Gwasanaeth **Mabwysiadu** Cenedlaethol | National **Adoption** Service

**Achieving More Together /
Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd**

ANNUAL REPORT 2018-19

FOREWORD

Since being established in 2014 The National Adoption Service has focused on clear priorities to deliver an improved adoption service in Wales. This Annual Report (2018/19) reflects on achievements whilst identifying future priorities to deliver ongoing improvement of the service to children and adopters.

Actively listening to adopters and children has influenced how the National Adoption Service has evolved and developed to deliver change and good services. There is evidence that the benefits of improvement are being felt by many adopters and their children although we acknowledge there is more to do.

Continued improvement remains a priority for the service delivered through the Central Team, Regional Local Government Adoption Services and Voluntary Sector Agencies. This collaborative approach has brought a shared vision, priorities, strategies and delivery of services that is making a positive difference.

We are very pleased to take this opportunity to thank adopters, staff in all agencies within the National Adoption Service Collaborative for their hard work and dedication.

We are also delighted that the Welsh Government has made available a £2.3m investment package from 2019/20 which will enable us to move forward on agreed improvement priorities for the immediate future.

Much progress has been made since the Service's inception, but the needs of children in Wales continue to demand a faster and smarter response to the scale and complexity of the challenge. NAS is ambitious for the role we can play in responding to that challenge.
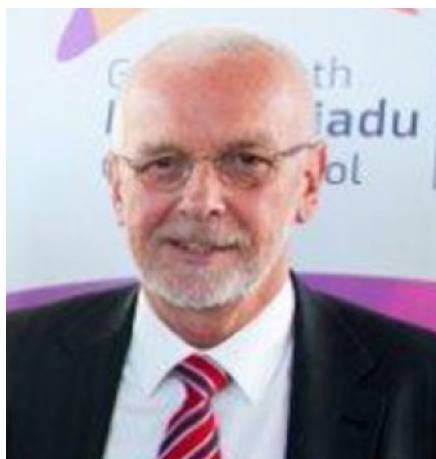
Phil Hodgson
Independent Chair of the Advisory Group

Cllr Geraint Hopkins
Chair of Governance Board

Suzanne Griffiths
Director

INTRODUCTION

The National Adoption Service for Wales is a collaboration for the provision of adoption services across Wales.

Since November 2014, it has brought together all local authority adoption services into five regional collaboratives, with co-ordination and leadership provided by a small central team and Director. Voluntary adoption agencies operating in Wales are key partners in the collaborative, as are other agencies such as health and education.

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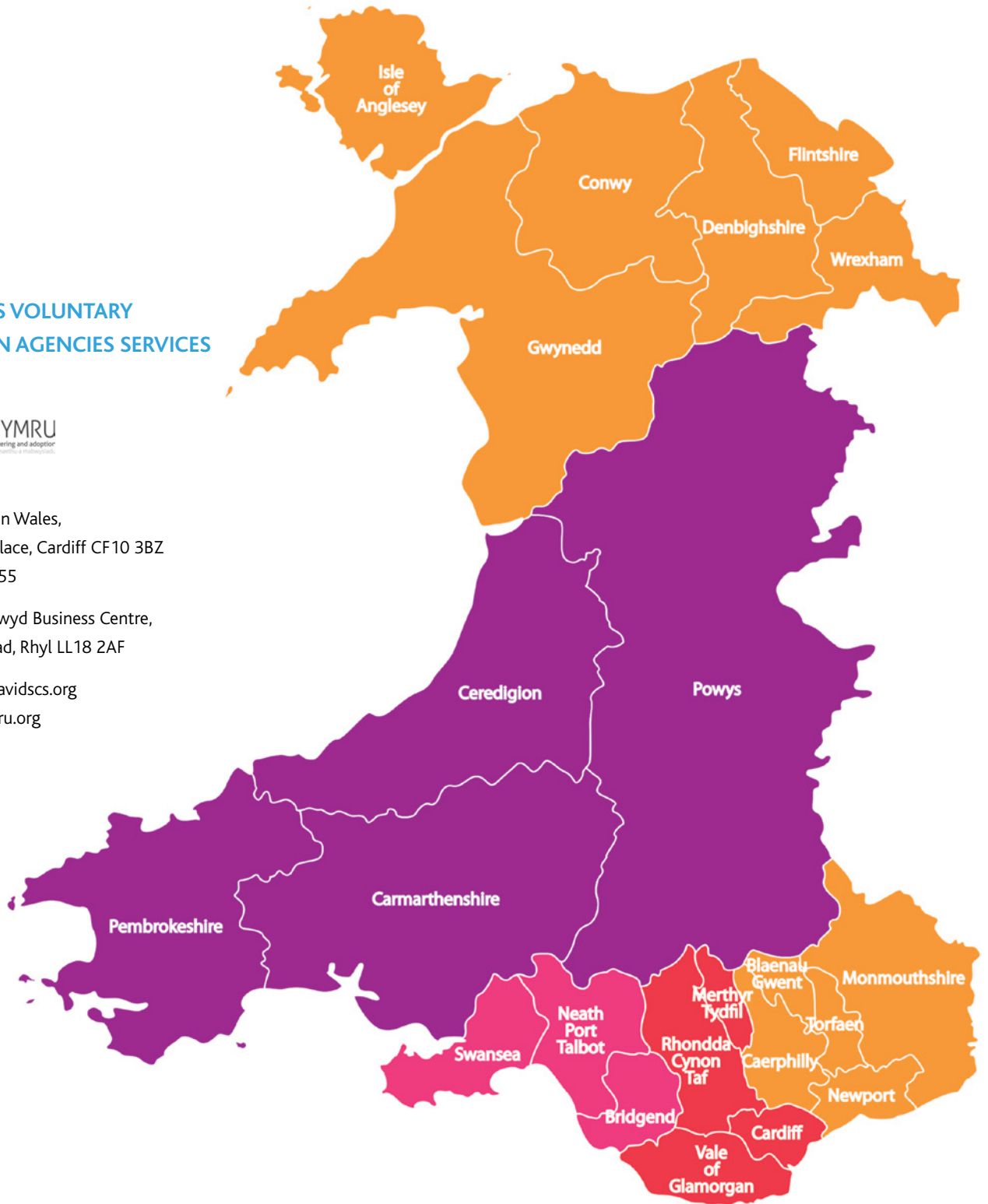
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Merthyr Tydfil
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FIVE YEARS ON

Celebrating our achievements and embracing the challenges

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

It was established in 2014 in response to a National Assembly Enquiry through a subsequent Ministerial Advisory Group. Its role is to work in a unique collaborative way, improving and coordinating the delivery of adoption services across Wales and in particular:

• Raising the profile of adoption;
• Improving timescales for children and adopters;
• Improving adoption support including changing the 'postcode lottery' for services; and
• Providing leadership to promote more consistent services and standards.

The role adoption plays in society continues to change; legislation continues to change to reflect this. What has not changed is that children who cannot remain with their birth family need permanent substitute families, to belong, to be nurtured and be loved. Adoption services provide these children with families as well as services and support to adoptive parents, birth parents and others affected by adoption.

This year marks the fifth year of the National Adoption Service and the thirtieth anniversary of the UK's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The National Adoption Service seeks to secure positive changes for children where adoption is in their best interests so that they might realise their rights under the convention.

SOME OF OUR ACHIEVEMENTS FROM THE LAST FIVE YEARS

- 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.

- 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.

THE CHALLENGES WE ARE NOW ADDRESSING 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.

THESE SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES INFORM OUR CURRENT VISION WHICH IS TO:

> Increase the number and range of adoptive homes available so that all children with an adoption plan are placed in a timely way.

> Ensure prospective and approved adopters receive good quality, timely assessment and support.

> Implement the National Adoption Service Framework for Adoption Support to provide improved access to advice, information and services for those that need and want support.

> Achieve overall improvements in the performance of adoption services across Wales.

> Create a modern, responsive and forward-thinking adoption service for Wales.

Alongside these undoubted strides forward and improvements to services new challenges have become evident; not least of all in ensuring that there are sufficient adopters available to meet the number and needs of children for whom we are family finding.

THE SERVICE IN 2018/19

During the business year:

- more than 310 children were placed in their new adoptive home;

- approximately 280 children had their adoption orders granted[1];

- a further 338 children, with the legal authority to be placed, were waiting to be matched or placed with their new family at the end of the year;

- 212 new adoptive families were approved.

The service worked with circa 14% of the children who were looked after in Wales last year.

Welsh Government data indicates that for 2017/18 (latest available) 18% of all the children who ceased to be Looked After were adopted.

The adoption agencies that make up the National Adoption Service for Wales provide a range of services to support these children and their families, as well as for others affected by adoption.

In addition to working with the children above, adoption services across Wales also:

- provided adoption support to more than 100 of the children placed in the year

- facilitated more than 3,281 active letterbox contact arrangements

- provided a service to 268 birth parents

- received 38 requests for support from birth siblings' other relatives

- received 226 requests for access to birth records and

- received 124 requests for intermediary/tracing support.

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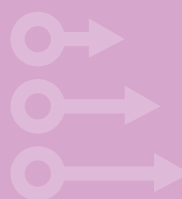
[1] Awaiting confirmation in Welsh Government data in October 2019

OUR 2018/19 PRIORITIES

PRIORITY 1

Placing children effectively

- Keeping recruitment focused on the needs of children likely to be adopted

- Implementing the new Wales Adoption Register and adopter database

WHY WAS THIS IMPORTANT?

- We wanted to increase the range of adoptive homes available to meet the needs of all children with an adoptive plan.

- Research tells us outcomes in adoption are affected by the length of time children spend in care and their age at the time of placement. Being able to make a timely match for a child depends on having a sufficiency of adopters who are prepared to care for children who have varied and sometimes complex needs.

- Making the best possible match between children and adopters increases the likelihood of a successful outcome and improves timeliness.

- We aim to use the best information about service performance, research and best practice to develop more effective processes, and timeframes to underpin best practice.

HOW DID WE DO?

At 311, slightly more children were placed with their new families this year and approximately 280 children were already in placement and had their Adoption Orders granted.

However, recruiting sufficient adopters in Wales has become an ongoing challenge.

At the time of NAS's creation, we faced a different range of challenges, namely reducing waiting time to approve adopters and ensuring we were recruiting adopters who could be matched with children who had complex needs and were waiting longer.

Our strategies are now informed by our data, giving us a much better understanding of the need for placements, which is greater than the number of adopters we are approving. However, having an impact on recruitment takes time; recruitment in 2018/19 remained at a similar level to last year. Adopter recruitment in Wales has been falling and is now back to pre NAS levels; it is difficult to identify precisely why adopter approvals have fallen – this trend is, however, also evident in England and Scotland.

Adopters Approved
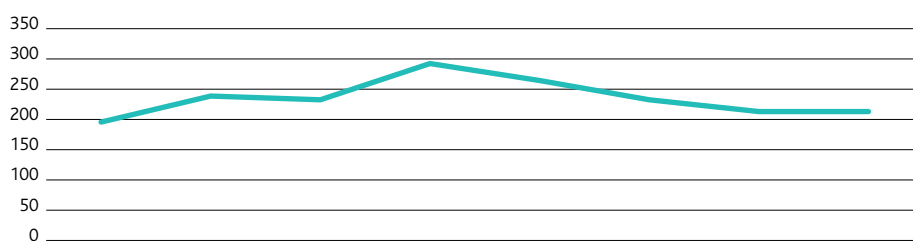
| 2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
197	245	236	294	266	236	212	212

The story behind the data

ADOPTER ENQUIRIES AND ASSESSMENTS

There has been an overall increase in enquiries from prospective adopters since NAS was formed.

However, the picture beneath this is more complex. At a regional level there is an overall upward trend in two of the bigger regions and maintenance in another, while the two voluntary adoption agencies have higher levels of enquiries.

In both the regional and voluntary adoption agencies, conversion of enquiries into assessments varies, with the regional services tending to see more applications resulting from enquiries received.

Percentage conversion from initial enquiry to assessment starting

	MW	NW	SE	VVC	WB	B	StD	Total
	50%	18%	36%	28%	58%	4%	9%	21%
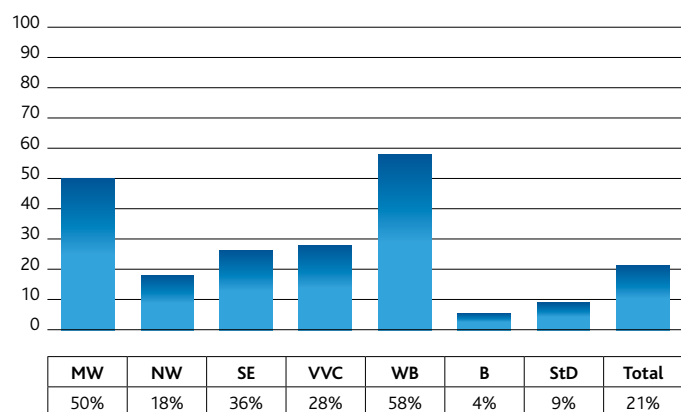
Q4 2018-19, based on average of 3 months from Initial Enquiry to Assessment Starting

We can build on the early indications of success, in increasing the number of potential adopters coming forward at enquiry stage. Adopters have reported that:

- there is good information available through the national website and directly from the regional services;
- response times to enquiries are timely and many first contacts are considered helpful and supportive.

In order to understand this better, NAS commissioned customer feedback research to consider the reasons behind so many enquirers not proceeding beyond this stage. The overall findings are informing our work. Whilst identifying that the majority of enquirers cited personal reasons for not proceeding, key recommendations from the report also include:

- A need for a more consistent message across agencies
- More flexibility around timeframes, where potential adopters want to delay their applications
- A more welcoming approach and clearer follow up processes for those who do want to defer applications.

This work has led to a number of changes which will be implemented in 2019/20:

- We are producing a good practice guide to support staff in dealing with enquiries and the early stage of the assessment process. This will move away from agencies trying to 'test' people at the very start of their enquiry and respond to adoption managers views that the messages that are given regarding issues such as smoking, income and medical criteria are up to date, accurate and consistent.

- We have commissioned Cowshed PR to support NAS at both national and regional levels. This will lead to better integrated marketing and recruitment activity.

- We are providing more focused efforts to increase enquiries and approvals within a revised NAS Recruitment Strategy. Using recognised marketing techniques, we aim to keep people engaged and ensure barriers families face, to progress their interest into further action, are removed.

- To meet planned changes to regulations, we are implementing a two-stage process for the assessment and approval of prospective adopters whilst reducing the timescales for making use of the Adoption Register for Wales. NAS has been working since 2015 to influence a change in the Adoption Agency (Wales) Regulations 2003 to simplify and streamline the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. This has borne fruit with revised regulations due to be implemented in 2019/20.

The above will enable us to further improve the timeframes for adopter approvals. The average timeframe from enquiry to approval improved to just 9.1 months this year, with administrative delays around essential checks behind many that took longer. The time between the formal application by adopters and their approval is good, an average of 6.2 months, which is within the government guideline. 56% of applicants were approved with the 6-month benchmark.

Average timeframe (months) from formal application to adopters approval

	2017-18	2018-19
Months	6.2	6.1
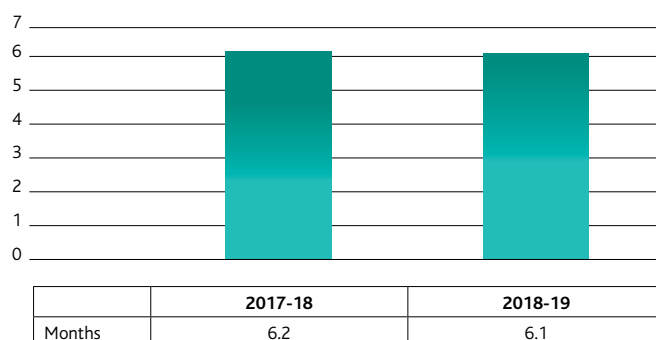
Benchmark: 6 months or less

DEMAND FOR PLACEMENTS

The numbers of placement orders being granted by Welsh courts is now showing year on year fluctuations after a peak of 467 in 2012/13; regions report that circa 340 placement orders were made in 2018/19. This is alongside a further increase in the number of children being identified by local authorities as, likely to be in need of an adoptive placement, which indicates that similar, or more placement orders are likely as we go through the coming year.

We are using these trends to project forward so that regions and agencies have a clear understanding of likely demand, allowing them to plan activity in advance in order to meet more ambitious recruitment goals.

IMPACT ON PLACEMENT ACTIVITY

The number of children waiting for a placement reduced slightly at the end of this year.

NAS had previously been successful in reducing average timeframes for children being placed, but this has changed this year.

Although almost half of the children were placed within the benchmark of 6 months or less, during 2018/19, the projected annual average time has increased in 2018/19 to 9.9 months.

There are a number of factors that have impacted on this indicator:

- Some adoptive homes have been more challenging to find due to a small number of children with very complex needs;

- Late decisions or delayed applications where it is agreed that foster carers can adopt the children they are caring for;

- Prolonged court proceedings including appeals by birth parents.

The more positive aspect of this is that regions have been increasingly successful in placing children with more complex needs, however as identified this leads to placement preparations taking longer.

Measure 7: Number of children with 'should be placed decision' and placement order who have not yet been placed
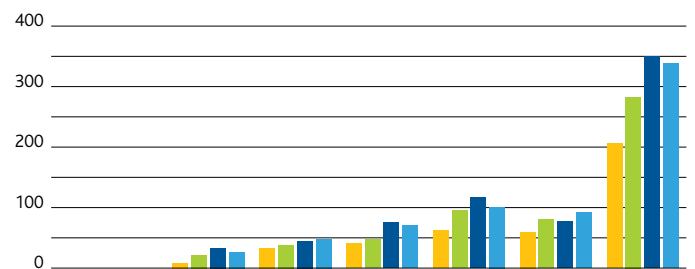
	MWW	NW	SE	VVC	WB	Total
2015/16	9	34	41	62	60	206
2016/17	22	39	47	95	80	283
2017/18	34	46	76	117	77	350
2018/19	27	48	70	101	92	338

Average timeframe (months) between placement order and placed for adoption
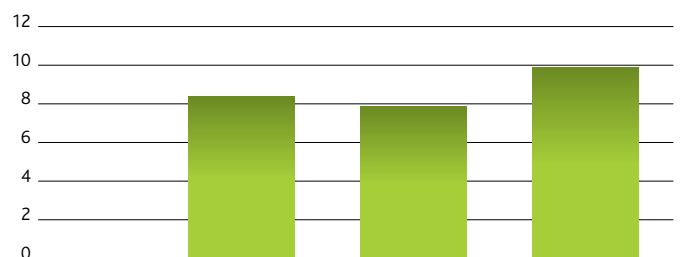
	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Months	8.4	7.9	9.9

Benchmark: 6 months or less

What else is helping us recruit adopters and place children?

ADOPTING TOGETHER SERVICE

The voluntary adoption agencies in Wales play a key role in delivering adoption services across the country, and recent innovative projects like the 'Adopting Together Service' demonstrates their commitment and capacity to work creatively and support the sector as a whole.

Adopting Together Service was launched this year in 2018/19 – a collaborative project between St David's and Barnardo's with Adoption UK in Wales and supported by the statutory sector through the National Adoption Service. It emerged, following a request from statutory services, for a creative response to a shared desire and need, to secure permanence for children who wait longest for a family.

Contracts have now been agreed in four out of the five regional services.

Although the number of children placed is unlikely to be high, it is of utmost importance that children with additional needs have the opportunity to experience living in stable and loving homes. Twelve children have been placed to date in the first year of operation, with a target of placing 25 children in 2019/20.

The scheme provides a new best practice for placing children and providing early support and is being evaluated by Cardiff University School of Psychology. An indication of its innovation and value is that it received The Institute of Collaboration ICW Innovation Award and a Highly Commended 1 Award in the GO Wales Social and Community benefit category.

WALES ADOPTION REGISTER / ADOPTION REGISTER FOR WALES

We have worked hard in the past year to ensure that the new bilingual Wales Adopter Register, now called the Adoption Register for Wales (ARW) is ready to be launched. In order to do this the Central Team has:

- Commissioned a new partner, 'Link Maker', to provide a modern bi-lingual and on-line linking service;

- Linked with adoption services and agencies to support implementation of the new Adoption Register for Wales, raising awareness for staff use and ensuring transfer of information about children and adopters;

- Supported the development of a set of national guidelines, which outline expectations for use of the Register;

- Briefed partners, and stakeholders including Heads of Children's Services and Family Justice Network for Wales through the publication of regular bulletins.

The new Adoption Register for Wales came into operation in March 2019 and was formally launched in June 2019. The aim of the ARW is to improve how we match children to prospective adopters. It will be more user friendly and efficient and provides managed access for approved adopters. It will also allow the development of a 'keeping in touch' system for adopters as part of the improved adoption support arrangements.

Significantly, all children and adopters will be listed on the Register more quickly. It will facilitate matching, managed at a regional, Welsh and UK level when needed.

During its last year of operation the previous Wales Adoption Register:

- Matched 36 children through the register data base, Adoption Exchange Days and an Adoption Activity Day;

- Saw an increase in child referrals to the register during the year although the end of year figure as of March 2019 was 293, 57 less than the previous year;

- Saw changes in the profile of children waiting; over 60% being below the age of 3, fewer sibling groups and the percentage of those with additional or complex needs continued to rise;

- Saw the number of adopters referred to the register continuing to drop, with just 32 active for family finding at the end of the year. This reflects proactive family finding with many adopters being pre-linked by the time they are approved.

Continuing to improve adoption support by implementing the NAS Adoption Support Framework

- Agreeing the next priorities and identifying funding

- Continuing things that are already helping e.g. improving Life Journey Work, improving 'adoption awareness' in schools and health services, changing the law for adoption support, improving training and development for adopters, consistent approaches across Wales.

WHY?

The Wales Adoption Cohort Study by Cardiff University shows that 47% of children who are placed for adoption had experienced at least 4 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) before they were placed. This puts them in the highest risk group for later life difficulties, in line with just 14% of the general population. It is therefore critical that good support is available from the start as well as being accessible throughout childhood.

Adopted children have additional needs that emerge at different points in their lives and can continue into adulthood. These can include; understanding their identity as an adopted child, why they were adopted, managing contact and feelings of loss or grief. Many of these are issues are unique to adoptive families and require adoption informed support. Children, young people and adopters consistently report high levels of dissatisfaction with the process of getting help and sometimes with the quality of the help itself.

Research also tells us that adoption and the long-term legacy for children who have suffered significant harm are generally poorly understood. There is a particular need to improve awareness in schools, where adopted children are being excluded at a younger age and in greater numbers than their peers. Children who have been in care often have additional learning needs and a more complex mixture of difficulties.

It is a NAS priority to deliver high quality adoption services in Wales.
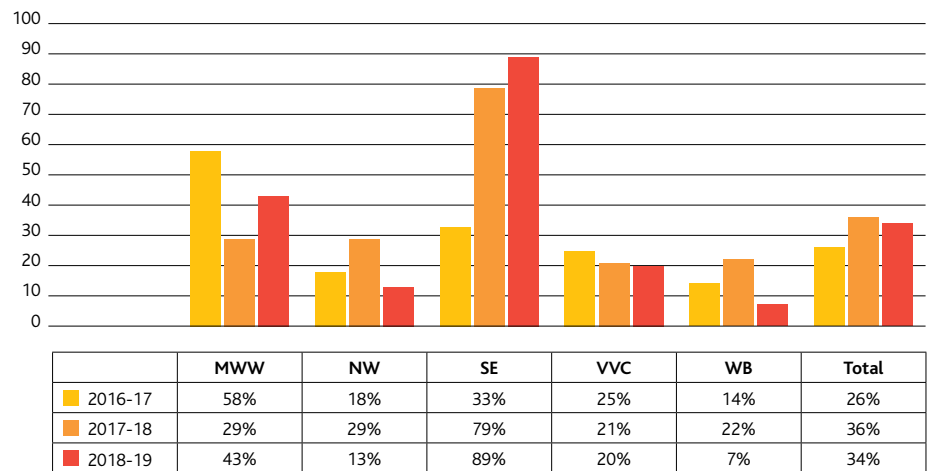
ADOPTION SUPPORT CARRIED OUT IN 2018/19

- More than 3,281 active letterbox contact arrangements were in place (a reduction from 2017/18)

- 819 birth parents were referred to adoption services in 2018/19 (a reduction from 2017/18) of these 98% were offered a service

- A service was provided to 268[2] birth parents

- 38 requests for support were received from birth sibling and other relatives (a reduction from 2017/18)

- 226 requests for access to birth records were received, an increase on the 205 for 2017/18

- 124 requests for intermediary / tracing support were received, a reduction on the 156 for 2017/18.

There was a slight reduction in the number of children who had an ongoing service established at point of placement, down from 112 (36%) in 2017/18 to 107 (34%). This masks significant regional variations as well as year on year changes within regions, linked to the fact that support packages are individualised.

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[2] A number of regions were unable to provide data as required from their LA's. An additional region was unable to provide data due to the contractor going into administration.

Percentage of children placed for adoption whose plan for adoption support involved ongoing service provision at the point of placement

	MWW	NW	SE	VVC	WB	Total
2016-17	58%	18%	33%	25%	14%	26%
2017-18	29%	29%	79%	21%	22%	36%
2018-19	43%	13%	89%	20%	7%	34%

There were fewer new requests for post adoption support received, with decreases in 2 regions. There were 160 assessments for post adoption support completed, similar to previous figures. The majority of these completed assessments resulted in practical or therapeutic support being provided to families.
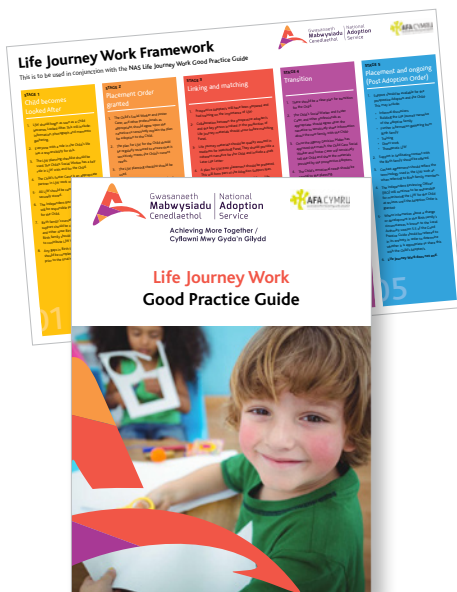
LIFE JOURNEY WORK

We have continued to implement and develop the new NAS Framework for 'Life Journey' work.

All children who cannot be cared for by their birth families, need to have an understanding of their family history and their unique journey. Life Journey Work is designed to help a child make sense of their past and understand their current situation in order to help them move into the future. Life journey work should support a child's identity, promote self-esteem, and help give the child a sense of belonging, wellbeing and support good mental health. The NAS website hosts guidance and existing tool kits around life journey work and we are currently working on making toolkits for children and young people, foster carers and birth parents available.

In November 2018 NAS was invited to present the 'Framework' developments within Wales to the Adoption UK national conference.

In January 2019 a conference was held in Wales to formally launch the Framework. Opened by the new Deputy Minister for health and Social Services, Julie Morgan, this highly successful event was oversubscribed with more than 110 delegates from across Wales attending, taking back the learning into their agencies.

Due to varying performance levels across Wales (from 83% to 46%) overall improvement has marginally declined. This will continue to be a priority area for NAS with all regions committing to making further improvements.

Percentage of children at second adoption review with Life Journey materials in place
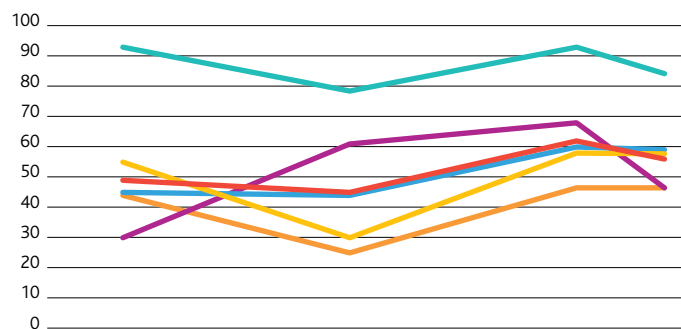
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Mid & West Wales	92%	79%	92%	83%
North Wales	44%	25%	46%	46%
South East Wales	45%	43%	60%	59%
Vale, Valleys & Cardiff	30%	61%	68%	46%
Western Bay	55%	30%	58%	57%
WALES	49%	45%	62%	56%

Consultation with adopters was commissioned through our 'Adopter Voice' service with Adoption UK Cymru. We wanted to identify whether adopters were beginning to see improvements in the life journey materials being provided.

There was evidence of some improved satisfaction amongst adopters who had adopted more recently (within the last 3 years) suggesting that, whilst there is still some work to be done in terms of delivering the Life Journey framework, improvements are being made. Significantly, adopters suggested that:

- More training workshops are needed pre matching to prepare adopters.

- The most confident parents were the ones who had met with birth parents.

- Overall adopters preferred having accurate information and then making the life journey book themselves.

These comments will feed into the ongoing improvement project.

How did we do on our improvement priorities?

We have focussed this year on continuing to implement the NAS Adoption Support Framework which is key to successful outcomes. We were delighted when the Welsh Government announced that they were making available a £2.3m investment package from 2019/20; this will enable us to move forward with our focus on the agreed improvement priorities for the immediate future.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR ADOPTERS

We have finalised the post-approval training package for adopters. This now includes twelve different modules, providing advanced information on areas that adopters asked for, such as; 'Attachment and Trauma', 'Parenting teenagers', 'Understanding and dealing with challenging behaviours' and 'Life Journey work'.

• This work was led by AFA Cymru and Adoption UK Cymru. The modules have been tested thoroughly including within regional services and will be launched during 2019/20.

We have improved our preparation training, with Adoption UK Cymru and AFA Cymru also leading on this working, utilising existing trainers to refresh and extend the preparation offer.

• This will also be launched during 2019/20 and will include a guide for prospective adopters outlining what to expect along with an individualised planner.

IMPROVING ADOPTION AWARENESS IN EDUCATION

NAS supports and works alongside the lead organisation Adoption UK in this area of work, with support provided by the Education Minister, as well as resources from the Welsh Government's 'Supporting Vulnerable Learners' section.

Adoption UK has continued to deliver its 'Adoption Support Wales – Getting it Right for Every Child' programme which extended its previous success; producing a school's guide and a parent's guide for working with adopted children

• Delivering a series of master classes supported by staff from the regional services to education professionals and adopters. This ensured they understood adoption, what it means for children and families and how they can shape and improve services to meet adopted children's needs.

• Delivering INSET training to 479 education staff in schools across Wales on the needs of adopted children

• Delivering education 'master classes' with 500 people participating and giving extremely positive feedback. The learning from this work has been made digitally available for use by school staff when supporting other adopted children.

NAS supported the launch of Adoption UK's 'Equal Chance' campaign, in Wales during June 2018. This UK wide campaign aims to ensure that adopted children have the same chances to education as other children by raising awareness of their particular needs for additional support.

The work was further supported when the Welsh Education Minister wrote to all schools encouraging them to co-operate in supporting adopted children within education services.

TESSA

Helpu teuluoedd sy'n mabwysiadu i dyfu gyda'i gilydd
Helping adoptive families grow together

IMPROVING ADOPTION AWARENESS IN HEALTH SERVICES

NAS benefits from input by the Designated Doctor for the NHS National Safeguarding Team and a lead Medical Advisor from North Wales into its Advisory Group; they work with us on health-related matters as does the Welsh Government CAMHS lead.

- We worked with these key health advisors and industry experts Practice Solutions to develop a publication for health service staff; 'Care about Adoption – A Guide for Healthcare Professionals'. This will come into use during 2019/20.

The guide will enable health staff to positively contribute to the well-being of adopted children young people and their families.

NEW INITIATIVE IN ADOPTION SUPPORT
TESSA

NAS worked alongside Adoption UK, to develop the Wales element, of a successful UK wide bid for funding from the National Lottery Community fund for the TESSA service.

TESSA – a therapeutic education support service for adoptive families began to be established in Wales in February 2019. It is the intention that NAS adds to the resources available for TESSA through match funding from the investment in 2019/20. The service sets out to deliver:

> A focus on early intervention and support as soon as post-settling in concerns are raised

> Professional psychological assessments for children, with information shared with parents and other support staff

> 6-session therapeutic parenting support, delivered by teams consisting of a clinical psychologist and experienced adoptive parents (parent partners)

> Ongoing parent partner support.

CHANGING TO KEEP PACE WITH THE 21ST CENTURY LIVING – CONTACT

NAS is continually seeking to improve adoption services informed by research and the life experiences of those affected by adoption, within a society that is continuously changing. This means that adoption policy and practice needs to develop, whilst keeping children's need for security and a sense of belonging firmly at its heart. Contact is one of the areas where this is most challenging.

In order for adopted children to be confident about their identity, they need information about their past. This requires us to change the 'clean break' approach to adoption of letterbox contact and annual exchanges of letters. We want to modernise contact to maintain children's rights to permanence and security, while enabling them to know and understand their history.

- We have been working with partners to respond to a recommendation from the Children's Commissioner for Wales, that NAS works with the Welsh Government *'to ensure that siblings' rights to contact are fully considered during adoption care planning'*.

- NAS attended and provided an issues paper for a scoping event with Welsh Government and other stakeholders.

- In order to get a better understanding of what would work better in sibling contact, we commissioned Adoption UK Cymru and the former After Adoption, to undertake consultation with adopters and adopted children and young people.

  – From an adopters' perspective this identified that contact arrangements, agreed at placement, often become unworkable and that there would be widespread benefit from increasing support to adopters and birth families. Practical areas for development were suggested including production of guidance, standardised templates and in-depth research to better understand what is best for children in terms of contact.

  – From a young person's perspective it was concluded that contact is positive and should be allowed and encouraged where possible, with young people stating that they felt the care they receive and connections they make, pre adoption, are an integral part of their early attachment and should be continued where they can[3].

- We've continued to work with other partners and are collaborating with:

  – Voices from Care Cymru, to be part of an 'Event' to create change in how we support ongoing sibling relationships.

  – Swansea Law Centre, to produce an advice leaflet for adopted and looked after children.

WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

We continued to request that Welsh Government brings entitlement to adoption support, into line with the Social Service and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014; Welsh Government has committed to doing this when the opportunity arises.

We continued to engage with adopters and children and young people to hear and understand their experiences through Adoption Voices and the former Talk Adoption services. We also focused on co-producing development where we could.

- Adopter Voice reports have been provided to all five regions and the third sector providers, for consideration by their management boards or equivalent.

- NAS worked with Adoption UK to develop the Wales section of their new Adoption Barometer which will be an annual survey gauging views from adopters. The first wave of this was distributed at the year, with an initial report expected in the Spring.

Most significantly, NAS has been involved this year in ensuring that a direct service for children and young people could continue, following the former After Adoption announcment that they would be withdrawing from providing services in Wales after March 2019.

We successfully worked with Adoption UK Cymru to support it to become the provider for this service, so that it could continue to support the circa 100 children and young people registered. We look forward to continuing to work with Adoption UK Cymru to expand and develop this valuable service.

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[3] The report was based on structured discussions with a very small number of children supplemented by informal information gathered through group sessions.

Regional & Voluntary Adoption Agencies Priorities and Achievements

AFA CYMRU

- Life Journey Work (LJW) – the annual conference was attended by over 100 people

- The LJW pack has been expanded to include materials for birth parents, young people and foster carers.

- Taking a collaborative approach to the development of post approval training courses – working alongside adopters and social workers to develop materials

BARNARDO'S

- The push within Barnardo's and NAS from an Equalities Diversity and Inclusion perspective has seen an increase in applications from people with more diverse backgrounds and cultures.

- Work to achieve an improvement in the timescales from Enquiry to Approval and ultimately placement of children

ADOPTION UK CYMRU

Many of our services are provided by volunteers who are also adoptive parents – between them they provided 984 hours of support to other adoptive parents.

- Established a buddy scheme for new adopters within the Adopting Together scheme.

- Worked with AFA Cymru to develop twelve training modules for use by adopters' post-adoption order, as well as new guidance and information for prospective adopters to be used during the preparation training.

- Delivered training to nearly 500 adoptive parents and delivered INSET training to 479 education staff in schools across Wales and responded to 1,376 contacts 25% higher than last year.

- As part of a UK wide project, Adoption UK Cymru were successful in an application to the Big Lottery Community Fund. This will provide therapeutic and educational input to adoptive families early in their adoption journey, in order to prevent difficulties building up over the coming years.

MID & WEST WALES

- Improved preparation arrangements in order to reduce delay for adopter assessments.

- Used social media to successfully increase attendance at Information Events.

- Produced an innovative short film with birth parent and adopters, which highlighted positive contact arrangements.

NORTH WALES

- Appointment of a Contact Coordinator Officer, offering a consistent response and support to adopters and birth parents, with in-direct and direct contact.

- Worked with expert Richard Rose, to implement the Life Story Framework.

- Expanded the Buddy scheme for adopters.

- Invested in upskilling Training Officer – completed Dyadic developmental psychotherapy level 2 and is currently undertaking a diploma in therapeutic parenting.

SOUTH EAST WALES

- Significant investment in workforce development including accessing innovative 'Circle of Security' training.

- Improved the information pack for adopters.

- Enhanced adopter's preparation training with greater focus on Therapeutic Models of parenting

ST DAVID'S CHILDREN SOCIETY

- External launch of Adopting Together Service and first placement made.

- Invested in upskilling social workers in Theraplay and DDP.

- Received two awards for Adopting Together – Winner of The Institute of Collaboration ICW Innovation Award and Highly Commended 1 in the GO Social and Community Benefit in Procurement Award.

VALE, VALLEYS & CARDIFF

- Appointment of a Marketing Officer offering a timely, consistent response to adopter enquiries and building knowledge of adopter demographic within the region.

- The development of the Life Journey Work 'champion' role resulting in positive progress in this area.

- Highest number of children placed for adoption since region was established.

WESTERN BAY

- Strengthened the work of our adoption panel on matching, by introducing a checklist to ensure that all the relevant information such as life journey materials, transition plans etc. are in place.

- Improved co-production; adopters have been involved in a quarterly form for adoption support and a successful inaugural profiling event to help approved adopters consider a wider range of children needing adoptive placements.

- Providing additional early support, where children with additional needs are placed with WBAS adopters.

PRIORITY 3

Forward thinking

- Thinking about the sort of adoption service we want for the future

- Continuing co-production and engagement with those who use adoption services

- Working to improve the legal, policy & evidence framework that affects adoption

- Encouraging the development of improved professional understanding and skills

WHY?

The National Adoption Service was created to improve services for all those affected by adoption in Wales. However, the needs and challenges faced by children presenting for adoption are changing rapidly and there is an on-going need to respond more consistently and effectively particularly in the areas of recruitment of adopters and ongoing support.

We also want to modernise the service to make adoption experience better for children, young people, and their adopters as well as others affected by adoption.

HOW DID WE DO?

We believe that adoption continues to provide good outcomes for children. The role of NAS is to ensure Welsh adoption services keep pace with the changing global environment of engagement and the way people live their lives.

We can and will contribute to the continued discussion about the role adoption plays in permanency planning across the country. Alongside this we will seek to continue to improve services through effective planning, informed by research and evidence from people who use our services.

The sections above gives an outline of the many things we have done to both deliver and improve services. We have also continued to engage in strategic and infrastructure work;

- We have considered the outcomes of the NAS Review of Arrangements which has been carried out for us, independently, by the Institute of Public Care. We have acted to implement the recommendations which will contribute to the streamline national level governance over the next year alongside looking at how we further improve accountability.

- Successfully secured marketing and recruitment support to increase adopter recruitment.

- Improved the integration of NAS policy work across local government and third sector organisations by working jointly with AFA Cymru so we can better influence more consistent and innovative practice.

- Provided advice to the Welsh Government for their proposed changes to adoption regulations as well as in relation to relevant education and safeguarding matters.

- Undertook work with the Adoption Leadership Board in England and Welsh services to ensure that Wales would stay in line with increases to the interagency adoption fee. These are paid when an adoptive placement is secured and purchased from another adoption agency. This led to the Welsh VAA's agreeing a short delay to allow Welsh local authorities time to plan in the adjustment.

- Put in place alternative arrangements for the NAS Performance Monitoring System when the current contract runs out in June 2019. Expert advice has been commissioned, working with Data Unit Wales to develop a service specification, which will deliver a flexible, easy to use system to improve accuracy and support. This will provide us with flexibility to join up with the Wales Community Care Information System in the future.

- Supported practice development

  – Inter-country adoption training was commissioned and delivered

  – Post commencement training was commissioned and delivered

  – Continued to share research and good practice across the regional collaboratives and to use the evaluation emerging from initiatives such as the 'Adopting Together' service.

  – Shared learning from significant cases, specifically, this year, the child practice review by the Regional Safeguarding Children Board in Wales, into the death of an adopted child. The central team worked with the adoption region and will be holding an all Wales practice seminar to share the learning.

- Worked to advocate and develop a business case which has resulted in Welsh Government investing £2.3 million ongoing funding to improve adoption services.

PLANS FOR 2019/20 ONWARDS

This plan will build on the improvements made over the first five years of NAS; with the significant benefit of the availability of new investment funding.

This is in the form of £2.3m from Welsh Government for service improvement; around £250,000 via Adoption UK Cymru for TESSA from the Big Lottery and Communities Fund, in addition to grant aid of around £300,000 to the Voluntary Adoption Agencies from Welsh Government Third Sector grant scheme currently agreed up to 2020.

The National Adoption Service will continue to work to deliver services to high numbers of children, young people and families and others affected by adoption; mainly though NAS regional services and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies. The core business of the service will continue to be, recruiting adopters so that children who cannot be cared for by their own families can live in stable, loving homes as the best alternative.

The work of NAS is closely linked with the Welsh Government Ministerial Advisory Group for Children (MAG). Adoption features across the numerous work streams of this important national initiative.

Improvement priorities for 2019/20

01 **02** **03**
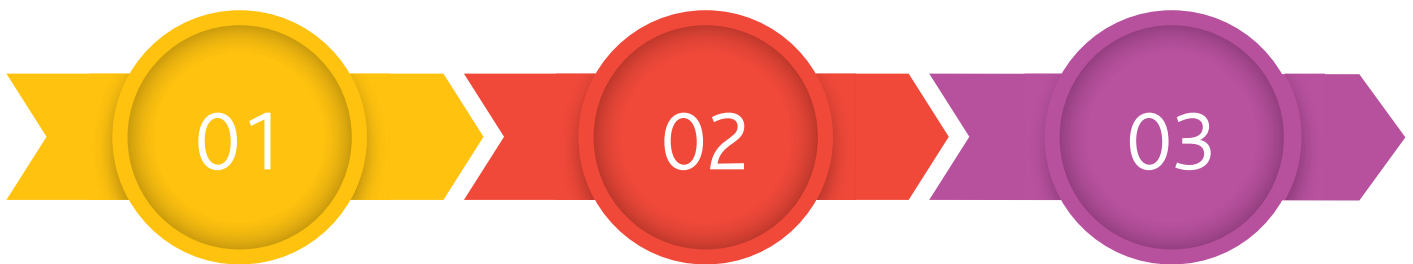
Placing more children

Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting including use of 'Adopting Together' for children who wait longest

Embed the new Adoption Register for Wales to speed up matching of children through quicker notification of children and adopters in line with revised regulations

Continuing to improve adoption support

Implementing the Adoption Support Framework and investment plans

Continuing to raise awareness amongst professionals and the public

Thinking ahead

Continuing to co-produce and use information from engagement

Using data from the revised performance measurement system

Working to improve the legal, policy and evidence framework that affects adoption

Encouraging the development of workforce understanding and skills to meet NAS priorities

The National Adoption Service was created to improve services for all those affected by adoption in Wales.

The National Adoption Service (NAS) for Wales, launched in November 2014, is an innovative collaborative for the provision of adoption services. It brought together Welsh local authority adoption services into a three-tier structure which includes partnerships at all levels with Voluntary Adoption Agencies based in Wales, Health and Education Services, as well as others.

At local authority level, all 22 Welsh councils continue to provide services to all looked after children whilst identifying and working with those children for whom a plan for adoption is appropriate.

Regionally, local authorities work together within five regional collaboratives to provide a range of adoption services. Each regional collaborative has links with the voluntary adoption agencies, health and education. The services provided differ in each collaborative but all provide the adoption agency functions for children, recruit and assess adopters, offer counselling to birth parents and advice to adopted adults. Some currently directly provide adoption support services, whereas in others this remains with their local authorities.

Gwasanaeth **Mabwysiadu** Cenedlaethol | National **Adoption** Service