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Regionalisation: improving the adoption experience in Wales

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Abstract:

We provide an overview of the National Adoption Service for Wales (NAS) which was launched in November 2014. Further to a 2016 briefing by John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research & Development at CoramBAAF, on the regionalisation of adoption services in England, we outline the background and legislative changes that have been made in Wales and report on progress so far. We summarise the current position of NAS, drawing on a wide range of consultation and engagement events with adopted children, adopters and practitioners working in the sector. We conclude by identifying future priorities, challenges and areas for further development.

Introduction

Provision for a national adoption service in Wales was made in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. The following statement highlighting some of the early successes of the Act, and, in particular, progress made by the National Adoption Service for Wales (NAS) was made at a plenary session at the National Assembly for Wales on 4 April 2017 by Rebecca Evans, Minister for Social Services and Public Health (Wales):

It would be impossible to describe all of the strides being taken in the sector under every part of the wide-ranging Act in this statement today, but to give the Chamber a flavour of the real benefits we are seeing as a result of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, I would like to highlight the successes of the National Adoption Service for Wales established under the legislation. Since its inception, we have seen the waiting time for looked after children to be placed for adoption nearly halved to 13.5 months from 26 months.

Background

In 2011, the Welsh Government published *Sustainable Social Services: A framework for action*. This clearly identified that the Welsh Government intended to deliver social services on a regional or, where more appropriate, on a national basis, rather than via the existing 22 unitary local authorities (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011: 12):

We believe that some services are more effectively delivered nationally. We recognise that we have limited experience of this and we would, therefore, want to pioneer this approach with particular services ... We intend to explore with stakeholders the remit and functions of a national adoption agency.

In 2012, the National Assembly for Wales, Children and Young People Committee reported on its inquiry into adoption. Its purpose was to examine the experiences and voices of those directly affected by the adoption process. To this end the Committee held a detailed public consultation process to gather evidence.

The report highlighted the need to focus on a wide range of areas including the first point of contact for inquiries, assessment of prospective adopters being delivered regionally, the critical importance of adopter training and preparation, improvements in matching, the quality of life story work, provision and entitlement to adoption support services, access to specialist therapeutic services, priority within school admissions and professional work- force development in respect of child development and attachment theory.

Following the publication of the Committee's *Inquiry into Adoption* report (National Assembly for Wales, 2012), Gwenda Thomas, then Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, identified clear priorities to develop and improve adoption services in Wales. This included a vision of a national adoption service with statutory and voluntary sectors working inclusively and collectively, providing a wide choice of placements and comprehensive adoption support services, and achieving consistent practice delivery across the country. After much debate and discussion, the Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru (ADSS Cymru), in conjunction with Welsh voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), developed and agreed proposals for NAS (2013). These included:

- . a new direction for the delivery of adoption services that is particularly suited to the Welsh context;
- . an increase in the pace of collaboration and the capacity to build sustainable services for the future;
- . a reduction in bureaucracy and a streamlining of service delivery;
- . collective opportunities for local authorities to respond effectively to rising pressures within the care system;
- . eradicating drift for children in care;
- . eliminating waiting lists for the training and assessment of adoptive applicants;
- . maintenance of the essential integrity and coherence between the needs of children requiring adoptive placements and the adopters being recruited.

The Children and Young People Committee report, the Deputy Minister's priorities and vision, together with the work of ADSS Cymru and the VAAs, created an opportunity for sector partners to design and deliver dynamic change to adoption services in Wales (Doughty, 2015).

These linked initiatives consistently identified a common theme of delivering service outcomes and improvement. Partners enthusiastically embraced the need for change and reflected on what children, young people and adopters had expressed in a number of consultation opportunities, messages from academic research in Wales (Bell and Kempenaar, 2009; Kempenaar, 2015; Ottaway, Holland and Maxwell, 2014) and meetings with professional staff and managers.

What we look like now

In November 2014 NAS was launched by First Minister Carwyn Jones, who noted:

The launch of the National Adoption Service for Wales marks a step change in the way adoption services are delivered. Today, we are delivering real change for children and prospective adoptive parents in Wales.

NAS was thus set in motion with the following four guiding principles:

- (1) to be led and delivered by local government through a Director of Operations, working closely with voluntary sector partners;
- (2) to be delivered by way of a new collaborative model, bringing together all Welsh local authorities and a broad range of key organisations and expertise;
- (3) all 22 local authority adoption agencies to be integrated into five regional collaborative areas;
- (4) to give more children the opportunity to become part of a loving and supportive family, by increasing the pool of adopters and ensuring good quality post-adoption support is available.

NAS became operational in January 2015 and has delivered significant change within a very short timeframe, as evidenced in the enormous tasks faced by the 22 local authority adoption teams who have reconfigured their services into five regional collaborative areas: North Wales; South East Wales; Mid and West Wales; Western Bay; and Vale Valleys and Cardiff. The current model is outlined in Figure 1.

Performance monitoring

Since NAS became operational, performance monitoring and management have been a high priority. It was crucial to understand the adoption business in Wales and provide a context for what was being completed well and where further focus was required. The agencies and services that make up NAS are using the research information, engagement feedback and performance data to work towards change and improvement. This has focused attention on recruitment priorities, e.g. adopters for sibling groups and children with more complex needs, the development of a Framework for Adoption Support and improving life story work for children.

Context and external factors that have affected the adoption service

It is important to recognise the context and some of the external factors that have affected the work of NAS. There are now fewer children in the adoption service system due to a 38% reduction in placement orders made by Welsh courts between 2013 and 2016. This mirrors a

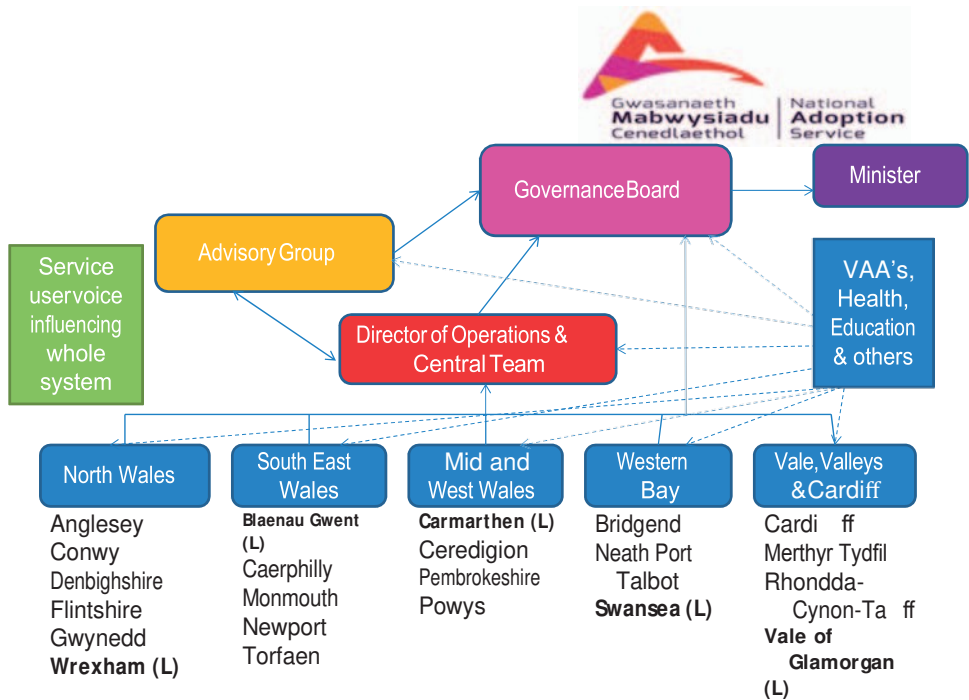


Figure 1. Regional collaborative model.

similar fall in England (Department for Education, 2015) and reflects the change in the interpretation and attitude that adoption should be a last resort (see high court judgments).¹ Consequently, the increase in adoption orders made in Wales over the last six years, which had been steadily increasing from 230 in 2009–2010 to 385 in 2014–2015, reversed in 2015–2016, decreasing by 12% to 340. However, recent evidence from NAS data shows the number of placement orders beginning to rise again in 2016–2017.

The reduction in placement orders does not mean there has been less work or demand for and pressure on adoption services. The requirements for twin tracking has meant children are referred early and agency functions commence prior to the ‘should be placed’ decision, including advising on the likelihood of a placement being identified. We now move on to the impact of the changes made.

Progress to date

1. Eradicating drift and placement of children

Children’s timescales. Overall, there has been improvement in waiting times since NAS was created, although initial progress is proving challenging to maintain or extend. There are again external factors that impact both positively and negatively; the focus of the revised Public Law Outline² has supported services to reduce timeframes, yet delay in placing a child for adoption can be due to a range of reasons, including the complexity of their needs and

increasing levels of legal challenges by birth parents. The average waiting time for a looked after child to be placed for adoption has reduced significantly from the pre-NAS position to 15.6 months in 2016–2017:

- . Average waiting time from placement order to placement for adoption has reduced by 8.4 months to 8.2 months between 2014–2015 and 2016–2017.
- . Fewer children are having their adoption plan changed to an alternative permanence option, falling from 78 in 2014–2015 to 21 in 2016–2017.
- . Fewer children are waiting more than six months for a match, falling from 247 children in 2013–2014 to 183 in 2016–2017.

2. Matching

Improved matching between the profile of adopters with the needs of children is more difficult to measure, and an aspect on which it is difficult to make an immediate impact. Most matching is undertaken at a regional level, within the five collaborative areas. Since NAS became operational it became responsible for the management of the new Wales Adoption Register, which has accounted for 10 to 15% of matches over the past two-and-half years. Taking over the Register was sudden and unexpected owing to the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) going into administration in 2015. There is a requirement for the Register to be used for matching if no match is found at regional level within three months of the placement order being made. This has meant that NAS has an improved and better understanding of those children who are waiting for families; these are mainly sibling groups, older children and children with complex or very specific matching needs. Register data has been used by NAS to develop a targeted recruitment campaign entitled #Seethewholechild (www.adoptcymru.com/adoption-see-the-whole-child) which was launched in the summer of 2016. The campaign includes a suite of flexible marketing materials based on real stories, which gives prospective adopters a clearer sense of the children waiting and an agreed approach to initial enquiries in all agencies, to ensure a consistent response and that the same information is made available to prospective adopters. The more targeted recruitment campaign is beginning to have an impact on the numbers of new adopters being approved, which, in 2015–2016, went down from 266 families to 236.³ However, there still remains a mismatch between the types of children adopters on the Register will consider and the need profiles of children waiting, which is something that is difficult to balance, but which the strategy aims to address over time.

3. Adopter satisfaction

Satisfaction with the approval process has significantly changed from the overwhelming negativity expressed by the Children and Young People Committee Inquiry (National Assembly for Wales, 2012). This has been achieved through improved focus on the importance of timeframes and bringing people (including adopters) together to review processes. Consultation with more than 600 adoptive families has taken place since NAS was formed and their feedback highlights improved satisfaction with this part of the adoption journey. This has included very positive comments from adopters about individual teams and social work practitioners across local government and the voluntary sector during both

assessment and matching. The leading adoption support charity, Adoption UK, reports a noticeable reduction in the number of complaints it receives about process and practice from adopters in Wales. Adopter recruitment continued without disruption through the creation of NAS. The response time to enquiries in 2016–2017 is good, with 99% being within five days. The timeframe target of eight months from enquiry to approval was achieved during 2015–2016, although it has lengthened again during 2016–2017 to 11 months. Analysis shows that adopter choice and preference have a significant impact on this timeframe, rather than the process, and that on average it takes five months for an adopter to formally apply to adopt following initial enquiry. Placement breakdowns have remained low at 3% and are similar to the proportions identified in recent research by Selwyn and Meakings (2015).

4. Adoption support

In June 2014 research commissioned by the Welsh Government and undertaken by Cardiff University (Ottaway, Holland and Maxwell, 2014) analysed data from all 22 Welsh local authorities and from 91 adoptive families. The report revealed wide variations in the types of support available across Wales, with a broad range of assessment processes and some adoptive families feeling a sense of shame or stigma when seeking support.

Adoption support is an ongoing priority and presents the greatest challenge, particularly in times of public sector austerity. The context in Wales is different from that of England where the Adoption Support Fund provides opportunities to develop dynamic support for adopters, children and young people. Funding for adoption support is something that NAS continues to discuss with ministers and Welsh Government; a business case is being prepared for their consideration. NAS has developed the Adoption Support Framework, whereby universal, targeted and specialist services will be more consistently available and further developed. It responds to and includes what adopters, children and young people say they want and need, e.g. simplified access to assessments, improved life journey work, adoption aware education and health services. Further work on the business case is being undertaken by NAS by scoping need and costing the model to respond to these demands.

In parallel with the Adoption Support Framework strategy, NAS is influencing and improving existing support models operating across Wales. For example:

- . The NAS national website (together with some regional websites) has been developed, providing advice and publicising the support and training that is being provided across Wales.
- . NAS negotiated and introduced an initiative with Adoption UK (AUK) that offers AUK membership to all new adopters currently being funded via Welsh Government third sector grant aid for three years from 2015–2016.
- . An increased range of support groups for children, young people, adopters, birth parents and other adults affected by adoption is available in each region.
- . All regions have focused on improving adoption support, for instance, investing in staff training and testing out different intervention methods.
- . Welsh Government grant aid to NAS has been used to provide specialist training and advice to practitioners and managers, and provide courses for adopters about non-violent resistance techniques for managing complex and difficult behaviour.

5. Education

The establishment of NAS has increased opportunities to consider the educational needs of adopted children. This has built on work already being undertaken and led by the Adoption UK team in Wales. Their early research report, *Support Needs of Adoptive Families in Wales* (Bell and Kempenaar, 2009), highlighted the difficulty that many adopted children were experiencing in school. A number of the recommendations of that report have been achieved.

In 2014 changes in Welsh Government policy around school admission policies provided previously looked after children with the same priority access to school places as those currently in the looked after system, mirroring changes made in England the previous year. In 2015–2016 the way in which the portion of the Welsh Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) earmarked for looked after children was to be spent was changed, allowing for far more schools training around attachment and the impact of early trauma and neglect on learning, and expenditure on adopted children. A booklet, *Getting it Right for Every Child: A schools guide to working with adopted children (Wales)*, was published by Adoption UK in 2016 and a second one aimed at helping adoptive parents to be more effective partners with education is planned for 2017. The Looked After Children Education (LACE) co-ordinators in local authorities have been authorised by the Welsh Government to use PDG LAC funding for previously looked after children, although their official role remains only for those currently looked after.

The Director for Adoption UK in Wales is a member of the National Strategic Group for raising LAC attainment as a representative of the National Adoption Service. Regular three-way meetings are now held between the DfES, NAS and Adoption UK and NAS has developed an action plan linked to the Welsh Government strategy. Opportunities to consider the needs of adopted children have been taken during scrutiny of new education legislation such as the Additional Learning Needs (Wales) Bill 2017.

As a national collaboration combining both statutory and voluntary sectors, and with strong links at both strategic and operational levels in all local authorities, the new structure offers a far greater chance of prioritising the educational needs of adopted children.

6. Birth parents

The numbers of birth parents being referred to regional adoption agencies have increased significantly and counselling being offered to those referred is now achieving 99%. Take-up within a year of it being offered continues to be low at 23% (N4229) for 2016–2017. However, a number of birth parents are coming back to services at a later stage, for example, 154 birth parents who had been offered a service in previous years took up a service in 2016–2017.

7. Reducing bureaucracy and streamlining services

The strategic commitment from local government, ADSS Cymru and VAAs through the National Adoption Service Advisory Group and Governance Board has provided a high level of commitment to work in partnership. The strategic lead from the Operations Director and central team regarding the annual priorities for NAS and the transparency of the performance management framework have enabled for the first time a clear national overview on what is being done well and what needs to improve.

NAS has required a cultural shift by the 22 local authorities who were independently providing adoption services, to operate as five regional collaborative organisations. This has created new methods of supplying adoption services although the opportunity to pool budgets and manage resources on a wider footprint is yet to be realised. One region, Western Bay, has a pooled budget for staffing and the interagency fee, which has enabled them to demonstrate savings through a reduction in the use of external placements, but this, or similar approaches, have yet to be replicated in other regions. In parallel, the VAAs continue to explore strategies to reduce duplication and costs. With the current and anticipated continuation of cuts in public expenditure, regions are consistently identifying how to further reduce costs alongside the challenge of continuing to improve the adoption service.

NAS has created the opportunity to develop and deliver consistent policies, strategies, systems and processes that avoid duplication and exploit existing resources. A national approach to target recruitment has included a consistent response and use of social media to promote and inform all organisations and individuals involved and interested in adoption. This has also provided clarity for existing and prospective adopters. The service's performance framework provides clarity about the adoption business and how the service is performing. This has enhanced engagement strategies with stakeholders, service users, the public and professionals to co-produce changes to service strategy and delivery. Effective management has been critical and achieved through elected members from the five regions driving the NAS governance board agenda. Effective and regular interface opportunities with the Welsh Government have been equally critical in taking the adoption agenda forward.

8. Life story work

The comments of both adopters and young people suggested the need for improvement in life story materials for children and their families. This was also evidenced by poor performance, indicating that in 2015–2016 life story materials were in place for just 49% of children placed by the time of their second adoption review, thus making improvements an additional priority for NAS. The Association for Fostering and Adoption in Wales (AFA Cymru) was commissioned to undertake a literature review of the different approaches to life journey work. The resulting proposal centres on this work being undertaken through a clear team approach that involves the prospective adopters and outlines the roles and responsibilities of each organisation and individual engaged in placing a child for adoption. The aim is for children and adopters to have a coherent narrative that adopters can build from as the child grows. We have been able to involve young people in improving life story work and in meeting and engaging with NAS. A Welsh Government development grant enabled NAS to commission Adoption UK to assist with the project management and provide support as well as engaging the regions, VAAs and TalkAdoption.⁴ A framework for life story work and a toolkit for adopters, practitioners and children have been developed. Regional teams are working with children to test the new framework and develop good practice examples.

9. Working with adopters, children and young people

Service user engagement has been a priority as have the opportunities to design and co-produce services. The service user voice is now integral to service development. Engagement with and listening to adopters, adopted children and young people have reinforced key messages from research undertaken by Cardiff University (Kempenaar 2015; Ottaway,

Holland and Maxwell. 2014; Selwyn and Meakings 2015). The strategy to improve services is wholly rooted in what stakeholders tell us they want and need.

Views from adoptive families: priorities for the future

More than 600 adoptive families have been engaged through surveys and events and they have been clear about progress made, the challenges they still face and what they want NAS to continue to prioritise, namely:

- . *Recruitment and assessment.* In consultation events, a workshop and two surveys undertaken between 2014 and 2017, adopters expressed satisfaction with this part of the adoption journey. This included positive comments about individual teams and practitioners across local government and the voluntary sector, during assessment and matching.
- . *Matching and placing process.* Newly approved adopters expressed concern about the reduction in the numbers of children available for adoption. Families highlighted their concerns in relation to delays in the legal process, advice and support around this and the priority given to birth parents.
- . *Post-adoption support.* Lack of support was consistently mentioned, with a particular emphasis on insufficient therapeutic support, including from Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). When it came to managing very difficult behaviour, particularly in adolescence, adopters described 'feeling on their own'. They gave examples of schools not being able or willing to manage adoption support needs; a consistent concern was the use of traditional methods for dealing with behaviour by teachers leading to exclusion and/or frequent calls to parents to collect their children. Families told of their frustration that, unlike England, Wales does not have an adoption support fund.

Views from children and young people: priorities for the future

Similarly, by working with TalkAdoption in Wales adopted children and young people have helped us to prioritise their concerns as areas for ongoing work, for example, the consistent frustration that schools do not understand adoption, including peers and teachers, their experience of CAMHS as not accessible or adoption aware, and how life story work is currently being undertaken.

Summary

While it is clear that positive progress has been achieved through the development of NAS and its engagement with adopters, children and young people, there are still many challenges ahead. Collaboration has been a key factor in the positive changes achieved, albeit bringing its own challenges and complexities, some of which are still being worked through. A combination of legislative requirements, local government concerns to retain responsibility for adoption and VAAs wanting to collectively improve adoption services has been a force for change.

The role of the Director of Operations for NAS has been both critical and influential. As a result of working with all stakeholders, clear strategy, priorities, systems and processes have begun to be put in place. While achieving consistently high performance delivery remains difficult, the foundation of NAS provides a strong and successful platform for the future.

Dynamic adoption support that is based on universal, targeted and specialist intervention remains a priority. Continued cuts to public expenditure will require continual innovation to alleviate the potential negative impact on service delivery. Commissioning with VAAs has been difficult because of acute uncertainty within local government about future budget cuts. The ability of NAS to carry on driving improvement and change will continue to be challenged by its collaborative nature, its sphere of influence and inability to direct resources. Nevertheless, the transformative achievements during the two-and-a-half years of the service's operation reflect the commitment and vision held by all stakeholders in Wales.

The drive and momentum achieved to date need to continue through further co-production, dialogue and interface with the judiciary, the voluntary sector and local government, including tackling investment to address the variation in the provision (or not) of adoption support. Quality academic research (e.g. Anthony, Meakings and Doughty, 2016; Doughty, Meakings and Shelton, 2017; Meakings, Coffey and Shelton, 2016) will also influence strategy, policy and practice.

For further information please visit the National Adoption Service for Wales website: www.adoptcymru.com.

Notes

1. *Re B (Care Proceedings: Appeal)* [2013] UKSC 33 / *Re B-S (Adoption: Application of Threshold Criteria)* [2013] EWCA Civ 1146; *Re A (A child)* [2015] EWFC 11.
2. The Public Law Outline is a revision of the 2003 Judicial Protocol, which was itself an attempt to reduce unwarranted delays in family court cases. For the right reasons, reducing delay remains a top political priority as every day matters for some children in the care system.
3. Revised figure.
4. TalkAdoption is a national support service for adopted children and young people.

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