

Cymdeithas Plant Dewi Sant



St David's Children Society

Children & Young People Inquiry into Adoption.

Submission of St. David's Children Society.

1st Feb. 2012.

Situation:

- There are four Local Authority (LA) adoption consortia operating across Wales. The consortia in SE & SW Wales (a total of 6 LAs), are meeting their internal demand for adoption placements, sometimes by purchasing from St. David's. These LAs service relatively small populations.
- There are a significant number of children within the South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium (SWAAC – 9 authorities) and the N. Wales Adoption Consortium (6 authorities) with an adoption plan but without an available adoption placement resource.
- As the regionalisation agenda gathers pace, there will inevitably be some restructuring of consortia arrangements.
- No national data is recorded in Wales on the number of children currently waiting for an adoption placement.

Background:

- The Welsh Government has set out its aims in Sustainable Social Services for Wales, A Framework for Action, to develop a National Adoption Agency.
- Improving permanency through greater placement choice is a key part of the Sustainable Wales programme.
- WLGA & ADSS are exploring greater collaboration including moving towards regional services and a national adoption service. There remains the critical question of timescales in achieving all of this.

- These past 5 years have witnessed a 20% increase in the looked after childcare population. ¹
- LAs are burdened by critical mass of child protection. Partly driven by the Baby P case.
- Recent years have witnessed a decrease in number of qualified social workers.

St. David's Assessment::**Adoption works.**

- The legislation, processes & structures are fit for purpose.
- All approved prospective adopters within St. David's Children Society complete their training, checks, assessment & are approved within the 8 month guideline.
- If prospective adopters face delays, children face delays and as a consequence are disadvantaged before they reach an adoption placement.
- Yes we can always improve systems, but the critical issues that impact on children are to do with delays, adoption agency capacity, service delivery, low outputs and a limited understanding of the true costs of providing adoption services.
- Adoption works: Outcomes for children placed for adoption with a St. David's approved adopter far exceed the national average. In our last 100 placements we experienced a breakdown rate of 3% compared to a national disruption rate of 20%. ²

1: Personal Social Services Statistics Wales 2010–11 www.statswales.wales.gov.uk

2: Adoption UK 'Disruption Report.' 11th Oct. 2010. + PM Review of Adoption 2000. (Performance & Innovation Unit).

Emotional cost to the child:

- BAAF estimate that 1 in 4 children available for adoption will not be placed primarily due to the lack of an adoptive parent resource.
- Where children experience delays in being placed for adoption, this has a detrimental effect on their life chances. The chances of being adopted reduced by nearly 20% for every year of delay. ³
- Successful adoptions reduce the likelihood of an over representation of the adoption population dependant on mental health services, in prisons, etc ⁴.

Financial cost to the public purse:

- DCSF (2010) estimate that the cost for a local authority to secure an internal adoption placement is £36,000. ⁵
- The cost of an interagency fee for a single adoption placement with a St. David's approved adopter is £27,000. This includes life long support to the placement.
- The core cost of placing and keeping children in care is very expensive and represents an ongoing cost for many years
- The more instability there is in the child's care journey, including multiple fostering placements or residential care, the greater the financial impact. The equivalent annual cost for such a care journey has been estimated at £56,225 per annum. ⁶
- Swifter family finding by LAs & VAAs leads to reduced care costs per child resulting in substantial costs savings to local authorities including reduced fostering & residential care costs, legal challenges, reviews, etc.
- Efficient, effective adoption services enable children to exit care in a timely manner, helping to stabilise a rising looked after childcare population.

6 Recommendations:

1: Partnership:

- We suggest that the Welsh Government consider spearheading the exploration of partnership arrangements between LAs and St. David's as we work together to achieve high quality adoption placements for children.
- The highly successful Coram & London Borough of Harrow partnership provides a bench mark for such working: this partnership delivered a 100% success rate in placing all children with an adoption placement order with all children being placed within the recommended 6 month timescale. ⁷

2: Effective Financial Governance:

- Service commissioners should develop a greater understanding of the social value that adoption provides including the contribution of St. David's to reduce the LAs current & future spending costs.
- We suggest that the Audit Commission conduct a study into the financial costs of providing adoption services within Wales: for example:

³: Selwyn, J., Frazer, L. and Quinton, D. (2006) 'Paved with good intentions: The pathway to adoption and the costs of delay', *British Journal of Social Work*, 36, pp. 561–76

⁴: "Handle with Care" by the Centre for Policy Studies (Sept 2006).

⁵: DCSF: Selwyn, J. Sempik, J. Thurston, P. & Wijedasa, D. "Adoption & the Interagency Fee," 2010.

⁶: Hannon, C, Wood, C, Bazalgette, L, *In Loco Parentis* (2010), Demos

⁷: *A report on the partnership between Coram and Harrow Council to increase quality and reduce cost of care in Children's Services*

- Last year, an English County Council reported that its adoption team of 41 social workers achieved 43 placements.
- While adoption teams in Wales have lower staffing numbers, anecdotal evidence suggests that greater efficiencies could be achieved in the staffing to placement activity ratios.
- By contrast, five St. David's social work staff will achieve 35 adoption placements this year.
- Efficient auditing of services should measure inputs, outputs and outcomes.
- We acknowledge that local authorities' adoption budgets are at times under resourced. It is imperative that we change rigid structures to one that is cost effective and delivers a future for children requiring adoption.
- Currently, the adoption VAA Interagency Fee is paid in two lump sums over a period of a year. We propose that this fee be paid on a monthly basis out of the fostering budget.

3: Practice:

- We suggest that each local authority set itself a timescale of 2 months, after which if it is unable to identify a suitable family for a child within its own resources or consortia arrangements, that authority must look further afield including the voluntary sector to achieve a placement irrespective of the age of the child.
- Where an adoption agency is unable to progress an adoption enquiry within 2 month of first contact, that agency must refer the enquirer to another adoption agency with the capacity to immediately progress the enquiry.

4: Establish a disruption register for Wales:

- Adoption UK reported that as many as 1 in 5 adoptions in Wales breakdown (11th Oct 2010).
- Need to record accurate disruption statistics across Wales and to urgently agree a standard format for recording and reporting this data.

5: Establish a National Register within Wales for:

- All children with a placement order whose assessed need is adoption.
- All prospective adopters waiting for a placement.
- Given BAAF's experience of managing the National Adoption Register in England & Wales, we suggest that BAAF be considered for this task.

6: Establish a National Adoption Helpline for Adoptive Enquiries:

- Supported by an effective adoption recruitment campaign.
- This should be managed by professionals &
- Part staffed by service user volunteers.
- Offered as a localised free phone service.
- BAAF, Adoption UK & St. David's could pilot this service.

We believe that all 6 of these recommendations are consistent with the vision of a National Adoption Agency for Wales.

Adoption is a serious business for children... Because of the complex processes involved in adoption, young children quickly become older with more demanding needs and are considered harder to place.

Adoption works. It is our structures that are failing children. New approaches work as is clearly evident by the Coram Harrow model. Until we get past decisions that are driven by short term financial considerations, children will not succeed.

The 'Social Return on Investment' report (2011), concluded that for every successful adoption from care, where the adopter is able to support the child in resolving the issues from their past, there is a social return of over £1m per placement. ⁸.

Gerry Cooney
St. David's Children Society.
1st Feb. 2012.

8: PACT Domestic Adoption and Fostering: SROI Evaluation. Evaluation carried out by Baker Tilly and Cass Business School (April 2011).

Addendum:

Key facts about St. David's:

- In our last 100 adoption placements we had a breakdown rate of 3%. This is the lowest breakdown rate of any adoption agency in the UK. 97% of our adoption placements are successful.
- This year we anticipate achieving 35 adoption placements which will result in 1 in every 7 children placed for adoption in Wales being placed with a St. David's approved adopter.
- In the past 5 years St. David's has placed more children over 5 years of age for adoption than any other single member agency of SWAAC. St. David's has also placed more sibling groups of children than any other single member agency within the same period.
- Our Welsh placement strategy delivers high quality outcomes for children.
- 90% of our adopters have children placed with them within 4 months of approval.
- Our recent CSSIW inspection report reflected an outstanding service. There were no action points or recommendations.
- St. David's is the longest servicing adoption agency in Wales.
- St. David's is the only voluntary adoption agency in Wales that is approved and inspected by the Welsh Government.

Core strengths of St David's:

- Experience and knowledge is imparted to adoptive parents and LAs.
- St. David's has a high retention rate for adoption social work staff:
 - A higher likelihood in retaining expertise
 - Greater consistency of the relationship between agency social worker and adoptive family
 - = Better placement outcomes for children.
- St. David's has 70 years experience of the lifelong impact of adoption:
 - St. David's has a proven track record of positively developing its adopters
 - St David's provides a seamless service to adoption support that addresses the lifelong impact of adoption
 - Experience is used to inform best practice
 - Ability to innovate and develop user empowered support services.
 - Ability to identify regional and national trends and respond more quickly to changes in demand
 - = Better placement outcomes for children.

A suggested structure for the proposed National Adoption Agency:

St. David's fully supports the proposal for a National Adoption Agency viewing it as a moment of great opportunity for children waiting adoption. The National Adoption Agency had the potential to be the single greatest vehicle to deliver significant long term costs savings to child care budgets and has enormous potential to improve life chances for children in the looked after system in Wales.

While the proposal creates immense challenge in performance, scale and outcomes, it has the potential to place Wales at the vanguard of adoption services within the UK, a beacon for others to follow. This is a defining moment for adoption services in Wales. It must be seized.

The National Adoption Agency will:

- Reduce delays and achieve better outcomes for adopted children.
- Provide greater choice of prospective adopters for children.
- Establish clear targets for completed assessments, placements and reduce delay.
- Free up foster carers – (currently a shortage in England & Wales of 10,000), thus enabling LAs address their 'sufficient duty' requirement.
- Reduce the need for social workers, team managers, legal challenges, IRO, mental health services, CAMHs services, after care service, etc.
- Result in increased savings to the LA as child is looked after for a shorter period, which increases best value for the rate payer.

Aims & Objectives of new agency:

- It becomes a centre of excellence for domestic adoption – while this will be a challenge, it will be more easily achieved if the focus is on the fundamentals which is securing high quality, life long placements for looked after children and are not distracted by inter country or step parent adoption – or indeed birth parent counselling.
- It drives forward placement outcomes for adoptive children
- It is imperative that the new agency not only succeeds but in the first instance seeks to promote and provide high quality, accountable client focused adoption services.

National Adoption Agency Responsibilities:

- The new agency to become a single reference point for all children with an adoption plan.
- The new agency establishes and maintains a register for all children with an adoption plan.
- A similar register of approved available adopters.
- That is has responsibility for recruiting, training and approving new prospective adopters.

- That it has initial responsibility for identifying and recommending proposed links of children with prospective adopters.
- That it has the responsibility for ensuring that children are prepared for adoption and that life story books are in place, etc. These omissions create significant delays for children.
- The new agency being the placement support agency – until such time as the adoption order is granted.

LA responsibilities:

- That the LA retains the decision to approve children for adoption, including panel approval of the adoption plan.
- The LA adoption panel and decision maker retain responsibility for approving the link – the link being proposed to the LA by the new agency. – To further reduce delays, Guidance may be required for timescales between the link being identified by the National Adoption Agency and the LA panel approving the match.
- *Issues of Inter country and step parent adoption may require further careful consideration. The growing demands of step parent adoption are of concern and risk draining precious resources away from domestic adoption. The Assembly may wish to consider setting up a separate section for these two elements, but we would suggest that the initial focus of the new agency concentrate on domestic adoption, revisiting step parent adoption after a period of five years.*
- That responsibility for post adoption support after the granting of the order remains with the LA, or alternatively is commissioned out to Adoption UK or After Adoption.

Accountability:

- The Assembly may wish to consider the establishment of a 'Board with Special Responsibility to advise on Adoption Matters,' including a chair, a senior member of CSSIW, a local authority chief executive, a civil servant, an experienced child care & family law solicitor, a child psychologist or paediatrician, an experienced researcher in child law and family law outcomes, and an experienced adoption social worker.
- The board works with the Chief Executive on matters of governance, strategic planning, accountability and financial oversight.
- The chief executive / director of the new agency to report to the board.
- The Chair of the Board prepare written six monthly reports to the Minister with Special Responsibility for Social Services

Precursory staffing numbers...

- In 2010 there were 229 children adopted in Wales. The increase in looked after child care population suggests it is prudent to estimate an increase in adoption placements to 250 children.
- To secure widest possible placement choice for children the new agency would require a pool of 300 approved prospective adopters.
- The St David's team of social work staff deliver training, assessments, support to adopters, response to high numbers of initial enquiries, support to existing placements, support groups for adopters & children, workshops and an increasing role (and number) in providing guidance

to individuals seeking contact with their birth parent, child they gave up for adoption, brothers and sisters etc.

- Each member of the team achieves an average of 6 prospective assessments per year, each making approximately 5 – 6 adoption placements per year.
- Using that staffing ratio, the national adoption agency would require a compliment of approximately 50 social work staff all working at an exceptionally high level of skill, outputs and outcomes – achieving 300 assessments.
- 50 social work staff would require approximately 10 - 12 managers, plus 3 higher tier management. *The National Adoption Agency would lead to substantive savings in existing budgets. 50 social work staff may initially appear excessive. A quick precursory analysis of SWAAC (the 9 member local authorities of the South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium), suggests that it employs an approximate total of 48 adoption social work staff, excluding team leaders and principle officers. The 13 remaining Welsh authorities probably employ at least another 35 social work staff between them, again excluding management layers.*
- Children often experience delays due to the slow response of district social workers in reading the prospective adoptive assessment report (PAR.). This is due to the critical mass of child protection, court work and staffing shortages. A designated linking team of 3 – 4 experienced social workers employed by the new agency to specifically explore and identify links between children and prospective adopters would significantly reduce delays for children, free up foster placements and provide substantive savings to budgets.
- Additional social work staff would be required should the new agency consider preparing children for adoption, including life story books (this being another source of delay for children).
- Admin support of approximately 15 full time equivalents.
- Approximately 5 - 6 regional offices.
- The new agency to consider securing the services of a pool of experienced self employed social work staff to respond to periods of increased demand, sickness periods, holiday leave, etc.

Adoption Panel.

- The new agency would need to plan for the approval of approximately 300 prospective adoptive applicants.
- A workload of 5 – 6 applications per panel.
- A permanent adoption panel that would meet weekly x 2 day's activity: 1 x day report reading. 1 x day attending panel. Alternatively the panel could meet fortnightly though this would still require 4 days work over a period of 2 weeks.
- The primary task of this panel would be to make recommendations to approve prospective adopters, including de-registration. – Approving children for adoption and linking children with new families would remain the task of the local authority panel.
- A permanent adoption panel would require a change in legislative guidance.

Training:

- Training programmes for prospective adopters consume a significant proportion of social work hours.
- Where social work staff are providing training, this is usually sporadically delivered requiring three days delivery by 2 -3 social workers with another 1 – 2 days preparation.
- The appointment of 3 lead experienced trainers, (one North Wales, / two South Wales, each supported by a social worker from the new agency during the training programme), consistently delivering all training across Wales, would lead to significant time and cost savings for the main task which is assessing and approving prospective adoptive resources. – The linking being secured by designated staff.

Recruitment / Marketing officer: - 1 post.

- Advertising, marketing, raising the profile of the new agency.
- The National Adoption Agency will have its own unique, exclusive 'brand.' It will attract considerable media attention and quickly be viewed as a centre for excellence in adoption services.
- Its uniqueness will do much to raise the profile of adoption and give rise to a new generation of prospective adopters.

Risks, contingency planning:

- It is imperative that in preparation for the new agency, the Assembly capture greater statistical data on children with an adoption plan. The annual number of children adopted each year in Wales may not represent the total number of children with an adoption plan. *(It is not unusual to find approximately 15 – 18% % of the looked after child care population initially referred to the local authority adoption agency. While the adoption plans for a significant number of these children will change, the 4% – 4.5% annual statistic of adopted looked after children appears modest and considerably short of the initial referral rate. A successful National Adoption Agency may witness a considerable increase in referrals).*
- On occasions, the plans of children waiting for adoption are altered due to the lack of an available adoptive placement resource. *(Situations occur where the adoption plan is changed with the child moving to long term fostering for reasons such as within a pre determined period an adoptive resource has not been identified, or that the child has reached a certain age, is part of a sibling group, has contact arrangements, etc. The Assembly may wish to devise an early formula for capturing such data, perhaps sourced from the IROs. Such data may evidence a marked increase in the number of children being referred to the new agency potentially leaving it under resourced at an early stage of its development).*
- Last year saw an increase of 500 children entering the looked after system in Wales, in part driven by the Baby Peter case. Eventually this will lead to an increase in the numbers of children being placed for adoption.
- The establishment of the National Agency will result in a greater emphasis being placed on adoption with LAs viewing it as a positive option for children and budgets leading to a marked increase in the number of children being referred.
- Over these past few years BAAF have consistently reported that somewhere between 25% & 35% of children (in England & Wales) with

an adoption plan will not be placed primarily due to the lack of an available adoptive family resource.

The financial and emotional costs of keeping children in long-term care are immense:

Beyond Care Matters (Narey, 2007): Estimates that the average annual cost of a looked after child in 2005/6 was £33,000 but rises to £50,000 for children with emotional and behavioural problems. For children with complex needs the estimated annual cost is £95,000.”

- The adoption budget is of significant importance to the reduction of long term costs, particularly fostering costs. (*We need to take greater cognisance of ever increasing foster fees, residential fees, reoccurring legal challenges, district social work and management time, governance time, medical reviews, IRO, GAL, reviews, staff offices & overheads, etc*).
- All agencies need a greater understanding of the true costs of adoption related activity. The Hadley Centre (*A study of the financial costs of 9 local authority adoption agencies Sept 2009*), evidenced that the cost to a local authority of placing a child internally was £36,000 per child. Loughborough University Sept 2009 estimated the same as £44,000 per child. Greater financial clarity is required on the full unit costs of running an adoption service.

The Adoption Act, the Children Act and the Human Rights Act all support the fundamental principle that every child had the right to family life. The legal status of so many looked after children has seen this most basic right diminished. The National Adoption Agency has the potential to champion this right. The creation of a National Adoption Agency would be a great legacy for some of our most vulnerable looked after children in Wales.

Gerry Cooney
St. David's Children Society
March 2011.