

## Submission of Evidence to Scrutiny – National and Regional Adoption Services

**Author** Head of Children and Young People Services, Newport City Council

**Date** 4 December 2019

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**Purpose** To ensure Members are fully sighted on the on the work of the South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) and the links to the National Adoption Service (NAS).

**Summary** This report is provided in line with the Regulations as set out in the Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2005. It provides information about the Regional and National arrangements for adoption. The appendices provide further detail for Members again both regionally and nationally.

**Proposal** **To inform Scrutiny Members of the work of the SEWAS and provide the information required for oversight.**

### 1. Background

The National Adoption Service (NAS) was launched in November 2014 with a remit of expectations to:

- Eradicate drift for children in care
- Eliminate waiting lists for training and assessment of adopters
- Improve the matching process for children
- Allay adoption breakdowns by improving adoption support
- Streamline the process to ensure better linking for children
- Provide a wide choice of placements
- Ensuring consistent delivery of adoption services across Wales.

The National Adoption Service is made up of the National team and five regions. The South East Wales Adoption Service is the region for NCC.

### 2. National Adoption Service and Regional arrangements

There is a small central team headed by the Director of Operations. The National team provides National direction, development and coordination to all the regions.

The Regions include:

- South East Wales Adoption Team (**SEWAS**) (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Torfaen, Newport, Monmouthshire)
- Western Bay (**WB**) (Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot, Swansea)
- Vale, Valley's Cardiff (**VVC**) (Cardiff, Vale, Merthyr Tydfil, RCT, Vale of Glamorgan)
- North Wales (**NW**) (Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd)
- Mid and West Wales (**MWW**) (Carmarthen, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Powys)

Every region is responsible for:

## Submission of Evidence to Scrutiny – National and Regional Adoption Services

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- Matching and placing children for adoption
- Recruitment and assessment of adopters
- Offering counselling to birth parents
- Offering advice to adopted adults
- Providing post adoption support
- Creating links with voluntary adoption agencies, health and education.

The National Annual Performance report (**Appendix 1**) and the Regional Annual Performance Report (**Appendix 2**) have been attached at the end of this report. Both reports focus on key areas, which include:

- Children placed and waiting for adoption
- Demand for adoptive placements and adopter recruitment
- Life journey materials
- Adoption Support.

### 3. Monitoring Arrangements

The performance of the National Adoption Service is monitored by a National Governance Board.

SEWAS has a regional Management Committee with Head of Service representation from each LA, health, education and third sector members.

### 4. National Adoption Service Annual Report 18/19

The full report can be found under **Appendix 1**. Below are the key elements of the report

The National Adoption Service (NAS) has been working for five years to support better outcomes for children for whom adoption is the best plan. The National Adoption Service has 2 priorities, which are

- I. Placing Children Effectively
- II. Continuing to improve adoption support by implementing the NAS Adoption Support Framework

Some of the achievements from the last five years have been:

- Successfully raised the profile of adoption with the public, funders and policy makers.
- Accessed additional funding; a £90k development grant from the Welsh Government each year, £125k targeted investment in 2017/18 and a £2.3m investment for adoption support to commence in 2019/20.
- Improved performance in the key areas of approving adopters and placing children more quickly, alongside embedding a performance culture supported through regular evaluation and reporting.
- Increased the availability of life journey materials through a new best practice approach.

## Submission of Evidence to Scrutiny – National and Regional Adoption Services

**Author** Head of Children and Young People Services, Newport City Council

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- Developed how we listen to adopters and their children and ensured their messages and input make a difference to the service.
  - Created five regional adoption collaboratives as the focus for local government adoption expertise and access point for services.
  - Developed and maintained a strong partnership with the Welsh Voluntary Adoption Agencies. This added value, different expertise, additional services and more choice, resulting in exciting new services such as Adopting Together Service, TESSA and a new Children and Young People's service.
  - Commissioned and developed the all Wales website, which now provides a comprehensive source of information for parents and agencies.
  - Brought the Wales Adoption Register into the service, giving greater breadth and depth of choice for prospective parents and children.
  - Produced strategic plans, which not only outline what improvements are needed but help influence and improve legislation and policy, as well as achieve investment in times of constraint.

However, a number of challenges remain which are:

- Maintaining performance improvements and making them more consistent within services and across Wales.
- Improving service agility and access to resources to respond to emerging issues and changing service demands.
- Using our data and information to better effect.
- Making a complex governance and operational structure for collaboration, work effectively within local government and with partners.

The key message from the National report is the need to ensure that there are sufficient adopters available to meet the number and needs of children who have a plan for adoption. It is critical to achieve a strong pool of adopters for the children waiting. Along with adopters, the need for support for children and their parents post adoption is vital in order to ensure stable and secure lifelong families.

### 5. South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) End-year Performance Report 2018/19

The full report can be found under **Appendix 2**. The highlights are captured here.

- 70 children were placed in their new adoptive home, a similar number to 2017/18. Numerically this compares to 80, 85 and 71 over the last three years.
- The number of children waiting for an adoptive family was 70. This compares to 41, 47 and 76 over the last three years
- The children placed for adoption in SEWAS were on average placed within 16.8 months from becoming looked after, moving away from the benchmark of 13 months or less. We are aware the figures have been influenced by the courts ordering reviews of old placement orders which subsequently needed to be discharged, for example; change of plans for long term fostering, this coupled with some delay placing children with complex needs resulted in the average timescales increasing.
- At an average of 10.3 months, the time from placement order to placement, is an increase from last year and also higher than the benchmark of 6 months or less. This figure will have also been affected by the discharge of placement orders and the delay in placing

**Submission of Evidence to Scrutiny – National and Regional Adoption Services****Author** Head of Children and Young People Services, Newport City Council**Date** 4 December 2019

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children with complex needs. On a positive note within SEWAS 64% of children were placed within the benchmark of 6 months.

- 34% of the placements made were for children in sibling groups.
- 77% of placements made with local authority approved adopters.
- In SEWAS 59% of children placed this year had their life journey materials by the 2nd review, maintaining similar performance to last year. This is disappointing given the target is 100%. The service is using Welsh Government investment money to improve performance going forward.

**Key messages in relation to Adopters in the SEWAS Region**

- Enquiries to SEWAS from adopters decreased by 6%.
- Fewer assessments of adopters were commenced 45 compared to 67 last year.
- The number of adopters being approved in SEWAS increased to 47 in 2018/19
- On a positive note, SEWAS are the best performing region in Wales in respect of the timescales for adoption approvals. The performance measure from initial enquiry to approval is 8 months – SEWAS have been completing these assessments in 7.5 months. In respect of formal application to approval the benchmark is 6 months – SEWAS are within the benchmark at 5.2 months

**Key Messages for Adoption Support**

- SEWAS saw a similar level of post adoption support being sought and completed a similar number of assessments in the year. 58 new requests for post adoption support were received during 2018/19. The majority of these assessments completed resulted in practical or therapeutic support being provided
- Birth parents - the numbers of Birth Parents referred to adoption services nationally reduced by 13% during 2018/19. In SEWAS the number stayed at a similar level 222. All of these birth parents were offered a service by SEWAS. In many regions data availability, particularly on take up has been affected by system changes within the local authorities for a number of regions or the loss of 3rd sector provider. SEWAS has been unaffected by this. Take up within a year tends to be low nationally but SEWAS performance was similar to previous years at 14% (n32). A service was also offered to another 43 parents who requested it.

The number of adopters available to the children waiting ratio continues to be a concern but despite the pressures, the staff team have done well to maintain performance and remain committed to improving the service.

## Submission of Evidence to Scrutiny – National and Regional Adoption Services

**Author** Head of Children and Young People Services, Newport City Council

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### 6. Key data for Newport City Council 2018/19

Placement Orders	51	A Placement Order is granted by the court when adoption is the plan for a child.
Placed for adoption during year	22	The number of children placed in the year
Placements with Independent providers	9	These are placements outside of SEWAS when it has not been possible to source carers in SEWAS. Each placement in 2018/19 cost £27,000
Placements with SEWAS	13	
Adoption Orders	28	Adoption Order is the final hearing. Of these Orders 25 were unopposed while in 3 consent was dispensed with. Some of these children would have been placed in 2017/18

### 7. Financial Summary

SEWAS is a collaborative arrangement funded by the 5 local authorities. The Management Committee (required under regulation) is responsible for ensuring arrangements are in place to deliver the regional service and this includes financial arrangements. Budget pressures are managed effectively resulting in no overspend at the end of the financial year 18/19.

In 2018/19 the NCC contribution to SEWAS was £385,629

### 8. Risks

Risk	Impact of Risk if it occurs* (H/M/L)	Probability of risk occurring (H/M/L)	What is the Council doing or what has it done to avoid the risk or reduce its effect	Who is responsible for dealing with the risk?
Shortage of adopters	H	M	To improve performance in this area SEWAS will continue to invest in recruitment. We know that a large majority of adopters come to SEWAS because of 'word of mouth' with this mind we are building on our core offer of support to adopters to ensure they have a positive experience of the service. This core offer includes:-  Direct work pre and post approval which prepares children and adopters for placement	Head of Children's Services, Strategic Director of People

**Submission of Evidence to Scrutiny – National and Regional Adoption Services**

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			Additional post approval adoption training before placement using therapeutic models Work with panel Assessment being completed in a timely manner; Advertising our core offer including our psychology service input which is a 'big sell'.	
Lack of support for children and adopters	H	M	Welsh Government recently allocated additional to improve adoption support. As a result new posts have been developed in 19/20 which should help increase the recruitment of adopters.	

**9. Links to Council Policies and Priorities**

The work of SEWAS is part of the wider work of Children's Services, which has been developed to support the delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan and is focused on:

Resilient Communities;  
Aspirational People.

SEWAS also supports the Safe Reduction of Looked After Children Strategy 2017 -2020.

The Corporate Plan sets out the meeting of the Well Being Objectives. "Supporting children to remain safely with their families" is within Well Being Objective 3 – To enable people to be healthy, independent and resilient.

**10. Cabinet Member**

The Cabinet Member has approved the report for consideration by Scrutiny

**11. Equalities Impact Assessment and the Equalities Act 2010**

There is no decision linked to this report hence there is no requirement for a FEIA.

**12. Children and Families (Wales) Measure**

SEWAS consults with all adopters following their attendance at: training; adoption panel for approval, and; when they are matched with children.

**Submission of Evidence to Scrutiny – National and Regional Adoption Services****Author** Head of Children and Young People Services, Newport City Council**Date** 4 December 2019

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The Adoption Support Team in SEWAS facilitates a number of support groups including; birth parent support, adopter support, therapeutic parenting support, and grandparent/ family and friend of adopters.

A quarterly newsletter is distributed to all adopters, which advises them on where they can access support and training.

**13. Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**

Throughout this report the core principles of the WFG are referenced and interwoven. This is clearly a long term proposal which seeks to embed preventative working as a way to ensure good outcomes for citizens. Integration with other elements of the Council and public bodies is key to the success of the adoption service. Working in collaboration with families and partner agencies is vital and drives this plan. Throughout Children's Services we are looking for new ways to fully involve and engage children, young people, parents and carers this plan is key to that work.

**Thinking for the Long Term (Forward Planning)**

SEWAS uses the performance information to plan for the longer term and changing the way in which services are delivered.

**Preventative Focus**

The focus is on avoiding drift for children in care by providing adoption placements that meet the needs of children who are referred to the service. The performance measures highlight that children are now being placed for adoption in a timelier manner which supports local authority looked after children reduction plans. A good standard of adoption support is also essential to avoid adoption breakdown and prevent children coming back into care.

**Collaboration / Partnership Working**

The regions continue to work collaboratively by sharing information and good practice. There are a number of work streams in process to improve collaboration with partner agencies including improving CAMHS services to adopted children and working with education so they have a better understanding of the issues for adopted children.

**Integration (Across Service Areas)**

SEWAS continues to form relationships with other department in the councils in the region to improve outcomes for children who are placed for adoption. An example of this is working with communication teams to promote adoption within the region to attract adopters. We also provide training for local authority social workers on a quarterly basis.

**14. Background Papers**

Appendix 1 - National Adoption Service Annual Report 2018-19

Appendix 2 - SEWAS Regional 2018-19 End Year Performance Report

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