

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT TO CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE

14 OCTOBER 2021

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING
MONITORING THE PERFORMANCE AND PROGRESS OF THE WESTERN BAY
REGIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Corporate Parenting Committee about the performance and progress of the Western Bay Regional Adoption Service, including the Annual Report on Regional Performance Indicators for 2020/2021 which is attached at **Appendix A**.

2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives/other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objective/objectives under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:

- **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.
- **Smarter use of resources** – ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's well-being objectives.

3. Background

- 3.1 Adoption has, and continues to receive, high levels of attention from both the UK and the Welsh Government. Members will be aware that the creation of a National Adoption Service is one of the key policy strands of the Welsh Government, as enacted in the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014. This Act provides powers, under Part 9, for Ministers to direct local authorities to collaborate in relation to adoption services and to prevent any local authority from withdrawing from these collaborations in the future.
- 3.2 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015 came into force on 13th March 2015. The primary purpose of these Directions is to ensure that effective joint arrangements are in place between local authorities in Wales for the delivery of adoption services.
- 3.3 Schedule 1 of the Directions sets out which local authorities must collaborate with each other. For the Western Bay region the local authorities are Swansea, Bridgend

and Neath Port Talbot. Swansea host and manage the regional service on behalf of the partner agencies, this having been approved by the Cabinet in all three local authorities in April 2014.

3.4 The Western Bay Adoption Service (WBAS) is integrated into the National Adoption Service (NAS) as one of the five identified regional collaboratives. The National Service is underpinned by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015.

3.5 The broad aims of the joint adoption arrangements across Wales as specified in the Directions include:

- Consistent and high quality service
- Keeping delay to a minimum
- Widest choice possible of placement
- Eliminating waiting lists for training and assessments
- Improving the matching process
- Streamlining adoption services improved liaison between adoption social workers
- Keeping breakdowns to a minimum by providing adequate adoption support
- Collaborative working between local authorities, voluntary agencies, health and education services

3.6 The Management and oversight arrangements of the National Service consist of:-

Governance Board

3.7 Includes representatives from each agency:

- Spokesperson and Deputy Spokesperson from the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) for Health & Social Services
- Mayor or executive leader of the Host Authority
- Independent Chairperson of the Advisory Group
- Representative on behalf of the voluntary agencies
- Elected member representation for each region

3.8 The functions of the Governance Board include; strategic direction, approval of the annual work programme, ensuring the views of stakeholders are represented, the monitoring and oversight of performance, complaints, engagement with voluntary agencies, service user representatives, budget and financial, Welsh language, and reporting to the Welsh Ministers.

3.9 The nominated elected member representative for Western Bay on the Governance Board is Councillor Alan Lockyer from Neath Port Talbot.

Advisory Group

3.10 Includes the following representatives from:

- each collaborative Head of Children's Service
- the Association of the Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru
- the Association of Directors of Education in Wales

- the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)
- 3 from voluntary organisations
- Legal adviser from the host local authority
- Health professional for Looked After Children
- Medical advisor to an adoption panel
- Community Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
- Service User
- Social Research Centre

3.11 The functions of the Advisory Group include:

- Provision of professional advice and support to the Governance Board
- Supporting the effective operation of the service
- Notifying the Welsh Minister of any issues

3.12 The City of Cardiff Council has been given the role of Lead Authority for the National Adoption Service and, as host authority, it works with key partners to run an all-Wales adoption website, developing a centre of excellence for adoption services and employing a Director of Operations for Wales.

Director of Operations and Central Team

3.13 The functions of the Director of Operations and Central Team include:

- Production of an annual work programme to include priorities and targets
- Financial plans and budget responsibilities
- Monitoring and analysis of performance data
- Determine actions to address issues arising
- Improvements and developments of the service
- Submission of a 6 monthly and annual progress and financial report
- Analysis of reports from regional collaboratives
- Establish and maintain website
- Co-ordination of pre-approval training and adoption support services

3.14 In addition to the development of the National Service and the Central Team, a Wales Adoption Register has been developed which is hosted by the Central Team operating on the principle of keeping Welsh children in Wales.

3.15 As referred to in paragraph 3.3, the 2015 Directions prescribe the membership of five regional collaboratives for the National Adoption Services with Bridgend County Borough Council presently forming part of the Western Bay regional collaborative with the City and County of Swansea Council and Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council.

4. Current situation/proposal

4.1 Western Bay Adoption Service (WBAS) became fully operational in April 2015. Prior to this adoption services were delivered locally via the three local authorities.

4.2 The regional adoption service provides a range of services and interventions across the five key domains to those affected by adoption. They are:-

- Assessing and supporting prospective adopters
- Assessing non-agency (parent/carer, formerly step-parent adoptions)
- Birth Record Counselling and Intermediary Services (BRC & IS)
- Adoption support (assessments and support services to anyone affected by adoption)
- Twin tracking and Family Finding (TT&FF), which involves working with birth families of children in or following care proceedings and once a Placement Order has been granted by court in searching for an adoptive placement

Performance and Activity

- 4.3 The attached annual performance report (**Appendix A**) outlines the performance for the regional adoption service for 2020/21.
- 4.4 2020 has been a very challenging year and saw the service having to consider how it could continue to operate during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Staff within the service have worked tirelessly to ensure that it has very much continued as business as usual and have adapted all the work that is needed to be completed via Virtual means. Panel, Assessments, family finding and adoption support tasks have continued via virtual means with risk assessments in place for limited face to face work when it has been needed. The work that this report highlights is testament to the commitment and drive of the staff group. Despite the challenges that this has brought the service has continued to deliver on both local and national objectives and maintain many aspects of performance
- 4.5 Key achievements for the year including for Bridgend children include:-
- The number of children referred for twintracking to the service saw a 16% decrease on the previous year. 44 Bridgend children were referred compared to 62 in 2019-20. A higher proportion of these referrals resulted in a placement order being granted, the service saw a 10% increase on the previous year with 69 children having a plan of adoption approved by the Court. 26 children were made subject of a Placement order compared to 18 the previous year, however this included two siblings groups of 3 and a number of sibling pairs so this may account for the slight increase.
 - The number of children placed saw a slight decrease during the year mainly due to the impact of COVID during the early months of the Pandemic - 69 compared to 79 in 2019/20 but more similar in number to 2018/19 when 67 children were placed. The number of Bridgend children placed remained the same as the previous year with 20 children transitioning to their adoptive placement. Of the 69 children 24 children were in the 'harder to place' category, and this included 2 older children, 3 children who had additional needs, 1 sibling group of three children and 8 sibling pairs. 52% of children in the region were placed within 6 months of their placement order being granted.
 - Of the children placed during the year we continued to place more children with Western Bay adopters than in Inter-agency placements (IAs). By year end the service had placed 55 children within Western Bay and at the same time reduced

the number placed in inter-agency placements to only 14. Of the placements made 80% were placed with Western Bay adopters. The service held a number of virtual profile events which were well attended and produced a number of links. 17 children from Bridgend were placed with Western Bay adopters and 3 were placed in Inter-agency placements.

- There continues to be collaboration between the Family Finding and Adoption Support functions within the service to put together packages of support for more complex children or where placements need additional support. The Service is now working hard to implement the “Understanding The Child Day” meetings which identifies earlier on children’s likely support needs.
- The number of Adoption Orders granted (AOG) increased by one from the previous year from 62 to 63. Of the 63 Adoption Orders granted during the year 20 were Bridgend children. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 a number of the applications were contested, however, were dealt with by the Court in a timely way using virtual technology.
- Following a number of strategies implemented by both Western Bay Adoption Service, including the development of life-journey worker using Welsh Government Grant funding, and the local authorities, there has been a significant improvement in this area with all children going to matching panel having a draft life-journey book and later life letter. In relation to final versions being available at the second adoption review performance has steadily improved from 51% in 2018-19 to 83% in 2020-21.
- 2020-21 has seen a significant increase in the number of enquiries received - 260 enquiries were received despite the challenges of COVID, possibly because more people had time to look on online, undertake their own research; this is compared to 166 the previous year and was the first time the service has reached over 200. The marketing officer post is now firmly embedded in the service and is working closely with the three Local authority marketing teams and the national marketing service which is delivered by Cowshed. The focus this year will be on targeting recruitment activity specifically in Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot.
- The number of adopters approved remain consistent at 53, one less than the previous year. 9 of these adopters came from the Bridgend area. 79% of the adopters approved were approved within the National Benchmark of 6 months.
- The service saw a 34% decrease in the number of new adoption support assessments commencing. The additional Welsh Government funding has enabled the adoption support team to grow to meet the demand and be able to focus on early intervention strategies to support adoptive families. The team work creatively to offer all adopters support early in placement e.g attendance at therapeutic parenting courses in an attempt to reduce later higher cost interventions. It is positive to note that adopters no longer have to wait for an initial assessment which had been the case in previous years.

4.6 The service plan reflects the key priorities for the coming year, the service are very aware that this year has been very different due to the Pandemic and the forthcoming year will be very much recovery. Areas and priorities for future development for the forthcoming year are:

- Embedding the national good practice guides within current practice.
- Learning from cases that have not gone as well as we would have liked, these will be considered at whole service events, panel business meetings and a summary provided to the interface meetings and management Board.
- Leading the development of the WCCIS adoption module with NAS.
- Develop quarterly panel business meetings responsible for monitoring quality assurance, performance and learning.
- Implement the two stage model for adopter assessments which will now be formally launched in October 2021.
- Marketing focus will need to be intensified in Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot.
- Recruitment work to consider with prospective adopters the needs of the children in family finding, attempting to narrow the gap in children and adopters waiting.
- Embed the nationally agreed core offer of adoption support
- Provide training in direct work to Children's social workers to support their understanding of why they are looked after.
- Offer an increased range of support to birth parents, eg start up a birth parent support group, working closely with the three regional Reflect services.
- Offer holiday and after school activities throughout the region to adopted young people and their families.
- Strengthen the interface arrangements between the three Local authorities' front door and early intervention service and the adoption service.

Conclusions

4.7 The current overall position of the regional adoption service remains positive. The overall assessment of the service during these difficult times is good, new ways of working have been identified for all aspects of the work of the service and performance has very much remained on target in the majority of areas. The service has continued to develop significant areas of the service and a growing number of adopters have agreed to support marketing activity. The use of virtual media necessitated by COVID-19 has also supported new ways of training and learning which will be continued after COVID-19 is over. Morale in staff across the service is good, and staff actively support new service developments.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

5.1 There is no effect on the Policy framework and Procedure rules.

6. Equality Act 2010 implications

6.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales, the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies,

strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an EIA in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

7.1 The implementation of the duties and responsibilities under the Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales) (SSWBA) 2014, in turn, supports the promotion of two of the seven goals of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 within the County Borough of Bridgend. By promoting an environment that maximises people's physical and mental well-being and by supporting children, young people, adults and their carers and families to fulfil their potential no matter what their circumstances, the wellbeing goals of a healthier and more equal Bridgend and Wales are supported.

7.2 The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides the basis for driving a different kind of public service in Wales, with five ways of working to guide how the Authority should work to deliver wellbeing outcomes for people. The following is a summary to show how the relevant well-being goals have been considered in this report:

- **Long Term** – Social Services is demand led and the SSWBA focusses on sustainable wellbeing outcomes for the future. There is a requirement to meet the needs of people in the longer term and, because of rising demographics and increasing complexity, the transformation of services continues to be a priority.
- **Integration** – the implementation of the SSWBA and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015 requires local authorities to work with partners, particularly the NHS and Education, to ensure care and support for people and support for carers is provided. The report evidences work with partners to enable children to be placed in permanent arrangements.
- **Collaboration** – The collaborative approaches described in the report, are managed and monitored through the regional collaborative management board and the National Adoption Service Advisory Group and Governance Board where there is local authority and sector stakeholder representation.
- **Involvement** – the key stakeholders are the people who use social care. There is considerable engagement including surveys, stakeholder meetings, feedback forms and the complaints process. The provision of accessible information and advice helps to ensure that the voice of adults, children and young people is heard.

8. Financial implications

8.1 There are no specific financial implications arising directly out of this report.

9. Recommendation

9.1 It is recommended that Corporate Parenting committee considers and notes the performance and progress of the Regional Adoption Service.

Claire Marchant
CORPORATE DIRECTOR SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING
September 2021

Contact officer: Nichola Rogers,
Regional Adoption Manager

Telephone: (01639) 685396

Email: n.rogers@westernbayadoption.org

Postal address: Port Talbot County Borough Council Civic Centre, Port Talbot,
SA13 1PJ

Background documents:

- Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions
- The Adoptions Agencies (Wales) regulations 2007