



Paper for the Children and Young Person's Committee's inquiry into adoption

Do you agree the functions that a National Adoption Service will be responsible for, as set out in paragraph bb? (Question 88)

In principle, BASW Cymru would agree with some of the proposed responsibilities. However, it is important to consider these again when they have become more task specific. The challenge is to ensure that this new service will make a difference to children and adopters in its continuing development and within the resources provided.

The roles and responsibilities of the National Adoption Service have to be considered from a perspective of finance and resources. To provide any of the services properly and timely will be costly. The issue for all of the local authorities is not one of understanding the needs of children and adopters; rather it is being well-resourced enough to provide for those needs. Alongside this is the issue of the considerable caseloads of those social workers identifying children in need of permanency.

The issue of adoption for the child and the delays that are incurred throughout the process are a matter of balance. The balance is between the rights of the child to family life, (article 9) and protection from harm (article 19) U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989.

It must also be considered that adoption is only one means of securing a permanent placement for a child. The other options are Residence Orders, Guardianship Orders and Long Term Foster Placements.

Much of the delay for children comes from the problems faced by the local authorities and the courts in balancing the above rights of the child. For example, many of the children requiring permanent placements come into the care system as a result of neglect or abuse. The authority is then faced primarily with considering rehabilitation of the child with their family. The court,

when requested by the authority to make a Care Order or Placement Order, is then faced very often with family and interested parties applying at a late stage for leave of the court to be made party to the proceedings. They then need to be assessed as permanent carer/s for the child.

This can be a very lengthy process with many assessments either from the local authority or from independent experts. Sometimes, this also involves further rehabilitation plans for the child.

A recent Ofsted report 'Right on Time: Exploring Delays in Adoption' (2012) verifies the above statement. When looking into the causes of delays in the adoption system, the report found that the most significant cause of delay is the length of time it takes for cases to be completed in court, rather than the failings of the social workers.

Measures would need to be in place to address the issue of court delays.

The majority of children requiring permanent homes tend to be over 2 years of age. They have many issues resulting from difficult starts in life. This is then compounded by possible changes of carers, and lengthy delays throughout the assessment process of family and the subsequent court process as described above. For their emotional well-being, most children when they are ready for a permanent home are in need of support, the right carers and in some cases specialist input.

The idea of one all-Wales Service for Adoption that can enable the consistency and standardisation of a service for children and adopters is one way forward. With 22 local authorities in Wales, this has remained a challenge with adopters and children receiving varying types of service, depending on resources, skills and training. The use of consortia throughout Wales has been a step towards standardisation so the development of an all-Wales Service will take this a step further.

The development of strong recruitment policies, and working with the media, will need to be at the heart of the new service. Yet again this has been a challenge for 22 authorities all doing their own recruitment and media work. The service will need to focus on and develop services for those harder to place children which include: those children who come in sibling groups, the older child and those children with issues and difficulties. This type of recruitment takes social workers time and skill to enable adopters to consider their options. The majority of people who apply to become adopters want adoption to meet their needs, which are primarily to have their own family. Therefore they are requiring children to be as young as possible, not the older child, sibling groups or children with issues, disabilities or problems.

With the delays in the adoption process, the older the child gets and the more changes of placement he/she potentially has. This brings more difficulties for the child and the matching with adopters.

Therefore adopters are not getting all that they require of their ideal child. Overcoming this, and encouraging adopters to look beyond the ideal, takes careful and skilled social work over a period of time to help people understand what adoption is today and to help them to explore their skills, abilities and emotional flexibility to take on a child that they had not first considered

The consideration of the commissioning of an Adoption Support Service could be seen as an essential component to the role of the Service. We know that for most of the children and adopters at some time during the adoption process, there is a need for more specialised services.

The development of the ASSA (Adoption Support Services Advisor) role, the commissioning of services and working between the major agencies i.e. Health, CAMHS, Social Services and Education, has been for most local authorities a real challenge and not as consistent as it should be in providing the right support services both pre and post adoption for the child and the adopters.

Support services need a major investment, which has been highlighted in CSSIW inspection reports.

With a standardisation of the support services, it potentially could help to reduce the disruption of placements

Do you suggest any additional functions that should be included? (Question 89)

One of the issues for the 22 local authorities, the 4 consortia and the Welsh Government has been the collation of vital information and statistics on Adoption. Without accurate information, it is difficult to address need.

The latest National Statistics on Children Looked After, produced by the Welsh Assembly Government were released on 15th September, 2011 and revealed that for 2011, 183 children had been 'placed for adoption' and 498 had been placed with parents or others. This particular statistic indicates that 498 children had gone into other permanent placements, possibly Guardianship, Residence Orders or under Placement with Parents Regulations. The statistics need to consider further information such as age;

sibling groups and difficulties in order to get an accurate picture of the needs of those looked after children who require permanent placements.

The National Adoption Service could be in a prime position to address this shortfall, and become a repository for information and data collection.

Consideration could be given for a Welsh Adoption Register, which is linked to the National Register. This would be helpful not only for the identity and culture of the Welsh children requiring adoption but also to widen the pool and to ensure resources are shared and needs identified within Wales.

Thought should be given for the setting up of a National Adoption Help line for children and adopters.

Attention could be given to standardisation of policies and procedures, IT systems and a standardisation of financial adoption allowances.

Consideration could be given to the National Adoption Service offering a service to Birth Parents. This birth parent counselling and support work, within local authorities, is not as consistent as it could be, due to resources. The needs of the birth parent are ongoing and it takes resources and skills to deliver an effective service that helps in the long term.

It may be a consideration for the Service to offer adoption from a concurrent planning perspective as well as traditional adoption. This means that adopters are recruited with a view that they take a child that is possibly coming into the care system on a planned admission i.e. newly born babies etc. that are being twin-tracked.

The adopters then offer the same care as a foster carer but if the rehabilitation planning does not work then the child remains with them for adoption.

Some English local authorities have teams for similar type of work. The positives for this are that for the child, if adoption is eventually the plan, then they have not had to have any change of carers. This gives the stability and emotional development to the children that they deserve. If the plan leads to rehabilitation then it is the adopters as adults that have to bear the emotional brunt as opposed to the child.

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

The Bill will need to put duties on other agencies, i.e. Health, CAMHS and Education to enable the changes to function sufficiently to make a difference to children.

The issue of inspections by the CCSIW will need to be considered. It is unclear in the proposals as to the National Adoption Service's role and responsibility within this.

The issue of Adoption Panels will need to be considered. Our understanding of the regulations is that only Registered Adoption Agencies can establish an Adoption Panel. The reading of the consultation 6.1.11 states that the National Adoption Service will not operate as an "adoption agency" as referred to in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and in the Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005 made under section 9 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. However, under point 3 of the consultation document it says that The National Adoption Agency would be responsible for "A Framework for adoption approval (including panels)".

Consideration will need to be given to how this Service will operate: whether it will be Welsh Government run or will it be out for tender.

Do you have any other comments that you wish to make about our proposals? (Question 91)

The role of the local authority adoption agency.

The role of the local authority adoption agency will change with the setting up of the National Adoption Service. There will be concern as to how and what its function will be. Careful consideration will need to be given to this and consultation taken as to how roles and responsibilities will fit such as:

- Panels for the 'ought to be placed decisions', the 'adoption approval' and the 'matching of child to adopters'
- Home-finding for the child.
- Matching of the child to adopters.
- Support post-placement for child and adopters.
- Birth parent counselling.

- Reports for adoption order.
- The provision for the other permanency placements such as Guardianship Orders, Residence Orders and Long term fostering.
- Step-Parent Adoptions
- Support Services including financial.
- Access to birth records counselling.

Staffing

The issue of staffing for both the new service and the local authority adoption agencies is crucial.

The consultation document talks of and agrees 'that the service should be economical, viable, cost-effective and a common understanding and a strong professional base for adoption knowledge and best practice'.

However the National Adoption Service will need to consider that if it provides a concentration of specialised skilled persons, where these are to come from as it may mean local authorities will lose their trained staff. It could lead to the local authority adoption agency social worker possibly not being experienced or trained enough.

When establishing this service, consideration should be given to everyone working in adoption being provided with the same training and skill opportunities, thus providing an equitable work force.

The role of the social worker in the local authority adoption agency will be just as challenging and in need of a strong professional base of adoption knowledge and best practice as the National Adoption Service role will be.

Conclusions

A National Adoption Service has to consider what it can provide that is going to make a difference to children:

How it will be provided and by whom.

How it will be funded.

What changes to legislation are needed.

How it can effect change within the court systems.

BASW Cymru would be positive about a National Adoption Service if its advantages included:

- Providing a repository for data collection to identify need.
- Standardisation of policies and procedures.
- Welsh Adoption Register and Helpline.
- National training.
- Standardised recruitment and assessment of adopters.
- Standardisation of Post Adoption Support Services.
- The service would be especially welcome if it avoided duplication and waste of resources

Robin Moulster
Country Manager – BASW Cymru
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