

Meeting of:	CABINET COMMITTEE CORPORATE PARENTING
Date of Meeting:	7 MAY 2025
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 the policy framework or procedure rules.
Executive Summary:	The report is to update the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting of the work of the Regional Adoption Service during 2024-25. The Regional Service is based on the old Western Bay footprint (Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot and Swansea Councils), 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 Quarter 3 & Quarter 4 2024-25 (**Appendix A**) which includes the end of year performance information.

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 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). The Management Board meets quarterly, and 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 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 following 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 including Birth family members)
 - 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
 - Support to adopted young people

Performance and Activity

- 3.3 The attached Quality of Service report at **Appendix A** outlines the performance for the regional adoption service for 2024-25. This report is a regulatory requirement and has to be completed every 6 months. The attached report covers the activity in the service for the last six months, October 2024 to March 2025 along with the performance information for the whole year.

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 2024-24 for Bridgend children include:

- The number of children referred for twin-tracking to the service saw a 50 % decrease in the figure in comparison to the trend in numbers of referrals since 2020-21. Consequently there was also a 50% reduction in the number of children who had an agreed plan of adoption at the end of care proceedings. The service has seen a downward trend of Placement Orders being granted for children across Bridgend over the last three years, most likely attributable to the stabilisation of the work force and the implementation of a new practice model in the service.
- The number of Bridgend children placed in 2024-25 was 6. 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. At the end of Quarter 3 the region had achieved an average time scale of 6.7 months with 75% of children being placed within the 6 month benchmark. 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 increased slightly due to the time taken to place sibling groups and children with complex needs.
- Regionally, 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 29 children within Western Bay and at the same time reduced the number placed in inter-agency placements to only 6.
- 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) increased very slightly with 11 Bridgend children being made subject of an Adoption order compared to 10 the previous year, although this number will further reduce due to the lower numbers of children with an agreed plan of adoption.
- 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 97% of 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 88% at the end of Q3 in 2024-25.

- 2024-25 has continued to be a difficult year in relation to the number of enquiries received from prospective adopters, which was 194 compared to 213 the previous year. This is a situation that is being replicated across all the regions and there is ongoing work taking place at the National Marketing and recruitment sub group to explore the reasons behind this and to consider what the regions can do to address this. The marketing officer post is now firmly embedded in the service and is working closely with the three local authority marketing teams and Cowshed. Cowshed are the Marketing company commissioned by the National Adoption Service Central Team to support with the national marketing activity. Although there has been a continued marketing presence in the Bridgend area, the service approved fewer adopters from the Bridgend Area (5) than in the previous year (8).
- Despite the reduction in enquiries, there was a slight increase in the number of adopters that were approved, 29 compared to 27 the previous year.
- The additional Welsh Government funding has enabled the adoption support team to meet the demand and be able to focus on early intervention strategies to support adoptive families. The service does not have a waiting list of families needing an initial or adoption assessment. The service operates a virtual hub arrangement when adopters not currently open to the service are able to meet with service staff to discuss any emerging adoption support needs. This means that the right support can quickly be provided.
- The service works closely with the CLASS service in Bridgend to ensure that adopted children's therapeutic needs are met.
- 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 18 young people, most of whom have been unable to engage with their peer group previously due to their challenging and additional needs.

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:

- Reviewing Adoption panel membership to ensure that panel represents the diversity of our adoption community.
- Update the service young person's guide to adoption and develop an adoption support guide for young people accessing adoption support.
- 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.

- Re-instate the adopter focus group to ensure that our adopters continue to feed into new service developments.
- Implement an adoption support evaluation pack to gather the views of those using the service and to measure the effectiveness of the interventions that are offered, this will include measuring the distanced travelled by families against the goals they set as part of the intervention plan.

Concluding Comments

- 3.6 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

- 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