



Gwasanaeth  
**Mabwysiadu**  
Cenedlaethol

National  
**Adoption**  
Service

Achieving More Together /  
Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd

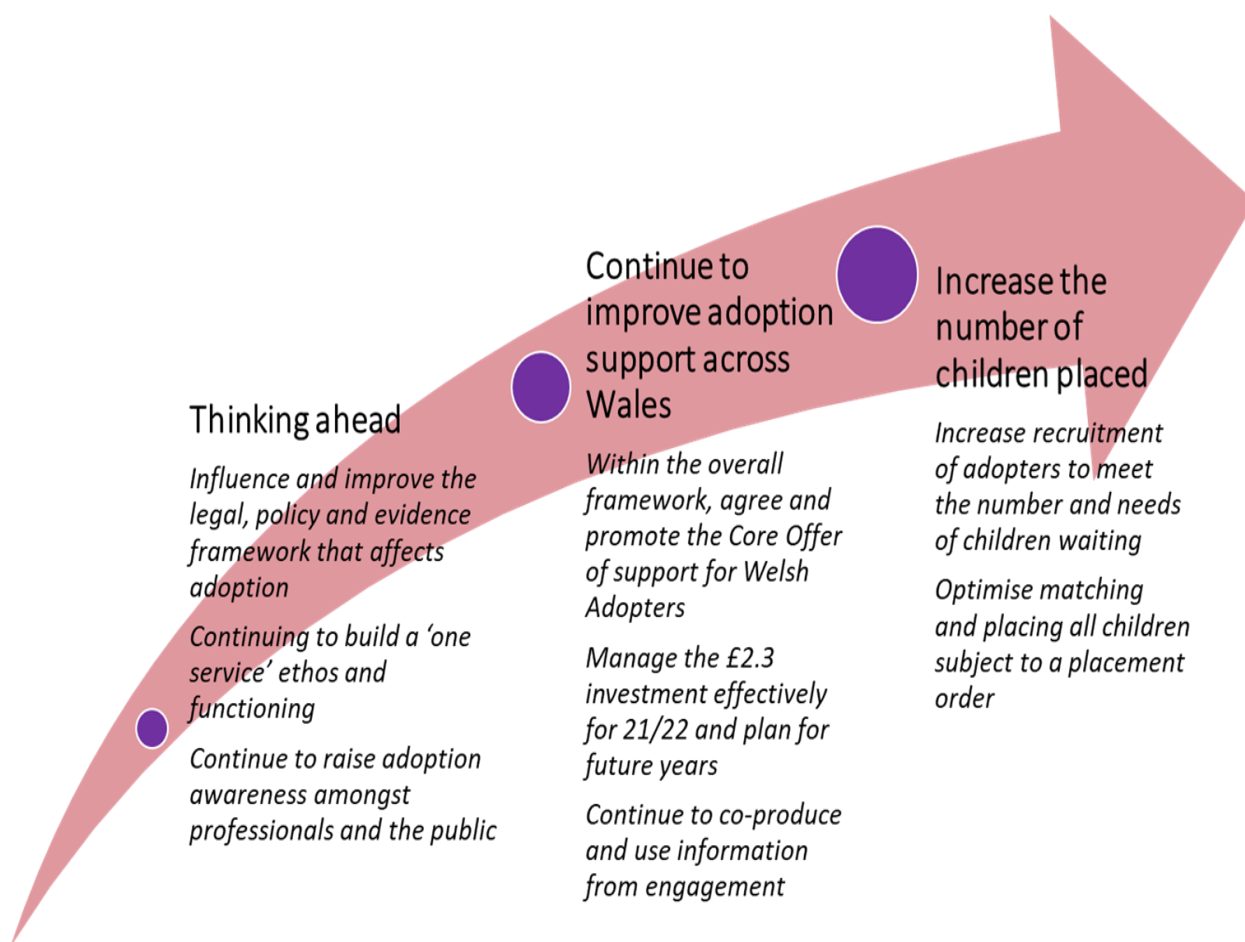
# Mid-Year Review 2021/22



## Introduction

The National Adoption Service (NAS) is the Wales wide collaborative for the provision of adoption services; its role is to improve adoption services for the benefit of all those affected by adoption in Wales.

Through its national / regional / local structure for Local Authority adoption services and its partnership with Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Health, Education and others, NAS has been improving services since 2014. Our current priorities are set out below.



With the input of services and stakeholders from across Wales this report records our progress against these priorities in the first half of 2021/22.

We hope the report will be informative for those who use our services, professionals as well as the Welsh Government and Ministers.

## A few words from Suzanne Griffiths

Director



We started the 2021/22 business year in the midst of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic which has continued to have an inevitable impact on aspects of our work as well as on staff, who have worked tirelessly to continue services as well as continue our improvement work.

Despite the continuing challenging context, much has been achieved. There are clear indicators that services have stabilised and that performance during the first half of 2021/22 is returning to pre-pandemic levels, with encouraging signs of ongoing improvement.

I want to record my appreciation to staff in our Regional Adoption Services, local authorities, Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA's), the Central Team and our many partners for continuing to make this possible. In equal measure my thanks are also to prospective and approved adopters across Wales and foster carers who enable us to continue our work.

It's been a busy year for everyone, including the central team who provide the infrastructure for the collaborative partnership working of NAS and lead the proactive and reactive development work that we do. We welcomed new staff to lead on the Adoption Register for Wales and Adoption Support.

We've continued to facilitate a strong voice and clear influence for children and young people by co-producing the new youth councils with our Connect service and for adopters by supporting the 2021 AUK Adoption Barometer.

We've also continued to focus on transformation, continuing the implementation of the Good Practice Guides [National Adoption Service - Good Practice Guides \(adoptcymru.com\)](https://adoptcymru.com), looking to further embed the Life Journey Work Framework [National Adoption Service - Life Journey \(adoptcymru.com\)](https://adoptcymru.com) and develop accompanying Trauma Informed practice tools. As the year developed, we 'dusted down' previous plans to implement the new '2 stage' recruitment and assessment process for prospective adopters that had been delayed by the pandemic but confirmed as starting in October. With this went planned changes to our data collection arrangements to further improve our knowledge and intelligence about services.

I've been delighted at the level of interest shown by other parts of the UK in how NAS is improving services in Wales, examples being an invitation to a workshop for the Scottish Adoption Task Force and to speak at other conferences.

As we reached midyear our attention was drawn to thinking about the future and a strategic plan up to 2025. We were particularly pleased in September that our Governance Board was able to engage in a 'listening session' with the new Chief Social Care Officer for Wales, Albert Heaney, it was clear that his priorities link to NAS' which will benefit Welsh adoption services.

We also saw the culmination of the fostering services work that I have been leading and supporting, with the launch of Foster Wales in July. The leadership, co-ordination and enabling of this new collaborative, for the recruitment and retention of local authority foster carers, will be integrated into the work of the central team as we go forward.

There is so much more as the remainder of this report will show. To start it off, we asked the regions and VAA's to share their key highlights:

### **Mid & West Wales**

We are adjusting well to the 2-stage recruitment process. We have welcomed the Good Practice Guides with proactive implementation to bringing about change in practice, working collaboratively with childcare teams, fostering services and panels with us. Our management of transitions has developed, they take longer with more focus on the building of the relationship between the adopters and foster carers pre move, and with the involvement of the foster carers post move supported by all involved. There is also more structured support around the introductions with therapeutic support happening either alongside the introductions or very soon after the move.

### **North Wales**

Our Adoption Support Team has gone from strength to strength. We recently completed an assessment for adoption support on a family who have moved from across the border. They have told a number of friends who have adopted about the process and services they have received, now they all want to move to North Wales! We've also had some success in our intermediary service by tracing family for older adopted people, reuniting them with their even older birth parent.

### **Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Vale, Valleys & Cardiff**

Whilst the pandemic brought many challenges, increased use of virtual communications has been an advantage, particularly in our approach to children moving to adoption. Now as standard all children will have a period of virtual contact with prospective adopters meaning they may have had approx. 10 interactions prior to the more intensive face-to-face introductions. In many cases this has also been boosted by in-person pre-meets which enables the adopter's relationship with the child and foster carers to build more gradually, making the overall transition more successful.

### **South East Wales**

At a time when operational demands have been so high, we have also been able to focus on development and service improvement alongside improving performance in recruitment and family finding. Adoption Support development is going well and in addition to TESSA, Connected and the implementation of the Good Practice Guides we are now delivering Circle of Security training.

### **Western Bay**

We have invested time in 12-month check-in reviews with both adopters and birth parents 12 months after placement made. These have been highly successful in identifying adoption support need and in supporting birth parents to engage in letterbox contact where they haven't already. Birth Parents have been surprised that they have been re-contacted and that there is continued support for them, and many were ready to engage now with support to receive or write that first letter. Adopters appear less vulnerable and are able to reflect on the support that has been given and the support that they may need. The reviews look at universal services, emerging needs, whether an assessment is needed, whether other services such as TESSA are needed, as well as engagement in letterbox contact. The review is also able to offer access to the therapeutic parenting course and life-journey workshops. Feedback from staff and the families involved has been positive.

### **Adoption UK Cymru**

Despite the pressures that young people generally have been under throughout the pandemic, adopted children and young people across Wales have joined Connected groups, come together to enjoy each other's company and in some cases join the newly formed Adoption Youth Councils. The other good news of the first half of the year is that the First 1000 Days programme has launched with nearly 50 newly formed adoptive families already registered to be part of the programme which will provide them with a ready-made adoption community, opportunities for reaching out, sharing knowledge, building resilience and linking together for mutual support.

### **St David's**

In April, a pilot was launched between Western Bay Adoption Service (WBAS), St. David's Children Society and Barnardo's Cymru to support an enhanced commissioning process which signified a move from spot purchasing arrangements to an agreed strategic approach in the procuring of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) placements for WBAS. Early evaluation infers that the pilot is supporting children being placed in Wales and that changes to working structures introduced are positively impacting working relationships across sectors and offering improved placement choice.

### **AFA Cymru**

The four Good Practice Guides have been recognised as excellent resources, by practitioners in Wales and nationally, along with the resources that AFA Cymru developed with NAS for the Trauma Nurture Timeline. AFA Cymru have been delighted to hear from professionals who are using the "language of the guides" and the changes in approach across disciplines (childcare, CAFCASS, Panel, etc.) which will benefit children and families in Wales. AFA Cymru is also proud to be involved in the development of the Wales Early Permanence framework, with NAS, which has not been available in Wales to date. We know how important stability, relationships and minimising moves are especially at a time when weeks and months really count so this is a significant development in Wales.

### **Barnardo's**

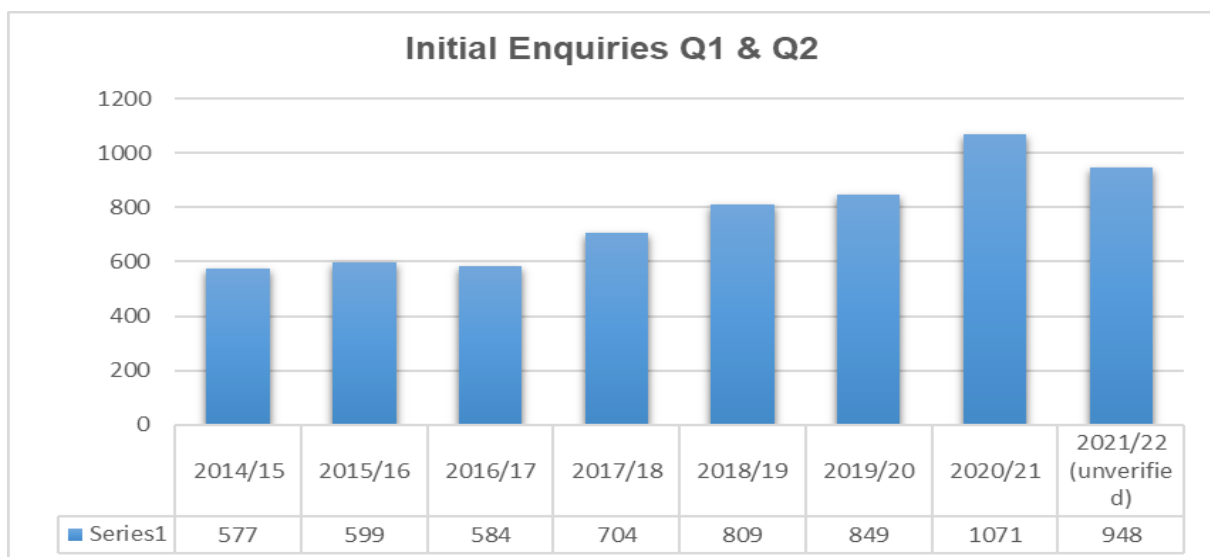
It has been a busy and exciting year so far as the service received over 250 enquiries and approved 12 adoptive households, far exceeding our predicted targets. During this time, we have also placed 10 children in 8 adoptive households, including 2 Adopting Together placements, so for those families experiencing their first Christmas together brings us all an immense sense of pleasure and satisfaction. The service has faced many challenges throughout the pandemic; however, we are pleased to report that we now have a fully staffed and motivated team who are working tirelessly to match children with loving families. We are now seeking an adoption manager to join the team and work collaboratively with colleagues to build upon these successes and work towards keeping Welsh children in Wales.

## Priority 1 – Increase the number of children placed for adoption

- a. Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting

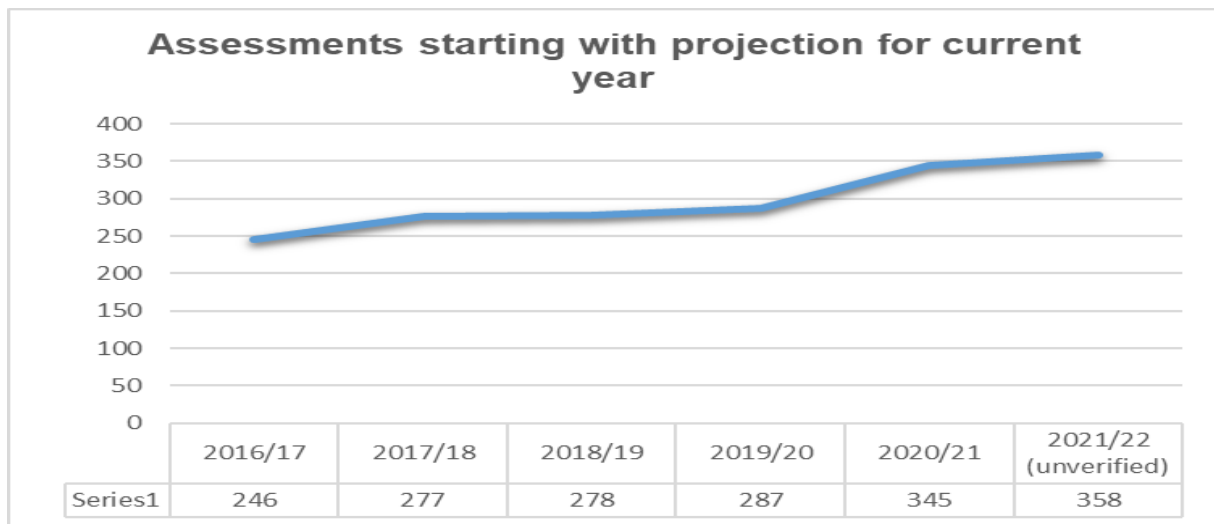
*A note regarding data: we have implemented planned changes to the NAS data set which has impacted on the timing for verifying the quarter 2 data. There may be slight changes to the data recorded in this report.*

At mid-year, performance in respect of both adopter recruitment and children waiting is improving. For adopters, growth in levels of enquiries and assessments starting has slowed in comparison to last year's exceptional increases but this is within the context that enquiries and adopter approvals are returning to, and improving on, pre pandemic levels. For children we also continue to improve with fewer waiting.

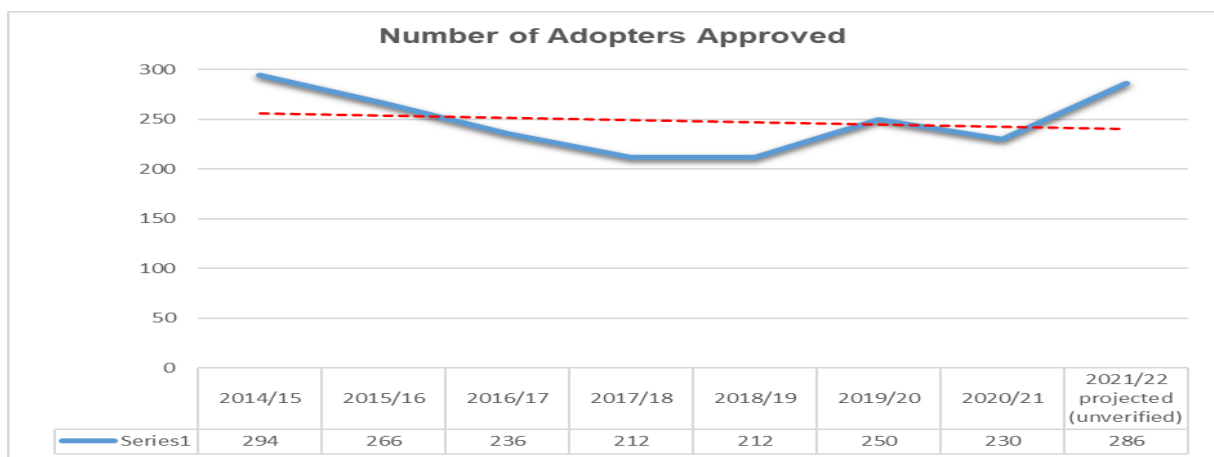


The level of enquiries fell by 11% compared to the same period last year. However, 20/21 was an exceptional year for enquiries, and even with this reduction, enquiries for the first half of this year are at a higher level than the same period in previous years, continuing the upward trend that we were seeing before the pandemic.

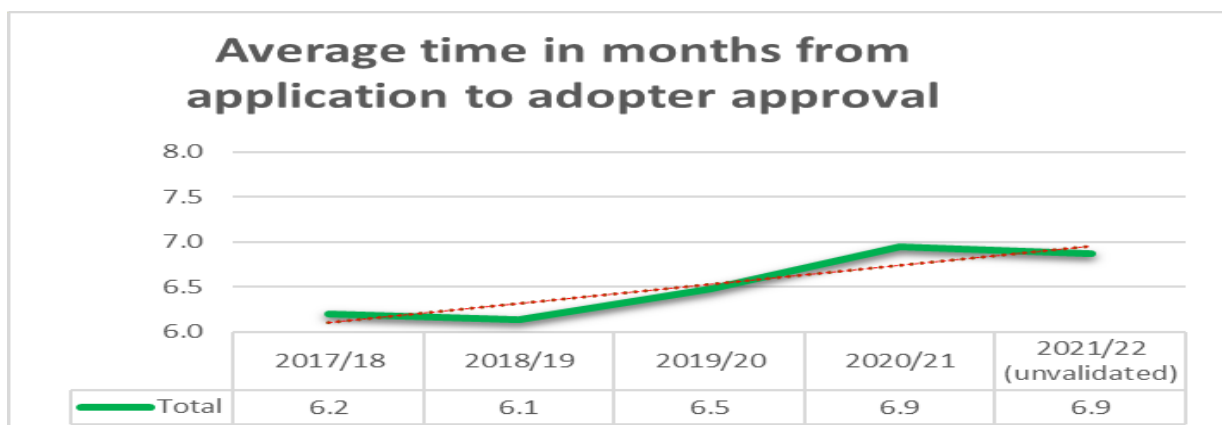
The projected number of assessments likely to start this is year is currently 358, an increase of 4% compared to last year. At 179, the actual number of assessments commenced in the first half of the year is marginally higher than the same period last year (172).



The projected number of adopter approvals likely this year is 280 a likely increase of 24% compared to 2020/21. Levels of approvals in the first half of the year at 143 are 60% higher than the same period last year (n54).



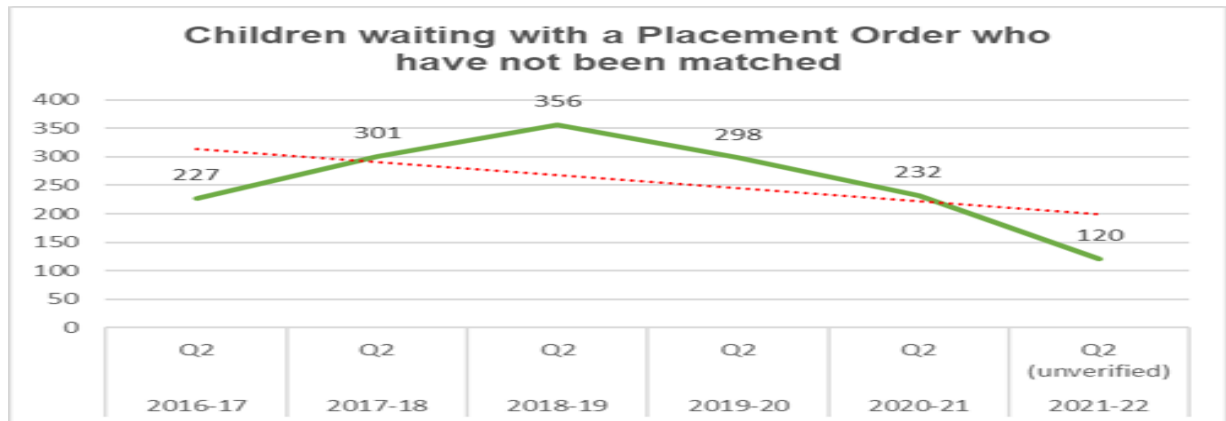
Timeframes from application to adopter approval remain at a similar level to last year. It increased due to ongoing Covid secure practices but even so remains just a little higher than the benchmark which is 6 months.





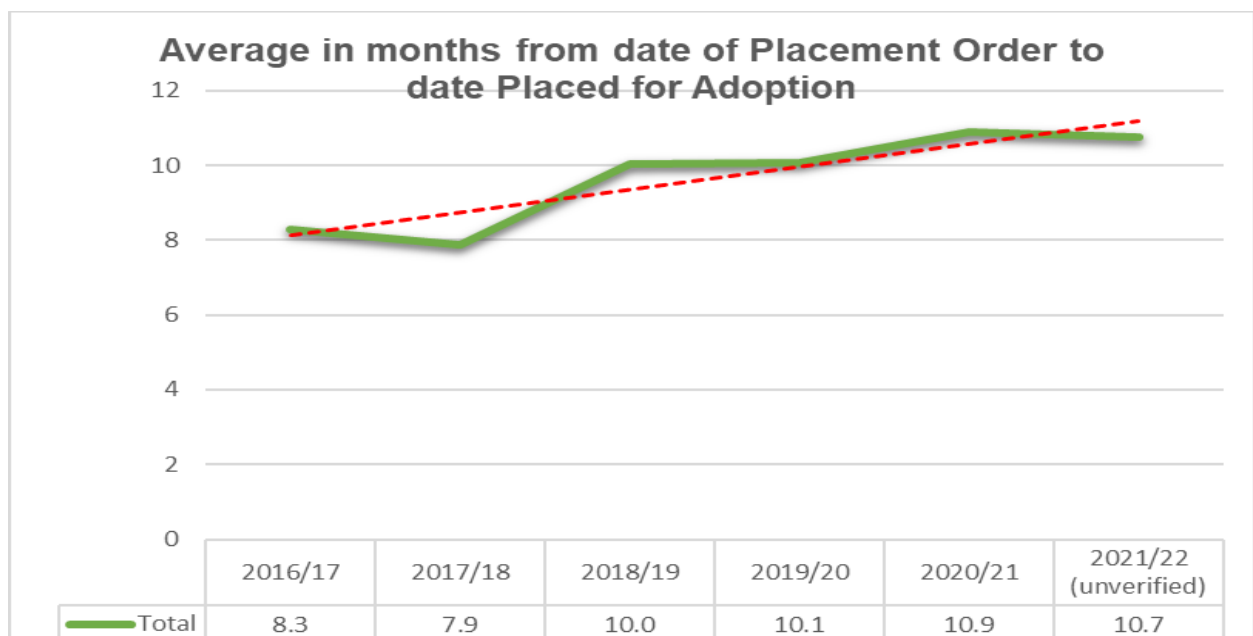
b. Optimise the matching and placing all children subject to a placement order

Performance in respect of children is also positive with the number of children waiting continuing to reduce. At midyear it had fallen by 48% compared to the same period in 2020/21.



Of the children waiting at midyear, a further 32% (n38) had a strong link in place that was waiting to be agreed. The actual number of children subject to a placement order and waiting at mid-year was therefore circa 80.

There has been an increase in timeframes for children being placed mainly due to very detailed pre-placement Covid secure risk assessment processes although good practice approaches going forward may require an adjustment to the existing understanding of optimal timeframes.



## Marketing and recruitment: Cowshed - award and planning for new recruitment campaign



The NAS 'Truth be Told' podcast, produced by Cowshed, our PR and Marketing Company, won a GOLD award at the CIPR Pride Cymru awards for 2021.

These prestigious awards, for the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, celebrate and recognise great communications.

Cowshed have continued to work with us to develop '#Choose Family' a new NAS recruitment campaign designed to help people thinking about adoption to open their hearts and minds to consider children who might wait longer for a family. Launched during National Adoption Week (October 2021) the campaign focuses on the stories of adopters and adult adoptees, and those family memories that help people through challenges and difficulties. We've always known that authentic stories from real people worked best for recruitment and have had an Adopter Champion scheme since 2016/17, Cowshed have supported us to maintain and develop this linking with very many new 'Adopter Champions' for this new campaign.

The campaign will run until early December and start again in January 2022 with the launch of a new TV advert designed to encourage people to come forward for those children who wait longer due to their age or more complex needs.

### Adoption Register Wales (ARW)



The Register Team continue to work closely with practitioners across the regions and VAA's to support matching children with adopters, particularly those who are not promptly matched through regional arrangements. They ensure children and adopters are referred to the Register in a timely manner, that the Register is kept up to date and used effectively including by co-ordinating Wales wide family finding activity.

During the first half of the year, 115 children were added to the Register and a total of 101 children were matched through it. This is a slight decrease from the same period last year but is in line with fewer children being referred for adoption and waiting. 102 adoptive families were also added to the Register during this reporting period which is an increase compared to the same period in 2020/21.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, face to face family finding events have been restricted. As a result, the ARW Team have developed 'virtual' family finding through online profiling events. Two successful events took place in June and August 2021 with adopters from across Wales invited to attend. In total 25 children were profiled across both, many of whom had additional complex needs and had been waiting longer. 46 expressions of interests were made for 16 children, with 3 successful matches made and another potential match still being explored.

Further online profiling events are planned for November 2021 and February 2022, as well as a face-to-face Adoption Activity Day in October 2021.

### **Adopting Together Service**



Adopting Together is a specialist service for children who wait the longest provided by St David's Children Society and Barnardo's Cymru for Welsh children.

St. David's have placed 4 children through the Adopting Together Service so far this year and approved 15 families. The Society has continued to innovate in the delivery of its adoption support services from providing intensive 1 to 1 support, some of which has been therapeutic and psychologically led, through to post approval training, peer to peer buddying, meet ups and family days.

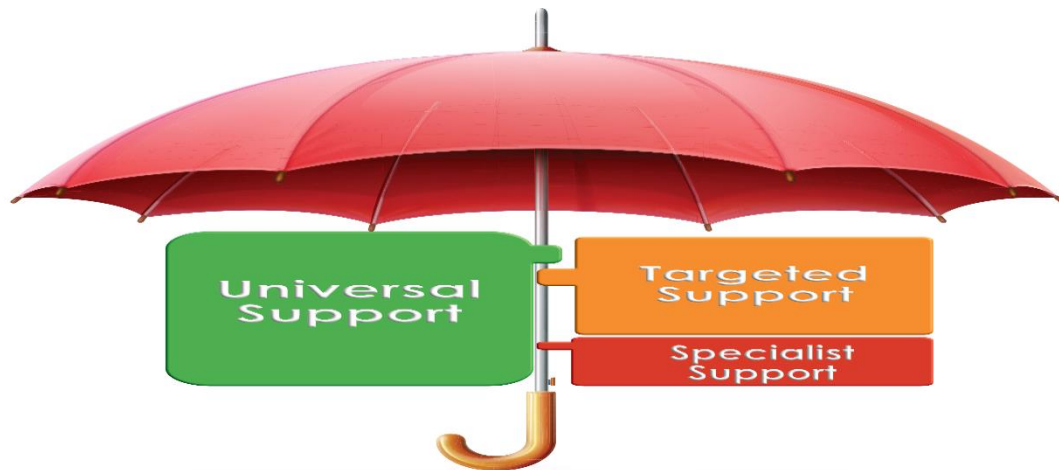
Barnardo's are working towards a placement in the second half of the year

### **Priority 2 - Continue to improve Adoption Support arrangements across Wales**

- a. [Within the overall framework, agree and promote a Core Offer of support for Welsh Adopters](#)

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. We're now calling it 'the commitment'.



### **The 'core offer' becomes the NAS 'Adoption Support Commitment'**

Our vision is for all adopters in Wales to be supported at every step of their journey, at the start when a child is placed, or later should issues arise. NAS is working on an 'adoption support commitment' that will be published and set out the range of universal and targeted services that adoptive families can expect to access via their regional team and/or the voluntary adoption agencies.

NAS wants adoptive families in Wales to feel confident that information or support will be available to them when they need it and from professionals with specialist knowledge of adoption and children's care needs. We aim to formally 'launch' the commitment later in the year.

### **Work on adoption support service transfers at 3+ years**

If a child is placed in another local authority area the responsibility for adoption support services transfers from the placing authority to the authority where the child and family live 3 years after the adoption order is granted. We have published practice guidance for services in Wales to ensure the continuation of support for children and families when this happens. This guidance, endorsed and supported by the Welsh Government, reminds staff and organisations of their duties and of the steps that need to be taken to plan this transfer of responsibility and avoid any unnecessary delay to ensuring the right support for children continues when the responsibility for that support transfers from one local authority to another within Wales.

### **Spotlight on education**

In the first half of this year Adoption UK worked with 200 schools across Wales through its professional membership scheme. Teachers came together online in 4 regional events to share good practice about how they can support their adopted learners. Through the AUK service staff and schools are given access to a wide range of bilingual resources on adoption for use in their schools; they are also able to book a telephone call with Adoption UK's lead education officer to discuss particular cases in more detail. 8 teachers have used this enhanced call back service so far this year.

#### b. Manage the £2.3m investment effectively for 2021/22 and plan for future years

The 2021/22 financial year marks the third year of this investment from the Welsh Government which is being used primarily to transform the adoption support service across Wales.

The investment has been used to increase capacity in the staff and services of the NAS regional adoption services so that children, young people and families are more effectively supported. It is also being used creatively to match fund other resources through the development of new and Innovative services, many being delivered in partnership with the Welsh Voluntary Adoption Agencies e.g., TESSA, Adopting Together Service and Connect (a service approach for adopted children and young people)

Significantly more and different types of support are now being provided as a result of this investment which funds elements of the NAS Adoption Support Framework and will enable us to confidently publish the 'commitment' later this year. So far this year the investment has supported the following adoption support services:

- at any one time over 100 families are in receipt of the TESSA service, including circa 70 new families so far this year.
- circa 200 children and young people are involved in the CONNECTED service including 70 new children and young people so far this year and with a further 8 children and young people engaged in the adoption youth councils.
- regional services have supported in excess of 135 families with a range of therapeutic interventions.
- circa 200 children and families received life journey materials and at least 100 professionals received refresher training with more to come in the second part of the year.
- four very complex children have been placed through the Adopting Together Service, as well as there being ongoing recruitment of adopters including through 2 bespoke recruitment campaigns.
- a significant amount of training has been provided on the four good practice events with circa more than 230 professionals working in a range of teams and services being provided with training.
- the funding has also supported further development work on Trauma Informed Practice and a 'Wales Early Permanence Scheme'.

#### c. Continue to co-produce and use information from engagement

##### Engagement with adopters

NAS supports the annual Adoption Barometer undertaken by Adoption UK and funds the production of the 'Wales only' report each year as well as the Wales 'Adoption Voices Website', [About - Adoption Voices Wales](#), managed for NAS by AUK Cymru. Linked to this we collaborate with AUK to hold the annual 'Big Adoption Conversation' event for adopters and professionals to meet, discuss and inform plans.

The 2021 Wales Barometer report was published in October and identified many positives about adoption in Wales e.g., 80% of adopters in Wales would encourage



others to adopt and 83% felt optimistic about their future. Welsh adopters were the most likely of the 4 nations to say that they were doing well as a family in 2020 – despite this being the year of the pandemic.

[National Adoption Service - AUK Barometer report for Wales - News \(adoptcymru.com\)](https://www.adoptcymru.com).

The report indicates that there has been, and continues to be, steady and impressive progress in the Wales adoption system with clear indicators that adoption services in Wales are working better than in the other countries of the UK. This improvement can be seen most clearly in the experiences of families currently going through approvals and matching and where children have been placed in the 2 or 3 years.

It is acknowledged that there is still a lot to do especially for those families and adopted young people who have not benefitted from the recent improvements. Adoption can bring with it challenges which last long beyond the adoption order and which (if not mitigated) can impact negatively on future life chances. There is a legacy of poor mental well-being in some adopted teenagers and adults, most of which can be traced back to lack of early support for families and poor life journey work. NAS is already making improvements to this for new families and remains committed to developing other services to benefit longer standing families and older adopted children and young people.

#### [Engagement with adopted children and young people](#)

Linked to the 'Connected' service supported by the WG investment, we have established two Adoption Youth Councils which have begun to meet regularly this year. The Connected groups have produced their first newsletter for children and young people this year and with the Youth Council are currently developing an advice and information website, which will be launched later this year.

### Priority 3 - Thinking Ahead

- [a. Influencing and improving the legal, policy and delivery frameworks for adoption in Wales](#)

#### **Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)**

There is higher prevalence of FASD in children looked after and adopted children. To consider how Wales might respond to this, a group has been meeting during the last 12 months consisting of NAS, AUK, Cardiff University, the Institute of Public Care and Paediatricians from NHS Wales. This group has developed a proposal which has been submitted to Welsh Government for funding to explore how to influence health and evaluation of FASD based on the good practice example of services provided by the Cwm Taf board. The business case proposal includes:

- Funding for a student nurse to undertake a literature search and comparison of FASD services in Scotland.
- Funding for a medical student to look at prevalence of FASD and services in Wales.
- Drawing together a clinical interest group across Wales.

#### **Black Lives Matter workshops and research**

As part of our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, all adoption panel members and staff in adoption services across Wales have received training on 'Unconscious Bias' provided by NAS. We plan to build on this as we go forward and consider further ways, through research, to develop our understanding of how matters such as these might impact on Welsh service users, particularly in relation to placing children or recruiting and supporting adopters.

### **Public Law Working Group – Adoption Sub-committee**

The Public Law Working Group (PLWG) was set up by the President of the Family Division in 2018 to address the operation of the child protection and family justice systems in England and Wales. Since then, the PLWG has undertaken a number of pieces of work significant piece of work and in 2021 commenced work on adoption. This committee is reviewing current legal process for the making of adoption orders and any reforms that might be necessary to make it efficient and fit for purpose. There are a number of Welsh representatives on the subcommittee and its workstreams, including the NAS Director and a lead Head of Children's Services. The workstreams are looking in detail at the following:

- International adoptions
- Relinquished children/consensual adoption
- Legal consequences of adoption and access to records
- Process and procedures in court
- Contact and human rights

### **Wales Early Permanence**

NAS is continuing to work closely with AfA Cymru who, in collaboration with the regions and VAA's, are developing a framework which will enable looked after children, who through a plan of twin-tracking (rehabilitation or adoption), might need an adoptive family. The aim will be to place children with carers who have dual approval as both adopters and foster carers so enabling them to have as few changes of placement as possible. The plan is to launch the framework via a national conference and to follow this with an implementation plan from April 2022 onwards.

### **Development of an 'App' for our Good Practice Guides**

Work is well advanced to launch an 'App' to hold our Good Practice Guides as well as other policies and procedures over time. The 'app' which will be widely available on IOS and Android devices.

### **Development of All Wales Adoption Procedures**

NAS has commissioned the development of common adoption policy and procedures. Working with the regions and VAA's we aim to draw on existing best examples to contribute to consistency in service delivery in the future.

b. [Continuing to raise adoption awareness amongst professionals and the public](#)

### **Welsh Government Parenting Expert Action Group (PEAG)**

As part of the PEAG stakeholder group NAS is supporting the work of the PEAG in the run up to the Children (Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment) (Wales) Act 2020 which comes into force on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022. The work undertaken by the PEAG will ensure practical and effective implementation of additional support required for all parents and carers and offer support to effectively manage any change before and after the Act comes into force.

## **NEST**

NAS organised for regional and VAA managers to input into the consultation on NEST by arranging a specific meeting with health colleagues leading the work. The NEST Framework is a planning tool for Regional Partnership Boards (RPB) that aims to ensure a 'whole system' approach for developing mental health, wellbeing and support services for babies, children, young people, parents, carers and their wider families across Wales. It will be implemented through regional partnership boards. Adopted children and young people and their families are included in the range of more vulnerable citizens whose needs this framework will address.

## **Links with the new Chief Social Care Officer for Wales**

The NAS Governance Board was delighted to welcome Albert Heaney the first Chief Social Care Officer for Wales to its September meeting and to have a discussion with him as part of his series of 'listening events'. It was a pleasure to have a productive discussion with Albert and to see that so many of his priorities will support the aims of NAS in particular to continue to listen closely to voices of those who use or are affected by adoption services including working co-productively with them and across services as we continue to transform services.

### **c. Continuing to build a 'one service' ethos and functioning**

NAS is a collaborative made up of Local Authorities, working nationally, regionally and in local authorities, alongside Voluntary Adoption Agencies, health services, education services and many other stakeholders. The ambition to continue to operate in a consistent way remains as strong as ever but the realities and practicalities of working together to the same aim at the same pace is challenging. NAS has continued to implement the changes to its governance below to create the best context for this.

## **Partnership Agreement**

All 22 local authorities in Wales signed the new Partnership Agreement in the first half of the year. This agreement sets out the framework for NAS to operate consistently to an agreed optimal model of excellence and as a single service through;

- Increased ownership and accountability throughout the service for improvement against nationally agreed objectives, policies and priorities
- Streamlined links between national and regional governance as well as service delivery and strategy
- More working together across regions and centrally to share best practice, improvement and where appropriate resources
- A business focus that maximises the contribution of all sector partners



### **Joint Committee**

Alongside the above a national Joint Committee is being put in place on behalf of the 22 Welsh Local Authorities to enable them to exercise their powers for the provision of the National Adoption Service for Wales (NAS) and Foster Wales (FW). It provides an improved mechanism for political oversight to complement the NAS Governance Board and its new Partnership Agreement and also puts in place an equivalent arrangement for Foster Wales. It will also provide an improved basis for the hosting arrangement with Cardiff Council

### **Joint Working**

The Central Team, Regions and VAA's meet on a monthly basis, continuing a meeting that was put in place to respond to Covid but now provides valuable whole sector operational group.

The NAS lead local authorities and the central team continue to meet regularly as the 'LA Business Planning' group and in the regional Adoption Managers meeting while the Director meets regularly with the VAA's in their network, the Strategic Voluntary Adoption Partnership (SVAP).

The membership of all the NAS subgroups and task & finish groups, which undertake the NAS improvement work 'on the ground', are a cross section of all the stakeholders in NAS.



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