

AGENDA ITEM NO.

ISLE OF ANGLESEY COUNTY COUNCIL	
Report to	Executive Committee
Date	^{9th} September 2013
Subject	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To secure approval of the plan to establish a National Adoption Service for Wales, supported by Regional Adoption Collaboratives.2. To secure agreement that Wrexham Borough Council will act as the lead authority for the North Wales Region
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Kenneth Hughes
Lead Officer(s)	Anwen Huws – Head of Children’s Services
Contact Officer	Anwen Huws – Head of Children’s Services
Nature and reason for reporting	
<p>To assure <i>Executive Committee</i> that the Council's statutory functions in relation to providing an Adoption Service are fully met, in accordance with legislation and guidance.</p>	

A – Introduction / Background / Issues
<p>Adoption must be seen in the broader context of planning placements and permanence for children and as part of an integrated system of services for meeting their needs and promoting their well-being. Adoption Services as a whole are complex, provided to a wide range of service users from very young children who are being placed for adoption to older adults who are seeking to be re-united with their birth families.</p> <p>There is a clear requirement that children in care must have plans for permanence in place which consider the full range of permanence options and which are put into effect with appropriate urgency.</p> <p><i>Executive Committee</i> will be aware that the creation of a National Adoption Service is one of the key policy strands of the Welsh Government and that, if enacted, the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Bill will allow Ministers to prescribe arrangements by local authorities.</p>

Working closely with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), ADSS Cymru produced a functional model for delivery of Adoption Services across Wales. A copy of this report is attached at Appendix A. The model was endorsed by the Expert Advisory Group on Adoption established by Welsh Government. The outline proposal developed by ADSS Cymru was agreed in principle by Leaders at WLGA Council in April.

Subsequently, in a Written Statement on 25th April 2013, the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services endorsed the proposals for achieving a National Adoption Service and the development of a Functional Model for the delivery of services across Wales, as presented by ADSS Cymru and the WLGA. A copy of the Written Statement is attached at Appendix B.

The proposals outlined in detail in Appendix A, provide an ambitious but realistic pathway for creating an effective and responsive National Adoption Service. This will help to ensure:

- A new direction for the delivery of Adoption Services that is particularly suited to the Welsh context.
- Timely implementation of the improvements required.
- An increase in the pace of collaboration and the capacity to build sustainable services for the future.
- A reduction in bureaucracy and a streamlining of service delivery.
- An improvement in service accessibility for all key stakeholders.
- Maintenance of the essential integrity and coherence between all elements of Adoption Services, to prevent a mismatch between the needs of children requiring adoption placements and the adopters being recruited.
- Long term and lasting improvements to address the weaknesses identified in some elements of current service provision.
- A central place for the significant contribution made by the Voluntary Sector as valued co-producers and delivery partners.
- Collective opportunities for local authorities to respond effectively to rising pressures within the care system.

The proposal will be underpinned by a National Standardised Performance Framework that will allow the National Adoption Service to identify, review and highlight key performance measures. The framework will set performance thresholds and make clear the Welsh Government's minimum expectations for timeliness in the adoption system, for both the child and prospective adopter.

The National Adoption Service will be responsible for:

- Establishment of a National Board.
- Monitoring the delivery of services in accordance with the national performance framework.
- Producing an Annual Report and action plan.
- Developing a national marketing and awareness raising strategy.
- Providing a single point of contact for anyone seeking information about adoption.
- Providing a database of information.
- Developing and maintaining a National Adoption Register.
- Co-ordination of Adoption Panels, Panel Members, Pre-Approval Training, Post Adoption Support Services and provision of the Independent Review Determination Service.
- Acting as a Centre of Excellence for Adoption in Wales.

The functional model proposes five Regional Adoption Collaboratives are established, to deliver the functions of the National Service including:

- Ensuring compliance with legislation, regulation and the performance management framework.
- Recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters.
- Ensuring appropriate matching of children.
- Provision of the whole range of support services including birth parent counselling, step parent adoptions, intermediary services and letterbox contact.
- Ensure effective links are maintained with local authorities Children's Social Services.

The proposed five regional collaboratives are:

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

These collaboratives are currently at different stages of development.

- North Wales – Wrexham, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire and Ynys Mon has been in existence since 2009.

It is planned that all five Regional Collaboratives will be established by April 2014.

In addition, each local authority will retain responsibility for the following:

- Assessment and care planning and reviewing of Looked After Children and young people.
- Ensuring the Agency Decision Maker functions are fulfilled.
- Assessment of the Adoption Support needs of children for whom the plan is adoption.
- Involvement in the matching and linking of children and adopters.
- Providing birth parent counselling.
- Making applications to the Courts for appropriate orders.
- Attending Adoption Panels where proposed matches are being considered.

B – Considerations

A Task and Finish Group will be established with representatives from Welsh Government, ADSS Cymru, Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW), British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), Voluntary Adoption Agencies and each of the five Regional Collaboratives. The purpose will be to produce a robust change programme for implementing the functional model.

It is recognised that Programme Management capacity is required to drive through these changes in a timely fashion and the Deputy Minister has awarded £50k to ADSS Cymru to support the implementation.

The following key milestones have been agreed:

- Membership and brief of the Task and Finish Group – June.
- Identification of the five Lead Authorities – June.
- Development of a common Implementation Plan format – July.
- Support Lead Authorities in their role – July.
- Outline business components for the infrastructure of the National Service – July.
- Regional Implementation Plans in place – August.

Adoption services are governed by a number of detailed Statutory Regulations and it is acknowledged that changes to these Regulations will be required in due course. However, progress in implementing key aspects can be made pending the required changes. In advance of any legislative requirements that may be included in the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Bill, each local authority will need to make its own decision regarding the case for change.

C – Implications and Impacts		
1	Finance / Section 151	
2	Legal / Monitoring Officer	
3	Human Resources	
4	Property Services (see notes – seperate document)	N/A
5	Information and Communications Technology (ICT)	N/A
6	Equality (see notes – seperate document)	
7	Anti-poverty and Social (see notes – seperate document)	N/A
8	Communication (see notes – seperate document)	N/A
9	Consultation (see notes – seperate document)	N/A
10	Economic	N/A
11	Environmental (see notes – seperate document)	N/A
12	Crime and Disorder (see notes – seperate document)	N/A
13	Outcome Agreements	N/A

C – Implications and Impacts

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CH – Summary

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D – Recommendation

For the Executive Committee to approve the development of a National Collaborative Adoption Service

E – Comments from the Partnership & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

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Name of author of report: Emily Whall
Job Title: Collaboration Improvement Officer
Date: 25/06/13

Appendices:

1 & 2

Background papers

Proposals For Achieving A National Adoption Service In Wales And Development Of The Functional Model – ADSS

Written Statement - The Establishment of a National Adoption Service – ‘case for change’ - Gwenda Thomas, Deputy Minister for Social Services



Appendix A - ADSS
Report - National Adc



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Leading Social Services
in Wales

Yn arwain
Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
yng Nghymru

**PROPOSALS FOR ACHIEVING
A NATIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE IN WALES
AND
DEVELOPMENT OF THE FUNCTIONAL MODEL**

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Proposals for achieving a National Adoption Service in Wales and Development of the Functional Model

- This paper sets out ADSS Cymru's proposals for achieving, as quickly as possible, radical reforms to Adoption Services in Wales and the creation of a National Adoption Service. It is grounded in a strong and shared commitment to building only on the best of current practice and to ensuring that the changes enable us to keep the child's best interests throughout their life at the core of adoption work.
- Adoption should be seen in the broader context of planning placements and permanence for children and as part of an integrated system of services for meeting their needs and promoting their well-being. There is a clear requirement that children in care must have plans for permanence in place that consider the full range of permanence options and that are put into effect with appropriate urgency. These plans should be agreed as soon as possible after admission and reviewed regularly thereafter.
- As a leadership organisation, ADSS Cymru acknowledges that reform on the scale set out in this document is delivered most effectively if there is a strong consensus across the key stakeholders and a coherent and professional approach to managing change. With others, local government has a key role to play in helping to generate these preconditions and so the plans have been produced in collaboration with the WLGA. A clear political mandate across local government has been achieved in respect of those issues which touch most directly on its role in bringing about change.
- The proposals acknowledge the significant contribution that the Voluntary Sector plays in the delivery of Adoption Services in Wales and its unique expertise. It is only by the statutory and voluntary sectors working together inclusively and collectively, drawing on best practice, that the vision of a National Adoption Service can be realised. Key voluntary adoption organisations have been involved in

considering the plan put forward by ADSSC, in part through the national Expert Reference Group which has endorsed the proposals.

- The proposals provide an ambitious but realistic pathway for creating an effective and responsive National Adoption Service, a goal to which local government is committed. The Local Government Implementation Plan for Sustainable Social Services includes responsibility for developing the operational model. These proposals build on two previous papers submitted to the Expert Reference Group and they are underpinned by the ten principles for adoption services devised by BAAF (December 2011).
- The proposals will help to ensure:
 - A new direction for the delivery of Adoption Services that is particularly suited to the Welsh context.
 - Timely implementation of the improvements required.
 - An increase in the pace of collaboration and the capacity to build sustainable services for the future.
 - A reduction in bureaucracy and a streamlining of service delivery.
 - An improvement in service accessibility for all the key stakeholders in every aspect of Adoption Services.
 - Maintenance of the essential integrity and coherence between all the elements of Adoption Services, to prevent a mismatch between the needs of children requiring adoptive placements and the adopters being recruited.
 - Long-term and lasting improvements to address the weaknesses identified in the some elements of current service provision.
 - A central place for the significant contribution made by the Voluntary Sector as valued co-producers and delivery partners.
 - Collective opportunities for local authorities to respond effectively to rising pressures within the care system.
- Adoption Services are governed by a number of detailed Regulations. These proposals recognise that changes in Regulations may be required in due course but progress in implementing key aspects can be made, pending those changes.

Context

1. In February 2011, *Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action* made clear that some services could be delivered more effectively at a national level. The Deputy Minister was keen to pioneer this approach in exploring, with stakeholders, the remit and functions of a National Adoption Service.
2. The Deputy Minister is clear that the new powers being sought under the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Bill will allow Welsh Ministers to direct local authorities (adoption agencies) to come together to form such a service. The law is to be underpinned by a National Standardised Performance Framework that will allow the National Adoption Service management team to identify, review and highlight key performance measures - such as how swiftly local authorities place children in need of adoption and how swiftly they deal with prospective adopters. The framework will set performance thresholds and make clear the Welsh Government's minimum expectations for timeliness in the adoption system, for both the child and the prospective adopter. It will allow local authority adoption agencies and others to monitor their own performance and compare it with that of others.
3. The case for change is widely accepted: BAAF estimate that 1 in 4 children available for adoption will not be placed primarily because an adoptive parent resource is not available. There are clearly issues about variability, both in performance between different local authorities and in the experience of prospective adopters. Services are insufficiently coordinated and they have not tackled well enough issues about supply and demand, to overcome barriers to recruitment and matching.
4. In November 2012, following an in-depth inquiry into adoption in Wales, the Children and Young People Committee published recommendations

calling for radical action. It proposed a major shift in the way adoption services are organised and delivered, re-invigorating the momentum and the aims of the 2002 Adoption Act and strategies for placement choice and stability.

5. The Deputy Minister then repeated her commitment to establishing a National Adoption Service, which will have the power to deliver services across Wales. She has established her expectations about what the new system must offer:

- eradicating 'drift' for children in care
- eliminating waiting lists for training and assessment
- improving the matching process
- allaying adoption breakdown by providing comprehensive adoption support services
- streamlining the process and ensuring better linking and understanding between social workers
- providing the widest choice of placements through the increased use of voluntary adoption agencies; and
- most importantly, ensuring consistent delivery across Wales.

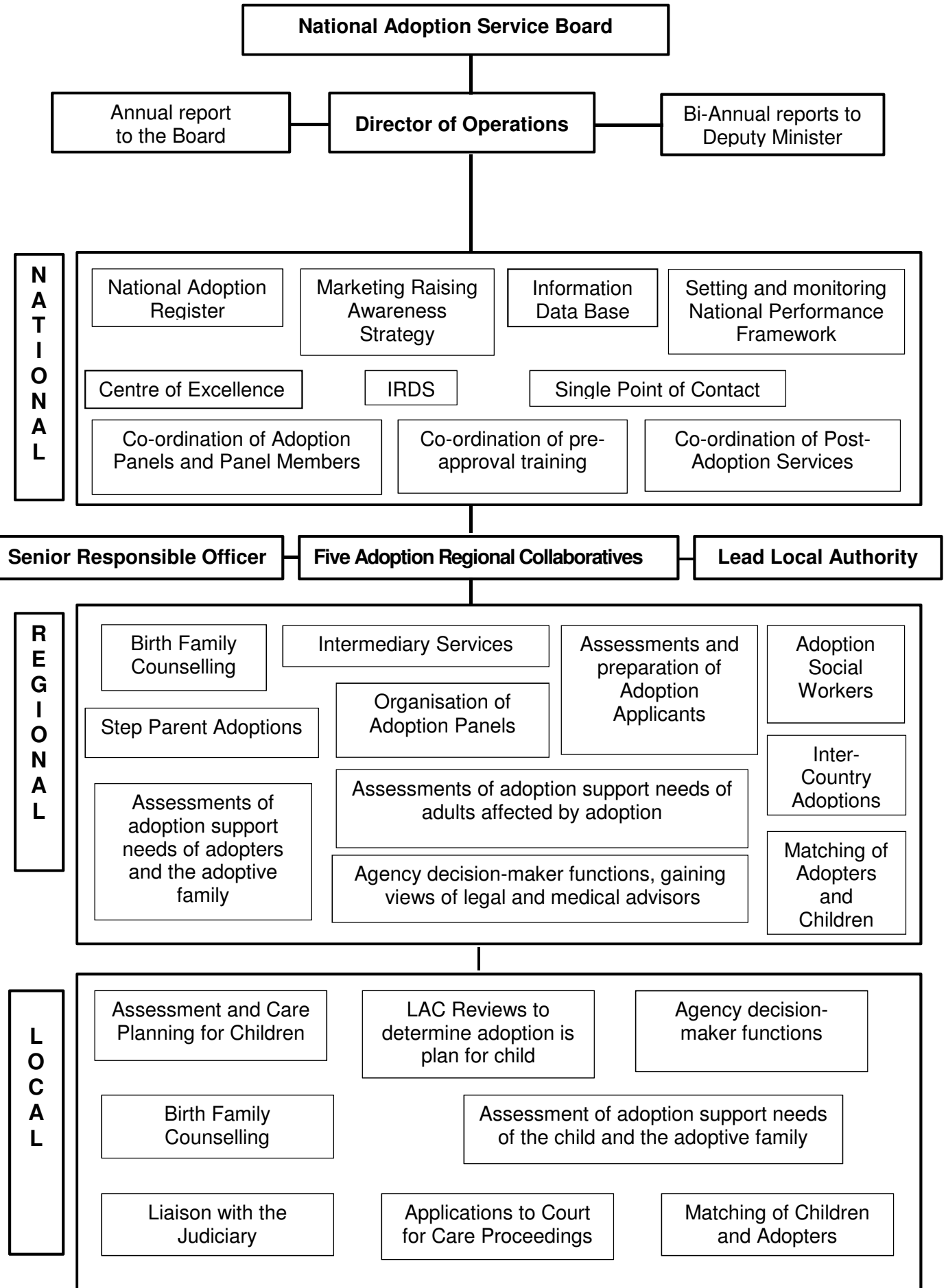
6. The Children and Young People Committee recognised too that some services are best delivered regionally. The Deputy Minister supports this approach "as the key to change is not the location of the service, but rather the delivery of a national framework for the recruitment, training and approval of prospective adopters. The focus of the National Adoption Service will be on promoting excellence and driving continued improvements, ensuring that opportunities for collaboration are maximised whilst maintaining the necessary local links and knowledge, which are crucial aspects of adoption services."

7. Adoption Services are complex, provided to a wide range of service users from very young children who are being placed for adoption to older adults who are seeking to be re-united with their birth families

and governed by a large number of detailed Regulations. These proposals are formulated as an appropriate response to that complexity.

8. One of the crucial tasks has been to ensure that the proposals provide a means of addressing urgently the concerns outlined earlier, without sacrificing the acknowledged strengths within the existing system – what the Deputy Minister describes as “achieving change without detriment.” For this reason, ADSS Cymru has worked with the WLGA to ensure that there is support for the proposals from local authorities across Wales as well as from the professional leadership organisation for social services. We believe the National Adoption Service would reap great benefits from harnessing this support for change.
9. The report of the *National Inspection of Adoption and Permanency Services delivered by Local Authorities*, undertaken by CSSIW in 2009/10 has also been re-visited. These proposals incorporate the strengths the Inspectorate identified in the provision of Adoption Services across Wales and address the areas that were identified as requiring attention.
10. A functional model for the National Adoption Service is set out in the chart overleaf. To ensure a seamless service, co-ordinated activity between the national, regional and local elements is critical. It is only in this way that children, adopters and those affected by adoption will receive the best possible service regardless of where they live in Wales.

National Adoption Service – Functional Model



A The National Adoption Service

11. Welsh Government would establish a national performance management framework. All Agencies will be required to operate within the framework set for by the National Service.
12. The National Service would undertake the following roles and functions.
 - i **Monitoring delivery in accordance with the national performance management framework.** The Regional Adoption Collaboratives described later would be accountable to a National Board for their performance and the National Board would have the powers to intervene if they are not delivering the service to the required standards. The Regional Adoption Collaboratives will have day-to-day line-management of the staff delivering the service at a regional level.
 - ii **Establishing a National Board** with the following membership:
 - Representatives from Voluntary Adoption Agencies
 - Adoptive Parents
 - Adopted Adults/Young People
 - The senior responsible officer of the lead Local Authorities for the Regional Adoption Collaboratives
 - NHS representative
 - Education representative
 - Academic representation
 - Director of Operations of the National Adoption Service (in attendance).
 - iii **Producing an Annual Report and action plan on the delivery of Adoption Services in Wales.** The Annual Report should be presented to the Board and to the Deputy Minister. In addition, the Director of Operations will produce bi-annual reports for the Deputy Minister.

- iv **Developing and delivering a national marketing and raising awareness strategy.** This would involve developing a national brand, a set of images to be used uniformly, to ensure brand recognition across Wales. Potential adopters would get a more accessible and consistent message. It will also help dispel some of the commonly held myths about the children who are seeking adoptive parents and which adults who can adopt children. The national marketing strategy will need to pay particular attention to attracting adopters for children whose circumstances make placement more difficult to achieve.

- v **Providing a single point of contact for anyone who is seeking information about adoption.** A National Adoption website and helpline will provide consistent information to children, young people and adults who may be interested in any aspect of adoption. It will also provide information on inter-country adoption. There is an increasing use of the Internet and social media sites by service users to gain information. It is essential that the National Service keeps abreast of these developments and maximises the opportunities they create.

- vi **Providing a database of information** to monitor where the greatest demand for services is being received by the Regional Collaboratives. This will allow resources to be deployed to areas of greatest demand or need.

- vii **Developing and maintaining a National Adoption Register.** This will enable linking and matching of children requiring adoptive placements with adopters across Wales, a service currently delivered by BAAF. It will maximise the opportunities for Welsh children being placed in Wales. A number of existing collaborative arrangements currently operate regional registers and a National Register could build on those experiences. Close links would be needed to the systems operating in

the other three Administrations in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

- viii **Providing the Independent Review Determination Service.** This service is currently commissioned by Welsh Government and delivered by BAAF. The service is being delivered to a high standard and it would be appropriate for this service to continue to be delivered at a national level only.

- ix **Co-ordination of Adoption Panels and Panel Members** to ensure that all the Adoption Panels are performing to the same required standards and Panels in all the Regional Collaboratives are being held frequently enough to avoid any delay for prospective adopters. It would also administer a list of suitably qualified panel members who could be called upon if any of the Regions were experiencing difficulties in ensuring quoracy on their Panels.

- x **Co-ordination of Pre-approval Training Courses** to ensure they are being held at regular intervals across the Regions, to avoid any delay for prospective adopters and to ensure consistency in the course content.

- xi **Co-ordination of Post Adoption Support Services** to ensure there is a robust range of adoption support services in place, particularly to support children with complex needs and their adopters

- xii **Acting as a Centre of Excellence for Adoption in Wales.**
The National Service will ensure that a set of policies and good practice guidelines are developed and maintained which reflect the very best practice in the delivery of all adoption services. It will arrange specialised training for staff in the Regional Collaboratives so that they are properly equipped for their role. There should be links to academic institutions and opportunities for promoting research.

Governance Arrangements at the national level

13. The National Adoption Service will have a Director of Operations who will be accountable professionally to the National Board for Adoption Services. The Director will prepare and present bi-annual information reports to the Deputy Minister and an annual report to the National Board.

B Regional Adoption Collaboratives

14. Five regional adoption collaboratives would be created in Wales, building on existing and emerging networks. This change will:
 - Assist in implementing as soon as possible the National Adoption Service.
 - Cause least disruption for children, approved adopters and adoptive applicants.
 - Ensure the speedy and appropriate matching of children requiring adoptive placements, making best use of knowledge about these children held locally.
 - Concentrate practitioner and managerial expertise, experience and skill into the regional hubs.
 - Achieve far greater consistency in the delivery of services.
 - Embed a culture of statutory and voluntary sectors working in partnership to deliver the objectives of the National Adoption Service.
 - Achieve efficiencies in number of adoption Managers required to deliver the service, staff accommodation required and support services needed.
 - Achieve appropriate economies of scale
 - Ensure sustainable services
 - Ensure regional contribution to marketing strategies, to recruit the numbers and types of adopters required.
 - Reduce the number of Adoption Panels required.

- Allow the Director of Operations to ensure resources are deployed to areas that have a particular need at any one time.
15. The Regional Collaboratives would deliver the following functions of the National Service.
- i Ensure compliance with legislation, regulations and the performance management framework set by the National Board.
 - ii Report on a regular basis to the Director of Operations and in turn to the National Board on performance.
 - iii Recruit and assess adoptive applicants and provide pre-approval training. This will include the initial counselling service to ensure a speedy, knowledgeable response to possible applicants.
 - iv Ensure that the children requiring adoptive placements are appropriately matched with adopters who can meet their needs for their entire childhood.
 - v Manage and host Adoption Panels to ensure compliance with Regulations.
 - vi Ensure that the statutory and voluntary sectors, working in partnership, provide the range of integrated post adoption support services as prescribed by the current Regulations and subsequently in accordance with the standards set by the National Service. These can include a number of services provided by colleagues in health, education, CAMHS, as well as letter-box contact with birth parents and relatives.
 - vii Deliver birth parent counselling for birth parents and relatives who have had their children removed from their care and placed for adoption. Close working relationships with Children's Social Workers and other key stakeholders are essential in the delivery of this service.

- viii Undertake stepparent adoption assessments, as directed by the courts
- ix Provide intermediary services for those adopted adults who are seeking to be re-united with their birth families
- x Provide inter-country adoption services for those adults who are seeking to adopt a child from abroad.
- xi Engage with key stakeholders- the judiciary, statutory and voluntary agencies.
- xii Employ and manage staff delivering functions of the National Service at a regional level.
- xiii Link to each Local Authority Children's Services Department within the region to assist with the training and support of social work staff and to ensure a seamless service for children, adopters and prospective adopters.

16. It is planned that the five Regional collaboratives will be:

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

17. These Regional Collaboratives are currently at different stages of development. North Wales led the way with their service becoming operational in April 2010 and the South East Wales Service followed in

April 2012. This will facilitate shared learning across Wales, to ensure speedy implementation of these plans. It is planned that all the Collaboratives will be fully operational by April 2014.

Governance arrangements at the regional level

18. Each Regional Adoption Collaborative will have the same set of responsibilities and functions and operate within a performance management framework developed at a national level. Each Collaborative will be accountable to the Director of Operations for its performance and then to the National Board. The Director of Operations, in consultation with the National Board, will have the powers to intervene if the performance of a Regional Collaborative is not meeting required standards.
19. It is likely that one local authority within each Regional Collaborative will agree to act as the lead authority for the delivery of all the regional roles and functions. The Senior Responsible Officer from the lead Authority will be a member of the National Board. This will ensure accountability of the Regional Collaboratives to the National Board.
20. Directors of Social Services will continue to exercise their statutory accountabilities through a Regional Collaborative Board and maintain the link to the executive and scrutiny functions of their own local authorities.

C The Local Authority Adoption Service

21. Each local authority will retain the following roles and responsibilities.
 - i Assessment and care-planning for children in need and those looked after conducting timely Looked After Children Reviews where the recommendation is for adoption to be the plan for that child.

- ii Ensuring the Agency Decision Maker functions are fulfilled in compliance with Regulations.
- iii Undertaking the assessment of adoption support needs of children for whom the plan is adoption.
- iv Being involved in the matching and linking of children with prospective adopters.
- v Providing Birth Parent counselling for parents who have had their children removed from their care and placed for adoption.
- vi Making applications to the Courts for care orders where the plan is for adoption.
- vii Attending Adoption Panels where a proposed match between a child and prospective adopter is being considered.
- viii Ensuring that staff maintain their knowledge and understanding of best practice in adoption.

Next Steps:

- 22. A task and finish group will be established with representatives from Welsh Government, ADSS Cymru, CSSIW, BAAF, VAA and each of the Regional Collaboratives. The purpose will be to produce a robust change programme for implementing the functional model as set out in this paper.
- 23. Programme management capacity would need to be available on a temporary basis to drive through these changes in a timely fashion. It might be possible to consider allocating responsibility for any posts to ADSS Cymru and/or one of the social services regional improvement collaboratives. A time-framed project plan would be produced for the task and finish group. The creation of the National Service will require fundamental change at many different levels. Robust financial analysis

and planning will be required to cost the delivery of a National Adoption Service. New IT systems will be required and there are significant Human Resource implications.

24. It is anticipated that this initiative will be taken forward using the wider leadership framework established for the ten-year strategy set out in *Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action*. The National Social Services Partnership Forum, Strategic Leadership Group and the Local Government Implementation Board will exercise oversight of the change programme. The Boards of Directors for the Regional Social Services Improvement Collaboratives will have a key role in steering through these changes to the required timescales at the regional and local level.
25. It is recognised that each of the agreed Regional Collaboratives are at different stages. Each Region will be required to develop its own detailed project plan, using a common format and approach. The project plans for each Region will need to reflect the performance management framework agreed by the National Service Board. It is planned that all five Regional Adoption Collaboratives will be established by April 2014.
26. ADSS Cymru awaits Welsh Government direction on the development of the National Service as outlined in these plans. We very much welcome the opportunity to work with the Welsh Government and colleagues in the Voluntary Sector to ensure we deliver a sustainable National Adoption Service of which Wales can be proud.

Written Statement - The Establishment of a National Adoption Service – ‘case for change’

25 April 2013

Gwenda Thomas, Deputy Minister for Social Services

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

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

The Group brought together key stakeholders from within the adoption system in Wales and provided a community of understanding and common purpose to oversee coordinate and deliver improvement of services and outcomes for children and young people in Wales for whom adoption is in their best interest. Delivering on these improvements included the introduction of a national adoption service and consideration of a national service model proposed by ADSS and WLGA. The remit identified was simple, I wanted to see greater collaboration and partnership working, a model which operated under a two tier system, dispelled duplication and delay, addressed current concerns and provided the mechanism for driving performance improvements across Wales ensuring a service that encouraged and welcomed a broad range of adopters to meet the diverse needs of our looked after children. In conjunction with the task of reform undertaken by the Expert Advisory Group the Children and Young People Committee also identified a need to review the delivery of adoption services in Wales and calls for evidence from the Committee were made in December 2011. After an in-depth scrutiny of the evidence presented both verbally and written the Committee presented its report in November 2012 which

compounded our earlier findings and remit of a national service. I was encouraged and heartened that we had the same shared values and aspirations on such an important agenda.

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

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

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

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

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

Each collaborative will have the same set of responsibilities and functions and operate within a performance management framework developed at a national level. Each collaborative will be accountable to the Director of Operations for its

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

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

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

Next Steps

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

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

It is acknowledged that creation of the National Service will require fundamental change at many different levels. It is anticipated that this initiative will be taken

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

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

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

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

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