

**Cymdeithas Plant Dewi Sant**



**St David's Children Society**

Children & Young People Inquiry into Adoption.

Supplementary Questions.

St. David's Children Society.

14<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

## **Adoption Breakdown**

### ***1. You say that we need better monitoring of the rates of adoption breakdown. How can we better record and share information on the causes?***

- There is inconsistency amongst agencies as to what constitutes a disruption and at what point a placement becomes a disruption.
- Currently all agencies agree a placement date: i.e the date on which the child is formally placed with the prospective adoptive family for adoption. Any breakdown that occurs after this date should be recorded as a disruption.
- Within the disruption data gathering process, it would be helpful to have additional data on the timescales in which a disruption occurred: e.g.:
  1. Data on breakdowns from the date of placement to the date of adoption order granted.
  2. From say the date of the adoption order to the first 3 or 5 years of placement post adoption order.
  3. Post 5 year data.
  4. Perhaps separate data on the teenage years.
  5. Of critical importance is to hold a formal 'disruption meeting' in every case where there is a placement breakdown.

#### **Purpose of a Disruption Meeting:**

When a disruption occurs, it is fundamental that we examine the various elements of the placement in order to understand the sequence of events with a view to:

- Meeting the child's needs now and in the future.
  - Supporting the family in recovering from the experience.
  - Improving agency practice
  - Ascertaining the wide variety of factors that, in all probability, led to the disruption. This to include the social care agency response, health, education, family factors, etc.
- Prior to the formal date of placement there is a period of introductions where the child is being introduced to the family. Occasionally, during this period the link does not progress. The period of introductions should be seen as a testing period and not formally classed as a disruption.

### ***2. Should the Welsh Government commission research on adoption disruption rates in Wales?***

- Perhaps this is a moment to look forward rather than back. The fact that more children are waiting for an adoption placement than were placed in the whole of last year, suggests that the current system is failing a large number of children. There seems to be little value in commissioning research into a failing system. Precious resources should be invested in the proposed national adoption service ensuring that it becomes a vehicle that will deliver justice for children waiting for adoption.

There is already a considerable body of adoption research that evidences several reoccurring themes in adoption breakdowns. These include:

- The lack of clear and accurate information contained within the child's assessment report, particularly in relation to the child's health, education, behaviour and history of attachment. Poor quality or inadequate child assessment reports may leave the prospective adopter feeling

undermined, resulting in a placement breakdown. It is essential that we secure qualitative data on children.

- The lack of adequate preparation of prospective adopters, including the lack of analytical thinking in assessments results in disruptions. The evidence demonstrates that at times prospective adopters are sometimes ‘over stretched’ in terms of their child preferences. ‘The child placed was not the child they were prepared for.’ Well-constructed, evidenced based reports are essential to improving placement outcomes.
- Disruption research indicates that insufficient weight is given to the child’s views on the proposed placement. This is more problematic in children who are older or who have behavioural difficulties. Children need to be properly prepared for placement with greater emphasis placed on developing qualitative life story work.
- Poor or inadequate post placement and post adoption support is often cited as key factor in adoption breakdown activity.

Reliable supervision structures, regular staff training, responsive support systems and reliable performance measures will significantly reduce the impact of these factors resulting in a marked improvement in outcomes for children. Robust matching also aids the process of successful placements as does a good choice of adopters developed by experienced staff.

### ***1. What are your main concerns, if any, about the Welsh Government proposals for a National Adoption Service for Wales?***

- The risk for a national adoption service is that it could become a fragmented entity e.g.: offering a single gateway for recruiting prospective adopters, a stand-alone adoption register, an assessment centre, etc. Adoption research clearly evidences that the most successful outcomes achieved for children are in those agencies where there are seamless, high quality services, where each element of the service shapes and informs the next stage or need. We need to build on what works.
- A significant risk to ‘national adoption service’ is that resistance to change or maintaining the status quo will result in little change for children. The 1976 Adoption Act was supposed to herald a new dawn in adoption service. 24 years later, the PM’s Review of Adoption reaffirmed a failing system resulting in new legislation. Another 10 years have passed, children continue to wait and a considerable number of prospective adopters report receiving a less than satisfactory service. We need to act now before adoption slips off the political agenda and another generation of children are lost in care.
- The greatest risk is that we do nothing. Yes there is a risk that a ‘national adoption service’ may initially struggle. That risk will be mitigated by a well run, properly managed service.

For 36 years (since the 1976 Adoption Act), a significant number of children have faced a failing system. In this system, it is the ‘children who wait’ who carry the entire burden of risk. Perhaps this is a moment for the Welsh Government to remove the burden of risk from children and courageously place it in a new model of adoption services for Wales. We simply cannot afford to lose another generation of children.

**2. What implications will the creation of a National Adoption Service have for your organisations?**

- St. David's mission is to find loving, nurturing, permanent homes for children awaiting adoption. Should the national adoption service, prove to be an effective, high quality service provider, St. David's mission would be achieved. The trustees have already agreed that in such an event, we would work to embed our social work and admin staff in the new service and aim to achieve an orderly closure of the charity. These actions are consistent with our mission.

**3. St David's say that the creation of a National Adoption Service will lead to a 'marked increase in the number of children being referred'. What evidence is there to support this view?**

- Last year 183 Welsh children were placed for adoption. Currently, there are approximately 200 children waiting across Wales for adoption placements. Many of these placement orders were issued last year. This would suggest that significantly more children could be placed for adoption in any given financial year.

- Over these past years, BAAF has estimated that 1 in 4 children available for adoption will not be placed primarily due to the lack of an adoptive parent resource.

- The annual number of children adopted each year in Wales may not represent the total number of children with an adoption plan. It is not unusual to find approximately 15 - 18% of the looked after child care population being referred to the local authority adoption agency. While the adoption plans for a significant number of these children will change, the 4% annual statistic of adopted looked after children appears modest and considerably short of the initial referral rate.

- The establishment of the National Adoption Service will result in greater emphasis being placed on adoption. In time, LAs will view it as a positive option for children and budgets, which will result in adoption being considered at an earlier point in the child's care journey.

- WLGA reports a marked increase in children entering the care system, particularly since the Baby P case. In due course, a proportion of these children will be referred to the adoption register.

- Most significantly, the English 'Action Plan for Adoption,' states, "In 2000, Prime Minister Tony Blair led a major overhaul of adoption legislation, guidance and practice. He increased funding for adoption, set out new National Adoption Standards.... and introduced specific targets for adoption numbers. At its high point this reform programme achieved an increase of 38% in the number of children adopted from care.....When financial incentives were removed, improvements in the system was not sustained." (Action Plan for Adoption. Page 11. Dept for Education website). Given the 38% uplift in the number of children adopted from care, it would seem reasonable to postulate that part of the reason underpinning this increase was due to a new mindset in which people warmed to the positives and significance of adoption.

***Additional Comments:***

*Hopefully you will allow me the opportunity of adding two additional comments (one on risks and the other which relates to evidence given by another party to the Committee).*

We must not be afraid of the risks or the misconceptions, one of the greatest of which is that there is a lack of available adopters. We know that a considerable number of families are lost due to the inadequacies of the current system. (evidence by research from Adoption UK 2010). We need to analyse the data: 1 in 10 families who wish to have children will remain childless. Clustering all of the fertility treatments together suggests a 1 in 3 success rate. A significant proportion of the childless population will consider adoption as a means of generating a family, particularly if there is a high quality, supportive adoption service. Families are also recruited from adopters with older children, from reconstituted families, single parent families and same sex families.

There is a risk that we feel overwhelmed by the challenge of finding 200 or 300 homes for children per year. There are 22 local authorities in Wales. For 200 children all that is required is that the national service recruit 10 families from each authority year after year. For 300 children we recruit 15 families from each authority. That is inherently achievable. The imperative is that we act with confidence, show leadership and finally secure justice for all children who wait.

***Comment on evidence given by a psychotherapist.***

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March a child psychotherapist shared very detailed, well informed and insightful thoughts on the impact of abuse on children. While I agree with much of what was said, I was disturbed by the comment, that some children, including younger children, due to the impact of abuse, may not be suitable placed for adoption.

Yes there is a recent vein of research which suggests that in a small number of young children, who have experienced abused and global neglect that the neural pathways upon which the emotional connections grow might close down as they were never stimulated. There is also rebuttal research, (I think by Chisum on Ceausescu's Romanian children adopted in the USA), that during adolescence these neural pathways re-opened as the adolescent brain restructured and reorganised. The USA research suggested that the adopted Romanian children, who were provided with a platform of stability, managed to reclaim their lives and move forward with the support of their permanent families. It would be fair to say that all of this research is in its infancy and at times light and sketchy.

Across our communities, families parent children with many challenging conditions, including birth children with extreme conditions. These families remain absolutely committed to children. They start inexperienced and grow, in part, with high quality support. The life chances of children should not rest on sketchy theories, but on ***the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child***. Implicit in ***Article 9*** is that each child has the right to family life.

***Article 19 (Protection from all forms of violence)***: “Children have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally. Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents, or anyone else who looks after them.”

“Properly caring for and protecting” children means offering them support to recover from their psychological and emotional wounds. Every child has the right to family life; and families who adopt our most vulnerable children should be provided with all of the support they require to enable that healing to occur.

Gerry Cooney  
Chief executive  
St. David's Children Society  
14<sup>th</sup> June 2012.