

# BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## REPORT TO CORPORATE PARENTING CABINET COMMITTEE

6 MARCH 2012

### REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR - CHILDREN

#### OVERVIEW REPORT ON THE ADOPTION SERVICE

#### **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an understanding of the role and function of the Adoption Service in delivering services to those affected by adoption in the County Borough. The report will outline the progress made since the service was created, key challenges faced and achievements to date. Whilst the Adoption Service has a role to provide services to both children and adults, the service is located firmly within the Children's Directorate.
- 1.2 For all children who become looked after, how they are cared for on a day to day basis, as well as what plans are made for their future care, is important. In Wales the number of children adopted from care is relatively small, around 4.5% on average. Although the number of children adopted is small, adoption is one of the most important and powerful decisions that can be made about a child. How the adoption service is performing, both in terms of the number of children adopted and the quality of the service offered to children and those affected by adoption is, therefore, an important issue for the Committee.

#### **2. Connection to Corporate Improvement Objectives / Other Corporate Priorities**

- 2.1 Looked After Children are a key responsibility for the Council as corporate parents and connect with the theme Corporate Plan and Community Strategy theme of Young Voices.

#### **3. Background**

- 3.1 Until 2006, the Adoption Service in Bridgend had no separate identity. The function of the service was spread across the fostering and safeguarding teams. The registered manager for the service had oversight of the adoption agency activity but did not manage a team or the day to day responsibility of service delivery. Instead, the manager's function was confined to oversight of the service and the reporting responsibilities to the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) and Welsh Government (WG). The fragmented nature of the service led to underperformance across all areas of adoption with improvements and developments largely unachievable.
- 3.2 In May 2006, the Adoption Service underwent a complete reconfiguration. A new adoption team was created by separating the adoption activities and personnel from other service areas into a distinct team. This was achieved without investment

but by realigning resources to deliver a carefully thought out service. The team now consists of one team manager, 4.5 full time equivalent (FTE) social worker posts and 1.5 FTE business support officers. Across Wales there are a number of service delivery models but in the main these fall into two distinct types, either a joint adoption and fostering service or a separate service. The latter was identified as the most appropriate for Bridgend.

3.3 The aim of creating the stand alone adoption service included clearer identification of service priorities both in terms of quantitative and qualitative agendas as well as defining accountability and service deficits. The first activity for the newly appointed team manager was to undertake an audit of the service and set service priorities. The audit identified significant issues that needed urgent but sustained action to address. These included:-

- high numbers of children awaiting adoptive placements, with some waiting in excess of three years;
- high numbers of potential adopter applicants needing assessments. The waiting list at the time was in excess of two years before assessments commenced;
- poor inter-service arrangements for identifying, in a timely manner children needing adoptive placements;
- limited processes or successes for searching for adoptive families for Bridgend children with care plans of adoption;
- a general lack of service visibility, accountability, performance, connectivity to wider directorate agendas and no clear targets.

3.4 A business proposal was created by the manager which set out actions to address key priority areas including immediate and sustained action to reduce the number of children waiting for adoptive placements and increasing the number of adopters approved. This formed the basis for an action plan which was later to become the 'adoption project', a three year plan. This project maintained a distinct identity but was later merged to form part of a larger project aimed at reducing the Looked After Children (LAC) population. The work of the adoption service has significantly contributed to the original and current LAC projects.

3.5 The adoption service has been developing its identity steadily since its creation. The first three years were characterised by its response to the wider service needs through supporting frontline services, whilst progressing the backlog of permanence plans for children waiting for adoptive placements. This support has created a stronger interface between the safeguarding and adoption teams and has significantly improved outcomes for children, year on year, in terms of placements, timeliness of services and quality of services offered.

3.6 The latter three years have built on these achievements as well as improving the performance of the adoption service both in terms of quality and quantity of outcomes. This has been achieved without significant investment but by utilizing more efficiently existing resources. Although the service has very few externally monitored performance indicators (PI's), local or internal performance indicators

have been set by the Head of Service with the Adoption Team Manager in order to align practice measurement activity to other service areas and in order to measure performance year on year. An example of this can be seen in the setting of 'targets' for adoption placements, adoption orders and approved adopters which are reported on through the quarterly business review process as well as other mechanisms. The targets are derived from monitoring the national average number of adoptions against the national average of LAC.

#### **4. Current Situation / Proposal**

4.1 Each local authority is required to have an adoption service and a registered adoption manager. The adoption service is a regulated service, subject to CSSIW inspections (three yearly) and annual reporting to the Welsh Government on all agency activity and performance. The last inspection of the adoption service was conducted in July 2010 and resulted in a very positive report. In addition to the external monitoring, the service has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to internal monitoring of performance and organisational fit. The adoption service is located within the Children's Directorate and the adoption manager reports directly to both the Group Manager for Accommodation and Regulated Services and to the Head of Safeguarding and Family Support.

4.2 The Adoption Service covers five key domains or practice areas, all of which are required of an adoption agency and include:-

- assessment and support of prospective adopters;
- assessment of non-agency adoptions (also known as step parent adoptions);
- provision of a birth record counseling and intermediary service (CRC & IS);
- provision of a range of adoption support services to all those affected by adoption;
- twin tracking and family finding service for children subject to care proceedings or where adoption is the care plan.

#### **4.3 Assessment of Adopters**

4.3.1 Assessment of adopters is a core function of the adoption service. Unlike fostering, there is limited recruitment activity needed as adopters come to the decision themselves that they wish to increase their family and usually arrive at the decision to consider adoption often having explored other options such as IVF.

4.3.2 The robust assessment process takes approximately 8 months (but can be considerably more if the assessment is complex). Prior to the assessment commencing, the applicants are screened for suitability, undergo a full adoption medical and attend pre approval training. Children from Bridgend are seldom placed with Bridgend based adopters as birth families also live locally. Therefore, Bridgend based adopters are matched with children across Wales and in some cases the rest of the UK.

4.3.3 All adopters are primarily matched through the South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium (SWAAC) for which there is currently no cost. However, where matches are made with non SWAAC members, the local authority receives a fee for the placement. This is approximately £13,000 for one child and £19,000 for two

children. The adoption agency has been in the fortunate position in the last two years of selling such placements thus generating a small income.

- 4.3.4 The increasing positive reputation of the adoption service has led to an increase in adopter enquiries year on year (see figure1). This reputation has been helped by a very positive adoption inspection in 2010, and recommendation from adopters out of county who have had Bridgend children placed with them. This has, in turn, led to the opportunity to assess not only Bridgend adopters but those who live out of county, thus enabling the agency to place Bridgend children with Bridgend approved adopters, increasing successful placements and reducing delays for both children and adopters.
- 4.3.5 Over the last six years, a local target of between 6 and 8 approvals a year has been set, which reflected the team capacity and needs of the service. In the main this has been achieved each year. In the current year, however, there has been a significant increase in the number of assessments undertaken. This is, in part, a response to the shortage of adopters nationally and a reflection of the increased needs for placements within Bridgend.
- 4.3.6 The increase in the number of adopters approved has been achieved by temporarily expanding the assessment capacity of the adoption team by utilising the council's secondary employment policy, which allows for suitably qualified and experienced employees to undertake assessments of prospective adopters under the supervision of the adoption manager.
- 4.3.7 Full training and support is given to the worker by the adoption manager. The worker undertakes the assessment for a set fee of £1,800 plus travel expenses, which is comparable to fees paid in other local authority adoption. In the last half of the financial year (to date) this initiative has contributed to the adoption service exceeding its target of 8 approvals by one as of 31.01.12. A further two assessments are due to be signed off by adoption panel and the head of service by the end of February taking the number of approvals to 11.
- 4.3.8 In March there are a further two assessments due for completion and presentation to adoption panel on 28 March. Therefore, these two approvals may not be counted this financial year and may form part of the statistics for 2012/13. A target of 16 adopter approvals is planned for 2012/13. Whilst this is ambitious, the adoption manger is confident that it can be achieved. This is due in part to, a full complement of staff, experience of using the secondary employment policy and the flexibility of the adoption service to adapt to emerging new priorities.
- 4.3.9 The use of the secondary employment policy could enable assessments to be completed for around £2,000 each. Adopters who are not used for Bridgend children could then attract revenue of approximately £13,000 per assessment, which is a nationally agreed figure. Use of this policy is being monitored carefully by the manager of the service to ensure it does not destabilise the adoption team or create adverse pressures elsewhere in the service. Monitoring of the quality assessments will continue as will the financial benefit to the local authority of this activity.
- 4.3.10 The calibre and quality of Bridgend adopters is extremely high. Once adopters are approved, the process of linking them with potential children begins. Where a link is

deemed to be suitable, this proceeds to matching them formally via the adoption panel. Traditionally this process can be a lengthy however, in Bridgend we have been successful in matching adopters within a few months of their approval. No adopters, in the last two years have waited for a child from the UK for more than 4 months.

- 4.3.11 When an adoptive placement is made the child continues to be looked after by the local authority until the granting of the adoption order. This takes approximately 8 months. The time is used to assess how the adopters are bonding with the child and the child attaching to the adopters. Occasionally the match, despite everyone's best efforts does not work and an adoption disruption occurs. This involves the child returning to a foster placement. When this occurs, either a new adoptive placement is located or consideration is given to changing the child's care plan from adoption to long term foster care.
- 4.3.12 In Bridgend, we have been successful in our matching process. There have been no adoption disruptions in the last two years of any child we have placed for adoption (either with our own adopters or with adopters from another agency). In the last 6 years, since the creation of the adoption service there have been no disruptions of Bridgend adopters (who may have a Bridgend child or a child from another adoption agency). This is a significant achievement and is evidence of the high standard of the adoption applicants, quality of assessments and range of support services offered to adoptive families.

#### **4.4 Non Agency Adoption Applications**

- 4.4.1 The local authority is responsible for completing the assessment and court work for non-agency adoptions. There is no control over the number of enquiries for this service. Applicants are required to notify the local authority in the area where they live of their intention to apply for a non-agency adoption. The service has to respond in a timely manner to such enquiries, with an assessment and report on the suitability of the applicant being presented to the court within 12 weeks. This activity is mandatory, necessitating ability within the service to react promptly to enquiries and court timescales. Table 1 shows the fluctuation year on year of these enquiries.

#### **4.5 Birth Records Counselling (BRC) and Intermediary Services (IS)**

- 4.5.1 This service is delivered in two parts. Firstly it offers people who have been adopted an opportunity to access information and birth records counselling (BRC) in respect of their adoption. The service responds by prioritising (as required by the Adoption and Children Act 2002) cases prior to 1976. Every effort is made to locate the adoption records which may be anywhere in the country and of varying degrees of quality and completeness. The worker then screens the file collating information, making further enquiries and searches for information where necessary. Once a sufficient record has been established, the worker provides counseling and information to the individual in relation to their adoption.
- 4.5.2 This is a highly specialised role which necessitates consideration of the context of the adoption of the individual which may be, for example, some 40 or more years ago when adoption activity, records and processes were very different from the highly regulated activity today. The work is lengthy and detailed and with applicants

very much in the driving seat in terms of the pace and depth of the involvement. Many applicants for this service will come back time and time again, dealing with 'bite sized' pieces of information and working through this highly emotional activity either with the team or alone.

4.5.3 The second aspect, a rarer but equally intense activity, involves an intermediary service (IS). This, in essence, is the assessment of the feasibility of reintroducing family members and individuals separated in the past by adoption. The activity includes a thorough assessment of the past issues, individual's ability to manage the reintroduction, and facilitating such meetings and will in most cases take place following the work carried out through Birth Record Counseling (BRC).

#### **4.6 Adoption Support**

4.6.1 The adoption service provides a range of adoption support activities to 'those affected by adoption' such as birth parents, adopters, children, foster carers and practitioners. Services range from the provision of advice and guidance to the direct provision of services both as a result of a planned tailored intervention following an assessment of needs or more generic provision such as support groups and training.

4.6.2 Alongside the provision of services to those affected by adoption who are known to the service, it is expected that people moving into the area or who have not had involvement for a number of years, but who develop support needs are entitled to an assessment for support. These families are assessed and where the issues are solely adoption related, the adoption service takes full responsibility for the case. However, where the issues are more generic, the adoption team works jointly with our referral and assessment team to undertake a holistic assessment of needs. The adoption social worker in these instances remain involved in the case as a secondary worker providing expertise to the allocated social worker and to respond to any adoption related matters that arise.

4.6.3 The adoption service has been proactive, creating a range of preventative support services over the years. Monthly under-five's support groups are held, where adoptive parents and young adopted children can meet and socialise. This has been highly successful and intends to expand to include older children.

4.6.4 Adopter support groups are both formal and informal. Adopters who meet each other on the training events will often keep in touch, creating an informal support network. In addition we promote a formal adopters support groups. In the last year adopters have been less enthusiastic about this group and have preferred their informal networking. Whilst the aim of the adoption team was to run these 4 times a year attendance has dwindled. This is not seen as a negative development and indeed adopters are advising that they have sufficient support networks so they do not need as many formal groups.

4.6.5 Currently the adoption service is consulting with single prospective and approved adopters about the creation of a single adopters group. Like the formal and informal support groups mentioned in 4.6.4, it is envisaged that the adoption service will set this group up, facilitate the initial meetings and enable and empower attendees to become self sufficient.

- 4.6.6 Adopters undergoing assessment are provided with pre approval training. All adopters once they are approved are also provided with opportunities to attend training on topical issues, that either they highlight as needed or that the adoption team facilitates following the emergence of issues that is causing concern. An example of this was attachment training which was commissioned for adopters following an increase in the adoption team member's awareness of how attachment issues can emerge when children enter teenage years. The aim of the training was to be proactive with an emerging issue. The training was aimed at enabling adopters to meet the emerging needs of their children and to reduce the risk of adoption disruptions, where adopted children may come back into care in their teenage years.
- 4.6.5 Whilst most birth parents struggle to engage in services, more so when their children have been adopted, some find a benefit from meeting other people and extended families in the same position. As such, a birth parent support group has been established. At present, only a small number of birth parents have felt able to join this group. However, efforts continue to widen the attendance of birth parents as this has proved to be highly valuable to those who have attended.
- 4.6.6 A range of other additional support services exist, such as a lending library of books on adoption, news letters, in-house training and workshops for members of staff on all aspects of adoption, managing post adoption contact and much more. The service aims to be creative and innovative, using good practice examples from other local authorities and feedback from service users.

#### **4.7 Twin Tracking and Family Finding**

- 4.7.1 This activity is in two parts. Firstly, twin tracking relates to the range of activities and services required by the legal process. Parallel plans for a child are considered and may include, for example, rehabilitation home, relative carers or adoption as potential options for the child. The adoption activity involves provision of advice, support and counseling to birth parents in these circumstances, undertaking statutory activities such as children's adoption medicals and running and attending adoption panels, so that should adoption become the care plan, the local authority is in a position to work towards securing an adoptive placement in a timely manner.
- 4.7.2 Family finding is the activity that takes place once the court has agreed that adoption is the best plan for a child. The adoption service assumes full responsibility for profiling the child to local and national adoption agencies and consortia, screening links and liaising with the allocated social worker where links have been identified. Both twin tracking and family finding, by and large, take up the majority of the adoption team time due to both the complex nature of the process and as a result of the competitive environment that now exists in adoption. Identifying suitable adoptive placements is seen as one of the highest priorities in the service and this activity directly relates to the reduction of LAC within Bridgend.

## 4.8 Collaboration and challenges facing the service

- 4.8.1 The Adoption Service is a small but highly efficient team who manage the increasing demands on the service by stepping up to the challenges and achieving more each year both in terms of quantity and quality. This has been achieved through a collaborative management style where all contribute to the business plans and developments of the service. The team has been able to improve delivery and quality of services year on year by identifying new developments as a result of service user comments and compliments, learning from other agencies as well as research. In the last year, the improvements and achievements have been impressive given that two members of social work staff were absent for 12 months on maternity leave. The team is now at full capacity and recruitment is underway for a further worker to expand the service. This post has been secured from additional funding allocated to the Children's Directorate in the Council approved budget for 2012/2013
- 4.8.2 As well as continuous improvement of the service, the team has explored more innovative ways to improve service delivery. Collaboration with the Vale of Glamorgan has been underway for over a year, with joint training of adopters, sharing of information and practice ideas and the establishment of joint support groups and activities. All have proved highly successful, with efficiencies noted and high positive feedback from adopters involved in the joint training as well as the staff from both services areas being highly positive about the ventures.

## 4.9 Performance since 2006

- 4.9.1 The table below (table 1) shows the key areas of work managed by the service. Whilst it is not possible to completely reflect the full work of the service, this table provides some statistical information and comparisons over the last six years.

<b>Comparative data on adoption activity 2006-2012</b>							
Referrals and Enquiries	06/07	07/8	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12 (to date)	Local Targets
Number of Adopter enquiries	21*	16	16	<b>36</b> (This is an increase of 125% on the previous year)	<b>54</b> (This is an increase of 50 % on the previous year and 238% from 07/08 to 10/11)	41 (this figure will increase in March 2012 following recruitment activity)	n/a
Number of Adopters approved (in team)	6	12**	16**	6	8	11	8
Number of referrals for Twin Tracking	37*	25	36 ( this is an increa	54 (This is an increase of 50% on	42 This is a slight decrease of	41	n/a



			se in referrals of 44% on the previous year)	the previous year)	23% On the previous year but since 07/08 there has been an overall increase of 68% )		
Number of children placed for adoption						22	13
Number of children adopted	14	18	20	12	13	7 (a further 8 applications in court)	13
Number of Adoption Disruptions	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
BRC/IS	n/d	n/d	24	37	24	24	n/a
Adoption Support Referrals	n/d	13	16	17	12	4	n/a
Indirect contact	n/d	92	118	136	146	166	n/a
None Agency /Step Parent	12	12	12	11	9	2	n/a

**Key:**

\* No data prior to this date so all children open at the time of the creation of the new team are counted as 'being referred'.

\*\* Higher numbers of approvals/adoptions achieved due to children being in placement already or with foster carers who adopted children and as a result of the appointment of a temporary project worker to assist with family finding and identifying adoptive placements.

n/d = no data available / collected to rely on.

4.9.2 The highlighted sections of the table relate to the targets set and reported internally. It is possible to see that, year on year, there has been an increase in referrals to the service as well as outcomes. Between 2006/7 and 2011/12 there had been an increase of 238% of adopter enquiries. Although this is highly challenging for the team, it is a very positive and favourable position for the local authority to be in. Likewise there has been an increase in twin tracking referrals. It has not been possible due to the timing of the report to collate the full data for 2011/12. Therefore, the figures in column 6 of the table are as of 16<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

**5. Effect upon Policy Framework & Procedure Rules**

None.

**6. Equalities Impact Assessment**

None.

**7. Financial Implications.**

None.

**8. Recommendation.**

It is recommended that the Corporate Cabinet Committee notes this overview of the adoption service report and considers any issues arising from the information presented.

**Hilary Anthony**  
**Corporate Director Children**

**Contact Officer: Karen Williams, Team Manager, Adoption Service**

**Telephone:** 01656 815181

**E-mail:** [Karen.williams@bridgend.gov.uk](mailto:Karen.williams@bridgend.gov.uk)

**Postal Address** Children's Directorate  
Safeguarding & Family Support Services  
Sunnyside Offices  
Sunnyside  
Bridgend  
CF31 4AR

**Background documents**

None