

Children and Young People Committee

AD19

Inquiry into Adoption

National Assembly for Wales' Children and Young people Committee Inquiry into Adoption

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:

i) 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.*

ii) 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.*

2. Adoptive Parents and Families:

- i) **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*

ii) **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

3. Adopted Children:

i) 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.

ii) 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.*

4. Professionals working with Adopted Children/Families:

i) 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 needs 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 cause 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

ii) 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 appear 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