

Report to: Partnerships Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 19th December 2013

Lead Member: Lead Member for Social Care and Children's Services

Report Author: Head of Children and Family Services

Title: Development of a National Adoption Service for Wales

1. What is the report about?

- 1.1 To seek Scrutiny's views on the plan to establish a National Adoption Service for Wales, supported by Regional Adoption Collaboratives.
- 1.2 To seek support that Wrexham County Council continues to act as the lead authority for the North Wales Adoption Service.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To assure Scrutiny Committee that the Council's statutory functions in relation to providing an Adoption Service are fully met, in accordance with legislation and guidance.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That Scrutiny Committee:-

- 3.1 provides observations on the contents of this report and;
- 3.2 supports the proposals for achieving a National Adoption Service in Wales as detailed in the report of the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru.
- 3.3 supports the proposal that Wrexham County Council will continue to act as the lead authority for the North Wales Adoption Service.

4. Report details.

Adoption must be seen in the broader context of planning placements and permanence for children and as part of an integrated system of services for meeting their needs and promoting their well-being. Adoption Services as a whole are complex, provided to a wide range of service users from very young children who are being placed for adoption to older adults who are seeking to be re-united with their birth families.

There is a clear requirement that children in care must have plans for permanence in place which consider the full range of permanence options and which are put into effect with appropriate urgency.

Scrutiny Committee will be aware that the creation of a National Adoption Service is one of the key policy strands of the Welsh Government and that, if enacted, the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Bill will allow Ministers to prescribe arrangements by local authorities.

Working closely with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), ADSS Cymru produced a functional model for delivery of Adoption Services across Wales. A copy of this report is attached at Appendix A. The model was endorsed by the Expert Advisory Group on Adoption established by Welsh Government. The outline proposal developed by ADSS Cymru was agreed in principle by Leaders at WLGA Council in April.

Subsequently, in a Written Statement on 25th April 2013, the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services endorsed the proposals for achieving a National Adoption Service and the development of a Functional Model for the delivery of services across Wales, as presented by ADSS Cymru and the WLGA. A copy of the Written Statement is attached at Appendix B.

The proposals outlined in detail in Appendix A, provide an ambitious but realistic pathway for creating an effective and responsive National Adoption Service. This will help to ensure:

- A new direction for the delivery of Adoption Services that is particularly suited to the Welsh context.
- Timely implementation of the improvements required.
- 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.
- An improvement in service accessibility for all key stakeholders.
- Maintenance of the essential integrity and coherence between all elements of Adoption Services, to prevent a mismatch between the needs of children requiring adoption placements and the adopters being recruited.
- Long term and lasting improvements to address the weaknesses identified in some elements of current service provision.
- A central place for the significant contribution made by the Voluntary Sector as valued co-producers and delivery partners.
- Collective opportunities for local authorities to respond effectively to rising pressures within the care system.

The proposal will be underpinned by a National Standardised Performance Framework that will allow the National Adoption Service to identify, review and highlight key performance measures. The framework will set performance thresholds and make clear the Welsh Government's minimum expectations for timeliness in the adoption system, for both the child and prospective adopter.

The **National Adoption Service** will be responsible for:

- Establishment of a National Board.

- Monitoring the delivery of services in accordance with the national performance framework.
- Producing an Annual Report and action plan.
- Developing a national marketing and awareness raising strategy.
- Providing a single point of contact for anyone seeking information about adoption.
- Providing a database of information.
- Developing and maintaining a National Adoption Register.
- Co-ordination of Adoption Panels, Panel Members, Pre-Approval Training, Post Adoption Support Services and provision of the Independent Review Determination Service.
- Acting as a Centre of Excellence for Adoption in Wales.

The functional model proposes five **Regional Adoption Collaboratives** are established, to deliver the functions of the National Service including:

- Ensuring compliance with legislation, regulation and the performance management framework.
- Recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters.
- Ensuring appropriate matching of children.
- Provision of the whole range of support services including birth parent counselling, step parent adoptions, intermediary services and letterbox contact.
- Ensure effective links are maintained with local authorities Children's Social Services.

The proposed five regional collaboratives are:

- North Wales – Wrexham, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire and Ynys Mon;
- South East Wales – Blaenau Gwent, Monmouthshire, Torfaen, Newport and Caerphilly;
- West & Mid Wales – Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Powys;
- Western Bay – Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot and Swansea; and
- Mid & South Wales – Cardiff, the Vale of Glamorgan, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda-Cynon-Taff.

These collaboratives are currently at different stages of development. The North Wales Adoption Service has been operational since 1st April 2010. Overall it is seen as functioning reasonably well, but we are undertaking a review of various aspects to ensure it is as effective as possible. This review will focus on reshaping and strengthening governance arrangements; service structure and location; strengthening systems and practice and will inform developments going forward. This will also include a review of the funding relationship and the basis of that going forward.

It is planned that all five Regional Collaboratives will be established by April 2014.

In addition, each **local authority** will retain responsibility for the following:

- Assessment and care planning and reviewing of Looked After Children and young people.
- Ensuring the Agency Decision Maker functions are fulfilled.
- Assessment of the Adoption Support needs of children for whom the plan is adoption.
- Involvement in the matching and linking of children and adopters.
- Providing birth parent counselling.
- Making applications to the Courts for appropriate orders.
- Attending Adoption Panels where proposed matches are being considered.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

It is a significant contribution to ensuring that children are safeguarded and enabled to develop appropriately in circumstances of stability and permanence

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

A Task and Finish Group will be established with representatives from Welsh Government, ADSS Cymru, Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW), British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), Voluntary Adoption Agencies and each of the five Regional Collaboratives. The purpose will be to produce a robust change programme for implementing the functional model.

It is recognised that Programme Management capacity is required to drive through these changes in a timely fashion and the Deputy Minister has awarded £50k to ADSS Cymru to support the implementation.

The following key milestones have been agreed:

- Membership and brief of the Task and Finish Group – June.
- Identification of the five Lead Authorities – June.
- Development of a common Implementation Plan format – July.
- Support Lead Authorities in their role – July.
- Outline business components for the infrastructure of the National Service – July.
- Regional Implementation Plans in place – August.

There are no sustainability or climate change implications as a result of this report.

Adoption services are governed by a number of detailed Statutory Regulations and it is acknowledged that changes to these Regulations will be required in due course. However, progress in implementing key aspects can be made pending the required changes. In advance of any legislative requirements that may be included in the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Bill, each local authority will need to make its own decision regarding the case for change.

There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report

7. What are the main conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) undertaken on the decision?

There are no equal opportunities issues arising from this report

Existing policy and procedures will need to be reviewed and revised to incorporate the impact of local, regional and national delivery of adoption services.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

Provision of an adoption service is a Council wide responsibility. This report has been considered by the Lead Member for Social Services

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

The national service model should be monitored to ensure that costs do not increase from the current level of net expenditure. Any additional costs arising from administering and hosting the new arrangements should be properly distributed between participating authorities.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

Risks as relevant are managed through the management arrangements of the North Wales Adoption Service overseen by the Heads of Children's Services across Wales

11. Power to make the Decision

The Social Services and Well-being Wales Bill outlines provisions for the establishment of a National Adoption Service and for local authorities to make arrangements to establish regional adoption collaboratives

Article 6 of the Council's Constitution outlines Scrutiny's powers with respect to this matter

Background Papers

Appendix A Proposals for Achieving a National Adoption Service in Wales and Development of the Functional Model – ADSS Cymru, April 2013.

Appendix B Written Statement by the Deputy Minister – 25th April 2013.

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