

Response to Social Services (Wales) Bill.

What is Adoption UK Wales?

Adoption UK is the only UK wide charity run by and for adoptive parents. The charity's aim is to help to make adoptions successful and to promote loving and supportive relationships between children and their adoptive parents.

Adoption UK is primarily a membership organisation for prospective adopters, adoptive parents and long-term foster carers (current membership of 4,800 families). However, many of our services are available to practitioners, as well as other groups of carers/guardians, most notably our general information, training programmes and workshops and *Children Who Wait* magazine. Our services are unique in that they are informed by a wealth of adoptive parenting experience and are delivered by experienced adoptive parents; they include the following:

- Four National Telephone Helplines (one in each of the countries of the UK and taking around 5,000 calls per year from prospective adopters, adoptive parents and professional working with adopted families)
- Four offices with locally based staff in each country of the UK who have knowledge of the devolved structures of education, health and different legal systems. The Wales office is in Cardiff and there are two part time staff and currently eight especially trained volunteers coordinating support groups around Wales.
- A UK-wide network of local support groups (run by adoptive parent volunteer coordinators). Eight groups currently running in Wales with two more starting up this year.
- Buddy support schemes (linking experienced parents with new parents or parents in difficulty), and other peer support networks.

- A Parent Mentoring Project which was developed in Scotland and which will be rolled out across the UK over the next two years offering intensive support to families who are struggling.
- Lending libraries in each of the four countries with inter-country loans available.
- *Adoption Today* - a magazine for adoptive families and professionals in adoption (6 issues a year).
- *Children who Wait* – a family finding service using a magazine and an online service which features profiles of children waiting to be adopted.
- Online Community (c12,000 registered prospective adopters and adoptive parents).
- Publications and other information resources.
- Training programmes and workshops, including *It's A Piece of Cake?* which is a six day training course for adoptive parents independently evaluated by the Hadley Centre in Bristol which has been shown to increase the confidence of adoptive parents and increase their range of parenting strategies.

The Wales office was established in Cardiff in 2008 with support from a Children and Families Organisational Grant from the Welsh Government. No one knows how many adoptive families there are in Wales in total. However, based on an average of 234 adoptions per year over the past 10 years (some of which will be sibling groups) there will be at the very lowest estimate 4,000 adoptive families with children between 0 and 25 living in Wales currently.

Our members have access to all of our services, but they are also part of a community of adopters who have made the commitment to help and support each other, with understanding and without judgement. This unique community of adopters is our most important resource.

A member of the Strategic Voluntary Adoption Partnership in Wales, Adoption UK, along with BAAF, After Adoption, Barnardos and St.David's Children's Society is exploring how the voluntary sector can work alongside the statutory sector in Wales to deliver the positive outcomes for children that Welsh Government aspires to.

Response to Consultation Questions

General Comments

For Adoption UK and the families we represent, the concern is less about whether a service is delivered locally or nationally and more about whether there is equality of service and whether there is adequate ongoing support for adopted children and their parents in the hugely rewarding but sometimes challenging task of parenting children who have suffered from early trauma and neglect.

Current experience tells us that it is very much down to luck whether the adoption social worker has the skills and experience needed to provide a good service or whether the adoption agency has a good training programme or good post adoption support services. Hopefully by moving some functions to a national service this situation will improve.

HOWEVER:

Currently some of the best practice resides within the voluntary sector and it is important that this isn't lost in any move to a National Service. Rather the voluntary sector should be engaged as a full partner in any new system and good practise build on where ever it exists.

88. Functions that a National Adoption Service would be responsible for.

Yes we agree with the functions set out in paragraph bb. With the following comments and additions:

Providing National leadership and overview of adoption services.

If well managed, it could lead to improved services and outcomes for adopted children. Important to find a mechanism which avoids adoption agencies arguing over which one has put in the most resources and which should get the most parents out of the service – this is all too often what happens with the existing Adoption Consortia! Considerable expertise around adoption resides in the voluntary sector and it is important that this isn't lost when a new structure is developed. St. David's in particular has an outstanding reputation amongst adoptive parents for the way it recruits, trains and supports adopters and this knowledge must be protected and built on if we are to achieve the best possible outcomes for adopted children.

Recruitment, Training and Assessment of adopters.

Consideration should be given to separating out the training and preparation of adopters from their assessment. Currently prospective adopters may feel inhibited about asking questions about adopted children and their needs, and their ability to meet those needs as they are at the same time trying to convince social workers that they can do it successfully.

The idea of an initial information gathering period which is adopter led and supported by social workers and others, with information and training sessions being offered by a range of organisations, followed by a more intensive assessment period led by social workers has much to recommend it.

We feel that prospective adopters come to the process with very different knowledge about adoption and will need different approaches. For example some will already be the foster carers of the children they wish to adopt. Others will have come to adoption as a second best – as a result of failed fertility treatment etc. So whilst there needs to be a reduction in the delay currently experienced by some prospective adopters, the idea of attaching some kind of fixed times scales is not felt to be helpful. Once approved, prospective adopters should immediately go onto a national register and be available for linking.

It is agreed that centralising the provision of adoption services should allow social workers to develop greater expertise in assessing, training, matching and supporting adopters.

Framework for adoption approval (including panels)

The ability to have dual registration of foster carers and adopters would offer a speedier path to permanency for those children whose adoption is the likely outcome but where foster care is initially the appropriate placement.

Promotion of adoption and building capacity in terms of prospective adopters and specialist workforce skills

We believe that the recruitment of adopters needs to be more closely aligned to other recruitment in terms of equal opportunities. We believe that there are a number of potentially good adoptive parents who are being discriminated against currently on the basis of disability, ethnicity or sexuality. We believe that the creation of a national service would make it easier to ensure that assessment of adopters is a more equitable experience focused only on the ability to be good parents to children who have experienced early trauma and neglect.

It must be recognised that as adoption is promoted more widely there will be an increasing number of people applying who do not have the skills, resilience or support networks necessary to adopt a child who has suffered from early trauma or neglect and that it will take time to identify those applicants and to counsel them out of the system with sensitivity to their situations. Adoption UK does not believe that fixed time scales for completing assessments as suggested in England is a helpful way to go forward.

Commissioning of an adoption support service.

Adoption support needs to happen at both a national and a local level. Every adoptive family needs to be encouraged to stay in touch with a network of other adoptive families so that they can be aware of issues that may arise and be equipped to handle them. Advice and support will often be most easily accepted if it comes from other adopters who have 'been there and done it themselves'. Thus there needs to be a network of support groups and an ongoing programme of training for adopters that they can access easily when they need it. It may be worth considering some kind of 'adoption support voucher' as a tangible sign of support which adoptive parents could exchange for training as and when they need it. Similarly buddying up adopters with more experienced adopters and providing a national helpline to provide information and signposting to adopters should be national functions.

Adopters also need financial support to allow them to reduce their working time in order to spend more time bonding with and supporting their adopted children. Some of these changes need to happen at a UK wide level for example parity between adoption pay and leave and maternity pay and leave. Adoption allowances are currently within the gift of local agencies and the value of allowances and who it is awarded to varies from agency to agency. The provision of a national minimum adoption allowance for all families and guidance about who should be eligible for ongoing allowances should be agreed at a national level.

Families who are at risk of breaking down will usually be assessed by the local authority intake team in the same way as any other family where there is a 'children in need' or 'child protection' referral. However, these teams may have little or no knowledge about adoption. With the proposal to separate out the functions to a national service this is likely to be even more of a concern. The working model of child protection and children in need systems is one of current dysfunctional parenting. It is essential that any children in need or child protection investigation is carried out by social workers who understand that children carry with them the patterns of earlier abuse and neglect and that these may become confused in their minds with events in their current family. Assessments of adoptive families should therefore include the input from either an adoption social worker from the national service or input from a peer support organisation such as Adoption UK.

Families facing significant challenges need to be able to access support from locally based education and health professionals quickly, however many services are not currently "adoption-aware" or "adoption friendly". Ongoing professional development for professionals in health and education about the impact of early trauma and neglect on long term development of children is important to help them respond appropriately when adoptive families contact them. Thresholds for referral to services such as Educational

Psychology and CAMHS need to be adjusted to give priority to adopted children in the same way as currently happens for LAC.

89) Do you suggest any additional functions that should be added?

There needs to be national support for adopted adults who are wishing to be reunited with their birth families. There is currently a requirement to provide both information about and counselling around their family of origin and it is important that this is still available in any new system. Again there is considerable expertise for this in the voluntary sector and some of the intermediary work done by After Adoption and other agencies is excellent but currently only available to people living in those local authorities who have a contract with those organisations.

Post adoption support for birth parents whose children have been adopted and arrangements for supporting and promoting letterbox or direct contact need to be considered and provided for in any new arrangements, with clarity about who needs to provide the service and what the expected standards for the service are. Adopted children are increasingly making contact with their birth families through social networking and so it is increasingly important that they have access to high quality and sensitively delivered life story work.

90) Are there any barriers to the current arrangements that should be considered in the development of the Social Services (Wales) bill

Prioritising adopted children in national legislation so that they have the same access to services as Looked After Children, would be a relatively simple way to make a significant difference to outcomes. This should include access to school places (as happens in England) access to the Educational Psychological services and CAMHS. The Looked After Children's Education coordinator in each local authority and the designated person in school who is already responsible for LAC should also be responsible for adopted children in school.