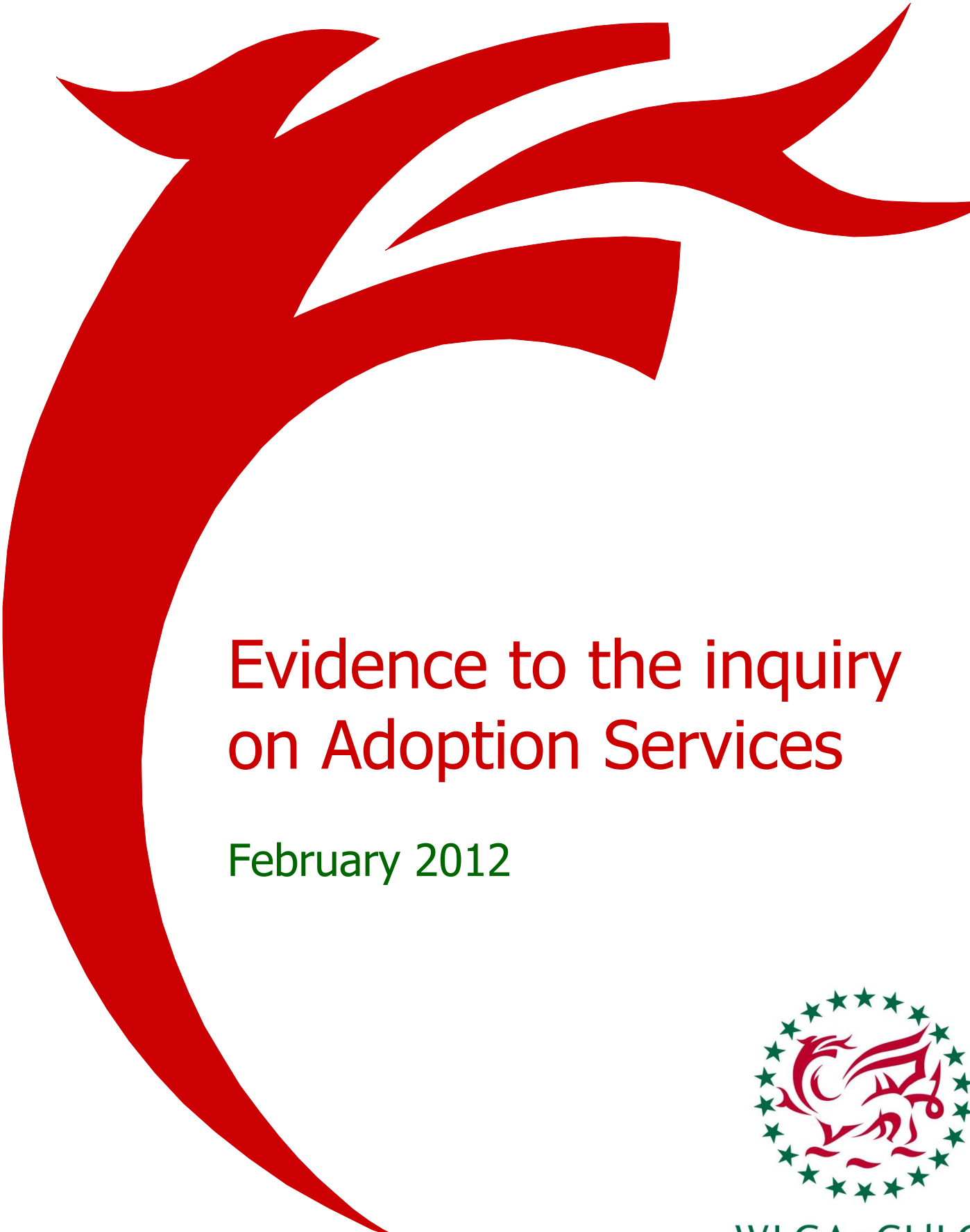




Evidence to the inquiry on Adoption Services

February 2012



WLGA • CLIC

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 31st 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 appeared 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 parent 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 enquirers 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 programme 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/smoothen 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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