

PAPER TO THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ADOPTION SERVICES IN WALES

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide written evidence in response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's follow up inquiry into adoption services.
2. Following the previous inquiry, we have acted decisively to establish an improved strategic focus for adoption services in Wales and to provide financial support for key aspects of these reforms.
3. Taking a co-production approach, we have worked with a broad range of stakeholders to establish the National Adoption Service for Wales, reinforced in law by the issue of Directions following changes we made to primary legislation through the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act. Furthermore, we have
 - established the Wales Adoption Register, with reciprocal arrangements to the registers of the other three home nations;
 - put in place a performance management framework for adoption services in Wales and;
 - supported the development of a more strategic approach to the provision of adoption support services through targeted grant funding for this and other key service developments.
4. When BAAF closed unexpectedly in the summer we moved quickly to ensure that services were maintained seamlessly for service users, whilst capitalising on the opportunity to develop bespoke new arrangements for Wales that will deliver improved services. The new arrangements for the Wales Adoption Register in particular, which is now located with the National Adoption Service, are already providing benefits in improved management information and enhanced strategic impact, as well as providing the platform for trialling options for service improvement.

5. More broadly, we are acting to draw together a strategic policy framework to reduce the numbers of children and young people being brought into care, where it is safe to do so. Where they do become looked after, our aim is to ensure high quality placements that provide stability, nurture and a loving family life. We recognise and support the role of adoption as a highly successful form of permanence for those children and young people for whom it is the appropriate decision.

Governance and leadership arrangements

6. The structure and governance arrangements for the National Adoption Service are based on the “functional model” that was originally proposed by the Expert Group of stakeholders and developed further in consultation with the Advisory Group that was brought together to establish the National Adoption Service. It was these co-produced arrangements that formed the basis for the Directions that we issued in March 2015.
7. Recognising that the statutory responsibility for providing adoption services rests with local authorities, the governance structure is built on an innovative local / regional / national model which gives clear lines of accountability whilst also delivering challenge and a platform for effective joint working.
8. Ultimate responsibility for performance of the National Adoption Service rests with the Governance Board, which draws together political leadership for the regional and national levels of the service, alongside a representative of the third sector organisations and the independent chair of the Advisory Group to provide additional challenge.
9. The Advisory Group brings together a broad range of stakeholders, including from those services which play a key and complementary role to social services in this field – particularly an education representative and three health representatives, one of whom is from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Service (CAMHS). It is also required to pay specific attention to the voice of those who use adoption services.

10. Both of these groups provide forums for powerful conversations about the performance of all aspects of the National Adoption Service, at national level. At a regional level, the collaboratives are required to have in place partnership agreements and management arrangements which include arrangements for working with Local Health Boards and NHS Trusts, and with local education departments, including representation from these services on the collaborative's management committee. This enables effective joint working and mutual challenge to take place at a regional level as well as nationally.
11. The Directions require that an annual progress report is submitted to Welsh Ministers on 30 June each year and an interim report on 31 December each year. Since the establishment of the National Adoption Service, I have used this requirement as the basis for regular 6-monthly progress meetings with the Director of Operations, the Chair of the Governance Board and the Chair of the Advisory Group. We use this opportunity to discuss in detail performance data and related issues, including any barriers to improving performance and how they could be unblocked.
12. I am aware that there remains a great deal of work to do, not least in tackling disparity between regions' performance in a number of key areas, and that it will take some time to address all the relevant issues. However, I am confident that a strong start has been made, as can be seen in the positive impact of the National Adoption Service across many of the key indicators and targets in its first year and onwards into its second. From the evidence of the reports submitted to me and the discussions I have held, I believe that our ambition to achieve real change is shared by the leaders of the service and that there remains a will to work together and challenge each other further to achieve the necessary progress rapidly.

Post adoption support

13. We do not underestimate the challenges that adoptive families can face. Some, but not all, will require support, possibly multi-agency support, after an adoption order has been made. Research we commissioned from Cardiff University on adoption support, and Bristol University on adoption disruption, confirms that when support is required it needs to be timely, accessible, appropriate, informed, compassionate and professional. We recognise that post adoption support in Wales needs further improvement and this is an area on which we are focusing.
14. To support the adoption service in addressing this issue we have granted the following targeted funding:
 - National Adoption Service – £65,000 for the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016 for the development of adoption support services, including devising a national model for these services (and therefore covering issues of responsibilities and entitlements). A further £15,000 will help to develop the National Adoption Service's communication with adopted children and adopters, including adoption support service pages on its website.
 - After Adoption and Adoption UK jointly - £564,477 over a three year period for *Adoption Support Wales – getting it right for every child*. This is a portfolio of activities delivered collaboratively between After Adoption, Adoption UK, the National Adoption Service, service users and stakeholders to strengthen, inform and improve the equity of adoption support across Wales.
 - St David's Children Society - £342,300 over a three year period to focus on a) the recruitment of prospective adopters for children who have been referred to the Wales Adoption Register, are aged four years and over, are part of a sibling group and/or have complex health needs, and b) targeted programmes of support to meet the needs and demands of those adopters.
15. We are of course aware that the Adoption Support Fund in England operates on a different scale and with a different approach. Recent evaluation of that scheme

points to some undoubted successes. One of the key points of learning in developing our own support services is to be mindful of the need to move away from spot purchasing and short term, local commissioning of these services and seek ways in which we can identify synergies, grow and apply expertise and maximise the impact of the available funding.

16. We have no immediate plans to ask the National Adoption Service to take on a role in assessing post adoption support needs, though we would be open to further discussion of this idea with partners. We recognise that the central team of the National Adoption Service is very small and that this issue would need to be taken into account as part of any consideration of this suggestion.
17. From April 2016, where it appears that a child may need care and support, the local authority must assess whether the child does have needs and what those needs are under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.
18. The current Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families provides guidance to local authorities to ensure children and families are assessed appropriately. The principles and three domains (the child's developmental needs, parenting capacity and family and environmental factors) of this guidance are incorporated in the code of practice on assessments to support the Act and include guidance on areas such as emotional and behavioural development, stability and attachments.
19. We recognise that it is important to ensure that those who undertake assessments, provide support and review that provision are adoption aware. Equally important is ensuring that clear procedures are in place for individuals to challenge decisions made and raise issues of dissatisfaction.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

20. The Committee will be aware of the concerns which have existed around the provision of CAMHS in general for some time. This is why Welsh Government established its service improvement plan, leading to the development of the NHS-led *Together for Children and Young People* programme, which was launched in February 2015. This initiative seeks to ensure that CAMHS works with its partners across local authorities, education, the third sector and elsewhere to ensure that the young person experiencing emotional and mental ill-health receives the most appropriate intervention, from the most appropriate source and in a timely fashion in line with the principles of prudent healthcare. A number of priority areas have been identified, and work is being taken forward to develop service specifications and recommended models of support for vulnerable children, including looked after and adopted children.

21. More generally, Welsh Government is supporting the work through the provision of additional CAMHS investment of £7.6 million announced in 2015. This represents a significant increase of around 18% on annual NHS CAMHS expenditure. The funding will enable the development of new services and a significant increase in the CAMHS professional workforce, including the expansion of the provision of psychological therapies as an alternative to medication. Examples are therapies which tackle attachment disorder and other issues affecting adopted and looked after children.

Education

22. We recognise the challenges that face some adopted children in education. The Welsh Government has been working corporately to address this issue, across the education and social services portfolios. We have also been working with Adoption UK and the National Adoption Service to try to understand better how adoptive families can be supported in schools.

23. We have extended the terms and conditions of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) to include support for adopted children. The new arrangements allow the

regional education consortia and partners, including local authorities, schools, adoptive parents and adopted children, to develop interventions which will have a beneficial impact on all children. Our expectation is, however, that they will have a greater benefit for children who are or were 'looked after' and those who have been adopted from care.

24. As part of a final year evaluation we expect the consortia to work with local authorities, schools and families to understand the impact the grant has had on the learners it is designed to support.
25. As a means of raising awareness on adoption issues, we have produced a video for schools. Adoption status is not always shared by parents with their children's schools and this is of course a matter of individual choice. Where it is known, bespoke training on specific issues can be addressed at a local, cluster or regional level. This training may include positive classroom management and awareness of potential attachment and mental health issues. The funding set aside for bursaries can also be targeted for specific needs of groups or individuals as necessary.
26. The Welsh Government and Adoption UK are presently working together to develop a new bilingual, electronic booklet on raising the achievement of adopted children in school.

Life story work

27. We recognise the central importance of quality life story work for children in the care system. It supports vulnerable children in understanding their past and preparing them for their future. For adopted children who may no longer have contact with their birth family, the work undertaken with them, and their life story book or box, are crucial in helping them to make sense of their life before adoption.
28. The provision of life story work for children in Wales is an area of shared concern. In discussion with Adoption UK, adoptive parents raised it as being an issue as

did professionals at staff events attended by the National Adoption Service during 2014-15. We know that, done well, it can be an effective way of reducing the potential for disruption of a placement.

29. From figures provided by the National Adoption Service, the percentage of children who had life story materials available before their second adoption review was:

- 23% for the period 2014-15
- 60% for the first quarter of the year 2015-16
- 38% for the mid year review 2015-16.

These figures are considerably lower than the target of 75%.

30. Delivering thorough, sensitively prepared life story work is demanding, especially when staff members are faced with competing priorities. However, improvement is needed and the National Adoption Service has identified this as a priority for action. It is one of the issues discussed at ministerial progress meetings with leaders of the National Adoption Service and one which I will wish to continue to monitor closely.