

# BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## ADOPTION SERVICE

### ANNUAL REPORT 2012 / 2013



Social Services

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## **Index**

### **Subjects**

1.	Introduction.....	2
2.	Background.....	2
3.	Current Position .....	3
4.	Staffing .....	4
5.	Adoption Panel, Membership and Training .....	5
6.	Panel Activity and Workload .....	7
7.	Advertising and Marketing.....	9
8.	Children .....	11
9.	Adopters.....	12
10.	Matches.....	14
11.	Disruptions .....	15
12.	Legal Issues.....	15
13.	Adoption Support.....	16
14.	Development of Adoption Support.....	18
15.	Policies and Procedures .....	18
16.	CSSIW .....	19
17.	Consultation .....	19
18.	Complaints, Comments and Compliments.....	18
19.	Agenda for Change and Future Challenges.....	20
20.	Conclusion .....	20

# Bridgend County Borough Council Adoption Agency Annual Report 2012/13

## 1. Introduction

The requirement to provide an annual review of the Adoption Service is set out in Regulation 22 of the Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007. This report is in respect of the period 2012/13. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information presented is an accurate record of the activity and quality of the Adoption Service.

Whilst the report is intended to provide statistical information throughout, with analysis where possible it is also providing where appropriate the implication of the findings and proposed future actions of the Service in order to improve the quality of services to those affected by adoption.

Adoption is the plan for a relatively small minority of Looked After Children as most will return home or have alternative arrangements for their care which is tailored to their needs. However, although the numbers are not large, securing the future of children through adoption is amongst the most significant and far reaching of the council's responsibilities.

## 2. Background

The Adoption Service has been a distinctive adoption team since 2006 and provides a service to those affected by adoption and who live in the Borough of Bridgend. The Service covers five main domains, adopter assessments, non-agency adoption also known as step-parent adoptions, birth record counselling, adoption support and family finding.

In the absence of national performance indicators the Adoption Manager has monitored performance of the service by setting local performance indicators and targets against which to measure achievements. This also enables deployment of resources in order to maximise output and improve performance. Year on year targets have reflected the national average, thus ensuring Bridgend Adoption Service is aiming to be at least average against the other 21 agencies. The Service however is consistently meeting and surpassing targets.

The Adoption Service is a significant resource to the council and provides an avenue for the reduction in the Looked After Children (LAC) population by achieving adoption for children with care plans of adoption. With growing LAC numbers nationally and in Bridgend in

particular, significant effort has been concentrated on targeting adopter recruitment and the placement of children. This has seen record achievements in 2012/13.

### **3. Current Position**

The Adoption Service has continued to develop and evolve and is characterised by its response to the wider service needs in order to support frontline services. The primary aim of the service currently is to increase the number of adoptive placements by both recruiting adopters and placing children for adoption. Parallel to this central function, members of the adoption team are assisting in alleviating frontline pressures and are currently case managing some LAC cases. Whilst this would at first seem to be counterproductive, holding LAC cases does broaden the Adoption Team's knowledge and understanding of some of the work in the frontline teams. It has also contributed to the strengthening of the interface between childcare teams and the adoption service. It has also helped to highlight areas for improvement, such as timeliness of intervention thus avoiding delays for children and minimising the delays previously experienced in placing children for adoption. Whilst this process of holding cases and being proactive has enabled more children to be placed for adoption and minimised unnecessary delays it has detracted from providing the holistic adoption service outlined earlier but has strengthened the knowledge base of both the adoption practitioners and the childcare practitioners.

In August 2012 Bridgend Adoption Service was selected to pilot the new Prospective Adopters Report (PAR), the document used to present the assessment of prospective adopters to adoption panel. This new PAR will be launched this year across Wales and the rest of the UK, with the views and feedback from Bridgend Adoption Service on the PAR being used to help shape practice across Wales. The opportunity to be engaged in the pilot has raised the confidence of staff members who have provided feedback on the new documentation, quality and effectiveness. This advanced involvement also stands the service at a competitive advantage when the new form is launched.

A review of the delivery of adoption across Wales has been progressed by the Welsh Government. The Inquiry into adoption, published in November 2012 reinforced the Deputy Minister's assertion that a central Adoption Agency should be considered. It also however, recognised that whilst some services could be delivered nationally others may be more effective if delivered regionally or locally. In the context of this significant examination of adoption, it is worth noting that the impact of the uncertainty (as with any significant reform of services) is proving to be both a destabilising influence on those involved in the delivery of adoption in Bridgend. However, together with some uncertainty comes opportunity to reconsider the current delivery, improve practices and to deploy resources

more effectively. Discussions are taking place across Wales into collaborations, and Bridgend is exploring a Western Bay collaboration currently.

## **4. Staffing**

### ***Registered Manager***

The registered Manager of the Adoption Agency, Karen Williams satisfies the requirements contained in the Local Authority Adoption Service and Miscellaneous Amendments (Wales) Regulations 2003 by holding a recognised management qualification, which was obtained in 2009. Nevertheless, the manager is working towards an MSc in Business Management and is currently in the final year. The research aspect of this final year has focussed on a Wales-wide research into the recruitment of adopters and will be useful to guide the Adoption Service in activities needed to increase performance in this priority area.

### ***Social Work Staff***

The team establishment has been increased by one member in 2012/13 to 5 full time workers and 1 part time worker. At the time of completion of this report, there is a full complement of social work staff all of whom are experienced and skilled in all aspects of adoption.

Development and training of staff within the team is very much a feature of the 'learning environment' and is seen as pivotal to the improvements within the service. Evidence of this can be seen in the flexible approach to staff development; all members are for example trained as trainers to enable them to deliver staff training on any aspect of adoption as needed.

Experience within the team is enhanced by team members' previous roles, including generic and specific childcare practice, fostering, adults with learning disabilities and mental health to highlight but a few.

The team members continue to use the caseload weighting system specifically designed and developed for the team by the team manager. This method is one of the tools to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads and to assist in assigning tasks appropriately to individual team members. The impact of this method has been to empower team members to identify pressure points on their caseloads, and to identify capacity so that workers can plan for or request further allocations of work. This in part has led to significant increased productivity without compromising on the quality of work produced.

The cohesive culture within the team is that of a learning arena, with team members undertaking external, formal, peer and self directed learning and development. All members have undertaken role enhancement training and each member has provision within their working month to undertake a ½ day study based on some aspect of the adoption service. Whilst this is underutilised, all members value the opportunity to be able to develop skills and experience in a supportive environment.

The team have successfully hosted students almost yearly since 2006, with the last three students being seconded students by BCBC onto the social work programme. The current student is due to finish placement the Spring of this year and will return to a post in one of the Safeguarding teams.

### ***Business Support Staff***

The Adoption Agency and Adoption Team is staffed by 1 full time Business Support Officer at level 2 grade and 1 part time Business Support officer at level 1 grade. Evidence was provided in August 2012 of the increasing workload across the service which resulted in a temporary appointment of a further part time level 1 Business Support Officer; the post being available until March 2013. However this post became vacant in December 2012 following staff changes due to retirement and promotion. Efforts to provide additional Business Support to the Adoption Service and to Team Members is underway with some temporary arrangements being established.

### ***Team Culture***

The team culture is recognised as strong and positive thinking, with a 'can do' outlook to the work of the agency. The team have enjoyed relative stability and consistency which is reflected in productivity which has increased considerably year on year despite no substantial staffing investments. Sickness levels are far lower than in other areas of the service, and the staff members report a positive working environment both in terms of personnel and location.

## **5. Adoption Panel Membership / Advisors and Training**

Bridgend has been fortunate to have secured the services of an experienced independent Adoption Panel Chair, who took up post in 2006 and together with the Panel Advisor (a role undertaken by the Adoption Manager) ensures panel is fully staffed and carries out its function appropriately.

During the Period 2012/13 membership of the panel dipped with a number of resignations, one due to ill-health and the other work pressures. Recruitment of members has been a challenge but two new members were appointed in the summer of 2012. It has become apparent that the pressures on panel members reached a peak in the last two or so years, with the quantity of paperwork and increased frequency of panels. Regulations are explicit, requiring no more than 10 members but in order to be quorate 5 members need to be present. Of the 5 members a particular configuration is needed, which is challenging and demands considerable commitment from independent members, the elected member and the appointed social work members. Recruitment of a further two members this year is needed to ensure capacity in the panel is maintained.

Changes to legislation in September 2012 removed responsibility from the panel to consider whether or not adoption was in a child's best interests, this development has eased some pressure on the panel and resulted in the latter part of 2012/13 a move to one panel per month. Capacity and willingness still exists by panel member to convene, when necessary emergency panels.

Panel Member training aims to ensure members are able to carry out their duties in a well informed and supported manner. In 2012/13 training was focussed on the pilot PAR and has proved valuable in enabling panel members and panel as a whole to contribute to the feedback on the pilot. Panel member's appraisals were not achieved in 2012/13 due to the sheer volume of cases being considered and the somewhat transient nature of panel membership. However, a commitment by the panel chair and the panel advisor has been given that all appraisals will be conducted in 2013/14.

Panel advisors range from a legal representative (National Minimum Standards NMS 18.3) who no longer needs to attend each panel (given the changes in the presentation of children's cases to panel) but is available for consultation prior to panel by the panel advisor or the chair and can be contacted on the day of panel to discuss issues that arise. The adoption panel has a named medical advisor (NMS 18.3) and can call upon an advisor for both inter-country adoption (NMS 18.4) and concurrent planning.

**Membership and advisors**

Panel members, except elected members, join for up to two terms of office, each of which is a total of five years. As can be seen in the table below, two panel members have entered their second term.

Panel Role	Term of Office	End Date
<b>Members</b>		
Panel Chair	2	July 2016
Medical Advisor	1	N/A
Independent Member Adopter	2	December 2014
Independent member	1	September 2017
Independent Member	1	September 2017
Elected Member	1	October 2013
Social Worker	1	August 2017
Social Worker (Disabilities)	1	September 2014
Social Worker (Safeguarding Team)	1	March 2015
<b>Advisors - Formal</b>		
Legal Advisor	n/a	N/A
Panel Advisor and co-ordinator	n/a	N/A

<b>Administrator</b>		
Panel Administrator	n/a	
<b>Panel Advisors - Specific</b>		
Inter-country Adoption Advisor	n/a	
Concurrent Planning Advisor	n/a	

**Table 1 – Panel members**



## 6. Adoption Panel Activity/Workload Management

The Adoption Agency planned in 2012/13 to hold approximately 2 panels per month to accommodate the increased demand. However, in September 2012 legislation changed, removing the requirement for panels to consider if a child should be placed for adoption. This has resulted in panels reverting to one per month with the potential to convene and emergency panel if needed.

### *Number of Panels held by Year*

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of Panels held	16	17	20
Number of Panels cancelled due to lack of quoracy	2	1	1
Number of Panels cancelled for other reasons	0	1	1

**Table 2 – Number of Panels held by year.**

The Adoption Panel calendar is planned a year in advance, and the dates agreed by the Independent Chair and Panel Advisor (Team Manager of the Adoption Service). Members are made aware of the dates, and if there appears to be considerable difficulty with any specific date, this would be rearranged at the planning stages.

In the reporting period 2012/13 one panel was cancelled due to quoracy issues and one as cases were not ready in time. No additional or emergency panels were needed which reflects the forward planning and increased frequency of panels. Usually, where a panel due to insufficient cases is unable to proceed, the planned panel would be used for training purposes. In September 2012, with the removal of the requirement to consider children's cases, an opportunity arose for panel to participate in training around the new PAR. Members were also able, some months later, to participate in consolidation regarding the new PAR which was fed back to the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) who are running the pilot.

The last couple of years have seen panel capacity stretched and members struggling to attend fortnightly, but nevertheless achieving a high level of attendance. The increased panel attendance has also been coupled with a significant increase in pre-panel paperwork and preparation by panel members. The pressure on panel has resulted in prioritising cases and not panel appraisals.

The quality of work presented to panel has improved year on year. Panel members frequently compliment adoption social workers presenting cases in terms of both the quality of the written work and of the actual presentation of the case. The joint training held with panel members and the adoption service in previous years has greatly assisted this improvement. Both panel members and adoption social workers have been made far more aware of each other's roles and responsibilities. Likewise both have a shared understanding of what constitutes a good assessment and therefore, with the transparency that now exists in the process, improvements and excellence is commonplace. In 2012 a change to the method of delivering training to panel was piloted. This reflected panel's request to 'find out more about the techniques used by assessing social workers to gather evidence for the assessment'. Members of the adoption service gave 30-45minute presentations on techniques they used, with panel members actively participating or observing demonstrations. This proved extremely effective in raising panel's awareness, improving understanding of the evidence gathering methodologies used and gave members an insight into how to interrogate evidence.

Panel now considers approvals of adopters and matches of Bridgend children with approved adopters. As outlined adopter assessments are viewed as high quality but attract considerable interrogation of the report and supporting evidence before adopters are approved. Likewise the matches of children with prospective adopters are considered with the same vigour. The standard of reports are not as uniform as with adopter approvals and this reflects the diverse background and experience of Safeguarding social workers who present cases to panel. However, efforts to assist Safeguarding colleagues have included the adoption worker actively participating in the collation of the information for the matching report which panel considers as well as the adoption worker attending panel. In addition, this year will see training via workshops for Safeguarding social workers on 'presenting a match to adoption panel' offered throughout the year.

Panel members have also requested training on life story work and direct work with children. This will be planned for this year and will enable panel to explore how children are prepared for the move onto adoption, how this is evidenced in the papers presented and where and how the 'voice of the child' in terms of their wishes and feelings have been ascertained and recorded.

## 7. Advertising and Marketing

Advertising and marketing do not immediately appear to be headings that sit easily within the functions of the Adoption Agency. However there have been considerable developments in this area and the benefits are being realised.

Soft advertising or raising the profile of the Adoption Service within the local authority has been progressed in the last two years with efforts to highlight the work of the Adoption Team to both colleagues in Safeguarding and elected members. In March 2012 a report into the adoption service was presented to Corporate Parenting Committee and outlined for members the developments and achievements since 2006. This report provided the platform for the annual report of the service to be presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee thereafter, the first of such reports being shared in April 2013. In addition, the Adoption Manager was invited to present the developments and achievements of the adoption service to full council in January 2013. This presentation introduced to members the adoption team, developments over the last few years, performance data and a comparative analysis of performance against neighbouring adoption agencies.

Awareness raising of the role and function of the Adoption Service continues but is now core business and is characterised by the service being present at or actively involved in presentations at major staffing events, workshop and training events, as well as through the LAC project and membership on Accommodation and Permanence Panel.

There are partnership arrangements, primarily with South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium (SWAAC) members and well as informal collaboration activities with neighbouring adoption agencies. The drive nationally to increase the number of children being placed for adoption and the increase in the recruitment of adoptive families has been effective in the last year for Bridgend. However, this is set against a backdrop of increasing LAC numbers, and a national shortage of adopter applicants coming forward. Therefore in 2012/13 the Adoption Service had leaflets and posters printed to mark National Adoption Week and secured some limited media coverage in a bid to boost prospective adopter interest.

Marketing has not previously been a need for Bridgend Adoption Service, as the majority of applicants are referred by word of mouth and seek to be assessed due to the positive reputation of the service. However, the changing landscape of adoption, the increased need for placements and the decline in applications has necessitated a more business-like and marketing mind-set to be considered.

The Adoption Team members attend events to profile harder to place children, these 'adoption exchange days' are run locally and across the UK. In addition the Adoption

Service has been using various media approaches including profiling children via video, using *Be My Parent*, the National Adoption Register and sending profiles out nationally. All efforts have proved helpful but more creative, innovative and professional approaches are now needed in order to compete with Adoption Agencies nationally who share the same challenges and who appear to be better equipped to market effectively.

## 8. Children

There is a strong interface between the Adoption Service and the Safeguarding Teams which has clearly improved the timescales of cases being referred for twin tracking. Changes in legislation have removed the role of panel in recommending whether a child should be placed for adoption this relatively new change and is still being embedded into practice. Scrutiny of recommendations that a child 'should be placed for adoption' are still needed and this is now an activity carried out by the Head of Service in his role as Agency Decision Maker. The impact of this has been to increase pressure on both the Agency Advisor and Agency Decision Maker as the task was previously shared by up to 10 Adoption Panel Members. This new and demanding activity is increasing with referrals of children to the adoption service rising by around 20% in the last year.

Pressures felt by Safeguarding colleagues relating to the new shortened 26 week time scale for court cases is also keenly felt in the adoption service. The reduction of time and increased number of cases impacts on the ability of the adoption worker to obtain the necessary consents from parents for medical records and to provide them with counselling, advice, guidance and support. The brevity of time means parents are usually still hostile and adopt an adversarial role with anyone they perceive to be connected with the local authority.

### ***Number of Children Referred for Twin Tracking***

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of children referred to adoption for twin tracking	42	46	58

**Table 3 - Number of Children Referred for Twin Tracking**

All children referred to the adoption service for twin tracking have an allocated adoption social worker at the point of referral. This worker will guide and support the Safeguarding

worker, work independently with the birth parents and progress the medical report process. The increase in referrals and the shorter time within which to undertake the adoption role impacts adversely on capacity to undertake other work in the service resulting in some service users, such as those wishing to access files are placed on a waiting list and have to wait for an allocated worker.

The Welsh average of children adopted from care fluctuates but is usually around 4.5% of the total LAC population. This therefore gives a target to aim for and ensures Bridgend is at least comparable with the Welsh average. Targets set each year have risen as the LAC numbers rise. The task of achieving placements is therefore more acute than ever before but the shortage of adopters has resulted in considerable challenges. Some children have been delayed in securing adoptive placements due to the shortage of approved adopters whilst others have moved in significantly shorter time scales than usual.

***Number of Children Adopted and Placed for Adoption***

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of children adopted	12	15	17
Number of children placed and awaiting adoption orders (will count in 2013/14)	-	-	14

**Table 4 - Number of Children adopted and placed for adoption**

At any one time the number of children with Placement Orders and who are waiting for an adoption placement can vary. In 2012/13 the number of children needing adoptive placements increased in line with the number of referrals received and the granting of Placement Orders, which permit the local authority to place the child for adoption.

It is only possible to give a snapshot of the number of children waiting, given that it can change with more needing placements and placements being identified and secured. As of 18.03.13 there are 20 children waiting for adoptive placements. A number of additional court cases are due to conclude in April and May so this number will rise. Of the 20 waiting, 12 are children who are being placed without siblings. Four of these children are currently linked to potential adopters but this is yet to be confirmed. The remaining 8 children are in 4 sibling groups of 2. None of these children have links but efforts to identify links forms a daily and constant challenge for the adoption social workers.

Children are sometimes adopted by their foster carers. Whilst this is sometimes ideal for the children it does raise resource issues on times as the recruitment of foster carers is also a key priority for the council. However, in 2012/13 no children were adopted by former foster carers.

## 9. Adopters

The number of enquiries regarding adoption does not reflect the number of assessments and eventually the number of approved adopters. Many people enquire of a number of adoption agencies and are looking for one that best answers their questions or can assess them as adopters as quickly as possible. In addition many of those who enquire are merely making exploratory calls and do not progress their interest in adoption with any agency.

The national shortage of adopters is starting to be noticed in Bridgend in that the total number of enquiries has almost halved in two years. The impact of this is significant, as a reducing enquiry rate will impact on suitable applicants to be assessed. Numbers need to be boosted in Bridgend as well as across Wales and as outlined the Welsh Government is exploring how this might be achieved. Table 5 shows the declining number of enquiries.

### *Number of adopter enquiries*

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of adopter enquiries	52	49	33
Number of adopter approvals	8	12	22

**Table 5 - Number of adopter enquiries and approvals**

Despite declining enquiries, the Adoption Service has made excellent progress in the number of adopters approved. Capacity within the service is limited but the need for approved adopters has necessitated the redeployment of resources to enable increased productivity. Expanding the approval of adopters without having an increase in staffing capacity has brought with it some challenges that have been overcome in part. The use of the council's secondary employment policy has enabled assessments of adopters to be undertaken by experienced staff both inside and outside of the adoption service. This,

together with the use of commissioned workers has proved successful in 2012/13 and is a method that will be used in 2013/14 in the light of budget cuts and a now growth provision.

We have found that the initial adopter enquirers are in the main indicating that they want to adopt children under five. Written information packs and a home visit as part of the enquiry stage helps potential applicants understand the nature of adoption, and the wide range of ages for which placements are sought. Applicants are made aware that those wishing to adopt harder to place children will normally be prioritised. However, priorities can differ from the traditionally identified harder to place children of sibling groups, older children or those with complex needs to, in recent times, the need for placements for younger children – those under two.

As well as increasing the number of adopters approved in 2012/13 the Adoption Service was successful in assessing and approving a concurrent placement. This is where an adoptive parent is dual approved as both an adopter and as a foster carer. This placement could then be used for relinquished children (those given up for adoption by birth parents) or children where there is a high likelihood of adoption becoming the final care plan. Unfortunately the placement is yet to be used concurrently but its creation has further enhanced the skills of the adoption staff and highlighted challenges to consider when embarking on this activity. Concurrent approval or 'foster to adopt' options are being keenly considered by both UK and Welsh Governments and provision for Concurrent carers is outlined in the Social Services and Wellbeing Bill which was launched for consultation early in 2013. All potential adopters, as part of the assessment process are advised of concurrent planning and their views or interest recorded. Take up of this type of approval has been extremely low, with just one approved adopter expressing an interest.

As part of the assessment process, prospective adopters are required to attend pre-approval training. Collaboration with the Vale of Glamorgan and utilising spare places on training events in other neighbouring local authorities has greatly assisted the Adoption Service to offer timely pre approval training. No assessment has therefore been delayed while adopters attend training.

In the last year there have been no recommended approval of an adopter rejected by the Adoption Panel. The skills of the Adoption Team continue to develop and individuals strive to improve practice. Learning from complaints and compliments as well as taking note of good practice guidance has enabled the individual workers and the service as a whole to improve performance. In the last 8 years no Bridgend adopters have had a placement disrupt. Adopters have children placed from Bridgend itself (if the adopters live out of county) or any other adoption agency within and outside of Wales.

## 10. Matches

The matching process for children needing adoptive placements with approved adopters available continues to be one of the most challenging aspects of the role of the adoption social worker and agency as a whole. It is seen as pivotal in placement success and builds on thorough, robust assessments of adopters being undertaken and clear and accurate knowledge of the child being available. For children, the activity is generated by the family finder for a child. Bridgend continues to value its membership of SWAAC and all children and adopters are registered with SWAAC. However given the shortage of adopters nationally more and more searches have been undertaken across the whole of Wales and the rest of the UK.

In 2013 children from Bridgend were placed both within South Wales and outside. The shortage of placements and the national searches produced placements in Anglesey, Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Cumbria, and Newcastle for example. Not all the children who were placed outside of Wales had a need to be placed at this distance but the need for a placement overrides the location of the placement in most cases.

## 11. Disruptions

Disruptions are distressing for all those involved. Every effort is made to minimise adoption disruptions, by ensuring thorough planning which will involve both the placement and child's agency working closely together. However, when a disruption has occurred a disruption meeting is held with lessons learned from the placement breakdown informing future practice, placement arrangements and support needs.

In the latter part of 2012/13 a disruption of two children placed with prospective adopters from a voluntary adoption agency occurred. The disruption meeting is yet to be held, taking place early in April and as such it is not possible to provide any indication of the lessons from this incident at this point.

## 12. Legal issues /Placement Orders/Placements

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 and associated Regulations and Guidance provides the primary legislative framework for the Adoption Service. However, changes in legislation in 2012, such as the removal of responsibility from the adoption panel to consider if a child



should be placed for adoption is still in its infancy. The requirement for the Agency Decision Maker to make the final decision has not been removed from the role invested in the HOS, Colin Turner. However the impact of this legislation has been felt in terms of both quantity of work now processed by the Agency Advisor (Karen Williams) and the Agency Decision Maker is considerable. This take was previously shared amongst the adoption panel.

The changes to the delivery of adoption in Wales is yet to be finalised, but the Social Services and Wellbeing Bill makes some provisions which, if translated into statute may significantly impact on the function of the Adoption Service in Wales.

Children who are made subject to Placement Orders form the majority of children for whom the Adoption Service is seeking adoptive placements. Not all children will be successfully placed for adoption and the court allows for this in the care plan. The search for adoptive placements can be limited to for example 6 months, one or two years or not limit at all. When the time for searching has expired or all searching activity has been exhausted children’s cases are presented to the Accommodation and Permanence Panel and an alternative plan agreed or the contingency plan followed. The contingency plan is usually long term foster care. In some cases the carers will then request consideration to a Special Guardianship Order, or occasionally adoption. In 2013 only one case has been referred to Accommodation and permanence panel for a change of care plan to long term fostering.

***Number of Placement Orders granted***

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of Placement Orders granted	21	23	23

**Table 6- Number of Placement Orders granted**

A close working relationship exists between the Adoption Service and colleagues in the legal department which has proved to be mutually beneficial in terms of case progression and avoiding delays. The legal advisor for the adoption panel is a senior member of staff, and has together with her colleagues provided specific guidance on issues to the agency as and when needed.

**13. Adoption Support**

Adoption support has a number of component parts including the provision of support groups and direct intervention when adoptive families, birth families or children affected by adoption are having difficulties.

Adoption support groups continue to be provided, but have had some varying fortunes in 2012/13. The under 5's adopter and child group has been reconfigured to run slightly less often (in school holidays) and for children from 0-8 years. This positive change was following consultation with attendees who were using the group and wanted the changes.

The single carers group has been slow to gather momentum. Running around 4 times a year, the group provides a valuable support to single carers. Efforts to engage carers from neighbouring adoption agencies proved fruitless so the group runs partly as a facilitated group and partly as an informal group with the participants making contact with each other as and when needed.

The general adopters support group has been the most challenging to maintain. Despite frequent provision of support groups attendance has been poor. Adopters report that they do not need/want a support group as they have made contact with other adopters (usually at the training) and can make contact with the adoption team as and when needed. However, despite the reluctance of general adopters to participate in a traditional support group, adopters have attended the various fun events that have been organised. These have included collaborating with the Vale of Glamorgan to put on events both within the Vale and Bridgend. Christmas and Easter parties and a summer activity event have been examples of these events. They are usually well attended and supported by adopters.

Bridgend has a well-established birth relative group. This group is open to birth parents and relatives who have had a child placed for adoption. The group was initially set up with the aim of it becoming self-sufficient but this has not been achieved. In recent months membership has dwindled but those still attending derive considerable support from the group.

In addition to the preventative / support groups the adoption team responds to referrals for adoption support from adopters. This work is increasing in complexity but the numbers have remained fairly static in the last three years. Cases range from the provision of intensive family support type interventions to direct work with children and multi-agency work to construct a wraparound support package for a family. Some adoption support continues for a significant period of time for example one case is in the third year of additional support. Whilst referral numbers are low, the cumulative effect of complex cases can result in significant resource pressures both in terms of staffing capacity and financial implications of funding therapeutic interventions. Cases that appear to be a mixture of both adoption related issues and wider family issues are referred to the Referral and Assessment Team but the adoption worker retains involvement as a secondary allocated worker.

**Adoption Support referrals (one off service / advice as well as on-going work)**

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of referrals to the adoption service for support	12	12	10

**Table 7 – Adoption support referrals**

In addition to preventative services and responding to adoptive families in need, the Adoption Service has a statutory responsibility for Birth Record Counselling (BRC) and Intermediary Services (IS). Referrals for either of these services are divided into pre 1976 cases and post 1976. Those adopted pre 1976 have a priority (as per regulations) given that often the birth family members they are searching for will be much older and may no longer be alive. Every effort is made to prioritise these cases but the increased workload year on year, holding LAC cases and the need to recruit more adopters has resulted in growing waiting lists for both BRC and IS. The demand for a service has remained fairly static over the last three years, as seen in the table below but limited access to search engines such as Ancestry.com and FindMyPast.com have constrained ability to provide an effective service. This will be reconsidered in 2013.

**Number of Referrals for BRC/IS**

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of Referrals for BRC or IS	24	29	30

**Table 8 – Birth record referrals (access to files)****14. Development of Adoption Service**

Other than those developments outlined in the various sections above, there have been very few developments in 2012/13. This has been in part to do with the considerable pressures on the service to increase the number of adopters approved, and activity which has been extremely successful.

2013/14 will see a number of potential developments. The Adoption Service will be expanding to become an Adoption and Permanence Service, reflecting the need for increased focus on promotion of the range of permanence options to families and thus assisting with the reduction of the LAC numbers which are at an all time high as of 18.03.13, standing at 389.

## **15. Policies and Procedures**

A planned review of policies and procedures due to be completed in 2012/13 has been delayed by a number of the other pressures facing the service. However commitment to this remains extremely high and with the refining of roles and responsibilities within the team and the development of the Permanence Service has given this activity renewed impetus.

## **16. CSSIW**

The last inspection of the Adoption Service was in 2010. As inspections of the service are three yearly it is anticipated that an inspection is due in 2013/14.

## **17. Consultations**

Formal consultations have not been developed for this review or any other aspect of the service. However, regular feedback is obtained from those using the adoption service. Efforts to formalise the consultation process are underway.

## **18. Compliments, comments, complaints and representations**

The Adoption Team delivers a responsive, proactive and customer focussed service wherever possible. However, whilst no agency or professional wishes to have complaints they are on occasions inevitable given the challenging service within which we work. The Adoption Team recognises that in the main the work undertaken is with a receptive and willing service user, which is at times reflected in the statistical data collected on complaints, comments and compliments. However, not wishing to be complacent, the service has taken to use complaints, compliments and comments proactively, using them to shape and improve service delivery. Usual practice is to investigate complaints, and where found to be at fault, learn from errors. We have found that it is equally as effective to use compliments in the same way, using what we are told worked well as a recipe for improving practice and service delivery or developments.

In 2012/13 there was one complaint, jointly between Safeguarding South and the Adoption Service. The complaint was in respect of two looked after children who had not had contact with their adopted sibling. Safeguarding contacted the Adoption Service to assist. The

adoptive parents, who now have full parental responsibility had moved address and not provided this information to the department. Also, they were reluctant for the contact to continue at weekends. The Safeguarding worker is progressing the contact and the Adoption Service has assisted in helping with the letterbox or indirect contact between the children. In the same period there were 11 compliments. These range from compliments to the full team and to individual members of the service. Compliments have been received from service users and professionals.

## 19. Agenda for Change/Future Challenges

In 2013/14 the biggest challenges will be maintaining performance achieved in 2012/13. The shortage of adopters impacts adversely on both the recruitment activity of the service and also the extra work needed to find and secure adoptive placements for children.

The announcement from the Welsh Government on the National Adoption Service is awaited and will impact greatly on the shaping and delivery of services in the future. However, exploration of more formal collaborative working with Swansea Bay colleagues will provide helpful opportunities to examine how to strengthen and improve performance and the delivery of services.

## 20. Conclusion

The Adoption Service has continued to deliver a strong and effective provision despite pressures outside the control of the service.

The drop in potential adopters enquiring about the assessment process has been a nationally experienced challenge. However, in 2012/13 the adoption service achieved 22 approvals, considerably higher than the locally set target. The Placement of children was also higher than expected, but only marginally. Some areas of work, namely service developments, reviewing policies and procedures and BRC/IS have not been progressed as anticipated and the latter has resulted in waiting lists forming. Efforts to redeploy resources have been on-going throughout the year and will continue into 2013/14. Team morale remains high and the quality of the work has been maintained.

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