

## Children and Young People Committee

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Meeting Venue:  
**Committee Room 1 – Senedd**

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Meeting date:  
**21 June 2012**

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Meeting time:  
**13:15**

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Cynulliad  
Cenedlaethol  
Cymru

National  
Assembly for  
Wales



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### Agenda

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#### **1. Introductions, apologies and substitutions (13.15)**

#### **2. Inquiry into adoption (13.15 – 14.15) (Pages 1 – 11)** **Cardiff County Council and Wrexham County Borough Council**

Angela Bourge – Children’s Services, Cardiff County Council

Kim Perkins – Children’s Services, Cardiff County Council

Mandy Humphries – Manager, North Wales Adoption Service, Wrexham County Borough Council

#### **3. Inquiry into adoption (14.15 – 15.00) (Pages 12 – 64)** **Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services**

Emily Warren – Welsh Local Government Association

Nigel Brown – Assistant Director for Children's Services, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Buddug Ward – Assistant Director Families & Children, Ceredigion County Council

# Agenda Item 2

## **NORTH WALES ADOPTION SERVICE** **Response to the National Assembly for Wales and Young People** **Committee inquiry into Adoption. 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 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/smooth 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



To whom it may concern,

As a Foster carer and also a prospective adopter I have been able to experience the adoption process from two different perspectives. I would therefore appreciate the opportunity to give my views on the service in place at present.

First of all when my husband and I decided to put ourselves forward to adopt a child in placement with us, we were given the view that Foster carers can't adopt. Although this perspective has been explained to us I still feel that there could be more children adopted by Foster carers if this was not the view of many social workers and people involved within adoption process.

Secondly our little girl is mixed race and we have experienced huge resistance to our perspective adoption of her due to this. Some of the opinions that we've been given throughout this process in relation to our little girl's heritage have bordered on racism. It is our understanding that there are a large amount of British children who are mixed race waiting for adoption because the regulations around placing children with same heritage are very difficult. There has been an awful lot of talk about meeting our little girls ethnic background, our little is girl British and therefore her culture is British. In effect what was actually being matched was the colour of her skin and this is something we feel need to be graded against.

Foster carers are also accused of using Foster carer as a backdoor to adoption. My husband and I could not understand this statement but as we proceeded through the process realised why this would be seen to be the case. We realised this when we met with other prospective adopters on our training and we recognised how long the process for them was going to be. It is our understanding that this process is so lengthy due to lack of staff to assess prospective adopters. From talking to other adopters this is one of the major problems that they come up against.

Also from talking to other adopters and prospective adopters it was a general feeling that those couples who had been in previous marriages were very anxious that there ex-partners would need to be interviewed.

From talking to other people who are considered adoption due to the fact that they are unable to have children themselves and have spent long periods of time going through cycles of IVF. I feel I have gained some understanding into why adoption is not an option for them. The people I've

spoken to feel there would be a huge difference in having their own child and having an adopted child. My husband and I have birth children and now an adopted child and from the perspective of a parent we feel there is no difference in the amount that we love our children. This is something we feel that should be betrayed more within the process and also the media and would help encourage prospective adopters.

From the perspective of Foster carer we are very frustrated by the court process and how it continuously delays placement for children. We have had problems due to shortage of court time, legal guardians being off for long periods of time ill and parents being allowed to delay the process. We also feel that courts specifying face-to-face contact after adoption are very off putting for prospective adopters. Also parents views on what type of people should adopt their children can sometimes delay the process of finding prospective parents.

We also believe that if prospective adopters are not found straightaway for a child within their own service that to avoid remaining in Foster care for long periods of time the national register should be consulted immediately. In an ideal world there should be a time limit placed on the process limiting the damage inflicted upon the children who are in this process. Recent research showing contact during Foster care placement with family members is having a detrimental effect upon the children should be taken into great consideration to try and minimise damage inflicted upon the children throughout the process. It is our feeling that the damage can be one of the courses of adoption breakdown and therefore any measures put in place that can prevent this should be taken.

All that said I would like to point out that we have been very well supported by our assessor and the outcome for us and our little girl has been fantastic. We are aware that there has been talk of the government employing private agencies to work within the adoption system. My husband and I work for Flintshire social services prior to that we worked as foster carers in the private sector. We would have huge reservations given our experience from both perspectives of the private sector having an involvement in this process.

We hope that information we have provided is of some use and would also like to reiterate these are not criticisms from our perspective but hopefully things that can be learned from.

# Evidence to the inquiry on Adoption Services

February 2012



WLGA • CLIO

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities, the three fire and rescue authorities, and four police authorities are associate members.
2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.
3. We value the opportunity to submit evidence as part of the Committees inquiry, which reflects the experience of adopters in local government adoption services and those working within the service. Whilst we understand the need for continued improvement, the evidence provided suggests a system that is providing a positive service to vulnerable children and prospective adopters, and clear and defined areas where reform would be beneficial.
4. As part of the Local Government Response to 'Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action' we have committed ourselves to lead reform, to make better use of resources and to ensure a continued positive outcome for those involved in the service. Our response states *'The Welsh Government will need to consider possible required changes in regulation and legislation needed to deliver the major shift in organisation and delivery of adoption services that we are looking to achieve. Of crucial importance is the need to increase the pace of the process, and additional legislative and policy change may be required in addition to new structural arrangements. WLGA and ADSS Cymru have commenced work with BAAF to scope out a model to deliver a national adoption service for Wales. Reform can be achieved immediately through a number of key changes at a regional and national level, and discussion with the third sector will be key to this work. We expect that a draft service specification will be shared with WG officials in the New Year and we would welcome clarity on arrangements to take forward the proposed changes. Any changes will require appropriate resources and an agreed lead in period to embed change in a safe and sustainable manner.'*

5. The WLGA and ADSS Cymru welcome the publication of the Family Justice review, as its recommendations may have a significant bearing on the time taken to complete the adoption process. The report recognises that the delays, endemic in the Court system are not acceptable, and we would urge that as part of the Committee's review the helpful recommendations contained within this report are reflected in your work.

**Further Information**

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## Context

6. Local Authorities in Wales have the statutory duty to deliver services that safeguard and promote the well being of children looked after and to secure permanency for them by the most appropriate route. Adoption is one route by which permanency can be achieved for children looked after and the statutory responsibility for developing and managing their individual care plans rests with Local Authorities.
7. The statutory functions include work with children pre and post adoption, birth parents who have children being placed for or potentially being placed for adoption. Work with adopters and their families, pre and post the adoption assessment process to include training, advice and support. The service places children for adoption, assesses and supports adopters and children in placement. We provide a range of non assessed support services (support groups/BRC and Intermediary Services/post approval training) and assessed adoption support needs. We run an adoption panel in order to adhere to the requirement of the regulations in respect of the agency.
8. National Minimum Standards (2007) are in place in England and Wales and set out a range of standards adoption agencies must meet when providing a service pertaining to a child's welfare, needs of prospective adopters and expectations regarding the matching process.
9. At the outset it is important to understand where we are in Wales in terms of local authorities performance on adoption.
  - There has been an increase of 16.7% in all Looked After Children since 2007 with the greatest increase of over 10% in 2009. 5416 children were LAC at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011.
  - 252 children were legally adopted during 2010/11 and represents 3.8% of all LAC; a further 183 children were placed for adoption at the year end.

- Another 85 children had their permanence secured legally through a Special Guardianship Order.
  - Over 85% of those children adopted had been subject to Placement Orders, whereby the plan for adoption had been challenged in court by his/her parents. Only 29 children were adopted with consent.
  - The numbers of placement breakdowns is very small in Wales. Less than 5 children's placements were disrupted prior to the adoption order being made last year and fewer than 5 children had breakdowns after the adoption order, requiring them to be brought back into the LAC system.
  - After the making of a Placement Order (note; no agency can place a child for adoption without a placement order or the consent of the birth parents) it takes on average 3 months 3 weeks for the child to move in to their new family. It then takes an average of over 10 months for an adoption order to be granted.
10. In recognition of the specialist nature of adoption services and in order to deliver adoption services within the resources available, different management and delivery arrangements have developed in Wales.
11. Regional collaboratives operate across South East Wales, Mid & West and North Wales, and it is crucial that the best practice and progress derived from these collaborations informs continued service development and aggregation of appropriate functions.

These include:

- North Wales: A single adoption service
- West Wales: A single adoption service delivers an adoption service to three local authorities operating a joint panel.
- South East Wales: A single adoption service hosted by Blaenau Gwent delivers an adoption service to three local authorities and has established a single Adoption Panel, in accordance with regulations.

- South Wales: ten local authorities deliver a collaborative arrangement in the exchange of placements

### **Combined Response**

**The responses contained in this submission are derived from the above services.**

#### **1. South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS)**

This is a response from SEWAS, (the South East Wales Adoption Service). This is a service that provides adoption services on behalf of Monmouthshire, Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Social Services Departments

The Adoption Panel that works with that service has been consulted regarding this response and a limited number of service users have responded. The time scale means it has not been possible to undertake as extensive a consultation as we would have wished and we have not approached a range of young people as we did not feel there was the time to undertake that work with the care that would have been needed. SEWAS routinely seeks feedback, e.g. from adopters following approval or matching and where there are identified themes those have been incorporated into the response

While there is greater contact with adoptive families through such processes as adopter support groups than would have been the case in previous years there are still a significant percentage of families who following the making of an adoption order choose not to have ongoing contact with the Agency. It is important in that context to note that comments will not necessarily reflect the views of all adoptive families.

#### **1. Prospective Parents:**

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

SEWAS is very aware of what an important resource adoptive parents are so the focus of the team is to respond promptly and professionally to all enquiries, and to sustain that throughout the process

Adopters are sent out an information pack and a follow up call is made. If prospective parents wish to proceed a visit will be undertaken to discuss the process and the needs of children requiring placement, so that prospective carers can make an informed decision about whether they wish to proceed. If they do then an assessment will commence, this will include a preparation group which is

held over a week-end and one week-day as feedback has suggested this is efficient for prospective parents in terms of requiring less time off work. This course aims to give prospective parents an understanding of the needs and experiences of children requiring adoption and the lifelong implications of adoption for both the child and prospective parents. As this service spans 3 Authorities courses are put on as and when required and in the most convenient venue to those attending, the aim being always to progress an application as promptly as possible

One worker will undertake the assessment with the prospective parent(s), the aim will be to plan the assessment with prospective parent(s) and the team will be flexible in terms of visiting arrangements SEWAS always aims to complete assessments within the agreed timeframes.

It can be helpful to link prospective parents with existing adoptive parents but the timing of that will depend upon the individual. Some prospective parents find it helpful to attend the adopters support group, again at which stage this occurs will depend upon each family.

It can be helpful to share resources with families, e.g. DVD's. Books, articles, etc some appreciate being given information about specialist agencies such as Adoption UK

The overall feedback from adopters as will be evidenced below is that they believe they were responded to promptly and professionally and while the process can feel intrusive they understand the need for a thorough assessment that focuses on the life long implications of adoption for all parties  
SEWAS does not have any adopters waiting to be seen and uses all feedback to inform service developments such as training opportunities

### **Adopters view**

- *One respondent felt very supported by her adoption social worker throughout the whole process and felt this worker was on hand at every stage to answer her questions and guide her through; she was confident that when she called the worker she would get a response.*

Another family had no concerns about the process but did comment that after being approved at panel they felt there was a gap, their view was

- *That while waiting matching for a second child, having successfully adopted one child already, they thought that they had been in limbo since the approval process and would have welcomed some type of support group during this period prior to matching. This respondent thought that he and his partner had received "sporadic" contact from the Adoption Team and would have welcomed more.*

The average waiting time for the last 15 adopters approved within SEWAS from approval to placement has been 6.6 months. This will include a return to panel for the match to be agreed and the period of introductions. Amongst this group there were 3 who experienced longer waits, (which obviously increased the average) but they all had specific requests in terms of younger ages or specific genders

SEWAS has recognised that support in this period can be helpful. Given the shortage of prospective parents, the majority experience a short wait, over the past year that has been an average of SEWAS is developing its training programme and is now offering a course on 'helping children in the early days of placement', as it has been identified that common issues develop in that period 'and the time before a child moves in is an ideal time to look at that Given this comment we will explore further other options that could help people feel supported through this phase. Prospective parents are able to attend support groups but we appreciate that type of support is not appropriate to everyone's needs.

The Adoption panel made the following comment in relation to the assessment process

- *It is not helpful to think that the adoption process can be fast tracked as it needs to remain a rigorous process, given the decisions that are being made, with time for reflection built in for both the prospective adopters and the assessing social workers at the end of the assessment process.*

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

There is a need to have consistent and high quality advertising that ensures people are aware of the need for prospective parents and which makes it clear who can apply.

There is potential for a combined approach to this from Welsh Adoption Agencies. It is critical that this advertising relates to the needs of those children requiring adoptive families, adverts on their own would not be sufficient there is a need to raise the profile of adoption, and the children needing placements and to counter some of the negative press

Prospective families need to be confident of a prompt and professional response, with clarity of information and for the process to be an open and transparent one. They also need to be confident that if approved and matched they will be given well assessed and complete information about the needs of the child In addition that they will be well supported following the placement of the child.

Most adopters talk about having been considering the process for some time, but some still approach the agency with misinformation about eligibility to become an adoptive parent. Adoptive parents can help inform recruitment initiatives

Recruitment needs to be informed by the needs of children requiring adoptive families. While there are shortages of prospective parents which are common to all agencies, such as older children, those with more complex needs or sibling groups. Links to local child care teams are critical as is robust forward planning, so that an awareness of children likely to require placements in the medium term inform recruiting priorities and also inform the assessment process. While it is important that prospective parents carefully consider the needs they might be able to meet, they also need an understanding of the needs of those children who are requiring adoptive placements

Local recruitment is also important in terms of an awareness of the local situation, where advertising is effective and knowledge of the community and how it responds to such campaigns. It is important that any national, regional and local recruitment is co-ordinated and giving the same messages.

### **Adoption panel response**

- *Recent press coverage blaming social workers instead of the courts for delays in the adoption process has not been helpful in relation to the public's perception of the service.*

SEWAS became operational in April 2011 so any combined statistical data is limited. Reviewing the last 50 children for whom adoption was the plan in Blaenau Gwent the timescales were as follows

- From the making of a placement order to placement with prospective parents 3.7 months
- From placement within the adoptive family to the making of an adoption order an average of 6.6 months
- From the making of a placement order to the making of an adoption order, an average of 10.7 months.

### **An Adoptive parent stated**

- *More positive media attention; e.g. more success stories of people who have been adopted. Of late any coverage of adoption issues has been negative – e.g. length of time it takes; fewer children being adopted etc.*

### **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?**

Children being considered for adoption need to be ready for the move to the forever family. The needs will vary, for some very young children that is about carefully planned introductions and foster carers supporting the transition. This work needs to start well in advance of a match between a child and a prospective family. Foster carers are key people in this process and need support and training to undertake the complex role of supporting a child to make an attachment then supporting them to transfer that to adopters, and continuing that link where appropriate.

For others it will also require direct work to ensure the child understands critical questions such as why they cannot return home and what a forever family means for them. For some good quality life story work will be sufficient, others might need more specialist play work to help them explore feelings and feel they have permission to move on. We have found that having workers with specific skills in this area to support social workers has been effective. These workers undertake direct work with the child and support the foster carers and then the prospective parents to care in the way that most effectively meets the needs of that individual child.

There then needs to be careful matching, to ensure the child's assessed needs are able to be met by specific adopters.

These foundations are crucial to ensure permanence occurs. Without these any support offered is less likely to be effective

There needs, (as stated above) to be good support of foster carers who are crucial in helping children to move on to adoptive family. This can be a challenging task with carers often looking after children for up to 2 years while proceedings are ongoing. They can (as mentioned below) be a tremendous support to adoptive parents in the early days of placement. Ensuring they are involved in the planning and are supported by their supervising social worker is important. Relevant training can also be helpful.

Feedback from a course provided on transitions and endings was, *'brilliant learned useful ideas, loads of new things another really helpful day'*.

It is also important to have an effective service for birth parents. As the majority of children now being placed with adoptive families are doing so without their consent. Research evidences that particularly for children who have a relationship with their birth family, they are more likely to form attachments with their adoptive family if their birth family can give their 'blessing' to this.

This is obviously an incredibly hard thing for a birth family to do especially given that proceedings are adversarial and often lengthy. Support to birth parents in relation such things as final contact and ongoing direct or indirect contact is

critical. It can be difficult for the child's social worker to do this given the court proceedings, but can be achieved by a worker with a good skill base. One parent recently worked with was able after support to say to her 4 year old son.-

*'I will always love you and will never forget you, but mummy is unable to look after you and you will have a new forever family and it is not because I do not love you, its because I love you loads and loads and I just can't look after you. Don't forget mammy will always love you and will never forget you and be a good boy'*

This was obviously incredibly hard for her to say (and such work is just as vital for fathers). It is time consuming, but it does give the child permission to move on.

SEWAS has started to use child appreciation days prior to placements. Although a limited number of these have been undertaken to date, the feedback has been positive. These bring the prospective parents into contact with people who have been involved with 'their prospective sons and daughters to date' and allows the sharing of the type of information that is not always recorded but can be so helpful in helping prospective parents understand the needs of their prospective sons and daughters. The feedback where these have occurred is that it has helped prospective parents put themselves in their children's shoes and so hopefully will aid their understanding of behaviours and support their responses to children in the months and years to come It also helps them to start to make an attachment to their son or daughter.

Adoptive families have been positive about adopters support groups and value the mix of informal support and learning, this is commented on below. Important topics such as managing facebook can be discussed. in addition verbal feedback has been,

- How good it is to meet other adoptive families
- How positive it is to allow children to develop friendships with other adoptive children
- That the topics discussed are useful in addressing issues and answering questions

These groups have developed and increased in number. There are also opportunities to undertake more specific training where there is an identified need, the 'early days of placement' is an example cited earlier, others being offered in 2012 include

- Talking to your child about adoption
- Understanding and managing teenage behaviour
- Attachment and child development
- Contact and Identity

Newsletters are also helpful to share information in another medium and to ensure e.g. useful contacts are shared. These can be used to allow adoptive families to share their experiences.

Once a child is in placement it is important that there is a clear adoption support plan, which identifies a child's specific needs. For many children universal services will be able to meet those. This does require agencies such as those working within services such as health and education to have a full understanding of how children's life experiences can impact on them and how they might assist in their integration into their adoptive families.

As children are placed within adoptive families who have experienced very adverse early life experiences some will require more specialist support. There is a comment below about the value of direct work and the view of the adopter that without this she would not have been able to meet the needs of her adoptive son. In SEWAS we have found it helpful to link workers with foster families to support them in their preparation and to undertake direct work if appropriate, then to be involved in planning the move and supporting the child and adopters in the new placement. This is an area of work that could be developed if resources permitted.

The longer children wait for a prospective parent, the more complex the move is likely to be. This makes robust permanency planning in agencies critical to the success of adoptive placements. This should involve monitoring children in care and ensuring that for those for whom adoption is identified as the best form of permanency that is achieved at the earliest possible date.

In Blaenau Gwent once a child has a 'should be placed decision' there are monthly meetings with all involved, (including foster carers) to ensure that all is being done to progress this plan as quickly as appropriate. This local focus ensures that the services are responsive to the identified needs in terms of direct work, recruitment and then the planning for a move

### **Views of adoptive families**

- *One family, who adopted a child outside of the South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) but was assessed by SEWAS, felt that the support and help received from their assessing social worker had been invaluable during the matching and placement stages. This family had a great deal of confidence in their social worker and any concerns they had were dealt with quickly and effectively by the worker, thus preventing them getting anxious. Also the informal and more formal Support Groups for adopters were mentioned as being very helpful in linking up adopters and gaining insight and knowledge about a whole range of issues that adopters face; the more informal coffee mornings helped adopters to get to know one another and share experiences with one another while the evening meetings were more structured and focussed on a theme sometimes with a speaker. The adoption training, which consisted of 3 consecutive days prior to the full assessment being*

*undertaken, was also cited as being helpful and insightful at the initial stage of the process.*

- *Another adopter spoke about the support she received from a therapeutic worker and later direct work shortly after her son had been placed with her and the fact that without this help she is sure the placement would have broken down as her son's needs had not been identified correctly at the matching stage through the Child Assessment Record for Adoption (CARA). This adoptive parent spoke very highly about this help and felt that had her son's needs been identified prior to placement the support should have commenced at this stage.*
- *One adopter had maintained close contact with her adoptive son's foster carer and felt that this had been extremely beneficial to the success of the placement. The positive relationship that had begun at the matching stage had been maintained and built upon after the placement and overall had provided much needed support. This adopter also mentioned the support from her social worker throughout the process and knew that there was always someone at the end of the telephone who would respond to any worries or concerns etc*

### **- What Improvements could be made to the support given to adoptive parents?**

#### **Views of adoptive parents**

- *One adopter thought that therapeutic help including direct work with adopted children should be given careful consideration at the matching stage after the needs of the child had been clearly identified; e.g. if there is an attachment disorder. This adopter also thought that ongoing access to support would be very beneficial to all parties.*
- *Another adopter mentioned the long time gap between the approval and a suitable match being found, but struggled to identify what more could have been done to help her cope with the year wait; she did feel supported by her social worker and realised that there needed to be a balance between keeping her informed and raising her hopes unnecessarily.*
- *The need for teachers and the education system being more aware of the needs of adopted children and their parents was another issue raised by an adoptive parent, who would have felt more supported had this been the case; in her situation, the adopted child had an attachment disorder but because the school did not understand this he was classed as a difficult child from a behavioural perspective.*

- *In relation to adopted children's needs being clearly identified at the matching stage, it was mentioned that the CARA, the document that should clearly identify these, needs to portray an accurate picture of the child and that social workers need to ensure this is the case.*
- *One adopter thought that a fact sheet giving information around the practicalities once an Adoption Order has been made could be very helpful and supportive; e.g. obtaining a new NHS number for the child.*
- *Support groups for adopters were widely praised and an increase in the frequency of these would be welcomed.*

The CARA is mentioned above. Feedback from Social workers completing this document do not find it the most helpful document in terms of profiling children's needs. Their feedback is that the form is repetitive. At the moment it serves 3 purposes, to inform panel, to offer information for prospective carers and for information for the child or young person in the future. As most Social Workers completing these are involved in care proceedings, there is a risk they focus on the legal matters at the expense of those things that would be important to the child in the future

### **Adopted Children:**

#### **-Do the current arrangements for adoption adequately reflect the rights of the Child?**

Given that the majority of adoptions in Wales occur for quite young children, it can be difficult to ascertain their views about the life long nature of adoption. Obviously there is feedback from adults who have been adopted and it is important to take account of their views but given the changing nature of adoption this will always reflect on a system that has inevitably changed in the ensuing years.

While there is rightful concern about adoption placement breakdown, the outcomes for children who are adopted are more positive than for those of a similar age who remain in the looked after system.

The welfare checklist does ask panels to consider the child's rights and it seems reasonable to believe that it is a right of each child to grow up in a stable and loving family who can meet that child's needs

Sibling relationships are also important and it is a challenge to find adopters who can care for larger sibling groups—thus meaning some children are separated from their siblings. This can be a particular challenge where e.g. older children remain with foster carers long term and younger children are adopted. Direct contact between the siblings ceases on occasions because of the risk of compromising the anonymity of the adoptive placement.

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

As was stated in the introduction, we did not feel there was sufficient time to undertake a consultation with young people but a brief conversation with one young person who is receiving ongoing support gained the following response

- *That she was happy with the support she was receiving from her therapeutic worker, with whom she meets on a weekly basis.*

**- Professionals working with Adopted Children/Families:**

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

Avoidance of delay needs to start from the first contact with a Social Services Department. There needs to be good support services within the community which mean that only children who need to be looked after enter the care system. For those that do there needs to be robust permanency planning. This should not simply identify the preferred permanence option for the child but detail how that will be achieved and within what timescale The Agency then need to have a process to ensure this is revisited. While it is looked at as part of a child's LAC review there is a danger that it is overshadowed by day to day arrangements rather than a focus on the child's need for a lifelong family.

There was a consensus that lengthy court cases were creating delay for children, this is commented on in the views of the Adoption panel but was also highlighted by Social Workers. Delay occurs by repeated reports and also by difficulty in timetabling hearings. This not only delays the process but leaves children living in an 'effective limbo' for long periods often receiving messages from families that make achieving any sense of security difficult. This is not only extremely difficult for them on a day to day basis but because of the trauma it can cause can make the likelihood of achieving a successful adoptive placement more difficult in the longer term.

The timescales referred to under section 1(ii) indicate that once Blaenau Gwent has a placement order it seeks to place children without delay and to support that it will have begun that process of family finding well in advance of the order. Without the placement order, (or family consent, which is very unusual) it cannot place children with adoptive families It is hoped that if the recommendations of the family justice review are accepted and implemented that this will reduce the duration of court hearings

For children that it is not possible to place within the SEWAS area detailed family finding can be difficult to start until the Agency has a placement order. Courts will sometimes give consent to start advertising earlier or referring to the adoption register but there is a general reluctance given that the matter is still being

contested. In Blaenau Gwent in the past year we have the example of children whose proceedings took just short of two years to conclude. By conclusion these children were harder to find a placement for because of their age and the uncertainties they had lived with in that protracted period but they were matched within 5 months of the proceedings concluding

Delay does occur because of insufficient numbers of adopters particularly for older children, sibling groups or children with more complex needs. Recruiting higher numbers for such children would aid matching and reduce delay. This does need to be looked at in conjunction with the comment of the earlier adopter who found the waiting period between approval and match difficult and reinforces the need to have both clear written information for people to utilise during that period and access to both individual and group support.

Caseloads for social workers need to be at a level that allows them to devote sufficient time to permanence planning and to be undertaking the quality of work with the child and family

### **Adoption panel views**

- *The Adoption Panel believed that delays in the adoption process occur when there are numerous assessments being undertaken with birth families by a number of professionals. Also, often courts do not give sufficient weight and credibility to a social worker's assessment, believing that there needs to be more specialist assessments undertaken by psychologists and psychiatrists etc. Social workers can often feel that their work holds less weight than other assessments being undertaken despite the fact they may well have worked intensively with a birth family for many months / years. It was acknowledged however by the Panel that there are occasions when additional specialist assessments are needed by the courts. The panel has also experienced poorly written CARA's that have been returned to the social worker for updating and clarification; this has inevitably caused delays in the decision making process in relation to agreeing that children should be placed for adoption. Medical reports not being returned in a timely fashion and the high turnover of social workers in some authorities along with high caseloads amongst child care staff were also cited as factors causing delay from the Panel's perspective.*

### **Team views**

- The direct / therapeutic workers within the Adoption Team believed that the courts were the main case of delay for children; e.g. by not limiting the number of assessments that are undertaken in relation to birth parents. Also, sibling groups and older children can be difficult to match with prospective adopters and there is the need to be recruiting more prospective adopters who are interested in sibling groups and older children.

It would be helpful if there were more services available from health at an earlier stage. It can be difficult to access services such as play therapy without a firm diagnosis yet if services can be offered in a preventative way it can avoid more expensive interventions at a later stage and avoid distress to children and families

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

Caseloads for social workers need to be at a level that allows them to devote sufficient time to permanence planning and to be undertaking the quality of work with the child and family, that leads to that occurring in a timely manner. They also need the skills and confidence that will support them in preparing the child for adoption. The volume of written work has impacted in recent years on Social Workers capacity to undertake direct work. (as per Munro report) This contributes to delay but also if the Social Worker does not know the child well then that could contribute to a less than accurate assessment (as cited by an adopter earlier), this could lead to the wrong match and in the worse case scenario an adoption breakdown

In addition there can be a lack of knowledge about adoption in some child care teams as it is a small part of the overall work of most social workers. It could be helpful to have one person with that knowledge in each team (this would be more helpful in some teams but not needed where there is that knowledge and skill base.)

It does need to be recognised that the needs of some children being placed for adoption have more complex needs than in previous years. There is now a greater awareness of the potential longer term impact of neglect on children and the fact that they will need skilled parenting, love alone is not enough. Even for children placed as babies the lifestyle of the birth parent in pregnancy e.g. drug and alcohol use can impact on the child's development.

All Agencies need to contribute to the support that some families will need, and it is important that is offered as part of an adoption support plan rather than waiting for a crisis. Agencies such as health and education need to be contributors and their staff need the understanding and skills to support such families. (As per earlier comment re education by adoptive family)

- The Adoption Team direct / therapeutic workers believe that there has to be a complete package of work undertaken with adopted children, adoptive parents and foster carers who are relinquishing children to ensure the best possible outcomes for all parties. This package would include the following:
  - Preparatory work with children before being placed with their adoptive families so that they as workers could develop a positive

- relationship with the child that can then be transferred over when the child is placed with the adopters.
- Training for foster carers to enable them to recognise and deal with the feelings they will experience in letting go of a child in their care as well as the need to ensure positive endings.
  - Liaising with schools around supporting adopted children in the school environment.
  - Rethinking the issue of contact with siblings who may well have a different permanency plan than the adopted child and working towards encouraging sibling contact to relieve anxieties in later life for all siblings.
  - Developing child 'appreciation days' whereby all individuals, who have been involved in the life of a child who will be adopted, has the opportunity to come and share their experiences of that child with the prospective adopters as well as bring photographs and other mementoes relating to that child that can be passed on to the adopters. This gives the prospective adopters a more holistic view of that child's life journey to date.

### **Adoption Panel Views**

- *The Adoption Panel thought that the 'buddy system', whereby an adoption social worker is linked to the child's social worker to guide them through the adoption process was a helpful way to ensure successful outcomes along with the different support groups in place for adopters and birth parents. They also thought that having direct / therapeutic workers in the team to support children and adopters was extremely beneficial to ensure that work is undertaken with children /adopters where this was felt to be beneficial. An effective matching process was also considered to be crucial in determining successful outcomes.*

### **- How effective has the Welsh Government been at monitoring adoptions and tracking the progress for the child and parents?**

Agencies need to have clear performance management information with respect to adoption activity.

It can be helpful to have statistics based on the date that children are placed with adoptive families as well as the date of the adoption order

It is helpful to have comparative data, from the Welsh Government.

It would be useful e.g. to have a more consistent picture about adoption disruptions across Wales and whether any lessons can be learned from those to inform practice—The oft quoted figure is that 1 in 5 adoptions disrupt which can give a negative and off putting picture to prospective families.

### **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?**

## **Good Practice**

These are included in the body of the response but the key points would be.-

- Direct work that bridges the fostering and adoption placement and ensures that children are well prepared and ready for a move to their 'forever family'
- Well trained and supported foster carers who can support the preparation of the children for the move to adoptive families
- A 'buddy' system that links an adoption worker with the child care worker at the point of referral for adoption
- Robust permanency policies which have structures such as adoption planning meetings to support them
- Child appreciation days
- Rigorous planning of introductions that take a holistic approach, (i.e. not just focused on a timetable) and ensure e.g. the part of foster carers during the period of introductions and where appropriate beyond
- Support groups and training to adopters and foster carers
- Work with birth families, including supporting adopters and birth parents to meet prior to a child's placement
- An integrated adoption system that enables a range of people in children's lives to pool skills and gain the best outcome for the child

## **Barriers**

- High caseloads for social workers which prevents focus on permanency and direct work with children
- Focus on paper systems has diverted attention from direct work skills so these need development
- Delays in process because of court delays Courts can appear focused on the needs of adults rather than concluding proceedings within a timeframe that meets the permanency needs of children
- Lack of sufficient adopters particularly for older children, those with additional needs and sibling groups
- Step-parent adoptions utilise time in adoption teams
- Lack of understanding of universal agencies about the needs of adoptive families

- Negative press which gives a misleading message and deters prospective adopters coming forward.
- The need to develop skilled support systems to ensure that every child who could benefit from adoption has access to a family with appropriate support

## **2. NEWPORT LOCAL AUTHORITY**

### **Prospective parents:**

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

Most of the feedback we get from prospective parents about support through the assessment and approval stage of the process is very positive. This is from meeting parents at the training, interest groups we run and also from the final visits managers do when an assessment is almost completed. They are generally extremely positive about the training - which is reflected in the training feedback forms they used to complete when we ran the training. I believe the feedback from the new trainer Mary Jones is also very positive. Prospective parents find the training helpful as it helps them consider issues they were unaware of previously. This is particularly true of contact issues and we often have parents who say they would not have considered contact before the training course, but after they can see the benefits for the child. Prospective parents also find our interest groups which they attend up until the point of approval helpful as we invite adopters and foster carers to speak to them.

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

In terms of what action is needed to encourage parents to pursue adoption I think more positive publicity about adoption would help, as recent publicity has been very negative and often puts people off. Adopters will always say they wish the process was quicker, however most parents do understand the need for the assessment itself, they only become frustrated when they are waiting to get on a training course, or to be matched with a child after they are approved. Recent collaborative working with other local authorities has ensured that there is a training event every two months, which means waiting for training courses is no longer an issue for Newport adopters.

### **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?**

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

Families would say swift access to the appropriate services is what helps secure the placement. A good adoption support plan helps ensure all the services they need are in place when a child is placed. Regular visits from social worker are also important to ensure issues are dealt with promptly. Families would also say it is really important they have access to all the relevant information on a child before they are placed, so they can ensure they are taking them on with the full information.

### **Adopted children:**

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

In general the current arrangements do reflect the rights of the children in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). There are a few cases where a decision about whether to move on children who have been in foster care for sometime has to be made. This can be difficult if the child is settled, as you could argue their needs would be better met in an adoptive placement to secure their future - however are the child's rights being adhered too? Their views could be ascertained, but they could be too young to understand the significance of the differences between long term foster care and adoption.

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

The support given to adopted children post is still mixed, as there is a lack of appropriate services to meet their needs. Some receive CAMHS support, and some receive private therapeutic support but there is little evidence to say how helpful these services are. The families who come back to us post adoption who seem to be having significant difficulties would say that therapeutic support to children is what they need and find difficult to access. There are few practitioners Newport Adoption Service can refer these children to and the options available are often very costly, and seem to work in an open-ended way.

### **Professionals working with adopted children/ families:**

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

Most of the delays in adoption come from the court process. Although the Adoption Team receives referrals from twin tracking early on in the process, they are unable to family find until the Placement Order is made. The child has usually

been in care for over a year by the time we get to this point, often because so birth parents have been granted additional independent assessments or they have put additional family members forward. Sometimes delays with adoption medicals also cause delay to the process. Once we have the Placement Order the adoption team can start family finding. We find there can be delays from this point on if the child has not been adequately prepared for adoption (life story work) or if they have emotional/ behavioural needs that are not being met (therapeutic support.) Otherwise in most cases we are able to keep delays to a minimum by holding regular planning meetings and widening our search to National very quickly (assuming we have the support to pay for inter-agency fees.)

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

- Life story work and therapeutic work where necessary - so children who are prepared to move on.
- The permission for inter-agency fees, so we can search nationally as soon as possible particularly for difficult to place children. However this does have budgetary implications.
- A commitment to supporting the adopters post placement, which should be represented in the adoption support plan.

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

Adoption is an issue that requires much more scrutiny, monitoring and evaluation. There are clear issues within the adoption process that would benefit from intervention or recommendations from the Welsh Government, particularly as there are moves towards greater collaborative working between local authorities.

**- 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?**

Newport have recently placed a dual heritage (white Welsh/ Punjab Indian) sibling group of children aged 4 and 6, one child has attachment difficulties, the other a significant hearing impairment. By advertising nationally we managed to find adopters to meet all the children's needs, including their cultural needs, without significant delay. We were open minded and had no clear views about the type of adopters required, and the match was made with two men. The children's social worker has carried out excellent life story work with the children so they understand who their birth and foster family are and why they need adopting. The social worker has also prepared them for two dads and they are very excited at the prospect of meeting them.

Newport has also successfully found a placement in the past for a sibling group of

three. Again we advertised nationally for the children to avoid delay, as there were no adopters able to take three children locally. The children were placed in two separate foster placements, and the introductions were complex as the adopters needed to get to know all three children. There were also a number of geographical challenges as the placement was at the other end of the country. These children have been placed for a number of years, very successfully - we are updated on the placements through the letterbox scheme.

### **3. Bridgend County Borough Council**

The response has been completed by the Group Manager and Registered Manager for the Adoption Service.

In response to the letter from Children and Young People Committee: Inquiry into Adoption. We have completed the section relevant to professionals working with those affected by adoption. Whilst our interpretation of the letter is that the Committee wish to hear direct from the four categories, we have facilitated this by forward transmission of the letter to adopters, prospective adopters and where possible adopted children. We have also provided some commentary on these three points from a provider of the services' point of view.

#### **PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH ADOPTED CHILDREN/FAMILIES**

##### **-What action is needed in the adoption process to ensure delays are kept to a minimum?**

- **Care Proceedings:** These have increased year on year but more so since 2008. Whilst both the court protocol and public law outline were intended to limit the length of time for proceedings, this in reality has not been realised. Multiple family member assessments, the need for which can come to light well into the care proceedings, creates a cumulative effect to the delay. This is on top of the already well noted delays caused by the demand for expert witness reports, many of which are then countered by 'opposing' parties in the proceedings. The reports are of a varying standard and quality. The value of the assessment is used only for the court decision making process and not necessarily for the birth parents post proceedings (in order for them to access support/treatment/therapy) and are not readily made available to adopters and their agencies when they are considering children to be placed. We recognise that the recently published Family Court Justice Review has addressed some of these points and made recommendations and we urge that Government take this on board as quickly as possible.
- Greater use of already existing expert assessments (from previous or earlier proceedings) to be used in newly instigated proceedings would avoid delay

to the child born into a family or to a parents where there is already a wealth of knowledge on the needs of the parent and parenting capacity.

- A stronger interface between the adoption team of the local authority and the childcare teams is important. This would ensure adoption practice wisdom and expertise is provided to the practitioners who are determining care plans. This would also enable the adoption agency/team to be well informed in respect of the historical, family and child's issues which is essential in identifying and securing links for children. Much time is wasted in family finding activities across agencies through locating multiple links which then do not proceed once the childcare social worker shares a fuller history of the child and family to adopters and their agency.
- Adopter enquiries have increased. This may be in part to potential adopters approaching multiple agencies in order to maximise their chances of being assessed; this may also indicate that there are agencies that are not responding in a timely way to enquiries and assessing all suitable enquirers that approach the agency. Consideration to a collective database of enquires could be given who are then directed to their local or an agency of children (Consortia could have a lead role in this i.e. The South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium SWAAC). This would ensure more accurate data on the number enquiring. A central agency could potentially compound delays in timely assessments but equally would enable the signposting of enquirers to agencies with capacity to assess.
- Targeting recruitment campaigns should not only be for children who appear to be harder to place, in sibling groups, older children, special needs etc. Our experience has been there have been challenges in locating suitable and sufficient numbers of adopters for very young children as well as the harder to place.

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

- If this question is referring to post panel 'should be placed' recommendations, then the issues in the question above on the lateness and quality of expert assessments is relevant as is the delaying of care proceedings.
- Courts could make a direction routinely at the completion of care and placement order proceedings to disclose the 'agreed' reports to potential adopters and their agencies. This would ensure that adopters and their agencies that provide support are better prepared and informed in respect of the holistic needs and issues of the child from the past.
- Strengthening the strategic and data capture role of consortia (i.e. South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium -SWAAC) to act as a repository for information. It would also act as an early and proactive disseminator and commentator for

the agencies in relation to trends, issues, good practice activities/initiatives and could also enable practice wisdom forums to be set up on key issues to improve standards across all aspects of the adoption role (adopter recruitment/assessments, matching and placing children, adoption support, BRC and Intermediary services etc). Prompt accurate information on trends enables agencies to adjust and make strategic adaptations to changing service needs.

- An increase in the provision of multi-agency resources in adoption support cases. This would include greater access to CAMHS for adopted children with 'priority' status given the needs of children from care and the additional needs when placed for adoption. This would enable a platform for therapeutic interventions and support in partnership with the statutory LA and go some way to reducing the number of adoption disruptions for children later in their childhood (primarily adolescents).
- An increase in capacity within all agencies to assess a sufficient number of adopters with a range of skills enabling better choice and greater skills matched to needs.
- It is the opinion of those completing this response that workers are in the main very aware of the value of this activity but other priorities make it difficult for them to prioritise and undertake the work. Therefore an 'environment' which provides value on this work and that enables social workers to embark on meaningful direct work with children would be desirable.

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

- Greater clarity in terms of the legislation, regulation and guidance is needed around the issue of a) direct work with the child and b) life story/journey work (information to the child about adoption). This would also need to underpin the validity of this work within childcare teams so that it carries 'weight' and its value is seen in terms of not the immediacy (i.e. a life story book availability) but in terms of the important messages given to the child that creates self worth and value, hears their voice - this fits in with the Munro report findings
- Collation of data and production of statistical information has a value. In terms of an analysis of this data there is little evidence that this has been used by WG directly to highlight trends and share this widely with agencies.
- The question is not clear in terms of 'parents' as this is not specific as to adoptive or birth parents.

**-Do you have any specific examples of good practice in the delivery of adoption services or examples of where action is needed to remove barriers to adoption?**

- This agency has for some time been working on and perfecting collaborative activities for those affected by adoption. To date we have shared practice knowledge to improve practitioners understanding across local authority areas, set up joint pre approval training for adopters and run support groups. Further collaboration is already planned in the areas of support groups, shared resources and post approval training as well as an opportunity to consider sharing potential adopter assessments across Local Authorities in order to ensure reduction in waiting time for assessments.
- Use of concurrent planning methodology to creatively match a child whilst maintaining the necessary safeguards and scrutiny in order to adhere to the regulations, guidance on adoption enabled the placement of a child with approved adopters who also became foster carers to care for the child prior to the completion of the birth mothers consent to adoption (Section 19 and 20 Adoption and Children Act 2002 – relinquished child).
- This agency has created a birth parent support group for those who have had children placed for adoption.
- Proactive, innovative and flexible solutions to external and internal pressures on adoption have been used. This has included the use of the council's secondary employment policy to enable the manager to expand the team capacity in order for more adopter assessments. This also has the advantage of increasing knowledge of adoption and development of staff skills.

**Comment on sections for completion by other parties.**

**Prospective Parents**

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

- This agency takes its lead from applicants and enquirers in ensuring the creation, monitoring and delivery of services meets the needs of the applicants. Where positive comments are provided on what has been helpful and supportive and what has worked well and not so well, this information has been used to 'shape the service'. In the same way negative comments or complaints are dealt with in a timely fashion and the agency ensures learning is active from both and not only reactive from the complaints.

- The agency provides written information to enquirers within 24 hours of the first contact wherever possible. This is followed up by a briefing evening. Prospective adopters are invited to talk to approved and adoptive parents for further information. In addition the agency provides a range of support groups to adopters such as celebration days, under 5's support group, adopters support group etc.

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

- The agency has not yet needed to advertise for adopters as there has been a year on year increase in enquiries and applications.

**Adoptive Parents And Families**

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

- We have generated a culture of close co-operation with childcare and fostering teams to ensure that all the information that is known and available to those involved in the care planning, linking and support to adoptive families and children.
- The team provides support and training to the extended family of adopters so that the child and prospective adopters have well informed extended family at a crucial time of the creation of the new family unit.
- The adoption service ensures that they provide good access to advice, support and guidance to adopters. This has been extended to ensure a responsive culture in that when contacted by an adopter a team member (even if not the allocated member) will make contact within 24 hours at the latest.

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

- Enhance the working relationships between the assessment teams and the adoption service. For instance we have (as a result of partnership working) an improved response in dealing with requests for 'adoption' support that are not purely adoption related issues. In these cases an adoption worker remains actively involved in the case to ensure any adoption related issues are addressed.
- Greater improvements could be made by stronger multi-agency collaboration around the support provision such as CAMHS.

## Adopted Children

### **-Do the current arrangements adequately reflect the rights of the child?**

- Efforts to ensure the 'voice' and rights of the child should be central to the adoption process. As outlined earlier, issues of delay and lack of direct work will therefore impact on the child's rights in terms of having their needs met in a timely and thorough fashion.

### **-How effective is the support given to adopted children post adoption, particularly for children with complex needs?**

- The support given to adopted children could be strengthened pre and post placement. As outlined in terms of avoiding delays, direct work, their voice being heard in the process.

## **4. RHONDDA CYNON TAF CBC**

### **Prospective parents:**

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

The majority of adoptive parents who responded to the consultation reported that the support was good through the assessment process and the supportive relationship developed with the assessing Social Worker was considered to be a key component of this. Some adopters who had experience of adopting from more than one authority reported that support varied between agencies but overall the response to this question was positive. The ability to offer a timely response at initial enquiry was seen as crucial plus having clear information about the process and likely timescales from the outset. Adopters reported that the training offered prior to assessment was regarded as invaluable.

Adoption Panel members & professionals felt that support had improved and the reduction in the time that applicants wait to attend preparation and training were seen as clear factors to support this.

Generally it was felt that there is however a need to build better consultation mechanisms into practice to ensure that prospective adopters' views are fed back into service improvement. There is also a need to embed quality assurance mechanisms into the approval process e.g. mid point assessment reviews.

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

All respondents argued strongly that the whole process should be speeded up and that duplication of paperwork should be reduced. It was also felt that more staff to undertake assessments and staff being provided with equipment such as laptops to use during assessments would be of benefit to speed up the process. Also those who had adopted for a second time felt that the process for assessing second time adopters should be reduced. There was general consensus that clear information on process and timescales involved and more information on the types of people who can adopt would assist in encouraging more adopters and would remove some of the myths surrounding adoption. It was felt that continually raising the profile of adoption via the media & press etc is required so that it is not seen as a second best option but a definite first choice for families. One responder felt that utilising experienced adopters in recruitment and assessment could ensure that the emotional and practical aspects of adoption are addressed as part of the process. There was also a view expressed by one of the responders that foster carers should be encouraged more to consider adoption and that possibly some prospective adopters would benefit from fostering first.

Panel and professional feedback acknowledge that this is a difficult task because people often come to adoption to meet their own individual needs and at particular points in their lives. Generally it is felt that continuing to raise the profile through marketing campaigns and provision of good information on the needs of children requiring adoption are of benefit in raising awareness and in encouraging more applicants and to ensure that it is a service to meet the needs of children .

**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?**

Professionals consulted felt that good resources to support placements are essential to ensure that support is built in from outset and not just at crisis point. It is acknowledged that this responsibility largely rests with Assessment & Care Management Social Workers working alongside the Adoption Social Workers until the adoption order is made. Following the making of the order the support provided largely falls to the Adoption team and where specialist support is required post adoption this is often commissioned externally because services cannot be accessed easily in the local authority. It is felt that adoption support should become the responsibility of the wider local authority and partners such as the NHS, to ensure that the support needs of adopted children are fully met e.g. in terms of accessing CAMHS services, speech & language support, educational support services etc. Professionals also reported that attitudes & support of wider family and friends to the adoption are key success factors along with good preparation of adopters and children prior to placement and support for foster

carers in moving children on. It was also felt that utilising the support of other adopters, providing ongoing opportunities for adoptive families to be involved in training and support groups are essential to the success of placements but often not well developed.

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

Responses received from adopters cited ongoing training opportunities and opportunities to meet with other adopters as important areas. One responder argued strongly that involvement of adopters in service design, planning, delivery and review would improve the service and ensure that it was more in line with the needs of adoptive families and that the body of knowledge and experience held by adopters is underused. This adoptive parent also felt that involving adopters in the training and continuing professional development of Social Workers would be of benefit to increase understanding and knowledge of adoption and that a standardised CPD programmed for Social Workers across Wales would reduce inequalities in the preparation and support of adopters.

**Adopted children:**

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

Panel members expressed concern that court proceedings appear to focus upon the rights of parents over those of children, and that cases become protracted creating unacceptable delays for children. Panel cited various examples where cases have had to be reconsidered several times due to new assessments being undertaken on the birth family members. Panel and professionals supported any proposed change to reduce delays for children but some concern was expressed that removing SBA decisions from Panel would remove an important independent safeguard for children. There was also some concern expressed that this would not necessarily reduce delay for children unless courts also worked to strict timescales and the adversarial nature of the process was tightly controlled.

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

Panel felt that adoptive parents meeting with the Agency Medical Adviser & Specialists involved with the child prior to matching/placement were positive in identifying support needs and putting mechanisms in place but that needs which develop post adoption are often not as well supported. Professionals and adoptive parents expressed concern that post placement support, particularly for children with complex needs, is often not well co-ordinated and not individualized, although budget constraints may be the likely reason for this. It is felt by those working in the field that there is a need to raise awareness in Education Departments and school settings of the needs of adopted children. An example cited was where it is

necessary for a child to spend time out of school initially developing their attachments to their family this is sometimes problematic because schools are measured on attendance. There was an overall consensus that adopted children should be given where necessary the same access to support services as they would have had as LAC children and that the fact they are adopted does not necessarily mean that their needs change. As outlined above there was strong support for developing a multi agency approach to post adoption support services and a central point of contact for adopters to access services would be beneficial.

### **Professionals working with adopted children/ families:**

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

Panel & professionals identified key actions to reduce delay as:

- Reducing court delays and number of assessments and expert reports.
- Removing specific details of care planning from court arena and place the responsibilities back with the local authority.
- Reducing court requests for placement “dry runs” for children, particularly those with relatively straightforward needs.
- Development of National Adoption Register for Wales and/or closer working between consortia to ensure resources are shared and needs identified.
- National targeted recruitment campaigns.
- Development of specialist Assessment & Care Management Workers to focus on completion of the adoption work for the child including life story work and Child Assessment Reports for Adoption.

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

Panel and professionals felt that the development of Post Adoption Support Teams & services across all agencies was vital and that these services are much more developed in England. It was also felt that the mechanisms to reduce disruption, such as the development of ‘Life Appreciation’ days should be embedded into practice.

#### **- How effective has the Welsh Government been at monitoring adoptions and tracking the progress for the child and parents?**

Professionals working in the field were not clear as to the measures which had been put in place to monitor adoptions and track progress, except via the triennial inspection regime, which needs to be urgently reconsidered to avoid duplication and develop an outcomes focus to support service improvements. The end of year statistical return figures captures some data but they do not give a clear profile of need or the reasons for delay in children being adopted.

**- 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?**

Currently RCT is providing training for prospective adopters in collaboration with two other authorities to ensure that it can be offered every two months thus reducing the waiting time for applicants significantly. It is also felt that a review of the financial support available to adopters would reduce inequalities between agencies and encourage applicants from a wider range of backgrounds.

**5. NORTH WALES ADOPTION SERVICE**

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

### **Adoptive parents and families:**

**-In terms of the support provided for adoptive families, what has been most important 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/smooth 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

**6. West Wales Adoption Service & Ceredigion Local Authority (Combined response)**

**Prospective parents:**

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

All prospective adopters are allocated a worker who supports them throughout from enquiry stage, training, assessment & approval, once approved and linked the same worker continues to support them.

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

Encourage them to pick up the phone & discuss any issues, not all people with criminal convictions/obese/smokers/older people are dismissed. It takes all sorts

to make adoptive parents. What is important is that the children are no longer straightforward relinquished babies, but although they will have had different life experiences & backgrounds; they are all children, needing a good ordinary, family life.

**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?**

Honesty of the placing agency and honesty of adopters

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

More post adoption support delivered at a local level, continuing after the order adoption is a lifelong experience.

***Adopted children:***

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

Judicial process taking too long, when parents case is hopeless, thus denying the child the right to permanency

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

CAHMS support is difficult to enlist if placement is unstable. All agencies need to accept that adopted children are also a corporate responsibility until they become adults.

Accessing support services for children post placement is proving difficult through lack of funding and resourcing in local authorities.

Investment in permanency planning for children is not addressing the numbers and needs of children coming through to adoption.

**Professionals working with adopted children/ families:**

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

Whilst the assessments need to be thorough and robust I am sure that following the reading of many completed forms the assessment process can be streamlined but still be thorough, robust and purposeful. The formatting of the assessments seem to be overly complicated and full of repetition. I am sure that addressing this issue would help minimise delays

Lack of capacity in adoption teams causes delay.

It may take 12 months or more for PAs to have initial visit, attend training and then identify an allocated worker. Need more staff to speed up this process.

Attempt to complete assessments within 6 months – further delay can be caused here by postponing applicants attending panel because children's cases are given priority. Whilst adoption panel needs to be rigorous – tend to focus on any negative rather than acknowledging positives and applicants resilience to such a bureaucratic process.

Currently need placements for a number of sibling groups – despite prep training we know that the majority of adopters have a preference for a single child as young as possible, with the possibility of a second child [sibling] following on. Where we have placed older siblings adopters have encountered many difficulties with regard to attachment and despite previous preparation find the reality of the situation very challenging. Have several scenarios where sibling groups have still not been adopted after 2+ years and future of these placements under review.

The number of children with a plan that includes adoption has steadily risen in the past 3 years – the number of staff IN adoption service has remained the same. This means that workload has increased in all areas – tracking, supporting child care staff, completion of support plans and adoption placement reports, attending panel [matches], attending LAC reviews, working with birth parents, letter box contact, post adoption support. ASC has been in post for 6 years and her workload has widened and will continue to do so because of the numbers involved – but no additional hours or admin support

Delays in the Court arena have meant that children are waiting longer; has sometimes meant that adopters too have had to deal with uncertainty about proposed matches and the most difficult aspect has been the emotional upheaval brought about by birth parents challenging the adoption order application. This situation provides birth families with false hopes and with older children further confusion

The necessity, post the ACA 2002 Act, of birth parents to be notified by the Court as a matter of course of adoption applications and hearings when a Placement Order has already been made causes delay, creates anxiety for the prospective adopters and also raises false hopes for the birth parents. The removal of this

need to notify birth parents would assist and expedite successful outcomes for adoption

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

If a child has been adopted, for all agencies to accept fast tracked referral if there are any issues, so that adopters are supported to maintain placement.

I think it has become essential that families can access support quickly and often this will be held up as parents do not want to go back to social services area teams. Teenagers' referrals are often only accepted when things have gone beyond crisis point anyway

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

There is little or no tracking of review decisions, timescale through to Panel & court decision, then stages including those introductions which break down & child needs to come back to selection process. More robust information on these timescales and reasons for delays would be helpful to ensure improvement in the system.

**- 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?**

Post adoption workers/ teams should have budgets to be able to develop their own therapeutic services. This could be shared across teams/ counties. E.g. a Theraplay therapist could work for 2 or 3 counties or a psychologist who could provide support for behavioural issues. There is a lot of good practice in West Wales that doesn't have time to develop.

Child Appreciation days-these could be developed so children get better chance of their new families understanding their background from different points of view.

More recognition that adoption is a lifelong process –funding for youth work comes from Children in Need. WG could provide funds for youth workers with a knowledge of adoption to work across adoption teams

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## **Establishing a National Adoption Service for Wales** **Initial outline paper**

Developed By:  
Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)  
Association of Directors of Social Services, Cymru (ADSSC)  
BAAF Cymru

### **Purpose**

This paper sets out a potential structure for the reform of adoption services in Wales, leading to a 'National Adoption Service' for Wales, as set out in '*Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action*'. We are committed to achieving a consistent national approach to adoption, with a strong focus on the recruitment and preparation of adopters and on adoption support. We believe that the adoption system in Wales is not broken, but will benefit from some aggregation of functions to a national and regional level. This approach reflects the complexity of the system which requires a complex set of solutions at different levels, to support sustainable change and improvement.

It is our professional opinion that this model proposes a safe and sustainable structure and mitigates the risks attached to one national agency, where safety issues and complexities would be likely to occur. We feel that these reforms set Wales at the forefront of the agenda, recognising how complex adoption services are, and maintaining a rights based approach in line with the UNCRC. Indeed we would go as far as to say we would caution against any radical reforms to 'nationalise' the whole service which undermine the role and function of the local authority and risk unaccountable delivery, and a loss of the voice of the child.

We welcome the Deputy Minister's view that Social Services remain an integral function within local government. As part of the delivery of social care local government has responsibility for adoption services, and whilst we are concerned at some suggestions in England that adoption services could be privately outsourced, we welcome the continued support from Welsh Government that adoption functions remain a core part of the social care role of local authorities. We also recognise the unique expertise the voluntary sector brings to adoption and adoption support in Wales and will work collaboratively with them to scope out the detail of any proposed implementation of adoption reform .

The proposed structure of a Welsh national adoption service is aligned to 10 principles for adoption services devised by BAAF (December 2011), and takes into account the key policy drivers in Wales of:

1. Improving the experience for adopters and children

2. Increasing the voice of the child
3. Maximising collaborative advantage
4. Efficient and sustainable use of resources

We propose that in order to deliver improvement and maintain safety, a new structure for adoption services would at the outset be structured on a three tiered model, aggregating a number of services to a national and regional level, and retaining a number of functions at a local level in accordance with wider care planning and social care legislation. In order to achieve such reform necessary resource allocation and legislative change is required, and further discussions with WG officials on both of these aspects will need to be a priority to ensure timely, yet sustainable change.

The status of paper is as a first stage document and will need considerable further work with partners, once agreement for the principles is provided by the Deputy Minister.

### **Case for Change**

Much media attention has been recently given to the need to reform the adoption process, to increase speed and better reflect the needs of the child. Any reforms in Wales must reflect evidence, practice and be driven by the need to deliver improved outcomes for both prospective adopters and children in the care system. Fundamentally we must demonstrate that these are the principles underpinning reform and ensure that in Wales we are not open to the charge of producing oversimplified solutions to an extremely complex issue. We must take note of the debate in England and reflect that there is no 'quick fix' or 'fast track' solution, both criticisms that have been levied at English proposals following the publication of the Narey report (2011), and which risk averting the focus from sustainable change.

Since 2007 there has been an increase in the number of Looked after children by 16.7% with the inevitable consequence of more children requiring adoptive families across Wales and it is critical that Adoption Services and the Courts are able to meet this increased demand for placements and support services. This is the key driver for reform to ensure a responsive, and sustainable service is in operation in Wales, recognising the value of service delivery at a national, local and regional level, determined by the needs of those using the service.

In developing proposals for reform we must not be driven by 'data' alone, as this can often provide a misleading picture, and can easily be misinterpreted. Recent league tables published in England were heavily criticised by professional bodies for over simplifying the very real complexities within the assessment, matching and placement processes. It is crucial that any new proposals maintain the primacy of rigour in ensuring the assessment, matching process and placement are carried out appropriately and effectively

leading to the right decision for the child, and should therefore not be subject to arbitrary statutory timescales. We are clear that there are changes required at each stage of the adoption process to remove unnecessary delay -from decisions made to place children for adoption, if that is the plan, to recruitment and approval of potential adoptive families and matching and placement of vulnerable children with their 'forever' family - but not at the expense of depth and quality of analysis, assessment and professional judgement that could increase the risk of adoption breakdown.

The role of the Courts must also be considered in constructing proposals for change, and recognised as outside of local authority control. However we are aware from MOJ stats published in January 2012 that courts in Wales are taking on average 55 weeks for court proceedings to be finalised .A process that is timely in terms of children's timescales must include judicial continuity and be normally completed within a 6 month timeframe We therefore would recommend to Ministers that this review of adoption reform in Wales moves quickly to respond to and implement the recommendations of the Family Justice Review

## **Existing Picture**

Local Authorities in Wales have the statutory duty to deliver services that safeguard and promote the well being of children looked after and to secure permanency for them by the most appropriate route. Adoption is one route by which permanency can be achieved for children looked after and the statutory responsibility for developing and managing their individual care plans rests with Local Authorities. Any analysis of cases where adoption is the agreed plan for children looked after concludes that the adoption system needs to start from the fact that currently more than 80% of all adoption work is conducted by local authorities and more than 80% of prospective adopters recruited are done so by local authorities.

### **(A) Legislation**

The existence and restrictions of current legislation, and the use of the terms in the legislation, particularly in relation to 'Agency' must be considered as a precursor to reform

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 and associated statutory regulations placed a statutory duty upon every local authority in Wales to become a Registered Adoption Agency and are prescriptive in how these services must be delivered. In addition to local authorities being a registered adoption

agency, voluntary organisations in Wales can be registered as an Adoption Agency. These regulations may need to be assessed against agreed proposals to determine any necessary changes.

National Minimum Standards (2007) are in place in England and Wales and set out a range of standards adoption agencies must meet when providing a service pertaining to a child's welfare, needs of prospective adopters and expectations regarding the matching process.

The Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005 set out the establishment of a panel, its function and membership. They also set out the agency's responsibility in terms of matching and placing a child and may require significant amendment, to enable an aggregation of functions to a regional or national level.

The Adoption Support Services ( Local Authorities ) Wales Regulations 2005 and accompanying statutory guidance ( 2006) sets out the Local Authorities' duties to assess the needs of all those affected by adoption ( including birth parents and siblings, children, adult adoptees and adoptive parents ) for adoption support services. This includes the requirements of other statutory bodies such as Health and Education to be included in any assessment for adoption support

## (B) Performance

At the outset it is important to understand where we are in Wales in terms of local authorities' performance on adoption.

- There has been an increase of 16.7% in all Looked After Children since 2007 with the greatest increase of over 10% in 2009. 5416 children were LAC at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011.
- 252 children were legally adopted during 2010/11 and represents 3.8% of all LAC; a further 183 children were placed for adoption at the year end.
- Another 85 children had their permanence secured legally through a Special Guardianship Order.
- Over 85% of those children adopted had been subject to Placement Orders, whereby the plan for adoption had been challenged in court by his/her parents. Only 29 children were adopted with consent.
- The numbers of placement breakdowns is very small in Wales. Less than 5 children's placements were disrupted prior to the adoption order being made last year and fewer than 5 children had breakdowns after the adoption order, requiring them to be brought back into the LAC system.
- After the making of a Placement Order (note; no agency can place a child for adoption without a placement order or the consent of the birth parents) it takes on average 3 months 3

weeks for the child to move in to their new family. It then takes an average of over 10 months for an adoption order to be granted.

## **Structures**

In recognition of the specialist nature of adoption services and in order to deliver adoption services within the resources available, different management and delivery arrangements have developed in Wales.

Regional collaboratives operate across South East Wales, Mid & West and North Wales, and it is crucial that the best practice and progress derived from these collaborations informs continued service development and aggregation of appropriate functions.

These include:

- North Wales: A single adoption service
- West Wales: A single adoption service delivers an adoption service to three local authorities operating a joint panel.
- South East Wales: A single adoption service hosted by Blaenau Gwent delivers an adoption service to three local authorities and has established a single Adoption Panel, in accordance with regulations.
- South Wales: ten local authorities deliver a collaborative arrangement in the exchange of placements

It is critical that the difference in an Adoption Agency and Adoption Consortium are acknowledged and there are different configurations of Adoption Consortia across Wales. For example The South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium (SWAAC), established in 2002 which facilitates a linking function between nine Local Authorities for children awaiting families and adopters approved by those member agencies and two associate voluntary adoption agencies.

## **Changes proposed**

The delivery of a National Adoption Service for Wales service is a priority action set out in *'Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action'*, and was endorsed in the local government response, submitted by the WLGA and ADSS Cymru in December 2011.

It is clear that there is appetite for reform that will strengthen existing adoption services and provide greater consistency across Wales, resulting in services being delivered that enable some of the most vulnerable children in our communities being able to live with a permanent family. Adoption is only one means of securing permanency for children and is a complex process which can only be successful if it remains part of the management and delivery of children's social care services.

The placement of a child in a secure, stable and loving family is what drives the adoption system, and central to our proposals is the need to ensure that permanence plans are implemented with appropriate urgency and are based on a full understanding and assessment of the child's needs for family life .. It is a local authorities' responsibility to ensure that the system that delivers this is effective and efficient to secure that objective.

It is proposed that a tiered model of Adoption Services is developed to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and this will only be achieved by Government, Local Authorities and the Voluntary Sector working together to share knowledge, experience and resources. It is essential that the different elements that make up an effective and efficient adoption service are appropriately aligned at a local, regional and national level. To this end, we have conducted a functionality review of all regulated functions and services associated with the adoption process. The functions have been assessed against a set of ten principles in adoption recently devised by BAAF to determine where they 'best fit' in a restructured service model.

It is proposed that "Local" functions aligned to wider social care legislation are managed and delivered by local authorities and "Regional" functions are managed on a collaborative configuration with consideration to aligning them to the Local Health Board footprint. It is suggested that further discussions will be required between National and Local Government on how the National Adoption Service could be resourced, commissioned and what appropriate governance structures may look like.

The ten principles by which the regulated functions and associated services have been assessed are set out briefly below to contextualise the proposed functionality of the suggested new model.

1. Adoption and Permanence - Adoption must be seen in the broader context of planning for permanence and as part of an integrated system of services

for children in care. Children in care need permanence plans that consider the full range of permanence options and are implemented with appropriate urgency. For example research indicates that Special Guardianship or permanent fostering arrangements provide children ,for whom adoption is not appropriate, with that sense of belonging within a family .

2. Availability of adoption - Adoption must be available for every child for whom it is the right plan. There is strong evidence that Adoption as a means of securing permanency for children is not consistently used across local authorities in Wales. Delay in implementing plans for adoption damages children's development.

3. A belief in the positive life changing impact of adoption - Adoption is a life changing event for all involved. It should offer a positive, stable and nurturing family life for a child and a rewarding and fulfilling experience for an adoptive parent who is enable by effective adoption support to parent their child/ren.

4. The value of evidence, research and analysis - Adoption is rooted in a rich evidence base informed by some empirical studies and much good practice. There is also important evidence of poor and damaging outcomes for children where there have been shortcuts and poorly informed practice. Evidence and analysis should underpin each stage of the adoption process.

5. The value of independent scrutiny and quality assurance - Any system of decision making in adoption should be underpinned by independent scrutiny of crucial decisions that includes a depth and breadth of relevant adoption experience.

6. Legal Proceedings and the Judicial Process – Delays in Court are damaging children and the variation across Wales in the length of time a case takes to conclude in Court is not acceptable.

7. Adopters need to be valued - For adoption to work well, we must have a well managed welcoming and inclusive first response to enquiries from prospective adopters followed by a safe and comprehensive assessment process. There is no reason why preparation and assessment cannot be conducted within 6 months, but practice experience suggests that most adopters need about 6 months to come to terms with the nature and consequences of this life-long commitment to a child. It is also important to note that a responsive inclusive service should extend well beyond the preparation and assessment stage to post approval and post placement of the child.

8. Matching - Matching matters because the child chosen through adoption will become part of the adoptive family forever. Prospective adopter(s) need to be actively involved in the matching process and be honest about the issues and needs they can and cannot accommodate. This is a life changing

decision for all involved but is also just another step on the lifelong journey of adoption.

9. Adoption Support - The process that leads to the placement of a child with an adoptive parent is the beginning of the adoption story. Access to an available, appropriately resourced range of adoption support services including financial support, Health, Education and CAMHS must be provided ,consistently across Wales,whenever it is assessed as a needed within an appropriate timeframe.

10. Workforce - Adoption is complex and its impact upon children and adults in profound. It is essential that those charged with managing and delivering adoption services have the necessary skill, experience and support.

These proposals have been developed jointly by the WLGA, ADSS and the Voluntary Sector and have been influenced and underpinned by professional experience from across both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

In developing the proposed model consideration was given to the different aspects of adoption services and each was aligned to one of the tiers of service. In some cases functions may sit across two tiers.

### **National Adoption Service**

Rationale:

- Improved outcomes for children
- Improved service
- Cost Effectiveness
- Maximising expertise
- Clear public point of contact for all those affected by adoption

This service will need:

- Resources
- Clear governance structures to deliver a unified service in collaboration with regions
- Collaborative tendering process for delivery
- Effective commissioning and procurement strategy

### **National Functions**

Information Service

- Helpline- Any individual affected by adoption (signpost)

- First point of contact for prospective adopters
- Greater information on permanency and support available.
- Advisory Function
- Consistency of advice and information for all aspects of adoption (CM)
- Citizen and user friendly
- Legal and professional advice and information on inter country adoption

#### Public Awareness

- National Campaign awareness strategy
- National Marketing Recruitment strategy reflecting local needs
- Marketing and Communication (Cost effective procurement)

#### Linking Children with prospective adopters

- National Adoption Register
- Targeted recruitment activity for children with particular needs

#### Data Collections

- Tracking outcomes for individual children
- Tracking outcomes of prospective adopters from inquiry to placement
- Development of Data to Inform service delivery (SID)

#### Independent Review Mechanism

- Hosted and Managed by National Service

#### Miscellaneous

- Policies and Procedures to increase consistency
- Workforce Development
- Learning and Knowledge Management/Dissemination
- Research

### **Regional Functions**

This term would require legislative and regulatory change, to enable regional agencies to be established as this function is currently the preserve of an individual local authority.

However if regional structures are permitted under new legislation, guidance would need to set out appropriate governance structures.

Risk and logistical difficulties (geography & culture) have been identified should these functions be delivered at a national level that includes:

- Increasing delays for the most vulnerable children
- Lack of consideration of cultural and community needs

- Service unable to be responsive to local need

Our professional opinion is therefore that for the following functions a regional aggregation is most appropriate and aligned to government objectives to increase collaboration.

Benefits identified by aggregating services up to a regional level include:

- Safety of child
- Economies of scale (assessment, training, recruitment)
- Better use of resources
- Increasing placement choice
- Will lead to a more robust sustainable services (high cost low volume)
- Workforce benefits- shared expertise and knowledge
- Earlier and more informed planning
- Recognising benefits of local delivery whilst maximising regional resourcing
- Supports consistency
- Identify gaps in service, knowledge, practice,

### **Management and Delivery of regulated adoption service at regional level**

#### Recruitment & Assessment

- First stage Counselling for prospective adopters
- Prospective adopters (targeted recruitment/assessment for all)
- Workforce development
- Training of prospective and post approved adopters
- Management of adoption panel to recommend approval

#### Linking individual children with potential prospective adoptive families

- Knowledge of children
- Knowledge of prospective adopters/ approved adopters
- Knowledge of research/ outcomes
- Matching meetings
- Management of Adoption Panel (see comments above)

#### Post adoption support service

- Assessment of post adoption service support- linking with local accountabilities
- Management of post adoption contact arrangements
- Collaboration with multi disciplinary colleagues- Health, education
- Facilitate support groups for adoptive families, birth families and children who have been adopted

## Intermediary

- Birth record counselling
- Searching & (and or) Reunion

## Inter Country Adoption

- Assessment and training of inter country adopters
- Support for families who adopt from abroad

## Engagement with stakeholders

- Judiciary
- Statutory agencies
- Voluntary bodies
- Public
- Children and young people

## Misc

- Regional accountability adaption of policies and procedures

## **Local Functions**

### Children

- Care Planning decision making and judicial process
- Matching Individual Children to named prospective adopter
- Direct Work (pre and post Placement)
- Delivery of assessed post adoption support services ( align also to Health / Education )including direct contact arrangements

### Prospective Adopters

- Matching with individual children
- Decision making on placement
- Introduction and post placement statutory duties
- Judicial processes / Adoption Order
- Delivery of assessed post Adoption Support Services

### Birth Parents

- Care Planning / judicial process

- Direct work with birth parents during and through care planning judicial process
- Delivery of some assessed post adoption support services including assistance in managing direct contact arrangements ( counselling though this could be a regional function )

Other family members including siblings

- Direct work pre and post placement
- Delivery of some assessed post adoption support services

Record Keeping

- Local authorities responsible for keeping adoption records in line with statutory duties

## **Conclusion**

ADSS Cymru will lead on this work strand in partnership with WLGA and third sector colleagues .We will look to increase the pace of collaboration, but any proposed service model will be derived from a need to improve practice and outcomes rather than a purist structural approach at a regional or national level.

It is likely that changes will need to be phased in and we will look to develop an implementation plan which sets out the scope of the proposed change, timescale for delivery, risk analysis and cost benefit analysis. Detailed planning around this implementation plan including resourcing , proposals on commissioning and possible legislative changes required to formalise aspects of the proposed plan will need to take place with Welsh Government, following acceptance of this paper which outlines a suggested structure for reform.