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**WRITTEN STATEMENT  
BY  
THE WELSH GOVERNMENT**

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**TITLE** The Establishment of a National Adoption Service – ‘case for change’

**DATE** 25 April 2013

**BY** Gwenda Thomas AM, Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services

You will recall that in February 2011, *Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action* was published, this document provided the platform that identified the need for a major shift in adoption services and my vision of a national adoption service. Evidence had been collated from various sources, and although able to demonstrate excellence within some areas, there remained a great disparity in service delivery across Wales which reaffirmed the need for radical reform.

The proposal of a national adoption service was one of the key strands identified within the consultation on the principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Bill, which ran between March and June 2012; officials visited the established adoption services and consortiums throughout Wales and explored the key issues, challenges, best practises and lessons learned of working within a collaborative. The information gleaned from these visits consolidated the need for an Expert Advisory Group on Adoption to be established.

The Group brought together key stakeholders from within the adoption system in Wales and provided a community of understanding and common purpose to oversee coordinate and deliver improvement of services and outcomes for children and young people in Wales for whom adoption is in their best interest. Delivering on these improvements included the introduction of a national adoption service and consideration of a national service model proposed by ADSS and WLGA. The remit identified was simple, I wanted to see greater collaboration and partnership working, a model which operated under a two tier system, dispelled duplication and delay, addressed current concerns and provided the mechanism for driving performance improvements across Wales ensuring a service that encouraged and welcomed a broad range of adopters to meet the diverse needs of our looked after children.

In conjunction with the task of reform undertaken by the Expert Advisory Group the Children and Young People Committee also identified a need to review the delivery of adoption services in Wales and calls for evidence from the Committee were made in December 2011. After an in-depth scrutiny of the evidence presented both verbally and written the Committee presented its report in November 2012 which compounded our earlier findings and remit of a national service. I was encouraged and heartened that we had the same shared values and aspirations on such an important agenda.

I am pleased to inform Members that good progress has been made; discussions have concluded in the group and a consensus has been reached. I have now received a functional model for a national adoption service proposed by the Association of Directors of Social Services in conjunction with the Welsh Local Government Association, and endorsed by the Expert Advisory Group - it is a model that I believe will achieve the step-change and radical reform we have all sought.

The proposal acknowledges the significant contribution and the unique expertise the Voluntary Sector plays in the delivery of adoption services in Wales. Embedded in the proposal is the message that 'only by statutory and voluntary sectors working together inclusively and collectively, drawing on best practice, the vision of a National Adoption Service can be realised'. It embraces a tiered model, the different elements making up an effective and efficient service which is appropriately aligned at a local, regional and national level, the functions of each determined where they best fit in the restructured service model.

It foresees the National Adoption Service having a Director of Operations who will be accountable professionally to the National Board for Adoption Services. He /she will prepare and present bi-annual information reports to me and an annual report to the National Board.

It proposes that five regional adoption collaboratives are created, configuration building on existing and emerging networks, it is planned that these will be:

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

Each collaborative will have the same set of responsibilities and functions and operate within a performance management framework developed at a national level. Each collaborative will be accountable to the Director of Operations for its performance and then to the National Board. The Director of Operations, in consultation with the National Board, will have the powers to intervene if the performance of a Regional Collaborative is not meeting required standards. One local authority within each collaborative will act as the lead authority for the delivery of all the regional roles and functions. The Senior Responsible Officer from the lead authority will be a member of the National Board. This will ensure accountability of the regional collaboratives to the National Board.

Directors of Social Services will continue to exercise their statutory accountabilities through a Regional Collaborative Board and maintain the link to the executive and scrutiny functions of their own local authorities.

Each local authority will retain the role and responsibilities pertinent to the child and aligned to the wider social care legislation.

### **Next Steps**

A task and finish group will be established, and a time-framed project plan will be produced. Representatives on the group will be from Welsh Government, ADSS Cymru, CSSIW, BAAF, VAA and each of the Regional Collaboratives. The purpose of this group will be to produce a robust change programme for implementing the functional model. To facilitate this change programme I am pleased to confirm that I have secured £50K which will assist ADSSC in the commissioning of resource to undertake a number of key tasks looking at both the business model and the processes and procedures for the proposed National Adoption Service. The key milestones undertaken by Autumn this year will be:

- Membership and brief for the Task & Finish Group for the National Service to be established;
- Identification of the five Lead Authorities;
- Development of the common format for the Implementation Plans to be agreed by each Region;
- Begin work on supporting the Lead Authorities in their role;
- Outline business components required for the infrastructure of the National Service; and
- Each Region to have in place an implementation plan.

It is acknowledged that creation of the National Service will require fundamental change at many different levels. It is anticipated that this initiative will be taken forward using the wider leadership framework established for the ten-year strategy set out in *Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action*. The National Social Services Partnership Forum, Strategic Leadership Group and the Local Government Implementation Board will exercise oversight of the change programme. The Boards of Directors for the Regional Social Services Improvement Collaboratives will have a key role in steering through these changes to the required timescales at the regional and local level.

It is recognised that each of the agreed regional collaboratives are at different stages. Each region will be required to develop its own detailed project plan, using a common format and approach. The project plans for each region will need to reflect the performance management framework agreed by the National Service Board. It is planned that all five regional adoption collaboratives will be established by April 2014.

We must remember that adoption must be seen in the broader context of planning for permanence and as part of an integrated system of services for children in care. Children in care need permanence plans that consider the full range of permanence options and it is imperative that these plans are implemented with appropriate urgency, that is why I am carefully considering the potential of introducing further provision within the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Bill, the purpose of which would be to place a child with their prospective adopter at the earliest possible juncture „once a decision has been made that adoption is in the child’s best interest and that every effort has been made to rehabilitate the child with birth parents or family and friends. . Hopefully this would negate

disruption to the child and provide earlier permanence for them. The detail of such a provision is currently being explored.

We are about to embark on yet another unique way of working in Wales, championing transformational change in service delivery and I am proud to be apart of that and to witness all sectors working together. We are pressing ahead with this agenda so the Welsh Government can consider any necessary changes required in legislation to accommodate this pioneering way forward.

I would like to conclude by thanking all those involved in embracing partnership and delivering a model which provides us with the first major stepping stone towards a flagship adoption service for Wales.