
The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the committee with information on the above in relation to children who are, or have a plan to be, adopted in Wales.

Adoption services that make up NAS, both local government and voluntary sector, have responded remarkably well to reduce, as far as is possible, some of the impact of the current pandemic. This has been done by moving services into remote working arrangements across a range of functions, being creative e.g. the use of online fora and support groups for adopters as well as children and young people, as well as continuing, subject to risk assessment, ongoing direct adoption support for a small number of families where there could be a risk of breakdown if that were not available. This has been achieved at pace and with much success in enabling many aspects of the service to continue albeit within a context that it is recognised as 'good enough for now but not necessarily sustainable or appropriate for adoption services in the longer term. One of the major issues is that timeframes are, of necessity in some cases, being extended which has implications for the wellbeing of individual children and securing permanence for them, as well as for capacity in the overall placement system.

The above also, of course, has implications for prospective and approved adopters but I wanted in this letter to focus on children and young people.

1. Information directly from adopted children and young people in Wales

As you will be aware NAS is developing, through a partnership approach between the regional services and the 3rd sector, a bespoke service for adopted children and young people in Wales. The 'Connected' service is working with 80+ young people and is expanding; the main service has switched to online individual and group support while the regional workers are currently providing bespoke services to an additional group of children and young people. We have therefore been able to gain the following information from the children and young people involved; responding to the issues emerging will require careful, individualised and nuanced support for some going forward.

- About 50% are positively enjoying being home with their parents with the pressure of school largely removed from their lives and having their parents around more to spend time with them.
- Most are missing friends and feeling 'stuck'.
- There is a smaller group - maybe around a third who are really struggling - and where the young people, who already experience high anxiety levels, are now even more anxious which is often displaying itself in very hard to manage behaviour. It depends on the age of the young person whether that is 'child to parent violence' in the home, running off or self-harming. There is, however, an impact on the child / young person themselves and the parents confidence / ability to manage this current, very different, context.
- There are also small numbers of families who are struggling with sibling groups who are very dysregulated; having no family members coming in to help or provide respite and no school to give the parents a break is particularly challenging for some families who are near to breaking point. As above numbers are small, however, there are examples of some really great responses from individual social workers and teachers who are doing what they can to help.
- There is an emerging anxiety amongst adopted children and young people about the impending return to school; a particular feature of this is those that will be due to take examinations next year with fears about work and teaching being 'crammed' into a single year.

2. Survey undertaken by Adoption UK into 'Home Learning' during Covid 19

Adoption UK undertook and recently published a short survey into the above to which Welsh adopters contributed. The committee may wish to consider this which is available through the following link

<https://www.adoptionuk.org/news/schools-will-need-government-help-with-vulnerable-children-when-they-return-charity-warns>

3. System / service issues

NAS has been working hard to put arrangements in place to maintain services; the latest service statement is available on the NAS website. <https://www.adoptcymru.com/news-and-publications>

The following may be of particular interest to the committee

- Thus far services have not seen any significant change in child referrals or interest in adoption from prospective applicants. We anticipate that this may change as some of the longer term implications of C-19 become clearer.
- Some children are now facing considerable delays to their placements being made. Whilst unavoidable there are concerns about the impact of this 'pause' in placements on individual children's wellbeing as well as the wider system of placement availability as children stay in foster care placements longer than they would normally. NAS has developed a framework to support services to make decisions about progressing plans on a case by case basis working alongside public health

guidance and local authority service prioritisation frameworks. This is being used across Wales but takes time for the detailed and careful risk analysis to take place and of necessity includes periods for children, foster carers and adopters to self-isolate before anything can move forward. Additionally, the ability to move individual children on is dependent on the ability of placing authorities to manage face to face final contact with birth parents and on fostering services advice to foster carers; these elements are by no means consistently supportive of trying to move children where it is safe to do so currently. There are concerns that these delays may cause plans to be re-considered / challenged.

- The Welsh Government has engaged with us and been supportive in many respects. For example in the early stages the Minister agreed to short term flexibility in how new regulations for the approval of adopters were interpreted once they came into force on April 1st. Their preferred approach has been not to amend regulations, albeit it is unclear whether this relates to their preferred approach or capacity. For many aspects of service this has worked for adoption services.

However the inability to access some necessary medical assessments to maintain recruitment of adopters is an example where this approach does not work. The Welsh Government has determined that the proposal to manage this differently, in the short to medium term, would require change to the regulations which they consider to be both unnecessary and likely to take too long to achieve. However, we remain in dialogue on this issue as there are a significant number of adopter assessments that will not complete due to the inability to access the required medical; if this cannot be resolved in the short term individual adopters will experience delays in their approval and there will in effect be a significant 'pause' in the availability of new adopters which has wider implications for children moving forward in the longer term.

- In some circumstances adopted children can be considered to be 'vulnerable' to access educational provision. However they are not explicitly included in the guidance which is linked to being subject of a formal support plan. We are aware that in some cases services have successfully supported an application to access this support but also that this is difficult to achieve due to further prioritisation at both local authority and school level. Numbers are small as this would only be considered where absolutely necessary but can be significant where there are higher levels of support needs.
- There are risks to our small but important Welsh 3rd sector adoption sector, which both NAS and local authorities are trying to mitigate where they can. This is particularly tricky for the smallest and those that rely on the sale of adoptive placements for the majority of their resources. This also has implications for the availability of new adopters for children as we move forward.