

Meeting of:	CABINET COMMITTEE CABINET REPORT CORPORATE PARENTING
Date of Meeting:	1 FEBRUARY 2024
Report Title:	MONITORING THE PERFORMANCE AND PROGRESS OF THE WESTERN BAY REGIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	CORPORATE DIRECTOR – SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING
Responsible Officer:	NICHOLA ROGERS – REGIONAL ADOPTION MANAGER
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	The content of the report does not have any impact on policy frameworks or procedures.
Executive Summary:	The report is to update the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting of the work of the Regional Adoption Service. The Regional Service is based on the old Western Bay footprint (Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot and Swansea), and this is set out in legislation. In terms of operational work the service functions well and offers the adoptive families across the region an effective service. The report and its attachments highlight the breadth of work the region now covers and highlights key performance information over the last 12 months.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Cabinet Committee about the performance and progress of the Western Bay Regional Adoption Service, including the Quality of Service Report for Q3 & Q4 2022-23 (**Appendix A**) and the Quality of Service Report for Q1 & Q2 2023-24 (**Appendix B**)

2. Background

- 2.1 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 (NAS) 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.
- 2.2 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 effective joint arrangements are in place between local authorities in Wales for the delivery of adoption services

- 2.3 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 Cabinets in all three local authorities in April 2014.
- 2.4 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.
- 2.5 The Regional Service is overseen by a quarterly Management Board chaired by a Director (currently the Director from Neath Port Talbot Council). The Board is comprised of the Heads of Children's Services from the three local authorities, a representative from health (currently the Medical Advisor from Swansea Bay University Health Board), education (currently the Team Manager for Pupil Support in Swansea), the National Adoption Service Central team and also a representative from the Voluntary sector (currently the Director of Adoption UK). Twice yearly joint committees are also held which are attended by the three Heads of Service and the three lead cabinet members for children.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 Western Bay Adoption Service (WBAS) became fully operational in April 2015. Prior to this adoption services were delivered locally via the three local authorities.
- 3.2 The regional adoption service provides a range of services and interventions across the five key domains to those affected by adoption, these being:
- 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 the Court, in searching for an adoptive placement
 - Birth parent support

Performance and Activity

- 3.3 The attached Quality of Service reports at **Appendix A and Appendix B** outline the performance for the regional adoption service. These reports are regulatory and have to be completed every 6 months. The attached reports are for the last six months of 2022-23 (**Appendix A**) and for the first half of the current financial year 2023-24 (**Appendix B**).

The reports demonstrate that the service has continued to deliver on both local and national objectives and maintain many aspects of performance.

3.4 Key achievements for the year 2022-23 for Bridgend children include:

- The number of children referred for twintracking to the service saw a small rise on the previous year from 44 to 49 children however this is still a considerable decrease from 2019-20 when the number was 62. A higher proportion of these referrals resulted in a placement order (PO) being granted, with 18 Bridgend children having a plan of adoption approved by the Court. The service has seen a downward trend of PO's being granted for children across the three local authorities over the last two years, most likely attributable to the Born into Care work and resourcing of preventative work by the local authorities.
- The number of Bridgend children placed in 2022-23 was 11. Across the Region placements for children were achieved within 9.6 months from the time the placement order was granted until the date of placement. The target is 6 months. We are seeing that children have increasingly complex needs and the work to transition them to placement is hugely complex and time consuming. The data for this year is showing that this length of time to place has reduced to 7 months far closer to the performance target, however it is important to note that the majority of these placed children were children under 12 months.
- 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 24 children within Western Bay and at the same time reduced the number placed in inter-agency placements to only 11.
- 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 children's likely support needs earlier on.
- The number of Adoption Orders granted (AOG) remained steady with 17 Bridgend children being made subject of an Adoption order compared to 16 the previous year.
- Following a number of strategies implemented by Western Bay Adoption Service, including development of the role of life-journey worker using Welsh Government Grant funding, 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 77% in 2022-23. Although this figure is below the target of 100%, this is likely to be attributable to the high turnover in social work staff.
- 2022-23 has been a difficult year in relation to the number of enquiries received, which was 164 compared to 224 the previous year. NAS have commissioned a piece of insight work through Cowshed, their commissioned marketing provider, to explore the reasons behind this as this was a trend seen across Wales. It is

likely that the cost of living crisis had a role to play in individuals' considerations. The marketing officer post is now firmly embedded in the service and is working closely with the three local authority marketing teams and Cowshed. There has been a continued marketing presence in the Bridgend area and it is pleasing to note that 14 adoptive families were approved from the area this year compared to 10 last year.

- The reduction in enquiries led to a decrease in adopters being approved, 31 compared to 52 the previous year.
- 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.
- The additional resource has also enabled a focus to be given to support birth parents. Three monthly support groups are held; the Bridgend group meets in the Hope Church hall the first Tuesday of every month. Birth parents from across the region also come together every quarter for a wellbeing event. We currently have over 50 birth mothers engaged in the groups across the Region.
- The service has also developed a regional youth group which is held weekly and is attended by 15 young people most of whom have been unable to engage with their peer group previously due to their challenging and additional needs. Members of the youth group have been able to attend the pantomime together, have been surfing, and undertaken bush craft activities.

3.5 The service plan reflects the key priorities for the coming year. The service are very aware that the forthcoming years will be very difficult due to budget pressures facing the local authority. Areas and priorities for future development for the forthcoming year are:

- Further embedding the National Good Practice Guides within current practice.
- Working closely with the three local authorities to consider respite and edge of care support to our most challenging adopted children.
- Re-modelling of the service to align with the available budget, a forward look at the service over the next 1, 3 and 5 years.
- To increase the number of approved adopters to 40 next year. To ensure a continued marketing focus in each of the local authority areas.
- Further implement the Building Undeveloped Sensory Systems (BUSS) model of sensory processing, being able to offer sensory assessments to our adopted children.
- Continue our Partnership with Foster Wales at local and regional level

3.6. **Concluding comments**

The current overall position of the regional adoption service remains positive. The overall assessment of the service is good and performance has very much remained on target in the majority of areas. The service has continued to develop significant areas of the service such as post adoption contact and birth parent support and a growing number of adopters are now supporting marketing activity. Morale in staff across the service is good, and staff actively support new service developments. There is a growing community of adoptive families in the region that actively attend support events, playgroups and support groups.

4. **Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)**

- 4.1 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 Equality Impact assessment 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.

5. **Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives**

- 5.1 The implementation of the duties and responsibilities under the Social Services and Well-being 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 well-being goals of a Healthier and more equal Bridgend and Wales are supported.
- 5.2 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.

6. Climate Change Implications

6.1 The service strives to work in line with the Councils climate change ambitions.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 The service works under the BCBC Safeguarding Policy to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of children, young people and adults at risk of abuse or neglect and to ensure that effective practices are in place throughout the Regional Adoption Service.

8. Financial Implications

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

9. Recommendation(s)

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

Background documents

None