

Review of national adoption arrangements

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

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1. Introduction

Why was the review carried out?

To establish the extent to which:

- a) The leadership and management arrangements of the national adoption service:
 - Have established a clear strategic direction, that meets the expectations and aims of the National Adoption Service
 - Demonstrate a clear vision and ambition for those affected by adoption.
- b) Each local authority has a clear, shared understanding of which elements of The adoption service:
 - It continues to carry out individually;
 - Are carried out collaboratively as part of the partnership functions (regional adoption service);
 - Link with the broad aims of the joint adoption arrangements in Wales.
- c) The adoption service has negotiated and defined its working relationship with relevant education departments, health boards and voluntary adoption agencies, with regard to adoption support and commissioned services.
- d) The regional adoption arrangements have effective mechanisms in place, in line with the nationally agreed framework, to ensure children, young people and their families are supported to achieve best possible outcomes.

Evidence to support the key findings outlined in this national report was gathered from:

- The findings from two self evaluations completed by the 5 regional services reflecting the progress of the implementation of Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015.
- The analysis of the adoption service data collected by the national adoption service for the periods 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Interviews with:

- The Chairperson of the National Adoption Service Governance Board;
- The Independent Chair, National Adoption Service Advisory Group;
- Members of the National Adoption Service Governance board;
- Members of the National Adoption Service Advisory Group;
- Heads of children's services from all local authorities in Wales;
- Director of Operations and staff from the National Adoption Service.

2. Background to the review

The National Adoption Service was developed following recommendations from Welsh government committee and ministerial advisory group to comply with requirements under the Social Services and Well Being (Wales) Act 2014. Accordingly the Adoption Act 2002 section 3(1) was amended to require local authorities in Wales to enter into specified arrangements with each other in relation to the provision of adoption services. This review focuses on the progress made in implementing the resulting Joint Adoption arrangements (Wales) directions 2015. The aim of the arrangements is to ensure consistent delivery of high quality adoption services across Wales. The arrangements are specified at national, regional and local level. Collectively these joint arrangements are referred to as the ' National Adoption Service'.

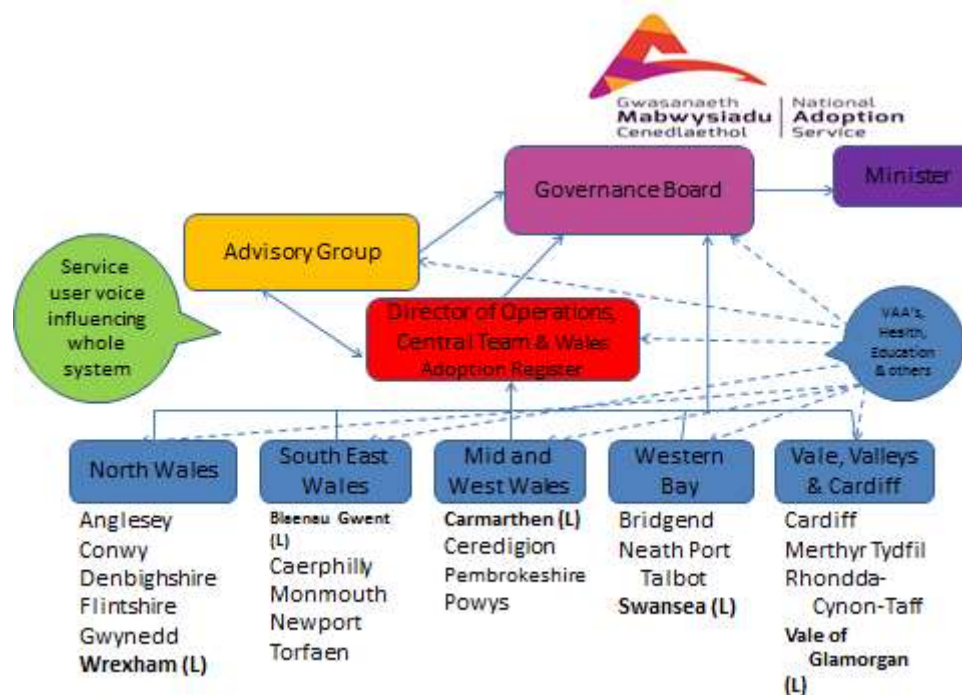
The duty to provide an adoption service under the legislation remains with the individual local authorities. It is a requirement for local authorities to:-

- Collaborate with each other regionally as specified in the guidance ;
- Make arrangements for establishing a national Governance Board and an Advisory group;
- Appoint a national Director for Operations.

The functions of the three tiered structure are specified in the guidance. The national director of operations and the national governance board have responsibility for the monitoring and oversight of the five regional collaboratives but have no powers to implement changes in the policies or practice nor to direct how regional resources are utilised.

The arrangements came into force in March 2015, but some work had already been completed enabling the launch of the national service in November 2014. Three years later the governance arrangements are well established and understood. However they are complex particularly with regard to the interface between the local, regional and national functions. Care Inspectorate Wales has no powers to inspect the national arrangements but has a responsibility to inspect the regulated adoption services at the point of delivery. NAS agreed to facilitate this review of the national elements of the service so that this could be seen alongside the pilot regional review. This review aims to look at the impact that the national adoption service has made on the improvement of adoption services across Wales.

Structure of the national adoption service



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Locally, each local authority identifies and meets the needs of looked after children, including those where a decision has been made that the child should be placed for adoption.

Regionally, local authorities work together within five regional collaboratives. They have strong links with voluntary adoption services, health and education.

Nationally, the local authorities collaborate to provide central services; the Governance Board and Advisory group and voluntary adoption agencies collaborate as the Strategic Voluntary Adoption Partnership.

The arrangements are underpinned by a range of comprehensive documents which outline the terms of reference; protocols; and partnership agreements for the service. The communication and links between the different layers are well defined and understood by the stakeholders. However it is not always easy to track how the recommendations made at national level impact on service delivery.

The functions of each level of the service are specific but the complex nature of adoption and the lack of control over numbers of children subject to a placement order and numbers of adopters coming forward present a challenge to the agility of the service in responding to changing demands.

Overall conclusions

The clear direction and intent of the National Adoption Service for Wales has benefited the children and families affected by adoption. There has been a high level of investment in terms of officer time expended in formulating the arrangements which are the basis of the national service. The governance mechanisms are well understood, but complex and can be a barrier to implementing a national framework.

There is a shared strategic direction and stakeholders have committed time and resources to work creatively to address the challenges of providing a consistent, high quality adoption service. This has raised the profile of adoption across the social care and public sector.

The unpredictability of the numbers of children being made subject to adoption orders, combined with their varying and complex profile of needs, inevitably impacts on the agility of the service to recruit sufficient suitable adoptive placements.

The arrangements to deliver the service across Wales remain inconsistent. While this may be a response of local circumstances it can impact on the timeliness of the implementation of national strategy and makes the effectiveness of quality standards challenging to implement.

The arrangements have supported productive partnerships with third sector organisations which have resulted in improved sharing of good practice and creative and promising initiatives for the future.

Improvements in the national collection and analysis of performance data have supported the development of an accurate profile of adoption services in Wales. This highlights regional differences and identifies areas for improvement.

There is a common understanding of barriers to better outcomes and what resources are needed. While timeliness in placing children for adoption has improved the numbers of children waiting for an appropriate adoptive placement has fluctuated, beginning to rise again in 2016-17.

Progress has been made in improving consistent standards for the service with initiatives such as developing a 'Best Practice Guide for Family Finding' and implementing a national framework for adoption support.

Some elements of the service which have been identified as in need of improvement such as life journey work and later life letters depend partly on the capacity within children's services for elements of the work.

3. Summary of findings

Question

Have the leadership and management arrangements of the national adoption service:-

- established a clear strategic direction that meets the expectations and aims of the National Adoption Service;
- demonstrated a clear vision and ambition for those affected by adoption

Summary of findings

- A strong strategic direction for the service has been established which is evidenced by the shared acknowledgement of the heightened profile of adoption across Wales combined with overall agreement on the improvements needed.
- Stakeholders demonstrated a high level of commitment and expertise to support the ambition to provide the consistent delivery of high quality services. Stakeholders are realistic about the challenges to achieving their aims.
- Strong efforts have been made to develop national initiatives to address key issues such as the recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of children who have a plan for adoption and increasing the availability of timely and effective adoption support. However there is currently a re-emerging increase in the numbers of children waiting for an adoptive placement.
- There is an inclusive approach to demonstrating the vision for adoption services in the future. This includes supporting co –production and enabling adopters and their families to share their experiences to inform better practice.
- Much effort has been made to establish an accurate data profile of performance which can inform future strategy and service improvement.
- It is difficult to evidence how the national initiatives can impact directly on improving consistency across some areas of the service. Therapeutic support for example continues to be described as a postcode lottery.
- Work which has been carried out nationally to improve access to advice and information for adopters and publicising support for adopted children in schools promotes shared responsibilities and increases understanding.

Question

Does each local authority have a clear, shared understanding of which elements of the adoption service?

- It continues to carry out individually;
- Are carried out collaboratively as part of the partnership functions (regional adoption service);
- Link with the broad aims of the joint adoption arrangements in Wales.

Summary of findings

- Each of the five regional services has a partnership agreement in place which outlines the responsibilities and functions it is responsible for. Some agreements have been reviewed but it is not clear whether the effectiveness of any particular approach is being routinely shared.
- The governance arrangements are not consistent across the regions, for example not all heads of service sit on regional management boards. This can impact on the timeliness of implementing decisions and changes in strategies.
- A shared understanding of the complexity of the service and the areas for improvement was clearly evidenced.
- There is a common understanding of how the improved data profile of the service has shaped the national strategy. There is less clarity around how local analysis of data is shaping service provision or recruitment of adopters according to children's needs.
- All agreements incorporate the broad aims of the joint adoption arrangements in Wales. There is wide understanding of the challenges of meeting these aims given the unpredictability of the demand and the inability to impact on the availability of prospective adopters.
- The multi-layered management arrangements could be a barrier to improving the effectiveness of seamless support for a child's transition between children's services and the regional adoption service.
- There is a lack of clarity about how regional strategies for driving improvement work along side the national approach.

Question

Has the adoption service negotiated and defined its working relationship with relevant education departments, health boards and voluntary adoption agencies, with regard to adoption support and commissioned services?

Summary of findings

- Progress in this area has been inconsistent; it has been difficult for regional boards to achieve routine attendance from some partner agencies.
- There are positive working relationships between voluntary adoption agencies and regional and national boards. There is joint working and shared ownership of planning and shaping services.
- Individual partner members of regional and national boards provide good support for the development of the adoption service which can be seen to have impacted positively on practice. The mechanisms for influencing health boards or education services to adopt recommendations for improvements across Wales are in their infancy. There have been some encouraging cross sector developments such as regional links with CAMHS.
- The arrangements for commissioning adoption support are variable. Only one regional service has a pooled budget but this was reported to be working effectively provided the appropriate service was available. There are issues around availability of the range of services needed and accessibility in some localities. One regional service has negotiated direct access to a psychological service which provides timely and effective support.
- It is difficult to evaluate the effect of positive national initiatives on local practice. For example the promotion of 'adoption aware' training and literature is aimed at improving support in education. Progress in engaging schools is reported in some regions but it is difficult to capture how this is impacting on outcomes for adopted children.
- All regions are engaging with CAMHS but again it is not evident that this work is leading to any definite improvements for adopted children and families in need of support.

Question

Do the regional adoption arrangements have effective mechanisms in place, in line with the nationally agreed framework, to ensure children, young people and their families are supported to achieve best possible outcomes?

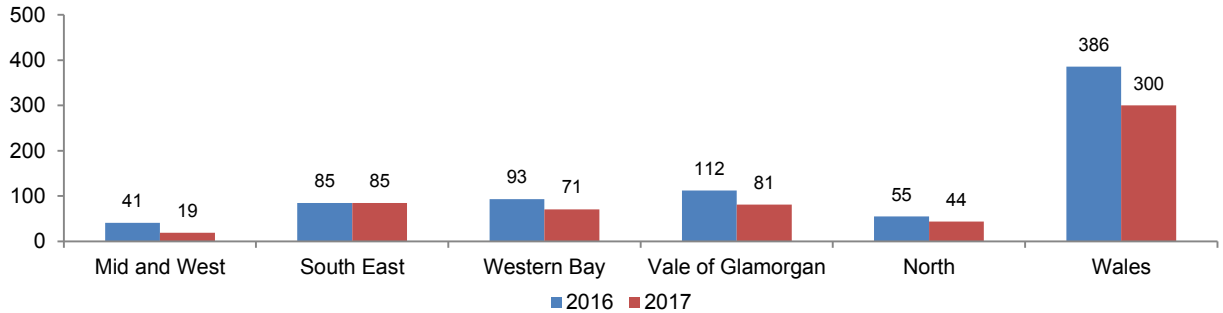
Summary of findings

- Much effort has been made to develop effective mechanisms across the regional structure. Good progress has been made with business planning and data collection in line with nationally agreed frameworks. Areas for development vary across the regions some of which are due to differing levels of resources which are available.
- Work which had been carried out has been very clearly focused on improving the quality of adoption services. A number of creative initiatives have been piloted and there are good opportunities for effective communication to share good practice between regions.
- More work is needed on how the interface between children's services and how the regional adoption services can be better supported to consistently impact on the timeliness and quality of life journey work. NAS has an active project working on this.
- Heads of service expressed a high level of confidence in their ability to track the progress of individual children and monitor the performance of the regional services. Collaborative working is valued but there are regional differences such as terms and conditions for staff and separate support services budgets.
- Agility to reshape resources to manage presenting demands is a challenge: nationally they cannot be directed and in most cases this does not happen at regional level either. . The changes in the profile of children with a plan for adoption and the availability of suitable adopters are not predictable enough to allow timely changes in recruitment strategies. The availability of a sufficient number of suitable adopters cannot be guaranteed.
- Nationally there has been a major effort to include those affected by adoption in planning and improving services. Ensuring that service users are engaged, and participate in assessing and improving the quality and development of the service at a regional level was identified as most in need of improvement by all the regional services.

Data charts

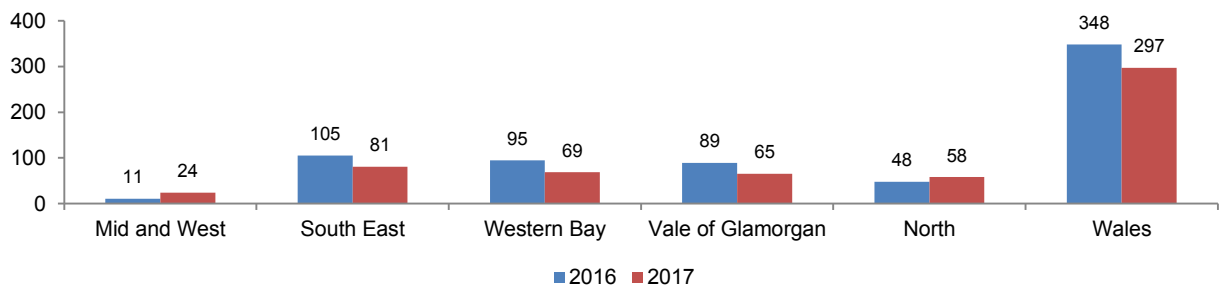
This data covers the periods 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016 and 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017. It has been reported by the regional adoption services and is not validated.

Figure 1: Number of children placed for adoption



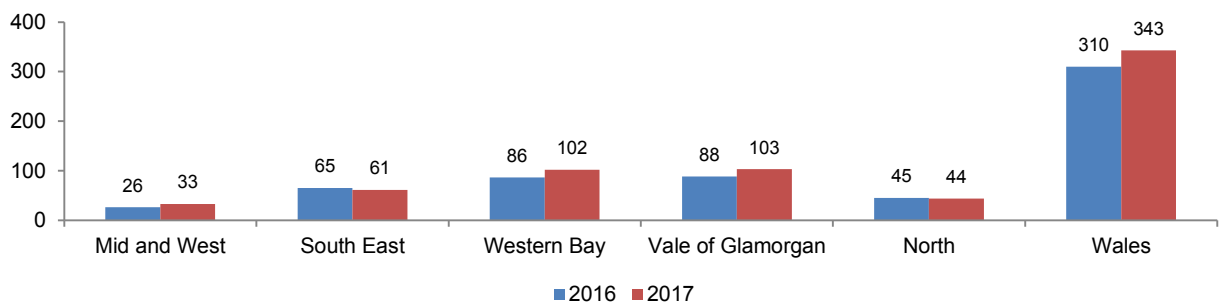
The reduction in the number of children placed for adoption in 2016/17 is reported to be due to a decrease in Placement Orders made; a combination of an increase in sibling groups and children with additional needs, and the impact of recruitment targeted to the needs of children which led to a reduction in the number of adopters being recruited.

Figure 2: Number of adoption orders granted



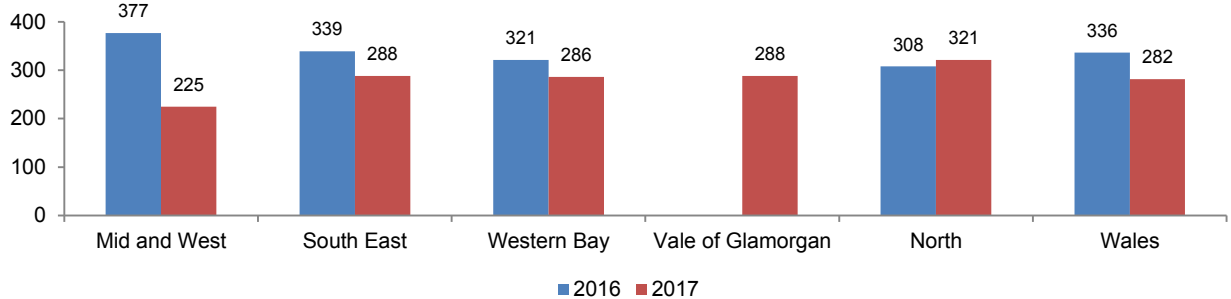
This decrease in numbers illustrates the challenge of planning recruitment around changing demand.

Figure 3: Number of children with a should be placed decision who have not yet been placed for adoption



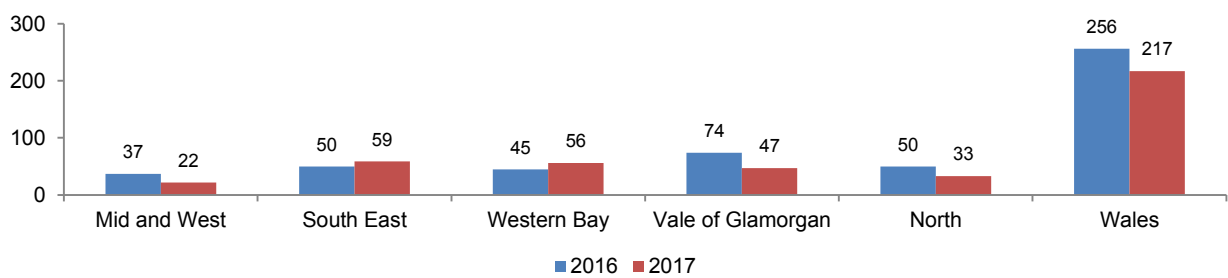
The increase in numbers of children waiting to be placed is the result of a lack of sufficient suitable adoptive placements for sibling groups, older children and those with complex needs.

Figure 4: Average (arithmetic mean) length of time in days it has taken children placed for adoption to progress from date of 'Should Be Placed for Adoption' Decision to date of placement for adoption



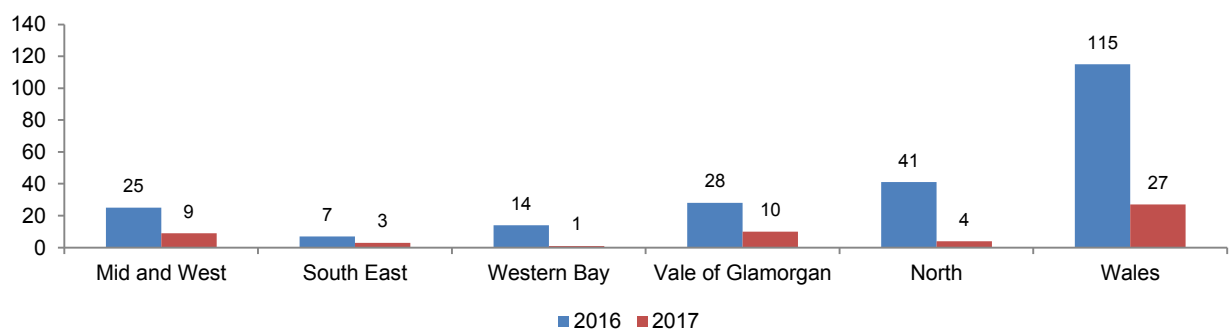
These figures illustrate the progress being made nationally to improve timeliness for placing children.

Figure 5: Number of prospective adopters receiving an agency decision to approve as suitable to adopt



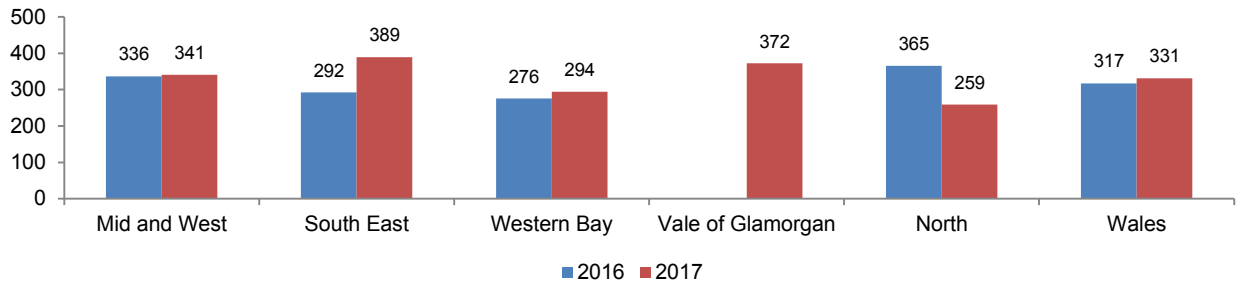
There was a lack of clarity as to the reasons fewer adopters were approved in 2016/17. The NAS ascribe this to a more targeted approach to recruitment. In previous years there had been a surplus of people wanting to adopt babies. These placements have been filled but the number of people wanting to adopt babies or sibling groups has declined.

Figure 6: Number of prospective adopters who do not proceed from initial visit to application to adopt



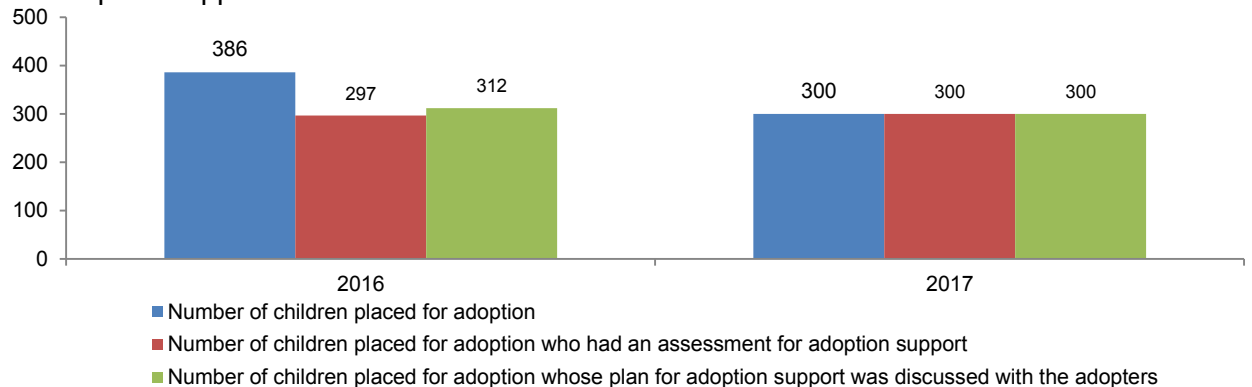
The decrease in the numbers of prospective adopters who do not proceed from an initial visit could indicate the better quality of information available to help people decide about proceeding with an application.

Figure 7: Average (arithmetic mean) length of time in days it takes for a prospective adopter to progress from initial enquiry to agency decision to approve as suitable to adopt



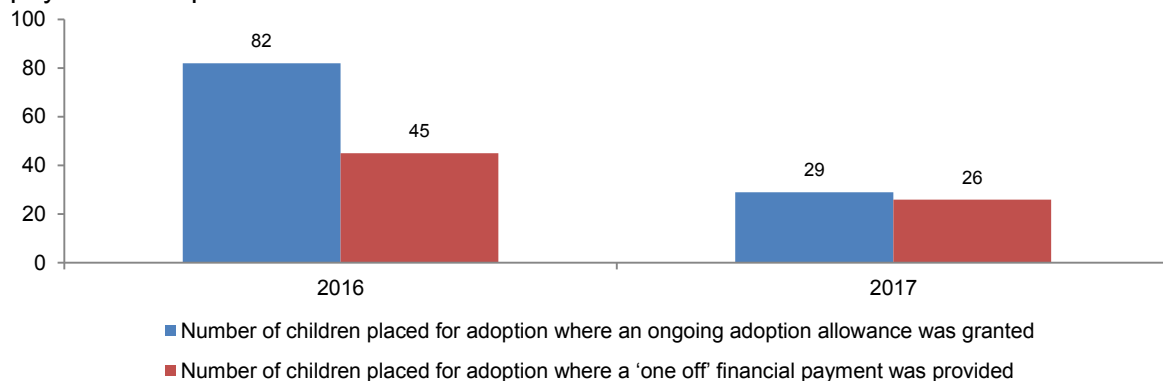
It has not been possible to report on the time from formal application to approval due to differing regional processes. Evaluation and analysis of performance is completed regionally.

Figure 8: All Wales comparison of number of children placed for adoption, the number of children placed for adoption who had an assessment for adoption support and the number of children placed for adoption whose plan for adoption support was discussed



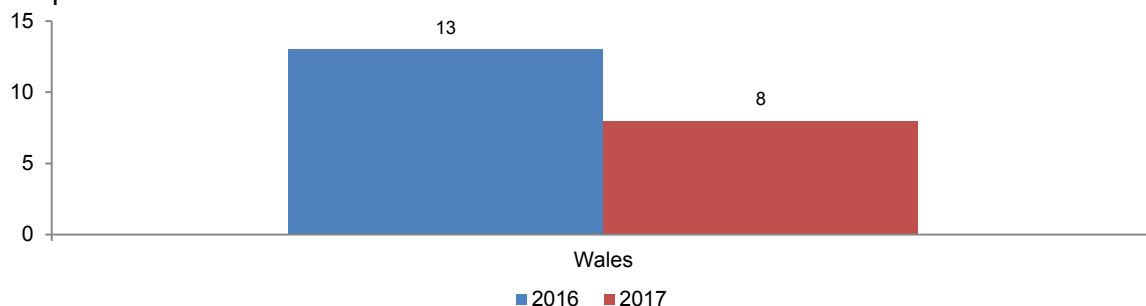
The chart above indicates a consistent improvement in the arrangements for offering adoption support. More work is needed to evaluate the outcomes.

Figure 9: All Wales comparison of the number of children placed for adoption where an ongoing adoption allowance was granted and the number of children placed for adoption where a 'one off' financial payment was provided



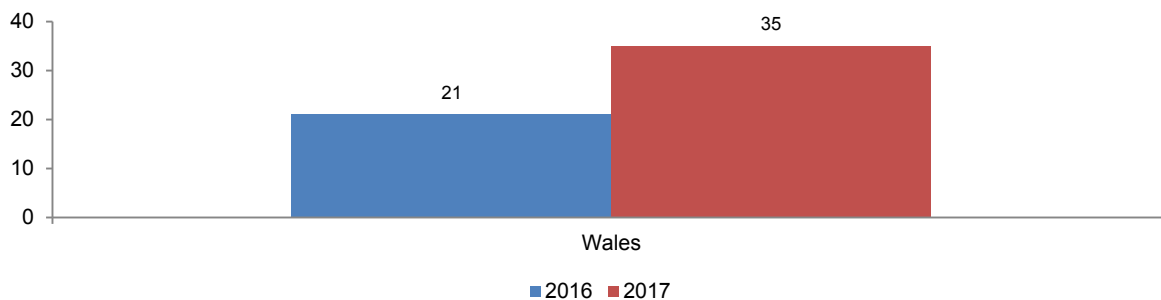
Not all regions had collected data about the number of adoption allowances agreed in 2015/16 so this is not an accurate picture but it still represents a decline in the agreement for allowances in 2016/17. There was no information available about why this was the case. (N.B these numbers do not include those already receiving support before 2016/17)

Figure 10: Number of children whose placement for adoption permanently disrupts between date of placement for adoption and before adoption order



All disruptions are reviewed and lessons learned are shared across regions but not nationally to date.

Figure 11: Number of children Looked After in financial year who are known to have been previously adopted



These numbers represent children who have been adopted in previous years as reported to the regional adoption services. This data is also collected by Welsh Government as part of the data set. The outcomes for children who return to the looked after system is monitored through the national outcomes framework.

Acknowledgements

The inspectorate would also like to thank the following participants listed below for all their help and co-operation with this review.

- The Independent Chair, National Adoption Service Governance board;
- The Independent Chair, National Adoption Service Advisory Group;
- Members of the National Adoption Service Governance board;
- Members of the National Adoption Service Advisory Group;
- Heads of children's services from 22 local authorities;
- Director of Operations and staff from the National Adoption Service.