

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Gwaith dilynol ar Ymchwiliad y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg i Wasanaethau Mabwysiadu yng Nghymru | Follow-up to Children, Young People and Education Committee's Inquiry into Adoption Services in Wales

AS 11

Ymateb gan : Cymdeithas Plant Dewi Sant

Response from : St David's Children Society

Overview Question

What are your views in the Welsh Government's progress in respect of the 16 recommendations and the 25 'detailed actions' set out on pages 5-11 of the [Committee's report](#).

There is much to commend the progress that has been made in respect of the majority of recommendations as set out in the Committee's report.

The structure of the National Adoption Service is well evidenced in the Director of Operations response to this follow up enquiry.

There is also much to positively acknowledge in the progress that has been made in respect of an overall change agenda to reform adoption services in Wales

There is some clear evidence collated from the National Performance Management data about how this change agenda has directly improved outcomes for children and their adoptive families.

- Children being placed more quickly for adoption (a 10month improvement in the average length of time between a child becoming looked after and being placed for adoption)
- Fewer children having their plan for adoption changed due to the lack of placements and
- Disruption numbers remain low
- Nationally there has been some improvements seen in the length of time it takes for adopters to be approved and
- Increased numbers are receiving initial visits or attending information evenings
- There has also been a 26% increase in the numbers of adoptive parents being approved.

In acknowledging these achievements, it is critically important to remember that just over two years ago, due to the paucity of prospective adopters, new-born infants were failing to achieve placements, while children as young as four years of age were having their permanency plans changed to long term fostering.

The change agenda driven by the Director Of Operations is still in its fairly embryonic stages with further improvements likely to follow as the vision of delivering a national programme of adoption reform through the National Adoption Service is achieved.

From a VAA perspective possible improvements would include –

1. Partnership working with the Regional Collaboratives – there has been significant engagement with the VAA sector in the establishment of the NAS , membership on key strategic groups – The Advisory Group, Governance Board , Regional Management Boards as well as contributions to the NAS 4 sub- groups and subsequent work plans. However, as yet this engagement has not resulted in tangible partnership arrangements at an operational level with the third sector.

2 .Early care planning for Children

The Children & Young People Inquiry noted that Wales was the only part of the UK which did not have a Concurrency Service. Concurrency arrangements across the UK clearly evidenced positive outcomes for children – Coram (2013) reported that the outcomes of 68% of children placed through concurrency planning were significantly enhanced than for those children placed at later stages of their development. The Cambridge – Coram concurrency partnership recently demonstrated that 24% of children placed for adoption in Cambridgeshire, found permanency through a concurrency model. Significantly, each child in a concurrency placement had their care journey reduced by 7½ months.

Concurrency has much to commend it –

- Dual approval provides a cohort of carers who will be willing to actively work towards reunification until such a time as the court rules it out.
- These carers have been specifically recruited for the purpose.

Concurrency can offer carers the intense resources and support they require to facilitate high levels of contact and there is active peer support available from other concurrency carers.

3. Support services The provision of adoption support services presents one of the greatest challenges for the National Adoption Service and critically for children and their adoptive families.

Research undertaken by Ottaway , Holland and Maxwell 2014 highlighted that

- High quality service provision is patchy across Wales, particularly
- In relation to specialist services to meet the complex, multi-dimensional needs of adopted children and their families.

There were high and possibly unrealistic expectations that the NAS would offer early resolutions to this complex and critical area of adoption services and these expectations have been compounded by knowledge of the significant investment in adoption support in England.

These issues aside, we would like to acknowledge both the hard work and concerted efforts to develop strategic proposals to improve adoption support services that are well evidenced in the response to this enquiry by the Director of Operations.

There are also examples of some excellent practice in the ongoing provision of adoption support as a lifelong requirement for all those affected by adoption – again specific mention is made of this in the Director of Operations response to this inquiry.

4. Training and upskilling workforce ... (Recommendation 15)

Training and upskilling the workforce in respect of adoption:

- Has to be seen in the context of a continuum of permanency planning for children. Practitioners (as do all who are involved in caring /parenting) need to feel confident and competent in evidencing and analysing what children need in order to develop healthy and secure relationships that are sustainable throughout their life
- Training that the workforce receives should be informed by research and some sobering evidence by Selwyn (J) and Meakin (S) 2015 in their research recognises that a poorly skilled workforce and foster carers who do not understand the importance of early nurturing, can be a contributory factor to difficulties in childhood and adolescence for young people who have been adopted.

Question 1

What are your views on the recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopter parents?

Significant progress has been made in respect of all of the above elements. All of us recognise that there is more work to be done:

- to ensure that the numbers of adoptive parents who are approved correlates to the needs of children waiting – a reduction in the number of placement orders made during the past twelve months – 405 (in 2013/14) compared to 325 (in 2014/15), families for children over 4 and sibling groups over 2 remain a challenging target to meet.

The partners within NAS are working together on the National Marketing Strategy proposals which will have a focus on harder to place children, particularly sibling groups and older children.

Within the NAS, both the VAA's and regional collaboratives are responsible for the assessment and preparation of prospective adoptive families. Currently if the regional collaboratives are unable internally to allocate the assessments, there is no mechanism to facilitate allocating the assessments externally to the VAA's. Potentially, some prospective adoptive families may be subject to unnecessary delay. Some further work is required to ensure that the basic principle of NAS as a collaboration is further integrated at an operational level.

The best practice model that is currently being developed from enquiry through to assessment is helpful in recognising potential gaps in present delivery and how they can be improved.

How could this be improved?

Recruitment : The recent best practice model for family finding that is nearing completion has very appropriately recommended:

- That regional collaboratives are notified much earlier in the process by the child care teams about children for whom there is a strong likelihood that a Placement Order will be sought. To further minimise delay for children – it may be helpful if this 'early alert 'of children, is extended to the VAA sector to enable smarter recruitment strategy to meet specific need, especially for

children who traditionally wait the longest for families – older children, children who need to be placed with their brothers and sisters and those children who have complex needs.

Wales Adoption Register – This has delivered many benefits particularly by initiatives such as the all Wales Exchange Days. Other aspects have been more challenging.

- Information required from the Regional collaboratives to refer children and adopters to the Register has proven difficult to gather and can lead to information not being up to date
- The existence of a fairly cumbersome process in respect of Inter Register protocols, signed up to by all Governments in the UK, has had the unintended consequence of social workers by passing the Register and seeking families throughout the UK, with greater costs for servicing these placements: eg social worker time, IRO's, as well as significantly impacting on the child's sense of identity and culture. We understand that there is going to be a review of WAR which will be helpful as greater flexibility in respect of how links are generated and better accessibility of adopter/ child profiles, compliant with necessary security arrangements, should lead to a more user friendly approach to the linking and matching of children
- It would make sense to revisit the Family finding placement strategy in order to promote Welsh heritage and make it a requirement that except in exceptional circumstances, placements should be sought within the originating region. If unachievable within a very strict timescale, (as early placement identification must be the principal priority) then immediate referral would be made to all regions and the VAA's simultaneously to maximise placement choice. Again, within very strict timetables, if no placement can be achieved within Wales, links are then pursued across the rest of the UK.
- National Adoption Service is a success. Fewer children wait for placement while many more families are approved within quicker timescales. Success presents new challenges. Many of the newly approved families came forward at a time when there were very young children waiting. With the fall in Placement Orders, it is questionable whether a considerable number of these families will achieve a placement. It is right to consider greater choice for children, but we also need to mitigate against the continued untargeted recruitment of adopters. The resultant mismatch coupled with

the unnecessary raising of expectations, risks undermining confidence in the adoption process. As families are processed for younger children, the margins for all of us to recruit and develop some of these families for the harder to place children will in due course present different challenges.

- Continuing to extend knowledge within NAS about current practice and gaps between the needs of children waiting and the profile of adopters that are being recruited, will aid all agencies to develop families from the outset and feature children who are actually waiting for families in the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters.

Applications from prospective adoptive families would be prioritised to meet the needs of children who were waiting for an adoptive family and adoption assessments tailored specifically to meet the needs of children waiting.

Question 2

What is your experience of and view of the matching process and support for the transition?

See comments above and below as these issues are inextricably linked. Social workers are often overloaded with the need to produce and duplicate information in several different formats.

At times there is a lack of consistency in terms of the quality of information available to prospective adopters, which can be repetitious and fail to convey a sense of the child outside of the evidential reports produced for courts. The best practice model on family finding recognises the importance of the adopters' voice and their ability to influence and be active in the matching process.

Regular and meaningful sharing of children's profiles across agencies in Wales, with opportunity for face to face discussion with a practitioner who knows the child could significantly increase understanding of the child's needs. Profiling of available adopters at same event (again by a practitioner who can talk knowledgably about them) could assist with effective and efficient matching. This will also be another means of establishing whether there needs to be a wider search for some children.

How could this be improved?

- Agencies and adoption panels have a key role in quality assurance and should challenge when information is missing, incomplete or inadequate.
- Training for staff and the provision of resources including time and mentoring by the adoption workers will improve practice. This will need to focus on ensuring that social workers are able to make the connections between a child's background and experiences and their current presentation, and are able to describe this in accessible language.
- Whilst being mindful and sensitive to the significant pressure that child care social workers are under in preparing evidence for court, further appreciation needs to be given to the future significance of the CAR/ANNEX B in providing accurate, detailed and sensitively presented information for the child. The issues that emerge in failing to do this competently are now being evidenced in the Adoption Cohort study being undertaken by Cardiff University .

Question 3

Do you think there is sufficient information and support for children and young people including access to quality life-story work?

While at times that has been ad hock, some regions have worked hard to improve their practise as evidenced by the NAS statistics. NAS consistently acknowledge that the quality of life story work as well as the completion of this critical information for the child by the second review needs to be improved for some of the reasons cited below –

- This work is crucial to children's identity and ability to make sense of their family situation
- Provides support to adopters in sharing information and answering any questions that children may have
- Can be helpful in reducing the confusion for children and adults and can negate the dependence on seeking information as an adopted adult.

The quality of this life story work is crucial. We have seen some excellent examples of life story work through direct sessions with children being undertaken and have been able to see the positive benefits of this. Conversely, we have also had experience of social workers who lack confidence and / or experience in direct work with children, and who have viewed their task as

complete when a book of photos have been handed to adopters.

Life Story work is not a one off event, it has life –long implications and should be ongoing and meaningful to the child. The importance of this is evidenced through the consultation with young people undertaken via NAS that is cited in the response to this enquiry by the Director of Operations.

How could this be improved?

- Providing resources for social workers to undertake this task with birth family and foster carers, including designated time, interactive, web based activities for example

Joint training for child care professionals, their managers adoptive parents and foster carers in line with skilling up workforce:

- Availability of therapeutic input to support this process
- Development of a clear set of expectations and competencies by which agencies will be measured via the Care Council and through the CSSIW inspection process.
- Introducing more rigour to the adoption panel process – quality assurance for all children being placed for adoption.
- Giving ‘more teeth to the IROs’, creating a climate of expectation and culture change > children have a right to this information.
- Listening to the voice of the child and what they need and want as an **entitlement** not as an **option**.

Question 4

What post-adoption support for children, young people and families (including from social services, education, health and mental health services) is available and what more could be done in this area?

This remains one of the greatest challenges for the National Adoption Service and is identified as one of the critical work-plan priorities for the next twelve months.

We welcome the initiatives set out in this work-plan and especially the inclusion of representatives from health, education and CAHMS at the NAS Advisory Group.

Significant weight has been attached to Julie’s Selwyn’s recent research *Adoption research / Beyond the Adoption Order: Discord and Disruption in adoptive*

families. While this research was undertaken before the launch of NAS, it is good to see that some of the Regions have already taken ownership of the findings and are beginning to proactively work to develop a helpful stream of adoption support services. Support services in other Regions remain ad hoc. In fairness to the latter, not all of the Regions developed at the same point in time. All of us recognise the need to make further progress on integrating health, education and therapeutic services.

From an individual organisation perspective 97% of all adoptive placements made through St. David's have a successful outcome – this achievement can be seen within the context that the children we place tend to have higher support needs. Selwyn research reflected a 13% breakdown rate for hard to place children.

We believe that our strength lies in providing high quality support from enquiry through to post placement, which empowers and enables adoptive families to develop their own strategies, building confidence and resilience Part of this strategy is that adoptive families view St. David's as their support community and we have simultaneously developed the concept of stewardship in the staff team. The very first phone call to the agency must instil trust and confidence, a base on which all future services are grounded.

Support service provision from St. David's includes :

- Individualised advice and support to families – including advice on school related matters, understanding and managing behaviour, advocating support in seeking medical advice with emerging health issues
- Specialist support via a therapist who specialises in theraplay based techniques
- Counselling for a young person through After Adoption
- Funding adoptive families to attend specialist training to assist in upskilling their knowledge and understanding of the needs of children they are parenting
- Support Groups with crèche facilities – speakers invited to attend groups including paediatricians, Adoption UK – (supporting children in education)
- Bi annual celebration events at Christmas and in the summer for children and their families.
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We are also in the early stages of developing a model of adoption support aligned to those developed by Adoption Matters and Caritas Care (findings Chester University) – which looks at a holistic model of support with the child integral to that support plan. Each plan would be tailored to meet individual need rather than the child fitting into a pre-existing programme.

How could this be improved?

- Recognition that support starts from the point of first contact with an agency and should be an integral part of the adopters' journey and their development.
- Involving adopters at various points in the assessment /preparation process is a good model and promotes a family feel for new adopters which influences where /how they seek support over the years.
- Like-wise for children, better support and understanding of need at the outset can reduce needs further down the line.
- Support needs should be embraced by all agencies, including children services, health and education – Improving outcomes for these children is the responsibility of all services as is developing the infrastructures to respond to requests for support in a timely way that meets individual needs.
- Learn from what works, many examples of excellent and proven good practice models in other parts of the UK that have been academically evaluated (Adoption Matters and Chester University) –
- Learn from good practice models that exist in the Welsh third sector – families approved by the voluntary agencies have sustained challenging placement as a result of available, relevant and consistent support.
- Development of a clear structure for accessing support services and a consistent model for assessing the individual needs.
- Involvement and accessibility of CAHMS is already on the NAS agenda and incorporation on the advisory group should aid developments.
- Online training for adopters that is accessible to upskill not just their understanding of the children they are parenting but strategies for managing the presenting behaviours that emerge as a result of early poor life experiences

Question 5

Are there any other issues you wish to draw to the Committee's attention?

Suggestions for future improvements are made within the context that an enormous change agenda has taken place over a relatively short period of time. There has been significant structural reorganisation to enable the formation of several of the Regional Collaboratives.

A consequence of the third sector not being integrated into the operational delivery of services alongside this restructuring has created a longer pathway in developing a fully integrated service.

That said, there has been significant work undertaken by the central team of the National Adoption Service under the leadership of the Director of Operations. In the spirit of co-operation and collaboration we look forward to the further developments of VAA integration at an operational level in order to deliver a holistic partnership critical for the ongoing adoption reform agenda.

We are working to understand the sudden and apparent significant decline in Placement Orders, brought on by the Mumby Judgement. Early information from the AFA Cymru legal advisors group suggests that the Courts may be increasingly reluctant to consider Placement Orders. Some impose a time restriction: if the child does not secure a placement within a six month timeframe, the PO can be set aside with care plans changed back to long term fostering. Does this breach the child's convention Rights? AFA Cymru are presently rolling out the Evidence Matters training to CAFCASS, Child Care social workers and managers to up-skill the workforce on presentation of robust analysis and decision making within the child's timeframe. AFA Cymru will also be developing a suite of training across the spectrum of permanency planning. That said, if the Mumby judgement continues to weigh heavily on Placement Orders, vulnerable children may have one of their most basic rights, the right to family life, eroded.