

Children and Young People Committee Inquiry into Adoption.

Adoption UK Wales Response – 19th November 2011.

About Adoption UK Wales

Adoption UK is the only UK wide charity run by and for adoptive parents. The charity's aim is to help to make adoptions work and promote loving and supportive relationships between children and their adoptive parents. We do this by providing a supportive self-help network for adoptive parents to explore the unique social, emotional and developmental needs of adopted children and young people. Through this network, Adoption UK also promotes effective learning practice, based on over 40 years' experience of adoptive parenting, which is integrated with current theories of trauma, attachment and development. Adoption UK has a membership of almost 5,000 families across the UK and an office, helpline and dedicated staff in each of the four nations. The Wales office was established in Cardiff in 2008 with support from a Children and Families organisational grant from the Welsh Government.

All children who are adopted will have experienced some form of loss or trauma through being separated from their birth families. Many adopted children will have experienced further loss and trauma through their early experiences of abuse or neglect within the birth family, which may have been compounded by numerous moves within the public care system. For many children, this trauma may lead to emotional, behavioural, educational or development difficulties, which may also affect the children's abilities to form secure attachments with their new parents. Traditional parenting techniques may not work and adoptive parents may need to develop alternative parenting strategies in their role as "therapeutic parents" for traumatised children.

Adoption UK's information, advice and support services include training programmes and workshops for adoptive parents and some for professionals in the adoption field provided at

venues across Wales; we also run local support groups (currently 7 in Wales and increasing each year), online message boards, two magazines, a helpline dedicated to Wales, a casework and advocacy service, mentoring schemes, a wide-ranging publications programme, a library in Wales and contact networks. We also work with numerous local authorities throughout the UK under service level agreements to help them deliver their adoption support services by running their support groups, accepting referrals from them for mentoring and buddying. Our members have access to all of our services, but they are also part of a community of adopters who have made the commitment to help and support each other, with understanding and without judgement. This unique community of adopters is our most important resource.

Research and consultation with adoptive families.

We have undertaken a number of research studies of adoptive parents across Wales and the rest of the UK over the last two years. Our report ***Support Needs of Adoptive Families in Wales*** was published in 2010 and contains 12 recommendations for improving the support to adoptive families and improving outcomes for adopted children in Wales. A copy of this report is attached to this response. The report focuses on four areas:

- The need to monitor and learn from adoption breakdowns and disruptions
- The need to improve the assessment of need process by which the needs of adoptive families are identified
- The need to improve the response given by education professionals to adopted children
- The need to improve the response given by CAMHS teams to adopted children and their families.

Other studies have looked at the recruitment process and at the first year of adoptive family life. We will use the information gathered in all these studies to inform our response to the committee. Perhaps the most striking finding from all this work is the great variety in service provision which exists across the 24 adoption agencies in Wales and the 22 local authorities. It is this inconsistency in response which we would like to see addressed by the creation of some kind of national agency or service.

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Adoption UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (regd charity no 326654) and in Scotland (regd charity no: SC037892). It is also a registered Adoption Support Agency (service no: 66957), regulated by Ofsted in England.

Response

Introduction

Given the nature of Adoption UK's work and its experience, our response is focused on the need for support to be given to adoptive families to help ensure the success and permanence of adoption. We do have some additional observations to make about some unnecessary barriers to adoption connected to the way initial enquiries and recruitment are conducted. We also have a clear opinion about the benefits of creating some kind of single, national adoption agency/ service for Wales as set out in Sustainable Social Services – a framework for action.

Understanding the impact of early abuse and neglect on the long term futures of children and young people.

There is now a mountain of information and research about the consequences of early abuse and neglect on the long-term futures of children and the families that will care for or parent them in the future. It is those carers and parents who will, in the future, have the most impact on those children and will be the ones who will help the children overcome the trauma and development delay that they have experienced. Decisions on the future shape of adoption services in Wales must be firmly rooted in the findings from this research.

The recent research from Ward, et al (Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm: A prospective longitudinal study, DfE RB053, Harriet Ward, Rebecca Brown, David Westlake and

Emily R. Munro, October 2010), clearly illustrates the challenges faced by children who are taken into the care system. It is based on a study of 57 children in ten local authorities who were subject to a core assessment, section 47 enquiry or became looked after before their first birthdays; Among the findings relevant to this inquiry are the following:

- Parents who show a high prevalence of factors such as drug and alcohol misuse, intimate partner violence and mental health problems are known to be associated with an increased risk of children suffering significant harm.
- About a third of the mothers and an unknown number of fathers had already been separated from at least one older child before the birth of the index child.
- Just under two-thirds (65%) of the infants were identified before birth and almost all before they were six months old.
- Neglect was the most common form of maltreatment, often compounded by exposure to intimate partner violence. About a third of the children were maltreated *in utero* as a result of maternal alcohol or drug abuse.
- By their third birthdays, 35 per cent of the infants had been permanently separated from parents who had been unable to overcome their difficulties. There is no evidence that any child was unnecessarily separated.
- However, the long-term well-being of 60 per cent of the permanently separated children had been doubly jeopardised – by late separation from an abusive birth family followed by the disruption of a close attachment with an interim (foster) carer when they entered a permanent placement.
- By their third birthdays over half the children who did not have a recognised medical condition were displaying developmental problems or showing signs of significant behavioural difficulties: aggression and speech problems were prominent.

The conclusions which flow from this and similar studies are

a) that children should be removed from danger as early as possible and placed as soon as possible with families which could potentially be permanent. There should be greater use of the sort of concurrent planning arrangements which have been developed by Coram and used in some English local authorities since 2001 for example, but never used in Wales as far as we are aware.

b) that the majority of children placed for adoption will have significant challenges to overcome and that this needs to be reflected in the support available to adoptive parents.

Increasing the numbers of potential adoptive parents in Wales.

Many people interested in adoption do not make it through the “front doors” of the adoption agency, because they are turned away without a proper assessment of their potential as prospective adoptive parents, or they are not treated with the necessary welcome and support. Thus many children in care lose the potential to be adopted because prospective parents are lost to the system.

Adoption UK is clear that there needs to be a single national recruitment campaign for adoptive parents in Wales. This should direct interested parties to a single website and phone number where accurate basic information about adoption and the assessment process can be given and initial details taken from people who wish to proceed further. The current system of 24 separate recruitment campaigns running across Wales is clearly not a good use of resources. Potential adopters regularly report to us that they were discouraged when their first phone call to an adoption agency and that it was not a positive experience.

Our recent survey of adopters recruitment experiences in which 181 responses (from across Wales and England) were analysed found that:

“over a quarter of respondents (27%) said that they were actively turned away from the agencies they approached, with a similar number (29%) saying that they were turned away from three or more agencies. When asked the reasons for this, 17% said that they were told that their agency was not currently recruiting adopters, 11% were told that their personal profile didn’t match that of the children in the agency’s care, whilst 13% were told that their ethnicity did not match that of the children in the agency’s care. More worryingly, 11% received no response at all further to their enquiries.”

Waiting to be parents: adopters’ experiences of being recruited
(Adoption UK Survey and Report, January 2011,p2)

The report quoted above also suggests that offering an independent counselling session to prospective adopters at an early stage where they are able to explore their feelings about adoption fully without the worry that they were jeopardising their chance of adopting was found to be very helpful. Once people have made contact they need to be offered an initial information session with a preparation course and the opportunity to begin their home study assessment without significant delay.

Reducing delay in matching.

Once a decision has been made to approve a person as an adoptive parent, the next stage must be to place them directly into a national pool of adopters. Currently too many local adoption agencies regard the adopters they have trained and assessed as an asset which they understandably wish to keep for children from their own authority. Although the recent development of consortia of agencies was supposed to help this situation, there is still very much an attitude of holding onto adopters even when there may well be children waiting in the system who could be matched successfully. This adds to the delay for children and sometimes means that children are placed too close to their birth families or that the best possible match is not achieved. The National Adoption Register run by BAAF and the Children who Wait magazine and online facility run by Adoption UK are mechanisms which are already in place and which could be used to find matches for all children placed for adoption in Wales.

Assessment of Need and Adoption Support Plans.

Whatever is done to reduce delays in the adoption process, there will still be a significant number of adoptive families who will need ongoing support, at least in the initial stages of the placement and in some cases throughout the childhood of their adopted children. A clear understanding of the likely challenges and support needs should be set out in the initial Adoption support plan and this should shape the adoption support offered to the newly formed family. There is little information available about the processes involved in constructing the Adoption Support Plan at the stage of placement and for the adoption order application. A small scale research study is being undertaken by a professional doctorate student at Cardiff University which will improve our understanding of these plans. Adoption UK's view, is that adoption support is not considered carefully enough at the time of matching/ placement. We believe that staff training is needed for the professionals involved in creating these plans to ensure an accurate assessment of a child's abilities and likely developmental needs. We believe that as part of the adoption support plan, all newly approved adopters should be offered 3 years of membership of Adoption UK (as they are in Northern Ireland) to ensure that they are immediately connected into a network of support as they start their adoption journey.

Adoption Support for Families

The support needed by adoptive families can best be described using the classification called the rainbow model and used in the Families First programme in Wales.

Level 1 - Prevention

This support needs to include membership of Adoption UK, and a more comprehensive and ongoing training programme for adoptive parents to help them get ready for the placement and to increase their skills as therapeutic parents from the moment that a child is placed with them. We believe that most parents respond best to training delivered by a professional trainer who also has personal experience of adoption and Adoption UK has a well respected training programme including our parenting programme 'It's a Piece of Cake?' - a six session programme for adoptive parents, which has been independently evaluated by the Hadley Centre in Bristol and found to result in lasting improvements in the confidence of adopters and their understanding of the needs of their children.

Adoptive parents also need to be given opportunities to meet with other adoptive families in support groups or at family fun days. Currently each local adoption agency in Wales is attempting to meet this need and either failing, or perhaps just as bad, using significant amounts of social worker hours running groups which could better be provided using a peer support model such as the one that Adoption UK uses.

We believe that a national network of support groups could be established which would ensure that all adoptive families have access to a group, in a location and at a time which suits their particular circumstances. Using trained and supported volunteers to run groups makes this an achievable and cost effective solution to ensure families do not feel isolated.

Level 2 - protection – supporting families who without intervention may reach crisis.

Research suggests that about two thirds of adoptive families will at some point in the childhood of their adopted children experience difficulties associated with adoption. This may be connected to explaining difficult early life stories, negotiating birth family contact arrangements or dealing with challenging behaviour. These families will need one to one support from services who fully understand the challenges of adoptive family life. Adoption UK offers a full range of family support services which includes a buddy service, a parent consultant service and a parent mentoring service. We believe that in general, adoptive families are more likely to be frank and open with others who are also adopters, and to accept suggestions for change better from people who have been in their situation. Families need to be aware that these services exist and know how to access them readily. They also need to be given the message that it is not a failure to need support.

Level 3 – remedy – this level of support will be needed for a small number of families who are at or near crisis point and who will need a team of professionals around the family where professionals understand the nature of adoptive families.

There is an urgent need to record adoption disruption statistics and to collate disruption review findings from across Wales. This data will provide significant information regarding barriers and gaps in the adoption support services. Figures collected from longitudinal studies of children placed for adoption suggest that the breakdown / disruption rate may be as high as one third across England and Wales. Families facing significant challenges need to be able to access support from education and health professionals quickly, however many services are not currently “adoption aware” or “adoption friendly”. Ongoing professional development for professionals in health and education about the impact of early trauma and neglect on long term development of children is important to help them respond appropriately when adoptive families contact them. Adoption UK currently runs an inset programme for schools and CAMHS teams alerting them to some of the issues that adopted children may face in accessing education. Such training needs to be much more wide spread and funded nationally. Adoption UK believes that a significant improvement could easily and quickly be made to the existing system by giving adopted children the same access to education and CAMHS provision as children in the Looked After System currently receive. This view is supported by the Children’s Commissioner for Wales.

Therapeutic Services for Adopted Children.

Whilst some CAMHS teams are able to offer some limited family therapy to adoptive families, many regularly tell us that they are very limited to a ‘medical model’ of mental health which relies on a medical diagnosis followed by treatment based largely on prescription drugs. Although this is of use to some families, many will also need ongoing therapeutic work to help them build the strong and healthy bonds between children and parents that are needed to heal the damage done by early trauma and neglect.

Wales currently has a number of independent therapists who provide play therapy and other forms of therapeutic intervention for adopted children and their families. At present access to therapeutic services is something of a ‘post code lottery’ in Wales. Adoption UK believes that therapy which recognises and supports the fundamental role that adoptive parents play in helping their children heal from early abuse and neglect is far more effective than therapy which is focused only on the child. Attachment based therapy such as that based on work by Dr Dan Hughes and used by Family Futures in England should be encouraged in Wales. The

current development of an All Wales Attachment Network which is being supported by Adoption UK, WLGA, Relate Cymru, Children in Wales, Hillside Secure Unit and a number of other organisations is likely to lead to many more therapists being trained in attachment based therapy and should be encouraged by the Welsh Government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Adoption UK feels that the biggest impact on outcomes for adopted children can be achieved by focusing on support offered to adoptive families. This needs to be based on a clear understanding of the potential impact of early trauma and neglect and to recognise the crucial role that adoptive parents play in helping their children heal from that early history. Adoptive parents must be treated as full partners in this process and consulted and involved in the way the adoption process is designed and support services are delivered. Adoption UK feels that this inquiry is to be welcomed and we are very keen to offer our support and expertise.