this report can be accessed via the link below.

<http://www.adoptcymru.com/en/news-and-events/annualreport>

In summary the achievements for the inaugural year included

- The establishment of all the regional collaboratives and the central

elements of the service.

- Implementing the governance arrangements and appointing the Independent Chair to the Advisory Group.
- Maintaining and embedding the strong national partnership with Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Wales alongside progressing this regionally by inclusion of a representative on each of the regional management boards.
- Establishing links with many important partners such as health services in Wales: through the Designated Doctor service, Medical Advisors and CAMHS services, a strong relationship with Cardiff University through both CASCADE (the social sciences research centre) and the Adoption Cohort Study; Education services nationally and regionally; the Children's Commissioner for Wales and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).
- Early engagement with adopters and adopted young people; this was an important first step for us in order to confirm current issues of concern and priority and how they would wish to engage with the service in the immediate and longer term.
- The ability, for the first time, to see the performance of adoption services across Wales and to be able to identify as well as commence analysis of regional variations.
- Some promising improvements in performance: most notably more children than ever being placed for adoption; a 10month improvement in the average length of time between a child becoming looked after and being placed for adoption and the approval of more adopters, 26% more than the previous year.

The change agenda continues with the National Adoption Service actively implementing the plan that was set out for the current year in the annual report.

The National Adoption Service has also responded to some unexpected changes having been asked, during the summer of 2015, to take over responsibility for the Wales Adoption Register due to the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) and BAAF Cymru going into administration. It was a considerable achievement that the service was able to complete the transfer 'in' of the Register, with the complexities brought by IT systems, data security and TUPE for staff within a 5 week period, with minimal disruption to service.

The Service is currently finalising the 'mid -year' report for 2015/16 but in terms

of performance there are some further improvements to note alongside some other important factors.

- Children with an adoption plan continue to be placed more quickly, with a further 2.3 month reduction to 14.3 months, in the average time between a child becoming looked after and being placed for adoption. Fewer children are waiting for a placement and fewer children are having their plan for adoption changed due to the lack of placements. Levels of disruption remain low. A new indicator in relation to adoption support plans shows promising performance.
- Fewer children have been placed for adoption than at the same point last year and linked to court interpretation of three appeal cases. This is having a range of impacts at the pre-proceedings stage and during court proceedings in terms of the number of children for whom adoption is being considered to be the appropriate plan. Clearly what is most important for all children is that their plans are such that they provide the best possible chance of individual children being placed permanently in homes that are safe and provide them with nurturing that will lead to good outcomes for them. Recent research is showing that other permanence options do not necessarily provide the durability and positive outcomes that adoption can: there is a need to guard against the changes we are seeing in the courts and practice having perverse and unintended consequences of steering children for whom adoption would be the most appropriate plan into other permanence options that do not then provide them with what they need.
- 141 adopters have been approved so far this year; almost the same number to the same period last year. The average length of time it takes for adopter to be approved has improved by a very small margin. The level of enquiries from prospective adopters is being maintained and increased numbers are receiving initial visits or attending information evenings although the average response time, within 5 working days, to enquiries fell a little to 95%. The proportion of adopters not proceeding beyond an initial enquiry remains at around one third although our review of this indicates that this is primarily due to adopter choice rather than agency systems and processes.
- There is now much clearer evidence that the profile of the children that adopters coming forward are interested in adopting does not match well enough the profile of the children who are waiting to be adopted.
- The performance of some aspects of service remains extremely challenging

namely that related to 'life journey' materials for children and the service to birth parents.

Question 1

What are your views on the recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopter parents?

The National Adoption Service considers the development of this aspect of service to be work in progress at the current time.

A new website www.adoptcymru.com was launched with the service to provide advice and information. It also generates an agency enquiry form for those interested in becoming adopters which is automatically sent through to the relevant regional or voluntary sector adoption service. At this point in time the agencies also retain their own enquiry portals. The website contains video clips of adopters which are being refreshed over time as well as 'Frequently Asked Questions' and 'News and Events'. The latter provides information about regional and voluntary adoption agency events of interest to adopters, be that linked to recruitment or support.

The assessment of prospective adopters is undertaken by one of the five regional adoption collaboratives or two Voluntary Adoption Agencies that now operate in Wales. The reduction in numbers of agencies improves the opportunities for consistent quality responses. We believe that the regionalisation of services has improved the availability of adopter training and preparation and resulted in some reduction in the timescale from enquiry to approval during 2014/15.

The service aims to provide consistency from enquiry to assessment and a 'best practice model' for this is being developed. Support for this has been sought from the Welsh Government Innovations Team which is working with the central team and agencies to review processes and develop the best practice model for Wales. This will take account of recognised best practice in the field but most importantly will also be informed by adopters who are involved the work. The intention is that the final version will be clearly informed by the adopters' experience and input.

Work is almost complete on a National Marketing Strategy, which will have a

focus on harder to place children, particularly sibling groups and older children. The availability of grant aid from Welsh Government will enable us to develop a suite of flexible tools to support this and be available for national and agency use over time.

Performance for 2014/15 showed that

- 96% of enquiries were responded to in 5 days,
- The number of adopters approved increased by 26%
- The length of time from enquiry to approval is currently at 9.4 months

Targets have been set for these measures for the current year.

How could this be improved?

We anticipate that the programme of work outlined above will significantly improve this aspect of the service although will wish to keep the approach to recruitment under review over time.

The National Adoption Service is very aware that it now needs to move quickly into different recruitment messaging that supports targeted recruitment of adopters where this is needed but also that there is a coherent deployment of this strategy across Wales that supports the strength of the various providers.

Question 2

What is your experience of and view of the matching process and support for the transition?

This is also work in progress.

In the current model for the National Adoption Service the local authority retains responsibility for identifying and meeting the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan while the responsibility for finding an adoptive family falls within the remit of the regional adoption services. Transition into the adoptive home is a joint endeavour between these staff. One of the challenges for the National Adoption Service as it develops will be to preserve the integrity and productivity of the joint working between children's social workers and adoption agencies particularly through the placement and settling in period.

One of the priorities for this current year was to develop a best practice model for 'family finding' alongside ensuring that agencies had available to them all

appropriate tools / mechanisms to support them in this task. There were a number of considerations to balance within this work:

- Ensuring our systems do not create delay for children
- Meeting the needs of all the children we have waiting in Wales including those who wait the longest who are more likely to be older, part of a sibling group or have additional needs;
- The importance of the adopters' voice and their ability to influence and be active in the matching process where they sought this;
- Ensuring that the Wales Adoption Register effectively supported this;
- Ensuring, where it is compatible with a child's needs, that placement options within Wales were considered in a timely way before pursuing options in other areas;
- Taking into account relevant research.

The work on this best practice model is nearing completion and after a final round of agency consultation we will be seeking to implement it as soon as practicable.

Alongside this, Adoption services in Wales have just commenced a pilot of an additional matching tool 'Adoption Link' <https://www.linkmaker.co.uk/>

This is an online support to matching which also features adopter access. The pilot will be evaluated to inform a decision about its longer term use.

As noted earlier in this response, the National Adoption Service now directly manages the Wales Adoption Register and part of the contract for this includes undertaking a review. It is anticipated that the review will be independent and undertaken before the end of this financial year.

In pure performance terms the first year of the Service showed improvements in timescales for children being placed for adoption. The average length of time from becoming looked after to being placed for adoption was 1 year 4.5 months, which is a 10 months improvement on the timescale recorded in 2013/14 and we aim to reduce this further in 2015/16. The number of children placed for adoption also increased to 386 in 2014/15 continuing a trend of increased numbers being placed.

The foster to adopt provisions within the Social Services and Well Being Act 2014

provide a further opportunity to reduce timescales for children waiting to be placed for adoption. This is in addition to concurrency arrangements which require no changes to regulations and which have been used by Welsh local authorities although no concurrency schemes have yet been developed. It has not been possible to focus on concurrency to date but we will wish to look at this in the future and have been supportive of emerging plans by one of the Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Wales to develop this.

However effective matching and transition is also about the quality of experience for the child/ren and adopters; this will be a key component of the implementation plan for the best practice model for family finding. Research has highlighted some examples of poorer practice and we are working closely with Cardiff University and the Adoption Co-hort Study to gain a very contemporary understanding to inform implementation.

In our consultation, adopters reported more satisfaction with the stage up to the child being placed than subsequent stages but both adopted young people and adopters also noted the importance of life story materials to them and we know that the current measure for availability of life story materials at the point of placement showed poor performance for 2014/15. We are currently doing a further study into the role that life journey materials is playing in the transition process which will provide us with additional information to inform how we address this.

There is work to be done with some aspects of the health and education service that is available to children through their transition to their adoptive home (and indeed onwards beyond this in terms of adoption support where this is needed). Both at point of placement and when an adoption order is granted children often become no longer eligible for services that they previously accessed as a 'looked after' child. In other cases some of their historical information is no longer available. The latter is usually based in the very good principle and legal / practice provisions to maintain the confidentiality of the child's information for safeguarding purposes. However both can inhibit the smooth transition of a child and at worse can limit the adoptive parents' ability to make best choices for the child. Both are worthy of a review and re-consideration.

How could this be improved?

We anticipate that the programme of work outlined above will improve this aspect of the service but will also want to ensure the continuation of links with research and that effective quality assurance and feedback loops are in place throughout the service so that practice is continually checked against actual experience.

By clarifying an entitlement to ongoing services for 'formerly looked after children' who are adopted and re-visiting the provision in relation to historical records.

Question 3

Do you think there is sufficient information and support for children and young people including access to quality life-story work?

Part of the response to Question 2 indicates the National Adoption Service is aware that there is improvement needed in relation to life journey materials and that the National Adoption Service is currently undertaking further analysis of this.

There are areas of good practice in relation to both information and support for children and young people e.g. the Talk Adoption group supported by After Adoption. We also know that there is some excellent direct work being undertaken with children in some regional services. None of this consistent throughout Wales however but we plan to address this in the overall development of adoption support services. An ambition is to develop some child / young person specific areas of the National Adoption Service website which could be informed by young people, widely accessible and linked to other relevant sites

The consultation we undertook with adopted young people strongly suggested that what young people want most is 'adoption aware' and 'adoption sensitive' mainstream services in particular schools and health services so that their experience of support from these services does not make them feel different. This is an important message that is informing the development work we are doing in relation to adoption support services. Voluntary sector partners within the National Adoption Service are supporting this, for example Adoption UK have been working closely with Welsh Government to develop materials to increase the awareness of adoption within schools

How could this be improved?

The National Adoption Service will wish to support the extension of groups for adopted children and young people into other areas in Wales and continue to listen to what children and young people say they would like and would make a difference to them.

The response to Question 2 also applies.

Question 4

What post-adoption support for children, young people and families (including from social services, education, health and mental health services) is available and what more could be done in this area?

The National Adoption Service recognises that developing adoption support services is probably its greatest challenge. With a legacy of under resourcing across Wales it has not, to date, received the levels of investment that have been made available in other parts of the UK. We are aware that adopters are watching the levels of investment that are happening in other parts of the UK, particularly just across the border in England and asking why the same isn't happening in Wales. It is difficult to provide a justification for this.

The Directions Powers allow for flexibility in what the regional collaborations provide and how, so the current position is that there are varied arrangements in place in terms of whether the regions provide or fund adoption support services directly or whether this responsibility remains with their constituent local authorities.

An overarching strategy has already been agreed which provides a framework for the development of a three tier service to adopters across Wales, consisting of universal services, targeted services and specialist services.

It is an area of the adoption services that we are working hard on and with the support of some Welsh Government grant aid this year we have been able to make some immediate differences alongside coming up with a strategy for the future. We now also have some better estimates of the numbers of children who might at some stage require support services.

In terms of the immediate changes what is already being provided has been mapped across Wales and we are in the process of making this information widely available so adopters and children and young people know what is actually there for them at the current time. Supported by the grant we recently announced an initiative to offer all new adopters this year a chance to join Adoption UK, a support organisation run by other adopters providing a range of peer support services, and over the next few months will be providing training and developing skills amongst social workers and adopters in a technique for managing more difficult behaviour. In doing this we hope we are ensuring that there is some universal support available plus something more specialist thereby plugging some immediate gaps while we work on everything else.

We are currently scoping the potential to develop a data base of adopters that can be used to keep in touch with all adopters who desire this and be the mechanism for keeping in touch, provisions of information and updates about services.

We are also beginning to tackle other issues.

- We are mid-way through a review of the use of financial allowances which will also provide some proposals for a more transparent and fair use of these across Wales.
- We are also looking at some of the models of best practice in provision of support services with a view to considering whether any of these can be developed in Wales over time.
- As part of the consideration of models we will also be reviewing where, and by whom, assessments for adoption support services particularly new requests when a child is a bit older and come back for some support, are done. This is with a view to developing proposals for the future consistent management of these.

We have also been working with the Welsh Government to ensure that the implications of the new Social Services and Well Being Act for adoption services is clear and made known to staff, people affected by adoption and the public.

There are numerous complexities and challenges in respect of developing adoption support services in Wales not least of all resources as previously highlighted but also how 'adoption aware' health, education and other local

services can form part of the pattern of provision that adopted children can access when needed. In particular we need a joined up approach with the development of child and adolescent mental health services that can assist with the assessment of complex needs and the delivery of effective interventions

There are however examples of good practice both within the voluntary sector, St David's Children Society and in the regional collaboratives, Mid and West Wales for example which are in line with the overall approach and are informing it.

How could this be improved?

The National Adoption Service does not believe that there is a simple or quick answer to this. The initiatives outlined above will over time improve the position although some of them may be dependent on additional resources or the use of existing resources in a different way which will not be easily achieved in the current financial climate.

The availability of good quality services responding to emotional, attachment and neurological impairment to all looked after children regardless of their ultimate placement that can continue, if there is a need when the child moves on, would be a significant step in the right direction.

As noted in the response to question 2 ensuring the ongoing availability of educational and other services is also important.

Question 5

Are there any other issues you wish to draw to the Committee's attention?

Notwithstanding the fact that there is further development and improvement necessary, the National Adoption Service would wish the Committee to accept and acknowledge the considerable change, development and improvement that has occurred over the last three years.

The Social Services and Well Being Act Wales 2014 provides both opportunities and challenges to the world of Adoption. There is potential to further improve availability of adoption as a positive choice for children and the timeliness of placements if the provisions in Part 6 for planning and permanence for looked after children are effectively implemented. The Act also has the potential to

simplify access and entitlement to post adoption support but this will only be possible if the new provisions are applied by adoption knowledgeable staff who can apply the principles of early intervention to prevent escalation of need to the specific issues that may arise for adopted children and their families.

We believe that an important task for the National Adoption Service is to lead a necessary change of attitude and culture in services so that there is an acceptance that post adoption support is likely to be a feature in the lives of many children who are placed for adoption, due to their early life experiences, and that the same rationale of providing early support to prevent escalation of need applies but with some specific consideration of the challenges that adopted families face that other families will not.

Inevitably ongoing austerity in public services will continue to challenge the ability of all services to change and develop.