



Gwasanaeth
Mabwysiadu
Cenedlaethol

National
Adoption
Service

**Achieving More Together /
Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd**

ANNUAL REPORT **2019-20**





FOREWORD

This report focuses on progress, improvements, and challenges for the National Adoption Service (NAS) in 2019/20. It is being published as we emerge from the unprecedented Coronavirus pandemic which has significantly affected lives and society since the end of March 2020.

This report focuses on the year up to March 2020; we felt it important to continue with this publication while acknowledging that our next public reports will undoubtedly comment on the impact of the pandemic. This report highlights:

- the crucial importance of dynamic collaboration between Local Government, Voluntary Adoption Agencies, and the NAS Central Team to meet and deliver excellent adoption services in Wales;
- that listening and engagement with adopters, prospective adopters, children and young people continues to influence and shape the priorities for adoption services in Wales;
- the intelligent use and scrutiny of data, research evidence, and the skills and experience of the workforce continues to influence adoption service priorities; and
- the important contribution of all organisations in the NAS collaborative, statutory and voluntary adoption services working together effectively in making a positive difference to the long term futures of children.

Placing children, recruitment of adopters, continued improvement of adoption support services, have all been important activities during 2019/20. The Adoption UK Barometer of adoption services across the UK highlighted significant progress and satisfaction with the development of adoption services in Wales.

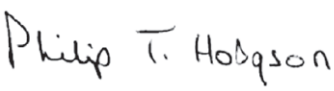
The support and financial investment by the Welsh Government during 2019/20 has been welcomed by adopters and the workforce and is making a positive difference.

We thank adopters, children & young people for influencing how services are improved and delivered in Wales. Equally, we thank all staff in the National Adoption Service wales wide for their hard work and dedication.




Councillor Alan Lockyer
Co-Chair of Governance Board




Phil Hodgson
Independent Chair of the Advisory Group




Suzanne Griffiths
Director

INTRODUCTION

The National Adoption Service for Wales is the collaboration for the provision of adoption services across Wales.

Since November 2014, it has brought together all local authority adoption services into five regional collaboratives, with co-ordination and leadership provided by a small central team and Director. Voluntary adoption agencies operating in Wales are key partners in the collaborative, as are other agencies including health and education.

CENTRAL TEAM



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ALL WALES VOLUNTARY ADOPTION AGENCIES SERVICES

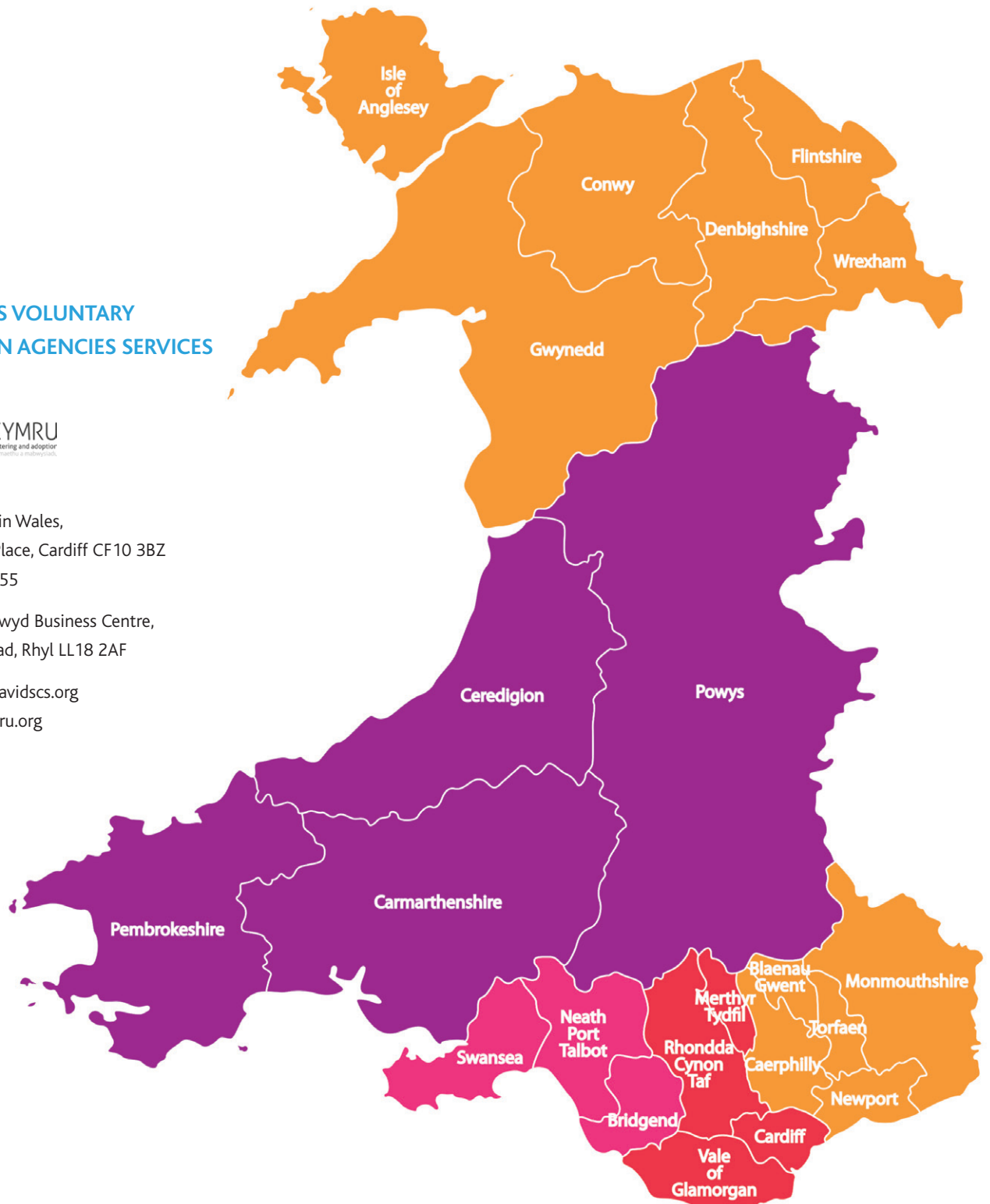


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PRIORITIES FOR 2019/20

NAS' improvement priorities for 2019/20 are described below. This report demonstrates how much has been achieved.

PLACING MORE CHILDREN

- Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting including use of 'Adopting Together' for children who wait longest
- Embed the new Adoption Register for Wales to speed up matching of children through quicker notification of children and adopters in line with revised regulations

CONTINUING TO IMPROVE ADOPTION SUPPORT

- Implementing the Adoption Support Framework and investment plans
- Continuing to raise awareness amongst professionals and the public

THINKING AHEAD

- Continuing to co-produce and use information from engagement
- Using data from the revised performance measurement system
- Working to improve the legal, policy and evidence framework that affects adoption
- Encouraging the development of workforce understanding and skills to meet NAS priorities

WELSH GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT

During 2019/20 the Welsh Government investment of £2.3m in adoption services began and an additional £100k, in a 'one off' grant, was made available to fund a second 'burst' of our adopter recruitment campaign.

The Central Team and the five Regions were each allocated a proportion of the £2.3m investment. The majority of the investment was used to create capacity in new and additional services in both local government and the voluntary sector.

The additional £100k allowed NAS to extend the period of television, radio and outside of home advertising at supermarkets and buses.

PLACING MORE CHILDREN

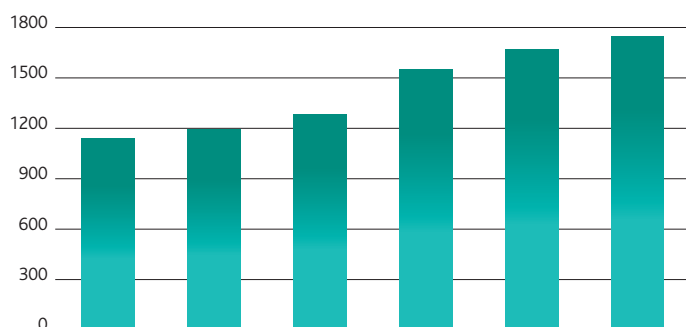
Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting, including using the new 'Adopting Together' service for children who wait longest

ADOPTERS – TRENDS IN APPROVALS, ENQUIRIES AND NEW ASSESSMENTS

Our aim is to recruit more adopters, to place more children in a timely way and to have choice in meeting the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan.

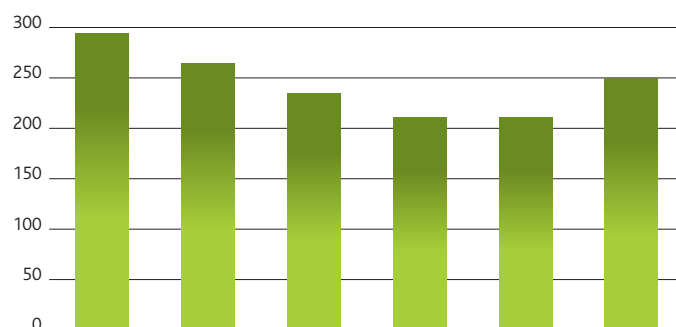
- Adopter approvals increased by 18% overall, new enquiries by a further 5% and there was also a small increase of 3% in adopter assessments commencing.
- Nearly half of adopters were approved within 6 months of their application; on average it takes 6.5 months for an adopter to be approved which is positive and in line with guidance.
- The number of approved adopters waiting for a match at the end of the year increased.
- The gap between families needed and adopters available reduced during 2019/20 by 26% to circa 170 families.

Number of initial enquiries



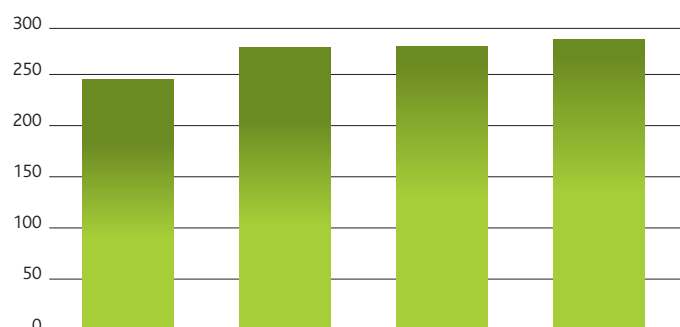
2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
1,161	1,197	1,280	1,550	1,687	1,764

Number of adopters approved



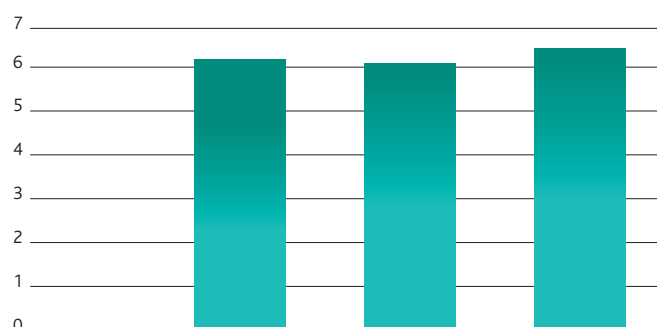
2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
294	266	236	212	212	250

Number of adopter assessments started



2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
246	277	278	286

Average timeframe (months) from application to adopter approval



	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Months	6.2	6.1	6.5

Benchmark: 6 months or less



Recruitment drive at Pride



Exhibiting at the National Eisteddfod for Wales



HOW ARE WE IMPROVING RECRUITMENT?

- We created and delivered a new recruitment campaign **#become the parent only you could be** that featured real adopters from our adoption champions which was shown on TV, on buses and in supermarkets as well as on social media. commencing during National Adoption Week in October 2019.
- The Welsh Government invested an additional £100,000 to enable a second 'burst' of the campaign from January 2020 onwards.
- The above was facilitated by Cowshed PR and Communications with whom we now have a contract to support national and regional/agency marketing.
- Cowshed assisted in co-ordinating staff from services across Wales to work together on recruitment 'stands' at a number of high-profile events such as the National Eisteddfod for Wales and Pride.
- All Regions now have a Marketing and Recruitment Officer in post to support the recruitment campaigns as well as respond to initial enquiries.
- Revised information for adopters about making an enquiry.
- New leaflet to accompany the recruitment campaign.
- New guidance for staff on dealing with enquiries, and
- The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on the website was updated to 'bust myths' about who can adopt based on a survey undertaken during the summer events.

ADOPTING TOGETHER SERVICE

2019/20 was the first full year of the Adopting Together Service (ATS) which was developed by the Welsh Voluntary Adoption Services for NAS in order to find and support families for children waiting longest for adoptive homes in Wales.

It provides specialist adopter recruitment, enhanced training for adopters, peer buddying, and customised therapeutic and psychological support to adopters through this service.

The service has placed 14 children for adoption since it was launched in June 2018: 8 during 2019/20. At time of writing the service was considering 46 active referrals and undertaking 2 child specific recruitment campaigns.

Ben adopted a sibling group with his partner talked about their experience of Adopting Together:

"Adopting Together enabled us to have more of an open mind with what we thought we were looking for, and we quickly realised there was no point overlooking children just because they didn't fit our initial perceptions of the 'ideal' age. With older children, you have a much clearer picture of how they are developing than you might have with a baby."

Embed the Adoption Register for Wales, to speed up matching of children through quicker notification of children and adopters, in line with revised regulations.



Cofrestr Fabwysiadu **Cymru**
Adoption Register **Wales**

ADOPTION REGISTER WALES

The new Adoption Register for Wales (ARW) was launched in June 2019. It is a fully bilingual, online family finding service with managed adopter access. Using Link Maker, a quick and easy to use secure system, the Register supports services in Wales to match children with adopters and reduce their waiting time.

ADOPTION REGISTER ACTIVITY

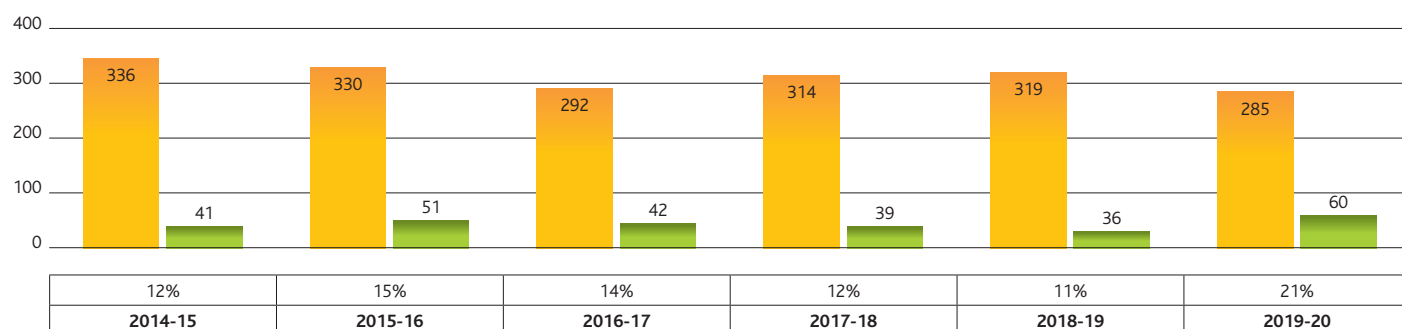
308 children were referred alongside 193 prospective adopters who had either self-registered or been referred by their agencies. This is a similar number of children to the previous year but 62% more adopters, which may be linked to adopters being able to access the service directly and the change in the regulations whereby children and adopters should be referred earlier.

A total of 285 matches have occurred in Wales this year, 60 of which were identified via the register, a comparison with 36 and 39 from previous years. This is a significant increase on previous years to 21%, given that matches via the register had varied between 11% and 15%.

As the new register becomes more firmly embedded we will continue to analyse these trends.

Register Matches

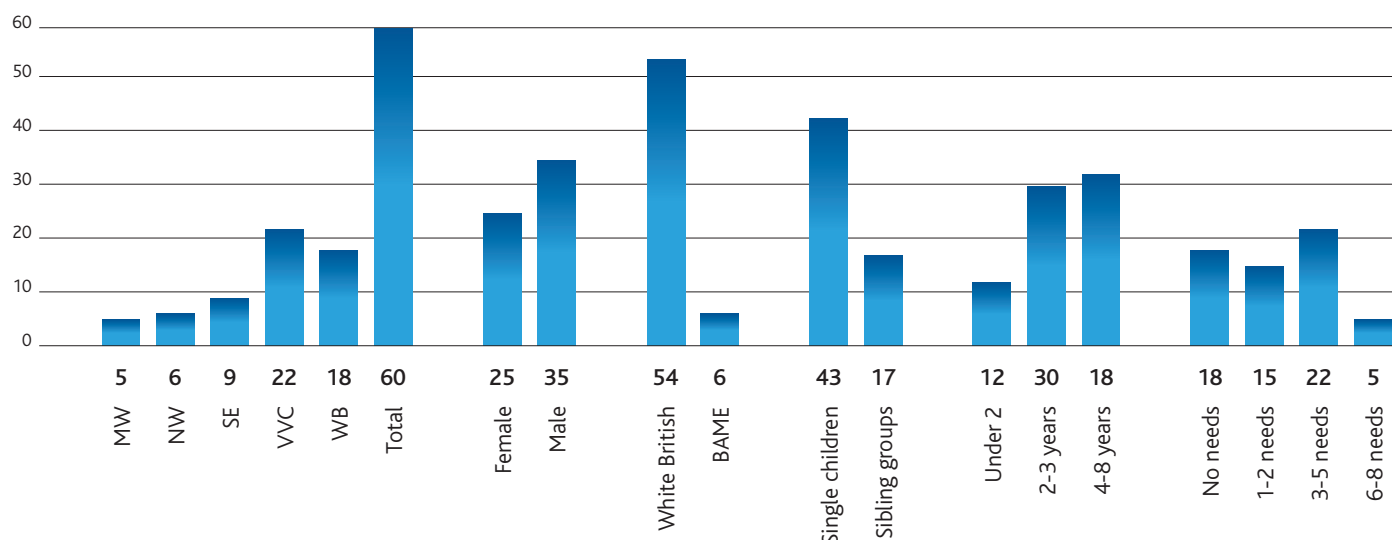
■ All matches ■ Register matches



Matches

The graph below shows 70% (n42) of the 60 children placed via the register were children who might wait longer for placement due to their identified additional needs or increased likelihood of additional needs. It also shows that 80% (n48) were over 2 years of age, 70% (n41) had attachment difficulties and 36% (n22) were classed as having behavioural difficulties and/or emotional difficulties.

Matches made through ARW 2019-20

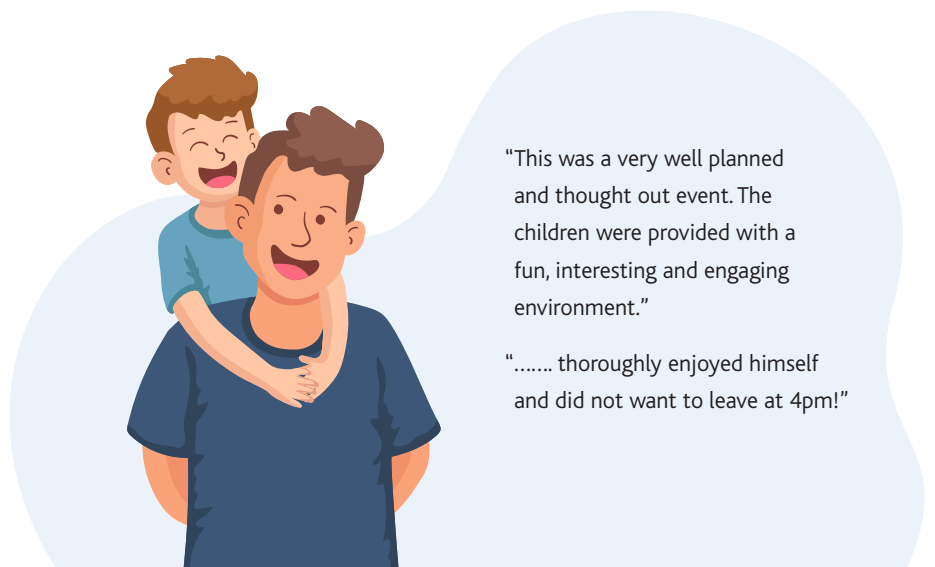




A 4th **Adoption Activity Day** was held in Wales in March 2020. These have become an established method of matching children waiting for adoptive placement, particularly for children who have been waiting longer to find potential adoptive families, some of whom may have additional needs. The event this year followed a similar schedule as had proved successful in previous years although due to the emerging Covid-19 situation required some adjustments.

As a result, there were 17 expressions of interest (compared to 14 in 2018/19) from families and these are in the process of being followed up.

There were also two Exchange Days held during the year in Cardiff and Colwyn Bay respectively. A total of 27 families attended with 136 children profiled, the majority being part of sibling groups and with complex needs. As a result of these events there were 4 successful matches (in comparison to 3 in 2018/19).

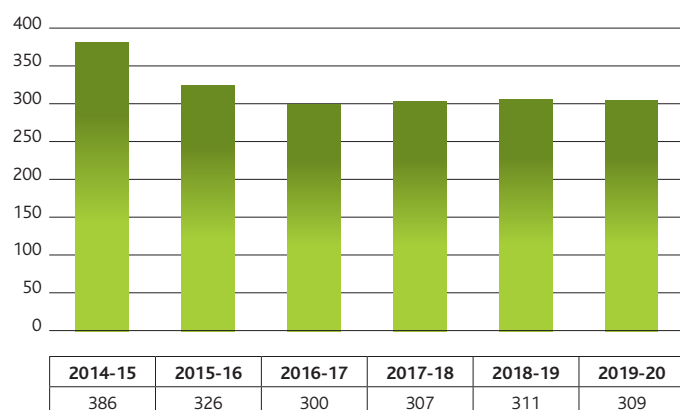


"This was a very well planned and thought out event. The children were provided with a fun, interesting and engaging environment."

"..... thoroughly enjoyed himself and did not want to leave at 4pm!"

What was the overall impact on placing children in 19/20?

Number of children placed for adoption

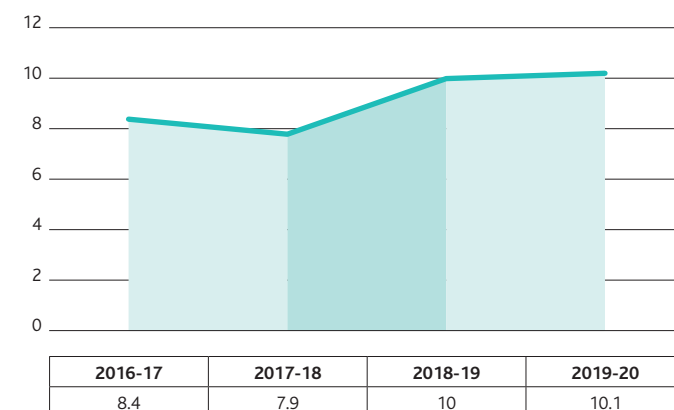


The number of children waiting for an adoption placement reduced during 2019/20.

- Overall 309 children were placed, a similar number to the last three years.
- Circa 270 adoption orders were granted for children already placed.
- The number of children waiting at the end of the year (31.03.20) reduced to 270. This included a further 68 children with a 'firm link' which was likely to be agreed plus 22 children who were likely to have their status changed back to long term 'looked after'.
- As such there was active family finding for 179 children at the end of the year.



Average timeframe (in months) from PO to PFA



Research and best practice emphasise the importance to children of being placed as soon as possible after their placement order is made.

- Average timescales for children being placed remained relatively static at 10.1 months, albeit a little above the benchmark of 8 months as outlined in guidance.

2019/20 saw some changes in demand for adoption with a reduction in children being referred, albeit not as large as that seen in 2015/16 after two significant High Court judgements.

- Referrals dropped by 21% from 2018/19 – all regions experienced a reduction.
- Placement orders dropped by 19% (n63) – all regions except for Mid & West Wales experienced a reduction.

The reasons for this are likely to be varied and will reflect the work being done by local authorities, with the Welsh Government, to reduce levels of 'looked after' children in Wales, including the positive impact of 'Edge of Care' and 'Reflect' services.

For adoption services this provides an opportunity to focus on further reducing the level of children waiting. It remains the case that circa one fifth of all children leaving the looked after system permanently do this through adoption.

CONTINUING TO IMPROVE ADOPTION SUPPORT



Implementing the Adoption Support Framework and investment plans

In 2016 NAS developed its strategic plan for the development of adoption support services in Wales.

With its distinctive umbrella symbol, the vision over time was to guarantee a 'Core Offer' of support for all Welsh adopted children and young people and their parents, as well as to others affected by adoption.

It is intended that this 'Core Offer' will:

- equip adoptive families at the start and support their early days to encourage healthy and confident families;
- provide effective information, advice or support as and when families need it and in a timely way so any issues that arise are less likely to escalate into more serious issues; and
- Provide ongoing support or easy re-entry to services where it is needed.

Realising this vision was given a huge boost when Welsh Government announced a £2.3m investment package from April 2019. The investment covered 14 objectives.

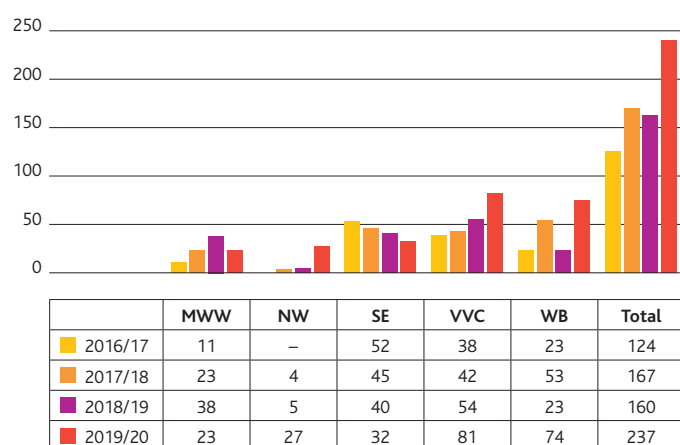


OVERVIEW OF ADOPTION SUPPORT PROVISION DURING 2019/20

The number of children whose plan included support from the time of placement remained relatively stable during 2019/20, comprising circa 35% of children placed. Although this remains a fairly low percentage, it is an increase from the estimates of circa 25% in the research that pre-dated NAS, as well as that undertaken by ourselves in 2015/16.

Similarly there was also an increase in the number of new assessments for adoption support carried out. These are for families / children who are not in receipt of ongoing support who develop support needs. This increased to 237 from 170 the previous year with increases concentrated in three regions.

Number of completed new assessments in respect of children that are currently not receiving an adoption support service



More than two thirds of new assessments result in therapeutic or practical support being provided, with the numbers of families receiving one off financial payments and adoption allowances continuing to decline slightly.

Taken together the above shows that more adoption support is being offered and taken up both before placement and post adoption.

In terms of other adoption support services:

- The number of active letterbox arrangements reached 3,819, an increase from last year. These are important links for adopted children helping them to gain information about their birth families and help them understand about their history;
- The overall level of requests from birth siblings for an assessment rose significantly, but this was largely concentrated in one region as a result of work focusing on this, with the trend across the other regions being a fall in requests;
- Requests for access to birth records also declined by a small amount overall, with some regions increasing and others reducing; and
- Requests for intermediary services also fell overall with all but one region experiencing a reduction.

THE NAS ADOPTION SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

2019/20 saw the first year of funding from the Welsh Government to implement specific elements of the Adoption Support Framework at national and regional levels, including some commissioned services from voluntary sector partners.

This £2.3m investment package was warmly welcomed by NAS and its partners enabling the first steps towards the step change in services that we want to make.



Implementation of the TESSA programme

The Therapeutic, Education and Support Services in Adoption (TESSA) programme is a Wales wide initiative that aims to empower adoptive parents, who are raising traumatised children, by giving them early access to a clinical psychologist as well as peer support. Research shows that up to two-thirds of adoptive parents in Wales require professional support at some point.

Adoption UK are our strategic partner for this initiative. Investment funding provides 5 regional posts and part funds the national infrastructure for this service, which also receives a share of UK wide Big Lottery and Communities Funding.

The service began delivery in November 2019, having spent the preceding months recruiting and training experienced parent partners to provide peer support across Wales and establishing the psychology service that undertakes assessments and provides support groups.

By the end of March the service had received 42 referrals. These families were all being supported by a parent partner and either had, or had planned in their assessment and/or support sessions, albeit that during March the service model switched to on-line due to Coronavirus. 16 consultations were held, 1 group involving 5 families delivered and 1 enhanced provision around child to parent violence.

Mary is one of the adoptive parents who is currently receiving peer support from Julie one of the parent partners. Mary and her partner adopted their son when he was nine months old. By the time he was four he had already gone through five nursery and school settings, all of which had broken down. Mary said: *"The lowest point came following the termination of one placement when we were told that he was "a naughty and nasty child who was bad for business". Mary recalled: "We were told about TESSA by Adoption UK and within weeks we had spent some quality time with a psychologist who helped us to piece together the jigsaw of our son's life and together we started to explore how we could approach things through his eyes. The support didn't stop there – we were partnered with a peer who also came to our house to listen and share experience. Less than two months on we've a detailed view of our son's needs; strategies to help ensure he feels happy and reassurance that we're doing the right things."*

Mary added: "We now look forward to working towards finding the right placement for our son to achieve his potential in September when he starts school."

A very successful Psychology symposium was held in early March, attended by more than 97 participants, where psychologists and other professionals joined with adoptive parents to discuss the TESSA approach and its roll out across Wales.

"The whole day was very good, it was well organised there were friendly faces on arrival. The food and singing were excellent. I really liked the message that it is the family and the environment that makes the difference for children's development and it's isn't about 'fixing the child'."

The conference was opened by the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services Julie Morgan MS, followed by an address from Lyne Neagle MS who, as chair of the National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee, was responsible for the influential 'Mind over Matter' report.



NEW NATIONAL SUPPORT AND INFORMATION SERVICE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

During 2019/20 the new 'Connected' service worked with 84 children and young people, alongside planning to expand into all parts of Wales in partnership with the NAS regions.

Adoption UK are our strategic partner for this initiative. Investment funding provided 5.6 posts, one national co-ordinator post and one in each of the Regions.

There are the four key elements to this service nationally:

1. Connected groups which will be available across Wales;
2. Information and advice – About adoption available to young people through the same channels that they access other information;
3. Being heard and respected – Gathering the views and priorities of adopted children and young people and feed them into regional and national plans in a systematic and fully participative way. It includes a young adopted adult's ambassador scheme with two young adults already signed up; and
4. Awareness and upskilling – Awareness raising and upskilling mainstream youth/play services to ensure they understand and respond better to the needs of adopted children and young people.

The existing connected groups have provided much positive feedback on the benefits of spending time with their peers in the sessions:

"It is good because I don't have to explain things to them and they don't say stupid things like 'what happened to your real mum then?'"

"My friends at school don't get what it is like to be adopted and I can't talk to them about it. When I have tried before, they didn't understand what I was talking about. I like being with other adopted kids because I don't feel like I am the only one."

"Yes to me it's just 'normal' being adopted, so to meet other people who are normal like me is great."



Charlotte is a young ambassador

"Some people might call me an adoptee, I call myself an adopted person, but day to day you can call me Charlotte because that's my name and I prefer my labels on clothes not people. There are so many positives associated with adoption however there are also some negatives experienced as well. Everyone is different and experiences and feels adoption differently. Being adopted to me, means being given a second chance at life. I grew up with an incredible set of kind and supportive parents who gave me age appropriate information throughout my life and so I'd always known I was adopted I just hadn't always fully grasped what it meant and the impact it would have on me and my life and it wasn't until I fully understood what being adopted meant, that I started to feel a sense of loss.

The way I would describe transitioning from knowing I was adopted to understanding I was adopted is experiencing the feelings of the grieving process, and I dealt with each feeling at a different age and time in my life. Denial being the stage where I knew I was adopted but didn't fully understand what it meant. In my teens I experienced the anger, bargaining and depression and guilt stages of the process where I understood what adoption was but it led to the 'why, what, how' questions that made me feel angry thinking of the likely answers and not having a way to find out. I would often fantasize about my biological parents and what it would be like to meet them and then when I really began to understand that my fantasies wouldn't be reality, that's when the depression and guilt hit because I didn't have a life story book, I felt a sense of loss because I was told different things by different people throughout my life that it didn't feel like my story, it felt like a bunch of people each contributing a piece to the puzzle that was my life. And I wanted to experience building that puzzle, so when I understood that the control wasn't necessarily mine, it hurt.

When I was first told about talk adoption I won't lie, it was daunting because I hadn't ever really talked to anyone else about my adoption and had always kept my experience on the down low so it felt like I ripping a plaster off a cut that hadn't quite healed yet, and showing the world. I was 14 when I was luckily introduced to talk adoption and the wonderful Ruth Letten, who has unknowingly been my life coach throughout the process, she gave me a safe space to explore and process all my emotions and feelings in an authentic way, through art, communication, drama, and engaging with other adopted young people, while also encouraging and allowing me to be 100% unapologetically myself. I was both nervous and excited to see what talk adoption was all about and I didn't for a second anticipate just how impactful it would be for me and so many other young adopted people.

Talk adoption [now 'Connected'] has been one of the greatest things to have been created in the last decade because it's helped shape me as a person and has given me so great opportunities to get my voice and the voices of other adopted people heard. Without the continued encouragement and support from both my parents and Ruth, I wouldn't have been able to reach the final stage of the grieving process, acceptance and for that I'm forever thankful and in debt. Since reaching the stage of acceptance I have been able to change my mind set from 'why did this happen' to 'how can I help others through their struggles and that's why I've put more time into volunteering at the talk adoption groups rather than using the service, because I realised I no longer needed help but I still want to help others and hope others can benefit from my experience."



EMBEDDING THE NEW LIFE JOURNEY MATERIALS FRAMEWORK

NAS continues to work on improving the content, quality and availability of Life Journey Materials for adopted children, young people and their families. We've continued to work on and implement the new Framework and Good Practice Guide for Life Journey work in Wales which was launched in 2016.

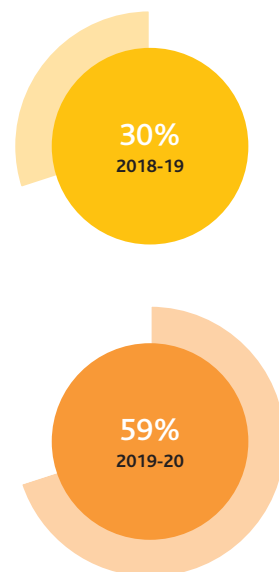
All children who cannot be cared for by their birth families, need to have an understanding of their family history and their unique journey through life journey materials which support a child's identity, promote self-esteem, and help give the child a sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Working with staff across Wales and supported by AFA Cymru, the on-line resources have been increased with additional guides and tools for birth parents and foster carers added this year. Work is ongoing to make the ever increasing range of on line resources for this work accessible and usable by both adoptive parents and staff.

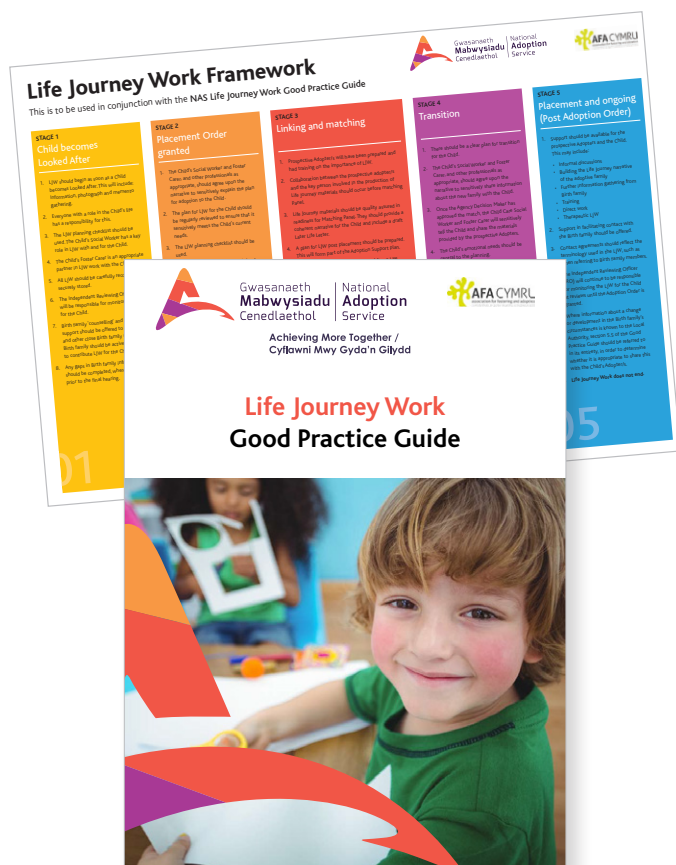
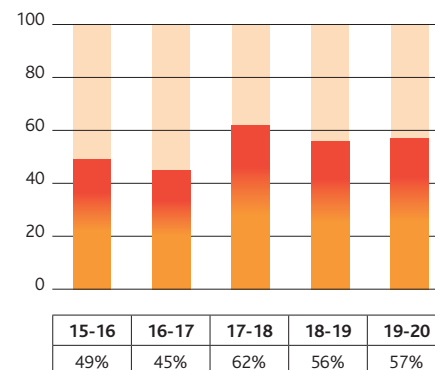
The investment funding has enabled a champion 'co-ordinator' post to be created in each of the five NAS regions, in order to better implement the approach consistently. One region has used some of its funding to create posts in its local authorities to deepen this consistency with staff who manage children's cases.

- The proportion of children whose life journey work was available at the time they were matched, has improved significantly to 59%.
- The impact on availability of life journey work at the second adoption review is less clear currently although, at 57%, the slow upwards trend continues.
- There are now up to 14 posts across Wales focused on this important area of work with some impact becoming clear; there have been significant improvements in the region that is using investment to work on this in its local authorities.

Proportion of children who had their Life Journey materials at matching panel



Proportion of children who had their Life Journey materials at second adoption review





NEW BEST PRACTICE APPROACHES

AfA Cymru have been commissioned as our strategic partner for this work. Drawing in relevant research and expertise and working with regions, VAA's across Wales and the central team, they are supporting NAS to develop new best practice approaches to:

- Transitions and early placement support (including Adopting Together);
- Contact arrangements for adopted children;
- Work with birth parents; and
- An updated good practice framework and approach to adoption support assessment, planning and review.

Alongside this, regions have invested in capacity to begin to deliver improved ways of working in these areas.

Placing children and providing early support

During the year AfA Cymru have been developing the 'good practice guides', drawing on the expertise and developing services that exist in regions and VAA's, as well as drawing on research and existing models. It is in final draft with plans to launch during 2020/21.

The aim is that all children and adoptive families in Wales will benefit from a consistent and supported approach to introductions, placement and early support shaped to their needs. Investment funding provides 5 posts with each region investing in staff capacity to implement these approaches.

The investment funding in 2019/20 also subsidised the local authority costs of the Adopting Together placements made in 2019/20.

A NEW BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO CONTACT

As above AfA Cymru have been developing the 'good practice guides', drawing on the expertise and developing services that exist in regions and VAA's as well as drawing on research, existing models and linking into the other work that has been continuing in Wales. This is also in a final draft stage with plans to launch during 2020/21 and there are posts funded in two regions.

- The Central Team continues to work with Voices from Care (VfC), Children in Wales and other partners (AUK, AfA Cymru, Children in Wales, Cardiff University, the Fostering Network) to respond to the Children's Commissioner for Wales 2016/17 recommendation that "The Welsh Government should work with the National Adoption Service (NAS) to ensure that siblings' rights to contact are fully considered during adoption care planning". This has become known as the 'Sibling Alliance'.
- As a result of this collaborated with the Children's Legal Centre for Wales to produce and publish an 'Advice Leaflet' on contact for children and young people who are adopted or looked after.
- The Sibling Alliance are currently developing a 'pledge' for children and young people who are separated from their siblings. The intention is that this will gain the support from all public and voluntary organisations to make improvements. This is currently at the consultation stage after which it will be shared widely with all professional stakeholders, Ministers and the Judiciary in order to steer improved practice in planning for contact.

A NEW FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO WORKING WITH BIRTH PARENTS

Again, AfA Cymru have been developing the 'good practice guides' drawing on the expertise and developing services in regions and VAA's, as well as drawing on research and existing models alongside considering the linkages with the network of **Reflect**¹ projects that are now in place across Wales. This will also be launched in 2020/21. Three of the regions have created 4 posts to support work with birth parents.

During 2019/20 more than 330 birth parents took up services from the NAS regions. There were more than 650 birth parents referred of which a high percentage were offered a service; take up in the first year is low but improves considerably when looking at parents from previous years. Again, take up is improved in those regions where the investment has been used to improve the service.

In one region the relationship with the **Reflect** service ensures birth parents are supported with some elements of adoption process. In South East Wales the **Reflect** process, to support birth parents and families at their farewell contact to their children, is based on constructive and positive information sharing and decision making. Birth parent feelings and wishes are included in when and how the final contact takes place. Birth parents are given help in travelling to the contact, preparing activities, taking photographs – anything to maximise the parent's time with their child. The photographs are used to support birth parents complete life story work for their child. These simple steps can make a difference to birth parents experiences of such a traumatic day and make it more bearable as they will feel more prepared and more in control.

AN UPDATED BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO ADOPTION SUPPORT ASSESSMENT, PLANNING AND REVIEW

AfA Cymru have also been working on this, albeit that this commenced last, as it needs to gather in the principles from the above guides as well as focus on the legal and regulatory elements. One region has used its investment to create an additional post to focus on improving this.

IMPLEMENTATION OF INDIVIDUALISED PLANS FOR ADOPTER POST APPROVAL TRAINING/ DEVELOPMENT

The 12 post adoption training modules for adopters, developed in conjunction with AfA Cymru and Adoption UK and in consultation with adoption practitioners and adopters, have been launched and are now on the NAS website.

They are intended to help and support adopters to weave together an understanding of what they need to know and the skills they need to develop to build and continue to improve their relationship with their child.

They are available on the website for people to access individually or for trainers to download and use in group training. The modules were piloted in the NAS regions by AUK.

Approximately 160 people attended 15 different training events hosted by Adoption UK Cymru (AUK) using these post adoption training modules during 2019/20. These were delivered across all the regions and included the following titles: Life Journey Work, Health and Development, Living with Challenging Behaviours, Non-Violent Resistance and Contact with Birth Families. Approximately 75% of the attendees were adoptive parents or prospective adopters and the rest were professionals working with adoptive families.

Feedback from staff is positive:

- 'a very thought-provoking course with lots of perspectives on contact' – parent who attended a course on Contact.
- 'really useful course, reminded me of a lot I had forgotten, feeling much more positive and able to manage as feel encouraged that I will be able to do it' – adoptive parent on a course for 2nd time adopters.
- 'this course was amazing, wish we had had it years ago, it might have made a big difference to our family' – adopter who attended a Challenging behaviour course.

One region has an active existing training officer post and a second region used investment to create a new post. In the latter, Mid and West Wales, almost 150 adopters and more than 40 foster carers attended training provided by the region during 2019/20. The region has also piloted an e-learning programme which 21 adopters and a number of staff have completed. Feedback from the e-learning has been positive in terms of content and accessibility, with a high completion rate by adopters as well as professionals.

¹ 'Reflect' is a service that aims to provide practical and emotional support to women and their partners who have experienced the compulsory and permanent removal of a child /ren from their care. Parents are supported for a period of time and given tailor-made help.

IMPROVING THE RANGE OF TARGETED/ SPECIALIST THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT AVAILABLE THROUGH HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

Investment funding provides 6.9 posts which are used according to regional need for example:

- in South East Wales additional capacity in the existing psychology service is being funded meaning circa 40 additional children and families have been supported, there have been excess of 130 additional direct therapy sessions and 7 training and support sessions for staff have been provided; and
- in three other regions posts have been created and staff trained to provide therapeutic services such as play therapy and DDP.

Feedback from parents in Mid & West Wales included:

"Great to have this adoption support as area has been neglected"

"Thank you, this help is really making a difference"

"without this help we would have suffered a family breakdown as I couldn't cope"

"... seen a marked improvement in behaviours and X is more settled in general".

AN 'ADOPTION AWARENESS' KITE MARK SCHEME DEVELOPED AND ROLLED OUT

One region is developing a kite mark for adoption awareness, which may be something to extend across Wales in the future.

REDUCING DELAY, ENSURING THE WIDEST CHOICE OF PLACEMENTS OR IMPROVING MATCHING FOR CHILDREN

There was some flexibility in the investment offer to support other adoption functions. Two regions opted to use this to create a fulltime and part time Marketing and Recruitment Officers respectively. Their role is to increase enquiries from prospective adopters and provide support for each contact made.

These additional posts mean that all region now have these posts which is benefitting our ability to recruit adopters.



Continuing to raise awareness amongst professionals and the public

Adoption is a feature of community life where adoptive families live, work and play including health, education. A key function of the National Adoption service is to keep and raise awareness amongst professionals and the public.

2019/20 saw the launch of leaflets and information for health professionals. This was developed in partnership with health colleagues and has now been circulated widely to community and hospital settings across Wales where Health professionals work. The aim is to help them better understand 'adoption' to inform the best way to work with the adopted children and families that they see.

NAS contributes to a wide range of the Welsh Government's all Wales work-streams; this contributes to us improving adoption awareness amongst professionals as well as informing policy to ensure that other developments, including in mainstream services that adoptive families use, are 'adoption aware'. During 2019/20 this included the below:

- Ministerial Advisory Group on Improving Outcomes for Children;
- Welsh Government 'Parenting Advisory Group'; and
- NAS is seeking to engage in the work on **Strengthening and extending Corporate Parenting in Wales** to ensure that principles, in respect of adopted children, that NAS negotiated into the current version in 2015, are retained in future guidance.



THINKING AHEAD



Continuing to co-produce and use information from engagement

The voice of the service user is paramount in the National Adoption Service and leads policy development and service provision.



ADOPTERS

NAS published a response to the 2018/19 Adoption Voices consultation with adopters outlining how it is responding to the issues raised.

Taking a 'What you said' and 'What we are doing' approach this updates adopters on topics such as CAMHS and emotional wellbeing service, Contact and adopter assessment.

Adoption UK have been commissioned to review the NAS Adoption Voices programme in light of its ongoing plans for the Adoption Barometer.

Alison Woodhead AUK Head of Communications and Ann Bell presented the findings for Wales of the Barometer at the first NAS combined Governance Board in July. The main findings were:

- More adopters had later life letters and life journey materials in Wales;
- Twice as likely to have been made a definite choice not to meet birth family members (social worker influence);
- 71% know where to go for post adoption support. 77% well informed;
- Very high level of need amongst adopted children. 26% had statements compared to 5% of children in Wales generally; and
- Much more training and resource needed for schools.





There were recommendations for Regions and VAA's as below; AUK have followed these up with all regional management boards and VAA's:

- All children should have a clear, written support plan agreed before placement, based on a therapeutic assessment;
- Services should review the advice given to new adopters to keep friends and family at a distance during early placement. Instead, improved guidance for adoptive family's support networks so that they can support early placement without disrupting attachment and settling in should be provided; and
- Services should review and revise the advice social workers give adopters regarding meeting with birth parents prior to adoption.

Alongside the above, regions have been:

- Facilitating family activity events to further develop stakeholder engagement and sustainability of support networks;
- Consulting with adopters to inform training; and
- Establishing feedback processes to learn what individual services do well and improve on areas of concern.

Children and Young People – Engagement is a key feature of the new 'Connect' services for children and young people; it is hoped that the services will, in future, achieve the participation standards. At time of writing, consultation is ongoing with children and young people across Wales to inform the ongoing development of the service which also includes an ambassador scheme as outlined earlier.

Children's Commissioner for Wales – NAS, through the central team, meets with Sally Holland annually to discuss adoption issues and monitor NAS in relation to recommendations she has made in her Annual Reports.

A small proportion of the Children's Commissioners casework is clearly adoption related, circa 3% in the year prior to the 2019/20 meeting. The themes below have been discussed with regions and are informing policy and practice development:

- Adoption support – not getting what's needed, having to 'fight' for funding and support;
- Foster carers – dissatisfaction with decisions re assessments as adopters and their role if a placement disrupts;
- Prospective Adopters – applications not accepted / assessment delays; and
- Birth parents – seeking advice on challenging decisions etc.

Using data

A REVISED PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

The new Performance Management System, supported by Data Cymru, went live at the beginning of 2019/20. The improvements include:

- the regions having their data at local authority level which helps identify variations; and
- supporting regional consistency in reporting to their Regional Management Boards.



SUPPORTING AND INVESTING IN RESEARCH

NAS continues to support the Wales Adoption Cohort Study in its efforts to gain ongoing funding and in promoting the publication of its research papers.

Professor Katherine Shelton is a member of the NAS Combined Governance Board; at its February meeting she provided an overview of the most recent research, 'The neurocognitive profiles of children adopted from care and their emotional and behavioural problems at home and school' helping the board to begin to understand some of the potential implications for practice.

To date the study has published more than 15 research papers in a variety of peer reviewed journals, with some free to download from this Cardiff University website:

<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/44107-shelton-katherine>

EVALUATION OF THE NAS ADOPTION SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

Following an open procurement process the Institute of Public Care were selected as the academic partner for this piece of planned work. This will evaluate the impact of the changes that NAS has made to the way we support adoptive families in Wales, including a focus on the early impact of the recent Welsh Government investment. This work will commence in 2020/21.

Working to improve the legal, policy and evidence framework that affects adoption

NAS contributes to a wide range of the Welsh Government's all Wales workstreams. This contributes to us improving adoption awareness amongst professionals, as well as informing policy to ensure that other developments, including in mainstream services that adoptive families use, are 'adoption aware'.

MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP ON IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

- The NAS plans, in respect of increasing recruitment and improving adoption support, are part of the 'Improving Placement Choice and Stability' workstream. Updates are provided to each meeting.
- Following the January 2020 meeting, NAS was able to input into the work on the new strategy for vulnerable learners through contact with Sir Alistair McDonald, Welsh Government.
- At the same meeting, the importance of NAS maintaining involvement in the continuation of the 'Together for Children and Young People' programme was emphasised.

NAS is represented on the Welsh Government 'Parenting Advisory Group'. This is one aspect of the work to implement the Children Bill Wales and the withdrawal of the defence of reasonable chastisement. This is to ensure that appropriate advice and information is passed through to adoptive parents.

NAS continues to work on the 'Mind over Matter' agenda with AWHOCS and WLGA. This report by National Assembly Children Young People and Education Committee focuses on improving CAMHS / services to support the emotional well-being of children. During 2019/20 NAS collaborated with AWHOCS and WLGA to send in a joint response to a request to evaluate progress and the Director participated in a Committee workshop.

This year also saw the fruition of some policy changes that we have been working on in previous years.

- In October 2019 the Welsh Government implemented revised regulations for the Adoption Register for Wales, which require agencies to use the Register sooner for both children and prospective adopters. This is an important step in supporting services to match children in as timely a way as possible.
- The regulations to introduce a revised way of conducting the assessment of prospective adopters were consulted on and came into force from April 1st 2020. The '2 Stage Process' is more transparent by grouping the initial checks e.g. medical, police, references into a first stage to be completed satisfactorily, before prospective adopters can progress to the in depth 'suitability' assessment in Stage 2.

Revised guidance for staff and adopters and leaflets are available.

<https://adoptcymru.com/the-adoption-process>

Note: At time of writing, due to C-19, the full implementation of this '2 Stage Process' has been paused temporarily with the agreement of Welsh Government so that agencies can continue to run both stages alongside each other.

We continue to lobby for improvements in the legislative entitlement to adoption support.

NAS REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS

This work is ongoing, having been commissioned by WLGA and ADSS Cymru as NAS' lead organisations; the Institute for Public Care are commissioned to work with us to achieve greater accountability in the arrangements for NAS.

- The first part of the work in this current phase was to combine the former Advisory Group and Governance Board. This has been concluded with the Combined Governance Board meeting for the first time, in July 2019 with revised Terms of Reference.

The first Combined Governance Board combined a workshop with a business meeting where members agreed principles for working within the meetings as well as revised Terms of Reference.

- The second element of the current work is developing the new operating model for NAS, which was agreed last year. IPC have undertaken consultation with a sample of local government stakeholders including Members, Directors of Social Services, Heads of Children's Services, Regional Adoption Managers and some staff.

This has produced a revised 'Partnership Agreement' for NAS replacing the original functional model and set out key elements of the way NAS will operate in the future. This will be finalised and implemented during 2020/21.

Encouraging the development of workforce understanding and skills to meet NAS priorities

AUK delivered 26 courses in total and also included Adopting for the 2nd Time, Therapy Maze and a more in depth 3 session NVR course.

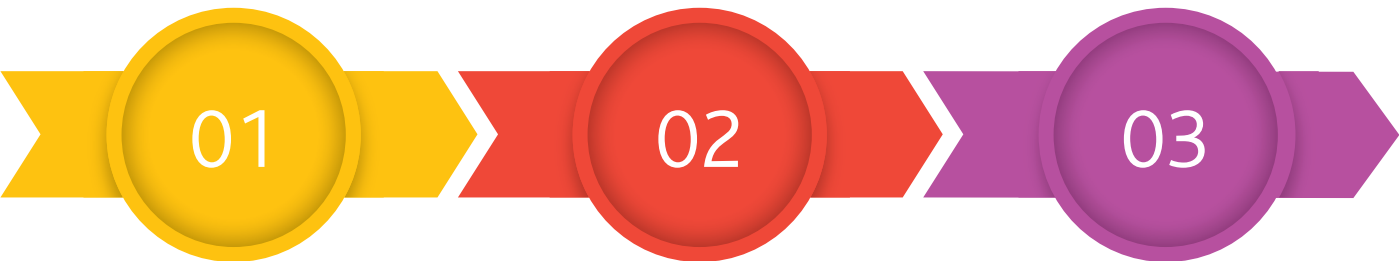
In addition to that AUK delivered INSET training to 278 teachers and other school staff over the year to help them support their adopted learners.

The NAS is proud of its commitment to supporting staff. Training during 2019/20 covered more than 30 subject areas which more than 300 staff attended. Examples include Dyadic Development Practice (DDP), which is based on and brings together attachment theory. The therapy helps children to learn trust.

MOVING FORWARD



Improvement priorities for 2020/21



Placing more children

- Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting
- Use of 'Adopting Together' for children who wait longest
- Continue to embed the new Adoption Register for Wales to speed up matching of children through quicker notification of children and adopters in line with revised regulations.

Continuing to improve adoption support

- Implementing the Adoption Support Framework and investment plans
- Continuing to raise adoption awareness amongst professionals and the public.

Thinking ahead

- Working to improve the legal, policy and evidence framework that affects adoption
- Continuing to co-produce and use information from engagement
- Encouraging the development of workforce understanding and skills to meet NAS priorities
- Moving on from Covid-19 lockdown arrangements to the recovery/adaptive phase.

The National Adoption Service was created to improve services for all those affected by adoption in Wales.

The National Adoption Service (NAS) for Wales, launched in November 2014, is an innovative collaborative for the provision of adoption services. It brought together Welsh local authority adoption services into a three-tier structure which includes partnerships at all levels with Voluntary Adoption Agencies based in Wales, Health and Education Services, as well as others.

At local authority level, all 22 Welsh councils continue to provide services to all looked after children whilst identifying and working with those children for whom a plan for adoption is appropriate.

Regionally, local authorities work together within five regional collaboratives to provide a range of adoption services. Each regional collaborative has links with the voluntary adoption agencies, health and education. The services provided differ in each collaborative but all provide the adoption agency functions for children, recruit and assess adopters, offer counselling to birth parents and advice to adopted adults. Some currently directly provide adoption support services, whereas in others this remains with their local authorities.



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