

National Assembly for Wales
Children and Young People Committee

Inquiry into Adoption
November 2012



The National Assembly for Wales is the democratically elected body that represents the interests of Wales and its people, makes laws for Wales and holds the Welsh Government to account.

An electronic copy of this report can be found on the National Assembly's website:
www.assemblywales.org

Copies of this report can also be obtained in accessible formats including Braille, large print; audio or hard copy from:
Children and Young People Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Tel: 029 2089 8153
Fax: 029 2089 8021
Email: CYPCommittee@wales.gov.uk

© National Assembly for Wales Commission Copyright 2012
The text of this document may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium providing that it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading or derogatory context. The material must be acknowledged as copyright of the National Assembly for Wales Commission and the title of the document specified.

National Assembly for Wales
Children and Young People Committee

Inquiry into Adoption
November 2012



Children and Young People Committee

The Committee was established on 22 June 2011 with a remit to examine legislation and hold the Welsh Government to account by scrutinising expenditure, administration and policy matters encompassing: the education, health and wellbeing of the children and young people of Wales, including their social care.

Current Committee membership



Christine Chapman (Chair)

Welsh Labour
Cynon Valley



Angela Burns

Welsh Conservatives
Carmarthen West and South
Pembrokeshire



Jocelyn Davies

Plaid Cymru
South Wales East



Suzy Davies

Welsh Conservatives
South Wales West



Rebecca Evans

Welsh Labour
Mid and West Wales



Julie Morgan

Welsh Labour
Cardiff North



Lynne Neagle

Welsh Labour
Torfaen



Jenny Rathbone

Welsh Labour
Cardiff Central



Aled Roberts

Welsh Liberal Democrats
North Wales



Simon Thomas

Plaid Cymru
Mid and West Wales

The following Member was also a member of the Committee during this inquiry.



Keith Davies

Welsh Labour
Llanelli

Contents

Summary of recommendations and detailed actions for Welsh Government	5
1. Introduction	12
2. Approach to the inquiry.....	15
3. Context.....	16
Statistics and trends	16
Adoption legislation.....	17
Adoption Agencies in Wales	17
4. Uneven provision across Wales.....	19
5. Securing permanence for children and reducing delay	21
Options for permanence	21
The importance of permanency planning for children	21
The role of dual planning for children: twin-tracking and concurrent planning	27
Financial issues which impact on permanency plans for children.....	29
Inter-agency fees	29
Budget structures	30
Social return	32
Targets.....	34
6. Recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopter parents...	37
Advertising campaigns.....	38
Initial responses to adopter enquiries.....	40
Assessment and approval of adopter parents	43
Time.....	43
Assessment	44
Training and Preparation.....	46
Content	46
Timing	46
Experiences of adopters from diverse backgrounds	47

Role of the adoption panel	49
7. The matching process and the transition.....	50
Matching	50
Matching difficult to place children	52
Sibling groups	52
Pre-adoption assessment and screening	54
Preparation support for children	57
8. Children's rights within the adoption process.....	60
Listening to children and young people during the adoption process	61
Children's rights to information: the quality and provision of life-story information.....	63
Rights to contact with birth families including birth parents and siblings.....	65
9. Supporting children, young people and families: post-adoption support.....	68
Funding for adoption support	69
Extending duties to adopted children	71
Rights to needs met as well as rights to have an assessment	71
Similar entitlements to looked after children	72
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and therapeutic services	73
Attachment issues	74
Problems accessing CAMHS	75
Specialist services	77
Same priority as looked after children	79
Education	81
Support and being adoption aware.....	83
School subjects.....	85
Additional Learning Needs	86
School admission.....	87
Looked after children education co-ordinators.....	88

Specific post-adoption support to parents	90
Parenting support programmes.....	90
Peer support.....	92
Adoption disruption and breakdown	93
Limitations of existing data on adoption disruption.....	93
Financial Support	95
10. Workforce issues	98
Social work capacity.....	98
Direct work with children and families.....	100
Continuity of social workers within adoption process	101
Adoption expertise and experience within generic social services ..	102
Specialist workers.....	105
Links between adoption teams and childcare teams.....	105
Implications for the proposed National Adoption Service	106
Initial training and continuous professional development (CPD)	107
11. Proposals for a National Adoption Service.....	108
Overall support for the concept of a National Adoption Service	108
Remit and functions of a National Adoption Service	109
Division of responsibilities at a national, regional and local level	111
Accountability within and operational delivery of the National Adoption Service	114
Role of the voluntary sector	115
Geographical implications	116
12. Limited adoption data	118
Annex A: Summary and analysis of written and verbal evidence from adoptive families prepared by Dr Sally Holland	120
Annex B: Terms of Reference	138
Annex C: List of witnesses who gave oral evidence	139

Summary of recommendations and detailed actions for Welsh Government

Recommendation 1. National Adoption Service The direct service delivery role of the National Adoption Service should be significantly strengthened from that currently set out in the *Social Services (Wales) Bill* consultation document. The service should have a central delivery role and employ staff to work on a range of adoption. It should not be ‘owned by local authorities’ as set out in current proposals. The lead role within the Service should be a senior independent role, reporting to a multi-agency board, and ultimately accountable to the relevant Welsh Government Minister. (Page 14)

Recommendation 2. Permanency planning for children The Welsh Government should work with the WLGA to establish a pilot voluntary sector partnership in one Welsh local authority (modelled on the partnership between Coram and Harrow Council) where a voluntary organisation works alongside the local authority and has early involvement in care planning with the aim of improving care management decision-making. (Page 26)

Recommendation 3. Adopter initial enquiries The proposed National Adoption Service should be the first point of contact for inquiries about adoption including the responsibility for delivering (or commissioning) a telephone helpline and website aimed at attracting prospective adopters. (Page 42)

Recommendation 4. Assessment The National Adoption Service should be responsible for the assessment of prospective adopters, delivering this via regionally based staff employed by the Service. (Page 46)

Recommendation 5. Adopter training and preparation The National Adoption Service should be responsible for the training and preparation of adopters, delivering this via regionally based staff employed by the Service. In collaboration with key stakeholders, including adopter parents, the Service should review the existing arrangements across Wales develop a comprehensive programme building on current good practice. (Page 47)

Recommendation 6. Matching The Welsh Government should establish a National Adoption Register for Wales and all prospective adopters and children with an adoption plan should be immediately placed on the register to be available for matching (Page 54)

Recommendation 7. Children and young people's participation The Welsh Government should establish a mechanism for adopted young people to participate in the on-going development and delivery of the National Adoption Service. (Page 61)

Recommendation 8. Life-story work Every adopted child should be offered quality life-story work. The Welsh Government and local authorities must, as a matter of urgency, review the extent of gaps in the provision and put a strategy in place to ensure that all children have access to quality information. (Page 65)

Recommendation 9. Post-adoption support The Welsh Government, in conjunction with the UK Government, should explore the feasibility of the responsibility for the provision of post-adoption support remaining with the placing authority until the child's 18th birthday. (Page 71)

Recommendation 10. Entitlement to adoption support services The Welsh Government should amend current regulations to create a statutory entitlement to adoption support services, not limited to the entitlement of an assessment of need. (Page 73)

Recommendation 11. CAMHS and therapeutic service The Welsh Government should, as a matter of urgency, work with the Welsh NHS Confederation in respect of provision to adopted children to audit current provision and identify gaps, considering the issues highlighted in our evidence with specific attention to access to specialist therapeutic services. They should subsequently set out a plan which outlines the specific actions which will be taken to address the current shortcomings in provision for adopted children. As part of this approach, the Welsh Government should also compel local authorities and local health boards to work jointly. Further evidence should be sought from all interested parties including adoptive families. The plan should outline whether therapeutic services will be delivered via the development of a new specialist service or make it clear how they can be delivered in a timely way within CAMHS.

The Children and Young People Committee will specifically revisit the progress which has been made in delivering this recommendation in 12 months' time. We commit to undertake any further scrutiny we regard as necessary to review progress and secure the changes needed in delivering these important services. (Page 80)

Recommendation 12. School Admissions Code Adopted children should be given the same priority as looked after children within the School Admissions Code. (Page 89)

Recommendation 13. Remit of Looked After Children's Education Co-ordinators The Welsh Government should extend the remit of Looked After Children's Education Co-ordinators to include adopted children. (Page 89)

Recommendation 14. Parenting support The National Adoption Service, in conjunction with key providers, should be responsible for developing a wide ranging set of parenting support programmes which: meet the varying needs of families across the spectrum; focus on evidence based models; and promote opportunities for adopters be involved in designing and delivering content. (Page 92)

Recommendation 15. Workforce issues The Welsh Government should work with the Care Council for Wales and the WLGA to review the social work 'workforce strategy' as relevant to adoption, specifically identifying and addressing gaps in respect of knowledge of child development and attachment theory. The review should look at the needs of staff within a National Adoption Service and, of equal importance, the needs of social workers within local authorities undertaking permanency assessment and planning work with children. The proposed National Adoption Service should have a lead role in the training and continuous professional workforce development in respect of adoption issues. (Page 107)

Recommendation 16. National Adoption Service The Welsh Government Expert Working Group should explore the model for a National Adoption Service based on the Committee's recommendations. The Deputy Minister should return and brief the Committee regarding the detail of the model, once changes to her proposals are more developed. (Page 114)

DETAILED ACTIONS (for response by Welsh Government)

Permanency planning for children

- the Welsh Government should require local authorities to have robust permanency planning systems in place which oblige senior managers and local authority members to scrutinise and monitor progress against individual plans;
- whilst the current performance indicator on permanency planning remains in place, the Welsh Government should require local authorities to issue an explanation outlining the reasons against any variation in the performance indicator target when the indicators are published.

Concurrent planning

- the Welsh Government should establish a time limited review, working with the key stakeholders, to identify the current barriers to concurrent planning and set out a strategy to resolve them. The review should also identify any legal issues which need clarification.

Financial issues

- the Welsh Government should work with the WLGA to support local authorities to review their adoption and fostering budget structures and identify any potential impact these have in securing timely permanency for children;
- the Welsh Government should, with reference to the WLGA, commission a review of the full costs of providing adoption services within local authorities with a view to identifying budgets which, in the medium term, could be used to finance the sustainability of a National Adoption Service;
- the Welsh Government should enable local authorities to introduce charging for step-parent adoptions.

Advertising campaigns

- the National Adoption Service should work with key stakeholders to develop a national advertising campaign. This should include distinct strategies to target adopters for 'difficult to place children';
- the National Adoption Service should develop (in conjunction with experienced adopters) a range of suitable materials aimed

at prospective adopters in order to support a national advertising campaign.

‘Difficult to place children’

- the National Adoption Service should work with key stakeholders with a view to increasing the adopter pool for ‘difficult to place children’ taking into consideration both ways in which recruitment could be improved and also examining issues relating to increased practical support which could be provided.

Preparation support for children

- foster carers should receive mandatory training on ‘supporting children to move on for adoption’. Any specific foster carer support needs should be identified at the time a decision is made on moving a child placed with them on to an adoptive placement. The Welsh Government should work with the WLGA to ensure this happens.

Listening to children and young people’s ‘wishes and feelings’

- the remit of the National Adoption Service should include the promotion of existing information for children and young people and the development of accessible materials to meet any gaps in the current available resources. The Service should also have a broader role in promoting training and good practice in respect of listening to children’s wishes and feelings during the adoption process.

Contact

- where it has been decided that contact with their birth family is in the child’s best interest, the Welsh Government should require local authorities to identify ways of improving practical support to sustain and better monitor such arrangements.

Education

- the Welsh Government should ensure that forthcoming changes to the framework for the assessment and planning of provision for children and young people with special educational needs include specific reference to the potential needs of adopted children;
- training on attachment disorders and the effects of early trauma on children within the school system should be incorporated within initial teacher training qualifications, as well as being part

- of the continuing professional development of teachers, school counsellors and other school based staff;
- the Masters in Educational Practice, should, in the academic year 2013/14, include a focus on attachment issues as part of its core teaching on additional learning needs;
 - the Welsh Government should work jointly with ADEW to develop written materials for adoptive parents to give to school staff in Wales highlighting the particular needs of adopted children.

Adoption Disruption

- the Welsh Government should work with adoption agencies in Wales to review the way data is currently recorded and should establish a new tracking and recording mechanism for the disruption and family breakdown rates for children placed for adoption from the care system.

Parenting Support

- the National Adoption Service should support adoption agencies and voluntary organisations to develop local peer support groups and develop national groups where there is an identified need, for example for single adopters.

Financial support

- the Welsh Government should make representation to relevant Ministers at a UK level, calling for a review of the tax and benefits systems to ensure that adopted families are supported and encouraged and that specifically there is parity between maternity and adoption pay;
- the Welsh Government should consult on the standardisation of financial adoption allowances.

Workforce issues

- the Welsh Government and the Care Council for Wales should work with universities providing qualifying and post-qualifying social work programmes to identify, and if necessary, address gaps in the field of adoption including child development and attachment theory, law, policy and evidence based practice.

National Adoption Service

- the Welsh Government should explore and take forward a management and accountability model for a National Adoption

Service based on the framework recommended by the Children and Young People Committee (as outlined in paragraph 357 of this report);

- the development of a National Adoption Service should be informed by the views of adopter parents. The Welsh Government should ensure that there are meaningful systems in place for adopters to participate in the on-going development and delivery of the National Adoption Service;
- the Welsh Government should consider how work in respect of step-parent adoptions can best be taken forward within the context of the creation of a National Adoption Service;

Data collection and monitoring;

- the National Adoption Service should have a specific role in collecting, monitoring and publishing a full range of adoption data (including qualitative data where relevant) in order to inform service delivery and identify trends with a focus on delivering improved outcomes for children.

1. Introduction

1. The Committee believes that, wherever possible, it is preferable for children to be brought up within their own birth families. Where this is not possible, we regard adoption as a valuable alternative which can offer a permanent family environment to some of the most vulnerable children in Wales. Adoptive parents undertake a crucial role in providing stability and minimising the effects of the harm which some adopted children may have already experienced. Many of the wide range of issues relevant to adoption are complex. As such, this report sets out to identify some of the bigger issues we have heard about during the inquiry. We have also highlighted other important areas which need additional further scrutiny.

2. We have received evidence highlighting the strengths as well as of some important shortcomings within aspects of adoption services in Wales. Of prime importance is the clear evidence that services are being provided very inconsistently across Wales. We have been told of poor initial responses to adopter enquiries from some adoption agencies and potential adopters feeling discouraged to take their interest further. Many adoptive families have been left lacking the support they need, both immediately after their child has been placed with them and in the longer term. This must change.

3. The National Adoption Service will need to deliver a major step change in the provision of adoption services. The Committee is unanimous in its view that the direct service delivery role of the National Adoption Service should be significantly strengthened from that currently set out in the *Social Services (Wales) Bill* consultation document. A National Adoption Service should have a central delivery role for a range of adoption services including the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. The National Adoption Service should employ staff at a central and regional level. It should have a role in facilitating the matching of adopters and children at a national level, including hosting a National Adoption Register for Wales. The case responsibility and the decision making role relating to children should remain with local authorities, however a pilot should be established to examine the potential benefits of a local authority/ voluntary sector partnership in respect of care management decision making. A National Adoption Service should not be 'owned by local

authorities' as set out by the Deputy Minister for Children in current proposals.

4. The development of a National Adoption Service is the most pivotal and important change, but it is not the only one needed. The range of evidence we have heard suggests that solutions are needed at a range of different levels. For example, the adopted young people we met raised some important issues relating to their experiences of education. Listening to their concerns, and taking action where possible, will be a key factor in determining whether future changes in adoption services actually make a difference to the lives of children and young people in Wales. We have also made recommendations about the workforce development of social workers, whose roles will be outside that of the National Adoption Service, specifically in relation to developing the skills needed to undertake permanency assessments and planning, including the crucial pre-adoption assessments.

5. Adopter parents need support to understand the likely challenges their child might face and an assurance that any future help which may be needed will be provided quickly and without dispute. Relevant agencies such as social services, education and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) need to recognise that 'the majority of children placed for adoption will have significant challenges to overcome and that this needs to be reflected in the support available to adoptive parents,'¹ Some adopter parents gave us examples of excellent support provided by social workers and other key individuals. We need to ensure that such support is provided consistently and to all families.

6. Whilst court delays are outside the remit of our inquiry and have been well documented elsewhere, the Committee is extremely concerned about the damage to children caused by delays within the family justice system. We have heard other important evidence which falls outside the terms of reference of this inquiry, such as support to birth families. Where appropriate we have passed this information to relevant parties.

7. The overwhelming message from adopter parents is that the positive life-changing experience of adopting their children by far outweighs the many challenges they may have faced along their

¹ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK

adoption journey. The Committee is keen that this is emphasised and reflected in the findings of this inquiry.

“Of course he is the best little boy in the world!”

“It has been fantastic!”

“My husband and I have a wonderful little boy who does have some challenging behaviour but we have come through it and we love him very much and feel truly blessed.”

8. We are exceptionally indebted to the adopter parents and the young people who have given their time to help us with this important inquiry. Their willingness to openly share their experiences gave the Committee a unique insight into adoption in Wales. A report of the evidence received from them is contained in Annex A. The Committee is grateful to Dr Sally Holland² who has expertly guided and supported us in gathering the views of some of those affected by adoption.

9. At the conclusion of our inquiry, we need to be assured that the changes proposed by the Welsh Government will deliver the necessary outcomes for adopted children and their families. **Unless substantial changes are made to current Welsh Government proposals for a National Adoption Services, a significant opportunity will be missed to make greatly needed improvements to services which affect the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in Wales.**

Recommendation 1: National Adoption Service

The direct service delivery role of the National Adoption Service should be significantly strengthened from that currently set out in the *Social Services (Wales) Bill* consultation document. The service should have a central delivery role and employ staff to work on a range of adoption. It should not be ‘owned by local authorities’ as set out in current proposals. The lead role within the Service should be a senior independent role, reporting to a multi-agency board, and ultimately accountable to the relevant Welsh Government Minister.

² Reader in Social Work, Cardiff University

2. Approach to the inquiry

10. On 9 December 2011, the Children and Young People Committee issued a call for evidence based on the adoption inquiry terms of reference (see Annex B). The Committee received 37 written responses to the consultation, 23 of which were from adoptive families. Three of these were anonymous, forwarded by adoption agencies. There were also sets of collated responses (but containing lengthy direct quotations) from adoption agencies: Rhondda Cynon Taf, Blaenau Gwent, North Wales Consortium. The WLGA collated responses from a number of adoption agencies, and some of that evidence included direct quotations from adopters sought specifically for the inquiry. One adoption support group held a special meeting to discuss the inquiry and submitted written comments from the group.

11. In addition to the written responses, members of 37 adoptive families (including seven young people in a group session) gave verbal evidence in informal, private meetings with sub-groups of the Committee. Some, but not all, of these also submitted written evidence. An estimate is that we have had direct or pre-collated evidence from at least 60 individual adoptive families.

12. Six private evidence sessions took place with families between March and July in Cardiff, Narberth and Wrexham. On these occasions, sub-groups of the Committee met adoptive parents, sometimes accompanied by their children. One session in Cardiff was with a group of seven adopted young people.

13. The Committee also held five formal evidence sessions, and a list of witnesses who gave evidence at these sessions can be found at Annex C.

3. Context

Statistics and trends

14. Latest adoption statistics (published by the Welsh Government in September 2012) show that 5,726 children were looked after on 31 March 2012, an increase of 310 (6 per cent) over the previous year. The number of children looked after by Welsh local authorities has increased by 24 per cent over the last five years. There were 246 children adopted from care between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012. Almost nine in ten children (89 per cent) were adopted by others and not by their former foster carer in 2011-12. The number of children adopted decreased slightly by 6 (2 per cent) over the previous year. Local authority level information is rounded to the nearest 5 children, to ensure that individual cases cannot be identified. Due to the low numbers of children per authority this makes identifying and analysing information at a local authority level difficult.

15. The Welsh Local Government Association / Association of Directors of Social Services (WLGA/ADSS) and BAAF Cymru referred to the increase in the looked after children population over the last five years and the subsequent increased demand on adoption services. Adoption UK Cymru told us that 'the complexity of needs presented by those adopted children who have come through the public care system' is increasing 'as a result of significant trauma and family breakdown'.³

16. The latest statistics also show that for the year ending 31 March 2012, 140 children were subject to a Special Guardianship Order, compared to 85 in 2011 and 60 in 2010. More information on the range of different options for securing permanency for children are set out in chapter 5 of this report.

17. Information is published on the age of looked after children at adoption in months. Welsh Government statistics show that since 2003, at the time of adoption, the average age of children who were previously looked after by local authorities in Wales has fallen by over a year from 61 months to 44 months, although the majority of this change took place between 2003 and 2007.

³ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK (Annex B)

18. Information is also published on looked after children adopted, by the average time in days between the different stages of the adoption process. Latest figures at a Wales level show: entry into care to best interest decision (371 days); best interest decision to matching of child and adopters (157 days); matching of child and adopters to be placed for adoption (22 days); and placed for adoption to adoption (278 days). Overall, the time from entry into care to adoption has reduced by over a year since 2003 and by 4 months since 2007.

19. Statistics are also published in relation to the profile of adopters and show that the majority of adopters in Wales, almost nine out of ten, are white male / female couples. There is very limited data collation on the rates of adoption disruption and breakdown and limited definitive information about the causes. This is referred to in more detail in paragraph 275 of this report. Chapter 12 of this report outlines the evidence we have heard on the issues arising from the limitations of the adoption data available in Wales.

Adoption legislation

20. Presently, apart from some Wales only regulations (which primarily deal with administrative issues), the law on adoption is the same in Wales and England. However, adoption is a devolved area under Schedule 7, Part 1 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 and divergence between Wales and England legislation in the field of adoption is possible in the future.

Adoption Agencies in Wales

21. There are 15 separate adoption agencies in Wales. Twelve local authorities have formed three regional adoption services⁴ and there are also two voluntary adoption agencies based in Wales.⁵ Each adoption agency manages their own adoption process in line with the adoption regulations. Some Welsh local authorities and voluntary agencies in North and South Wales have formed adoption consortia to share information about children and prospective adopters to help find suitable matches within the region. The aim of a consortium is to

⁴ North Wales Adoption Service comprises Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham; West Wales Adoption Service comprises Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire; South East Wales Adoption Service comprises Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen and Monmouthshire.

⁵ St David's Children Society and Barnardo's Cymru Adoption and Fostering Service

facilitate the placement of children for adoption within the consortium area, maximising the choice of adopters and reducing the time that children wait to be matched.⁶

⁶ The [South Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium](#) comprises of: Bridgend CBC, Caerphilly CBC, Cardiff CBC, Merthyr Tydfil CBC, Neath Port Talbot CBC, Newport CBC, Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC, Swansea CBC, Vale of Glamorgan CBC, Barnardo's Cymru Adoption & Fostering Services and St David's Children Society; The [North Wales Adoption Agencies Consortium](#) comprises of: Anglesey CBC, Gwynedd CBC, Conwy CBC, Denbighshire CBC, Flintshire CBC, Wrexham CBC, Barnardo's Cymru Adoption & Fostering Services, St David's Children Society and Adoption Matters North West .

4. Uneven provision across Wales

22. One of the obvious conclusions from the evidence presented to the Committee, both from organisations and adopters alike, is how unevenly adoption services have been provided across Wales. There is general consensus that there are substantial variations in provision including many aspects of recruitment, assessment, and the whole range of issues encompassed within the delivery of post-adoption support. Seeking to address such inconsistencies is stated as the key driver behind the Welsh Government proposals for a National Adoption Service.

23. From the evidence provided by adopters, one of the strongest themes was the inconsistency of responses between local authorities, with initial responses, assessment, training, matching and post-adoption support varying from excellent to very poor. We acknowledge that some of the issues we have heard about may be historical. Several adopters had adopted more than once through different agencies and have provided evidence that there is a contrast in terms of levels of support, speed and efficiency of processes and post-adoption support between agencies. While both of the voluntary sector agencies were discussed extremely positively in terms of all aspects of their service, it is important to point out that several local authorities were named as providing excellent, responsive, sensitive services on an equal par with the voluntary sector.

24. In their evidence BAAF Cymru referred to variation in local authority provision stating:

“It is a varying picture. We have pockets where we know that there is some very good practice and pockets where local authorities struggle for a myriad of reasons in respect of their organisations.”⁷

25. The WLGA/ADSS told us:

“We would accept that provision is uneven across Wales, and there is probably a lot that we can do as local authorities to improve that. Probably one of the reasons for why there is

⁷ RoP [para 154], 9 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

uneven provision is historical, in terms of where demand has been and where resources have been allocated.”⁸

In her oral evidence, Gwenda Thomas AM, the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services (‘the Deputy Minister’) acknowledged that change is needed and stated that:

“There are variations between local authorities on many aspects of their responsibilities [...]. That is why the risk would be to not take any action and to try to preserve the status quo.”⁹

26. The Committee welcomes the Welsh Government’s ambitions to address these variations via the proposals for a National Adoption Service. However, we are clear that current proposals are not far-reaching enough to deliver the step changes needed. Further details on the evidence heard in respect of the lack of consistency in services and our recommendations in this regard are set out in more detail throughout this report.

⁸ RoP [para 156], 21 June 2012 (pm), Children and Young People Committee

⁹ RoP [para 13], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

5. Securing permanence for children and reducing delay

Options for permanence

27. Adoption is one way of securing permanence for children. The Committee accepts the evidence we have heard of the importance of considering adoption within the context of other permanency options for children, such as special guardianship orders; long term fostering; kinship care; and residence orders. Voices From Care told us that they ‘would like to see all options for permanence being afforded equal value,’¹⁰ whilst the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Cymru, NSPCC Cymru and BAAF Cymru also emphasised the importance of valuing the range of options which can provide a permanent placement for a child. The Fostering Network highlighted the risk associated with focusing on adoption as the only way of securing permanence for children and advocated that:

“A care planning framework for all looked after children is introduced which places the need for permanency at its heart and which explicitly states that there is no hierarchy of legal status and that in each case what is right for the child or young person must determine the decision.”¹¹

28. The Committee accepts the evidence that there is a range of options which can deliver high-quality outcomes for individual children. We believe that it is possible to substantially improve adoption for those children for whom it is in their best interests, whilst also maximising the number of children who are provided with security through the other permanency options best suited to their individual needs.

The importance of permanency planning for children

29. The Committee has heard evidence of the importance of robust permanency planning to avoid children ‘drifting’ within the care system. Planning for permanence involves a range of options, including adoption. Adoption UK Cymru told us that at a critical stage in their development ‘many children are left to drift far too long’ and

¹⁰ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Voices From Care, Consultation Response AD20

¹¹ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from the Fostering Network, Consultation Response AD21

that they are ‘increasingly damaged the longer they wait in the care system’.¹²

30. Further highlighting the potential implications of children spending long periods within the care system, Dr Julie Selwyn, Director of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies (University of Bristol) told us that:

“Social workers have been too focused on finding a placement for a child rather than thinking about finding a permanent family and permanent relationships for children. We know that delay increases the likelihood of moves for children in the care system. Children are moving around foster-care placements; it is not as though they are staying with one family. Those moves, by themselves, can trigger mental health problems in children. [...] Delay increases mental health problems, makes children stressed and makes the chances of adoption much lower. For every year of delay, the chance of being adopted reduces by about 20 per cent.”¹³

31. Dr Alan Rushton, visiting Professor, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, told us that:

“The core element is uncertainty: living for a long period of time in uncertain circumstances—whether you are going to stay or remain—and finally being transferred to a new environment, with a new school in a new neighbourhood with new siblings, which is a huge challenge. The less that is delayed, the better.”¹⁴

32. Many of the adoptive families who gave evidence were distressed by how long their children spent in foster care before coming to live with them. This appears to be a particular issue when the likely outcome prior to the birth of the child was adoption and the adopters of an older sibling were willing to be considered as potential adopters for a new-born baby. Several parents felt that decisions about adoption could have been made earlier and that birth parents were given too many opportunities to the detriment of the child's need for a permanent placement.

¹² Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK (Annex A)

¹³ RoP [para 284], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁴ RoP [para 285], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

33. Whilst the issues and debates in respect of early intervention in birth families are inevitably of interest to the Committee, this complex debate falls outside the terms of reference for this specific inquiry. Several families felt that they should have been given the chance to immediately care for younger siblings who were removed at birth, rather than those children spending several months with foster carers prior to the adoption placement.

“I had six months of knowing that ‘my’ child, as I felt towards her, knowing that the plan was for her to come to us, was being cared for by someone else.”

34. The specific issue of court delays is beyond the scope of the Committee’s inquiry and has been considered in depth by the Family Justice Review (FJR). The Committee has heard evidence from several witnesses which echoes the findings of the FJR that there are avoidable delays within the care system and adoption services that fall within the responsibility of local authorities.¹⁵

35. Local authorities in Wales complete annual returns to show how they are performing in key areas of children’s services. One indicator is the percentage of children who have a plan for permanence at the time of their second looked after children (LAC) review, which the regulations state should be held no more than four months after a child begins to be looked after. While this indicator is not specifically about adoption, it has the potential to identify local authorities that are not meeting the permanency planning target of 100 per cent. If no plan for permanence has been agreed at the second review, the Committee is concerned of the potential for drift in a child’s case. Figures for the three-year average between 2008 and 2011 show that there were 13 local authorities in Wales who did not meet the requirement to have a permanency plan in place at the required time.¹⁶

36. The WLGA / ADSS told us they were very aware that local authorities ‘must not allow drift to happen’. However, they questioned the value of the current performance indicators in respect of permanency planning stating:

¹⁵ Calculations by National Assembly for Wales Research Service.

¹⁶ In one local authority there were more than 40 per cent of children without a permanency plan in place at the required time

“I cannot sit here and say that there are no children drifting in the system. I am simply saying that I do not think that you can measure the drift by that particular performance indicator. There is much more complexity behind that and there are much more rigorous questions that we could ask than simply looking at that performance indicator.”¹⁷

37. They also told us that they are negotiating a change to how local authority performance is measured and are working to develop data which shows:

“... what the outcome was for the child, and the targets that people were working towards that supported improvement, rather than very arbitrary timelines.”¹⁸

38. They went on to tell us of the challenges facing social workers in making ‘timely’ decisions on the best permanency options for children including being satisfied that they have ‘ruled out every possibility with the family’ stating:

“[...] what is ‘timely’ when you have a child who will be taken away from their family and placed with a forever family? It is the most important decision that you make, is it not?”¹⁹

39. One of the Welsh Government’s stated priorities for children’s services is ‘to act sooner to find permanency or replacement families for those children for whom a return is not in their interest’.²⁰ In her oral evidence, the Deputy Minister told us:

“There has been an improvement. The majority of local authorities do now comply with this by the second review. In some authorities, that figure is up to about 80%, but that is not good enough.”²¹

40. South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) told us

“The longer children wait for a prospective parent, the more complex the move is likely to be. This makes robust permanency planning in agencies critical to the success of

¹⁷ RoP [para 179], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁸ RoP [para 182], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁹ RoP [para 197], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²⁰ Welsh Government: [Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action](#) 2011

²¹ RoP [para 19], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

adoptive placements. [...] For those that do there needs to be robust permanency planning. This should not simply identify the preferred permanence option for the child but detail how that will be achieved and within what timescale The Agency then need to have a process to ensure this is revisited. While it is looked at as part of a child's LAC review there is a danger that it is overshadowed by day to day arrangements rather than a focus on the child's need for a lifelong family.”²²

41. The recently published Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skill (OFSTED) report in England²³ found that care proceedings were the most common reason for delay within adoption. However, it also found that local authorities who had robust systems in place to track the progress of cases were more likely to minimise the risk of significant accumulated delay. The Committee heard evidence from Dr Julie Selwyn on permanency planning management systems, such as those put in place as part of the partnership between the London Borough of Harrow and Coram Family in 2006.²⁴

“[...] if plans were not being pushed for particular children, action would be taken. Individual social workers would be called to account. [...] Also through that system, children were reunited with their birth parents in a more timely manner. So, the drift for all children was reduced.”²⁵

42. St. David's Children Society also cited the 'highly successful'²⁶ partnership between Coram and London Borough of Harrow.

43. The Fostering Network told us that:

“There are many examples in Wales where permanency planning works well and we need to ensure this is the case for all children in Wales.”²⁷

²² Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from South East Wales Adoption Service, Consultation Response AD19

²³ OFSTED, [Right on time: exploring delays in adoption](#), 2 April 2012

²⁴ Selwyn, Dr J, [Evaluation of a new model of providing adoption services: the LB Harrow and Coram partnership](#), 2009

²⁵ RoP [para 391], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from St David's Children Society, 23 May 2012

²⁷ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from South East Wales Adoption Service, Consultation Response AD21

44. The Committee believes that for those children where there is uncertainty about whether they can remain with their birth family, everything possible should be done quickly in order to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them throughout their childhood. This, of course, should include exploring the option of remaining with the birth family and assessing whether this is in the child's best interest.

45. Given the extensive evidence we have heard about brain development in the first two years of a child's life and the problems which arise when children do not develop appropriate attachments during this period, we believe that timely permanency planning is crucial. We accept the WLGA / ADSS evidence that current performance indicators do not necessarily reflect the outcomes for children and that plans might change after the four month period. We nevertheless feel that the current indicator upholds the importance of timely permanency planning and that all local authorities should be required to deliver against this target until alternative measures of performance can be put in place.

Recommendation 2: Permanency planning for children

The Welsh Government should work with the WLGA to establish a pilot voluntary sector partnership in one Welsh local authority (modelled on the partnership between Coram and Harrow Council) where a voluntary organisation works alongside the local authority and has early involvement in care planning with the aim of improving care management decision-making.

Detailed Actions: Permanency planning for children

- **the Welsh Government should require local authorities to have robust permanency planning systems in place which oblige senior managers and local authority members to scrutinise and monitor progress against individual plans;**
- **whilst the current performance indicator on permanency planning remains in place, the Welsh Government should require local authorities to issue an explanation outlining the reasons against any variation in the performance indicator target when the indicators are published.**

The role of dual planning for children: twin-tracking and concurrent planning

46. Twin track planning occurs when plans for a return to the child's birth family are explored alongside plans for a placement outside the family, including adoption. This has the benefit of putting the local authority in a position to immediately implement long-term plans when the court makes its final decision. Concurrent planning is a more specialised form of twin track planning, when a young child is placed with a foster family who are specially trained and approved as adopters. It was introduced in a small number of agencies in England in the mid 1990s. If the court decides that an adoptive placement is the best outcome, the child is able to remain with their foster carers when adoption is approved rather than having to move again. However, the foster carers also have to prepare for the possibility of the child returning home to their birth parents if the court decides this is the best option.

47. Of the parents who gave evidence, several second and third time adopters told us they would have considered concurrent planning arrangements for new-born younger siblings.

48. Many agencies provided evidence in support of these approaches. Adoption UK Cymru, Pembrokeshire County Council, Bridgend County Borough Council, and BASW Cymru, all cite the benefits of their use. They reference that it results in fewer moves for children in care and can be beneficial for attachments and healthy emotional development. Barnardo's Cymru provided the Committee with a potential model for concurrent planning that they suggest could be developed in partnership with local authorities in Wales and also told us:

“Concurrent planning means that children get a stable loving home as early as possible and that the risks of disruption are taken by adults rather than children.”²⁸

49. The Committee was keen to find out why concurrent planning had not been taken forward in Wales, especially as it can minimise the number of changes experienced by the child. Dr Julie Selwyn told us:

²⁸ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p2b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Barnardo's Cymru, 23 May 2012

“Cost is one of the key areas. The other is having the right kind of concurrent planning placement available when the social worker needs it.”²⁹

50. In their oral evidence, Wrexham County Borough Council told us of the challenges of recruiting adopter parents who were willing to consider the placement of children under concurrent arrangements:

“I think that we have to accept that the majority of adopters who come forward are childless couples who want a child of their own, and do not want to consider fostering or the chance that this child will return home to its parents. So, you would have to be very specific and have good staffing levels to support them.”³⁰

51. They also referenced some potential complexities:

“We just wonder whether the parents are initially approved only as foster carers and then as adopters or whether they are just approved as adopters. The legislation does not allow for those two approvals to happen in one place. At the moment, under the legislation, those have to happen in two different places. I think that that can delay the process quite considerably.”³¹

52. Barnardo’s Cymru told the Committee that there is a need for:

“[...] strong leadership and commitment in local authority senior management to promoting the use of Concurrent Planning and a greater understanding of the process within social work teams, local authority legal departments, judiciary and the courts.”³²

53. In her oral evidence in respect of concurrent planning, the Deputy Minister told us that:

“I have reservations...What it would actually mean is that we would have to seek to recruit adopters who were prepared to become foster carers as well. I think that some people might feel that that was not for them because it would mean going

²⁹ RoP [para 388], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

³⁰ RoP [para 56], 21 June 2012 (pm), Children and Young People Committee

³¹ RoP [para 124], 21 June 2012 (pm), Children and Young People Committee

³² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Barnardo’s Cymru, 23 May 2012

through the assessment process to become foster carers at the same time as the process for adoption. The process for becoming foster carers would require them to accept contact with birth families and the possibility of the child going back to the birth family.”³³

54. Whilst the Committee understands that there may be complexities in taking forward aspects of these dual-planning approaches, we are of the view that the potential benefit to children is significant. The Committee is aware that concurrent planning is likely to be suitable for a relatively small cohort of children and acknowledges the challenges of attracting adopters who are willing to care for a child who has the potential of being returned to their birth family.

55. However, the Committee is also of the clear view that that any increased drive for concurrent planning placements should be mindful of the risk of excluding the recruitment of adopter parents who would not choose to offer such a placement. We believe that concurrent planning should be considered more proactively for some children and that it should be considered as a potential option within all permanency plans. The Welsh Government should provide leadership and support to local authorities in taking this approach forward.

Detailed Actions: Concurrent planning

- **the Welsh Government should establish a time limited review, working with the key stakeholders, to identify the current barriers to concurrent planning and set out a strategy to resolve them. The review should also identify any legal issues which need clarification.**

Financial issues which impact on permanency plans for children.

Inter-agency fees

56. Where local authorities place children for adoption with adopters approved by a voluntary agency or another local authority (with whom they are not part of a regional adoption service), an inter-agency fee is charged.

57. The issue of inter-agency fees was highlighted by several agencies, such as Newport City Council, Pembrokeshire County

³³ RoP [para 28], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

Council and the North Wales Adoption Service (NWAS). Both voluntary adoption agencies based in Wales also highlighted inter-agency fees as an issue.

58. Barnardo's Cymru suggested 'there is a perception that Voluntary Agency Adopters (VAA) are expensive because a high inter-agency fee is charged. Meanwhile, many VAA adopters are waiting for a placement'.³⁴

59. Along with St David's Children Society and BAAF Cymru, Barnardo's Cymru referenced the work co-authored by Dr Julie Selwyn³⁵ on the cost of adoption and the inter-agency fee, which compared the true financial costs of adoption in comparison to a child remaining indefinitely in foster care. This report found that local authorities under-estimated their own costs of finding an in-house placement.

60. In written evidence, referencing the proposed National Adoption Service, the Deputy Minister told us:

"The National model will need to examine the pooling of budgets across Wales, to eliminate the competitive market between local authorities when dealing with adoption placements. This should in turn significantly reduce delays in the process for both the children and prospective adopter. The legal framework for pooled budgets is well established and we have made considerable investment in building an understanding of how this approach can be managed in reality."³⁶

Budget structures

61. The Committee has received conflicting evidence as to whether the structure of local authority budgets influences decision making on permanency options for children. Adoption UK Cymru told us that:

³⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p2b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Barnardo's Cymru, 23 May 2012

³⁵ Selwyn J; Sempik J; Thurston, P and Wijedasa, W, (2009) *Adoption and the inter-agency fee*, Department of Education 2009

³⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-24-12(p2b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 19 July 2012

“Local authority funding does not prioritise promoting and supporting adoptive placements, as against other, less beneficial placements.”³⁷

62. And that in respect of funding for post-adoption support:

“Adoption team managers throw up their hands at the idea of spending £10,000 on a parent mentoring programme, for example. That may well keep a family together and make all the difference for those children, but their total adoption support budget is £10,000 and there is no way that they are going to spend it all on one family.”³⁸

63. St David’s Children Society told us that:

“[...] some agencies will actually park children for three years. In a sense, it is about the structure of budgets. [...] The adoption budget is a small one, whereas the fostering budget is a huge one. The budgets dictate the service that the child receives, rather than meet the child’s needs.”³⁹

They recommended that:

“It is imperative that we change rigid structures to one that is cost effective and delivers a future for children requiring adoption”.⁴⁰

64. Dr Julie Selwyn told the Committee:

“As far as I know, a consultation paper is due in September in England, which will look at how placements are commissioned and at the role of the voluntary sector. Budgets in England are used in similar sorts of ways. In England, children have been left in foster care for a further year, rather than being placed for adoption, because the budget for that year had been spent. Adoptive parents have been lost as a result.”⁴¹

³⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1d), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

³⁸ RoP [para 234], 9 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

³⁹ RoP [para 122], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁴⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from St David’s Children Society, 23 May 2012

⁴¹ RoP [para 287], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

65. However, other evidence suggested that budget structures did not affect permanency planning. In oral evidence, both Cardiff County Council and Wrexham County Borough Council told us that, in their experience, the structure of local authority budgets did not affect the speed at which children moved into adoptive placements. When questioned on this issue, the WLGA / ADSS told us they were ‘taken aback by any suggestion that that (local authority budgets) would prevent any child from being placed for adoption’.

“Certainly for us, I have to say that there is no way that a child would not be adopted if there was a need for that child to be adopted. It is a children’s services budget, not a fostering budget or an adoption budget. If I overspend on my children’s services budget because I need to, I will. If I need to go to my members and say, ‘Look, we’ve got these five children who we want to place, but we haven’t got the resources in-house or within the consortium at the minute so we have to go outside and purchase them’, I know that they would support me to enable that to happen, despite going over budget”⁴²

Social return

66. Some evidence highlighted the issue of the social return of investing in services and systems that enable early adoption. For example, Adoption UK Cymru told us:

“The long term costs of failing to address early trauma far outweigh the costs of providing high quality, professional and effective support to children and families”.⁴³

67. BAAF Cymru highlighted the ‘huge emotional and financial cost of keeping a child in care with no sense of belonging to a ‘forever family’.⁴⁴

68. Barnardo's Cymru told us that:

“[...] attention should be given to the potential cost benefit of increasing adoptions. Early adoption is a cost effective option

⁴² RoP [para 204], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁴³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁴⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

compared to frequent and unstable placements and demand on other services during a lifetime in care.”⁴⁵

69. St David’s Children Society suggests that the Wales Audit Office conduct a study into the financial costs of providing adoption services within Wales.⁴⁶

70. In written evidence, the Deputy Minister referenced the ‘Social Return on Investment’ report,⁴⁷ which she told us ‘concluded that for every successful adoption from care, where through adoption a child receives the support needed to resolve problems from their past, there could be a social return of over £1million per placement’. Angela Burns AM suggested to the Deputy Minister that ‘local authorities tend to be far more short-termist in their views - it is much more about how much money they have in their budget this year.’⁴⁸

71. Within the context of current financial challenges, local authorities will be seeking to maximise the resources available to them. The Committee acknowledges that addressing the disconnect between how local authorities existing services are funded and the long term investment needed to secure a significant social return is a major obstacle, especially in securing the investment needed in post-adoption support. Whilst the Deputy Minister made it clear that (other than potential start-up costs) there will be no additional resources attached to the proposed National Adoption Service, the Committee consider that the Service offers a significant opportunity for commencing a longer term ‘invest to save’ approach, in particular in respect of specialist post-adoption support.

72. In additional written evidence on the structure of local authority and adoption budgets, the Deputy Minister told us she was ‘aware of these concerns’ but that not all local authorities have separate budgets for adoption and fostering.

“Under the umbrella of a national adoption service we will examine market between local authorities when dealing with adoption placements. This should in turn significantly reduce

⁴⁵ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(pb), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Barnardo’s Cymru, 23 May 2012

⁴⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from St David’s Children Society, 23 May 2012

⁴⁷ Clifford, J. (2011). PACT Domestic Adoption and Fostering: SROI Evaluation. Reading. PACT. and London. Baker Tilly.

⁴⁸ RoP [para 86], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

delays in the process for both children and prospective adopter.”⁴⁹

Other financial issues

73. We also heard evidence from the NWAS and SEWAS about the resources needed to assess Partner of Parent adoptions.

74. NWAS suggested that the Welsh Government should give local authorities the power to charge for Partner of Parent adoptions to prevent these costs being absorbed from the core adoption budget as ‘these detract from the core activity of assessing general adopters for children in the care system.’⁵⁰ Introducing charging for step-parent adoptions has been recommended by the English Expert Working Group on Adoption.

Detailed Action: Financial issues

- **the Welsh Government should work with the WLGA to support local authorities to review their adoption and fostering budget structures and identify any potential impact these have in securing timely permanency for children;**
- **the Welsh Government should, with reference to the WLGA, commission a review of the full costs of providing adoption services within local authorities with a view to identifying budgets which, in the medium term, could be used to finance the sustainability of a National Adoption Service;**
- **the Welsh Government should enable local authorities to introduce charging for step-parent adoptions.**

Targets

75. The Committee received evidence on the issue of setting targets for the stages of the adoption process that are the responsibility of local authorities, with the aim of ‘speeding up’ the process. In England, targets have been set both in respect of OFSTED inspections

⁴⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 26 September 2012

⁵⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from North Wales Adoption Service, 21 June 2012

of local authority adoption services and also within the Department for Education 'Adoption Scorecards' for individual local authorities.

76. The evidence we have received about delays within aspects of adoption services is set out in more detail elsewhere in this report. However, in terms of the broader issue of timescales, several adopters noted that timescales felt about right for them, and that if the assessment or matching had been carried out any more quickly it would not have been thorough enough. Many felt that reducing the assessment process would be detrimental for children. A parent told us:

"I personally felt some alarm at hearing that the adoption process should be speeded up."

another told us:

"You can't rush the process".

77. These views were echoed by BAAF Cymru, the WLGA, Adoption UK and the SEWAS adoption panel. The Children's Commissioner for Wales told us:

"We must ensure that in seeking to reduce delays in the adoption process we do not commit to a system based on performance measured against the length of the adoption process – to the detriment of thorough consideration of the best interests of the child in each individual child."⁵¹

78. In her oral evidence, the Deputy Minister said:

"I do not believe in adoption targets. I believe that time needs to be taken in the case of each individual child to ensure that what is being proposed is in the best interests of that individual child. That is not to say that we cannot have targets on performance and improvements."⁵²

79. The Committee agrees with the evidence we have heard that the setting of targets relating to timescales will not guarantee meaningful progress for either children or prospective adopter parents. There is a

⁵¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from the Children's Commissioner for Wales, 21 June 2012

⁵² RoP [para 15], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

risk that they divert attention from real challenges that service providers need to take forward. We are, however, of the view that the Welsh Government adopts more rounded measures of assessing standards and progress, including the valuable feedback which can be provided directly by those affected by the adoption process.

6. Recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopter parents

80. Because of the evidence we have heard about the damage caused to children by delay and uncertainty, we regard addressing the current shortfall of adopters as pivotal to securing permanence for those children for whom adoption has been identified as the best option. Prospective adopters should be regarded as a valuable potential resource. The systems in place should seek to maximise the numbers who go on to adopt successfully.

81. However, the evidence we have heard suggests that many potential adopters are lost to the system and, of those who do go on to successfully adopt, some do so in spite of the systems in place rather than because of them. We have heard of some examples of efficient recruitment, assessment and preparation services, with excellent support being provided by social workers. Much more consistency is needed to achieve this standard of service across the whole of Wales.

82. In her written evidence the Deputy Minister told us:

“There has been a reduction in the numbers of approved adopters in the last 18 months. Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Register have identified the urgent need to recruit, assess and approve potential adopters, a process which can take between 6-8 months to complete. The lack of potential adopters obviously has a huge impact on the availability of suitable matches to meet the varied needs of children waiting to be adopted. BAAF estimate that 1 in 4 children available for adoption will not be placed primarily due to the lack of an adoptive parent resource.”⁵³

83. However, Adoption UK Cymru and St David’s Children Society referred to a large pool of potential adopters that is ‘not being

⁵³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-24-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 19 July 2012

tapped'⁵⁴ and that a 'considerable number of families are lost due to the inadequacies of the current system.'⁵⁵

"There is a risk that we feel overwhelmed by the challenge of finding 200 or 300 homes for children per year. There are 22 local authorities in Wales. For 200 children all that is required is that the national service recruit 10 families from each authority year after year. For 300 children we recruit 15 families from each authority. That is inherently achievable. The imperative is that we act with confidence, show leadership and finally secure justice for all children who wait."⁵⁶

84. SEWAS, BASW Cymru and Barnardo's Cymru highlighted the need for specific targeted recruitment to address the shortage of adopters for older children, those with additional needs, sibling groups and those from black and minority ethnic groups.

Advertising campaigns

85. Many adopters noted how they felt their lives had been enhanced by their children and some stated that they would like more positive stories to be portrayed in the media to encourage more adopters to come forward. Almost all families wished to emphasise that the joy of parenting their children outweighed any difficulties they had experienced and they wished more positive stories to be used by the Welsh Government to promote adoption in Wales. Several witnesses told us of the need for media coverage about the positives of adoption and the need for promoting the improvements that adoption can make to children's lives.

86. We received extensive evidence of the need for a more coherent national advertising campaign. The adopters we heard from wanted more positive portrayals of how adoption has enhanced their lives. We were told of the benefits which could be delivered by investment in a national recruitment campaign, which would include all adoption agencies. We were also told that a national recruitment drive would deliver most benefits if supported by local and regional knowledge.

87. Adoption UK Cymru told us:

⁵⁴ RoP [para 11], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁵⁵ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from St David's Children Society, 23 May 2012

⁵⁶ Ibid

“[...] there needs to be a single national recruitment campaign for adoptive parents in Wales. This should direct interested parties to a single website and phone number where accurate basic information about adoption and the assessment process can be given and initial details taken from people who wish to proceed further. The current system of 24 separate recruitment campaigns running across Wales is clearly not a good use of resources.”⁵⁷

88. In respect of inconsistent responses, BAAF Cymru told us that:

“A potential solution to this would be a national cohesive centrally funded recruitment strategy to provide consistency across Wales. This would require support from a National Adoption helpline which managed initial enquires and was serviced by an experienced workforce who could respond effectively, sensitively and efficiently to the scope and range of calls being made. A national enquiry service can also be used to collate data, analyse trends and plot variations in interest from different regions.”⁵⁸

89. The Committee agree that a national recruitment campaign is needed and that its development should be one of the first tasks of the National Adoption Service, working in partnership with key stakeholders including adopter parents. The campaign should harness the positive experiences of those who have adopted, and should also have a clear strategy in place to attract adopters who match the profile of children who are waiting to be adopted, specifically those harder to place groups of children.

90. Some parents told us of the need for clearer information about how to apply to adopt and a ‘road map’ of the stages of the adoption process. This was a view shared by the Children’s Commissioner for Wales and Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council. Dr Julie Selwyn told us:

“I would like to see the national agency establish an approved set of literature that anybody who wants to be an adopter can read in advance. At the moment, people just go on Google, and

⁵⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁵⁸ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

there is a host of very unsuitable things out there on the internet. It would be nice to have a set of approved articles, books and DVDs, which adopters could read and watch, even before they went in for assessment. I think that that would be really helpful for adopters.”⁵⁹

Initial responses to adopter enquiries

91. BAAF Cymru told us that ‘a targeted recruitment strategy must be supported by a robust and responsive early response to enquiries from prospective adopters.’⁶⁰

92. One of the Committee’s main concerns is that we have been consistently told by many adopter parents that they received a poor response to their initial enquiries to become adopters. Given the shortage of adopter parents, we are extremely concerned that this is leading to people not carrying on with their interest in adopting. Many adopters we talked to felt discouraged by their local authority response to their initial query. Several were told that they would need to wait many months before an initial appointment or that they were not the type of adopters currently being considered (due to age or previous adoptions precluding the adoption of sibling groups). Several adopters tried neighbouring or independent adoption agencies and received a much more encouraging welcome and almost immediate initial visits or invitations to information evenings. At the other end of the scale, adopters talked of services that fell short of expectations, with lengthy delays, particularly in response to initial enquiries. Due to the obvious challenges of accessing people in such a situation, we did not receive evidence from anyone who had been interested in adopting and who did not progress further due to the initial response to their enquiry.

93. We were told by parents:

“Two years after our assessment we received a call to say that it had been found in the bottom of a cupboard”

“Our applications forms got lost”

“We felt that we were being told to join the end of the queue”

⁵⁹ RoP [para 396], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁶⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

94. Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru reflected the evidence which had been heard directly from many adopter parents, stating:

“Many people interested in adoption do not make it through the “front doors” of the adoption agency, because they are turned away without a proper assessment of their potential as prospective adoptive parents, or they are not treated with the necessary welcome and support. Thus many children in care lose the potential to be adopted because prospective parents are lost to the system.”⁶¹

95. BAAF Cymru told us that the response to initial enquiries:

“[...] is varied and inconsistent, and we need to get to a stage where, if you are enquiring about adoption, it is not a postcode lottery, dependent on where you live.”⁶²

96. In their oral evidence the WLGA / ADSS told us:

“[...] there is a varying response across Wales, and that is something that we recognise needs to improve greatly.”⁶³

97. They also told us of the challenges they face in appropriately communicating information to some prospective adopters on the reality of adoption, saying:

“To give an example, we get enquiries from people wanting to adopt new-born babies or a child under the age of six months who is female and blond, so the conversations may well be about the reality that it is rare for us to have children under the age of 12 months to be placed for adoption, so they may want to reflect upon what it is they want to achieve from the adoption process. Sometimes people can feel put off by that and can go to other local authorities.”⁶⁴

98. When questioned about poor initial responses, Cardiff County Council stated:

⁶¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1d), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁶² RoP [para 154], 9 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁶³ RoP [para 158], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁶⁴ Ibid

“That is a position that we cannot defend today, and it is something that we are acknowledging and will be seeking to address.”⁶⁵

99. St David’s Children Society recommended that a National Adoption Helpline for Adoptive Enquiries should be established. Bridgend County Borough Council suggested that a ‘collective database of enquiries’ should be established which could direct people on to local agencies as needed.

100. The Committee is of the view that a National Adoption Service would be best placed to address the concerns we have heard in respect of poor initial responses. The Service should offer a website and a national helpline telephone service. The detail of what can be best provided through such a national helpline should be developed in conjunction with key stakeholders, including adopter parents. All adoption agencies should be required to make prospective adopters aware of the helpline telephone service.

101. Whilst no adoption agency should be discouraged from directly attracting potential adopters, the Committee believes that a single point of contact initial response is likely to provide a more quality, specialist and coherent response. We agree that people must not be excluded from making their initial contacts through their local authority or voluntary adoption agency should this be their specific wish to do so, but they then need to be referred to the National Adoption Service for assessment and approval.

Recommendation 3: Adopter initial enquiries

The proposed National Adoption Service should be the first point of contact for inquiries about adoption including the responsibility for delivering (or commissioning) a telephone helpline and website aimed at attracting prospective adopters.

Detailed Actions: Advertising campaigns

- the National Adoption Service should work with key stakeholders to develop a national advertising campaign. This should include distinct strategies to target adopters for difficult to place children.**

⁶⁵ RoP [para 104], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

- the National Adoption Service should develop (in conjunction with experienced adopters) a range of suitable materials aimed at prospective adopters in order to support a national advertising campaign.

Assessment and approval of adopter parents

102. The Committee has received evidence relating to the assessment and approval process for prospective parents, which included perceptions of delays in local authorities starting and completing the process and some perceptions of intrusion and a requirement for too much detail.

Time

103. In respect of the time it took to assess and approve adopters, there were strong views from some families that the process moved at about the right pace, whilst many others found it frustratingly slow. Second or third time adopters sometimes had to repeat lengthy assessments, where briefer, more focused reviews might have sufficed and led to children being placed more quickly. This was particularly frustrating when adopting siblings of their existing children and the plan had been adoption from pre-birth.

104. Many stated that assessments could be speeded up and that there were delays in starting assessments. Some assessments were carried out very slowly. There were often frustratingly long waits for approval and matching panels. Some had waited years from first enquiries to the time their child came to live with them. For a few families the process had been completed within months.

105. In their written evidence the NWAS say it is:

“Difficult to identify which aspects of the assessment process could be eliminated without increasing an element of risk. The adoption process has been adapted and improved over many years in line with recommendations from inquiries.”⁶⁶

106. The Committee agrees with this view in respect of first time adopters.

⁶⁶ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from North Wales Adoption Service, Consultation Response AD04

107. Adoption UK Cymru told us that:

“Consideration should be given to separating out the training and preparation of adopters from their assessment. Currently prospective adopters may feel inhibited about asking questions about adopted children and their needs, and their ability to meet those needs as they are at the same time trying to convince social workers that they can do it successfully. The idea of an initial information gathering period which is adopter led and supported by social workers and others, with information and training sessions being offered by a range of organisations, followed by a more intensive assessment period led by social workers has much to recommend it.”⁶⁷

108. We believe there is some merit in exploring the two-stage process for assessment. We note that consultation is currently taking place in England on a shorter two-stage process. This consultation follows proposals made by the English working group on adoption: including an initial stage for preliminary checks and e-learning, with a second stage for assessment of suitability and linking. We also note that the English group recommended that ‘fast track procedures’ for second time adopters and for converting long term foster carers to adopters, and that these are also being consulted upon.

Assessment

109. In their written evidence BAAF Cymru told us:

“The primary objective and outcome of preparation and assessment is to identify and predict the capacity of adults to become effective adoptive parents to the specific child or children placed. Identifying and predicting parenting is extremely challenging - most people only know what parenting is like when they actually experience it. In adoption there are specific issues about approving adopters that depends on the accurate prediction of what is a future event. The preparation, assessment and approval process are often generic when the child’s needs and circumstances are very specific.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁶⁸ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

110. Most comments from adopters were about the individual relationship with the social worker, speed of the process and the types of area covered. Adopters commonly said that the assessment was deeply personal and challenging but that this was necessary due to the needs of children waiting for adoption.

“We did find the assessment process hard and long at the time but now after the fact we understand the need.”

111. Many individuals had developed good relationships with social workers and found it particularly helpful when they had continuity of staff.

“Our social worker has supported us through each step and has explained clearly and honestly what each step will entail and mean to the whole process.”

A small number of adopter parents found some questions irrelevant or insensitive and far too intrusive. One family felt that they had been ‘grilled’ about their Christian religion, in a manner that might not have been applied to people of other faiths or atheists, despite their willingness to allow any adopted child to pursue their own faith or none. Another family felt that the exercises and essays that they were asked to write made them feel like ‘school-children’.

“The bureaucracy for all of the different forums can lead to social workers’ attention being diverted from the central core of their work which is the child’s best interests.”

112. Several adopters mentioned the feeling of powerlessness in the process. They felt the need to be very passive and extremely compliant in order to be recommended for adoption and to be matched with children.

113. The WLGA / ADSS suggest that assessment could be delivered at a regional level within the proposed model for a National Adoption Service. St David’s Children Society suggest that approval of adopters could be undertaken by the proposed National Adoption Service itself.

114. Julie Morgan AM asked the Deputy Minister whether the proposed National Adoption Service would have any facilities to undertake assessments or whether this function would remain the responsibility of local authorities. The Deputy Minister told us:

“This is a developing process. We are developing these frameworks and we are considering this at the moment. I would value the view of the committee on that process and the way in which you see that aspect developing.”⁶⁹

Recommendations 4: Assessment

The National Adoption Service should be responsible for the assessment of prospective adopters, delivering this via regionally based staff employed by the Service.

Training and Preparation

115. The Committee has taken evidence which highlights the importance of timely and appropriate training and preparation of adopters.

Content

116. In the evidence received from adopter parents, many testify to the positive experience of group information and training sessions, especially when led by adopters. Indeed, training, support and advice from other adopters was one of the strongest themes in the evidence. A few instances were reported of very dull, compulsory preparation training sessions, ‘death by PowerPoint’.

Timing

117. Some adopters told us they had waited months for training to be provided, as the local authority ran the sessions on a cyclical basis. BAAF Cymru told us:

“Lack of resourcing or insufficient numbers to make training cost effective for the agency can result in preparation classes only being offered sporadically throughout the year. This has been recognised as a potential contributor to delays in the assessment and approval process and some Adoption agencies have now entered into joint partnership arrangements to offer more preparation classes throughout the year (examples of this

⁶⁹ RoP [para 63], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

working in practice can be found in Caerphilly, RCT, Newport and Bridgend).⁷⁰

118. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and Newport City Council both told us of their collaboration with other local authorities in their areas, stating that waiting times for applicants had reduced significantly as a consequence.

119. In respect of the timing of training of adopters, Dr Alan Rushton suggested that such input was potentially of more relevance after the child had been placed:

“The preparation of adopters can often be lengthy and not always be relevant for a particular family. Scarce resources are better deployed when the child has been placed and where the parent/ child interactions can be observed and assessed.”⁷¹

120. The Committee regards the development of a National Adoption Service as an opportunity to standardise the timeliness and effectiveness of the training and preparation of adopters.

Recommendation 5: Adopter training and preparation

The National Adoption Service should be responsible for the training and preparation of adopters, delivering this via regionally based staff employed by the Service. In collaboration with key stakeholders, including adopter parents, the Service should review the existing arrangements across Wales develop a comprehensive programme building on current good practice.

Experiences of adopters from diverse backgrounds

121. The families who provided evidence to the Committee live in a wide range of family circumstances. The inquiry has heard from single adopters, adopters of older children, trans-racial adopters, Welsh-speaking adopters and same-sex couples. These diverse experiences add to the evidence provided by those families who represent the majority of adopters in Wales and the majority of our participants: heterosexual, white Welsh or British couples who adopt pre-school children from white ethnic backgrounds.

⁷⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁷¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-17-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Alan Rushton, 13 June 2012

122. St David's Children Society told us:

"Aside from the childless population, there are reconstituted families, families with older children, same-sex couples and single carers, who form a huge pool of potential adopters, and we need to welcome and bring them into the system. It will help recruitment if we treat these families with the dignity and respect that they deserve rather than putting obstacles in their way."⁷²

123. A 'single' adopter felt that the system was geared towards couple adopters in assessments, financial support, training and adoption support groups. Two single adopters mentioned the considerable financial strain they had experienced and feel that there should be better provision for long-term adoption allowances for those who need to reduce their working hours due to the adoption. Further detail on this issue is provided later in this report. Another single adopter felt that she had been treated well as a single adopter.

124. Adoption UK Cymru suggested that:

"Single adopters, gay adopters, those on low incomes, disabled adopters, do not always get the service they deserve. In some cases, white adopters are turned away from agencies that predominantly place BME children, whereas these adopters may be a valuable resource for children waiting elsewhere in the country."⁷³

125. They also told us:

"We believe that the creation of a national service would make it easier to ensure that assessment of adopters is a more equitable experience focused only on the ability to be good parents to children who have experienced early trauma and neglect."⁷⁴

⁷² RoP [para 11], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁷³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1d), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁷⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

Role of the adoption panel

126. We received some specific evidence on the role of the adoption panel. For example NWAS told us:

“If the number of children currently being placed for adoption continues to increase, it is likely that Adoption Panels will need to meet more frequently to combat the risk of delay.”⁷⁵

127. We were also told by Barnardo’s Cymru and St David’s Children Society that the structure and operation of panels were not the main obstacles in the adoption process. Given that the role of the adoption panel is due to change and that they may also be impacted by the development of the proposed National Adoption Service, the Committee regards this as an area where further scrutiny may be needed by others in the future.

⁷⁵ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from North Wales Adoption Service

7. The matching process and the transition

Matching

128. An effective matching process is crucial to maximising the potential of successful outcomes for children. At present, there are generally three stages to the matching process. The local authority will try to find suitable matches within their local area; then they will look to the consortia to facilitate a match on a more regional basis; and then they will look to utilise national resources such as the National Adoption Register for England and Wales.

129. Of the adopter parents who gave evidence, their experiences of matching were very varied. Most were matched within weeks or months of approval as adopters. A small number felt pressurised into considering children they may not have previously considered, but most found the process acceptable or good. Several commented on the fact that having a social worker with whom they have an excellent and trusting relationship made the experience very positive. For example, one family told us:

“Sometimes finding a match feels like a series of lucky coincidences or the result of good personal relationships between social workers.”

Whilst another adopter parent’s experience was less positive:

“From our experience it seemed that the children and parents were far from being at the centre of the process. There was too much emphasis on the system, paperwork, box-ticking and little emphasis on the true needs of the child and parents.”

130. Several thought that matching is done too locally (to keep expensively assessed adopters for local children) and that better matching could be achieved if done on an all-Wales or even all-UK basis. Local matching caused a problem with speed, but also with protecting their children from birth families or places that might evoke bad memories. There were mixed experiences of consortium matching days. Most found the experience of queuing up to look at profiles of children and to register an interest rather distasteful, however at least three of the families who gave evidence had achieved successful matches with children through this process.

131. In their written evidence, Adoption UK Cymru told us:

“Currently too many local adoption agencies regard the adopters they have trained and assessed as an asset which they understandably wish to keep for children from their own authority. Although the recent development of consortia of agencies was supposed to help this situation, there is still very much an attitude of holding onto adopters even when there may well be children waiting in the system who could be matched successfully. This adds to the delay for children and sometimes means that children are placed too close to their birth families or that the best possible match is not achieved.”⁷⁶

132. Some evidence suggested that prospective adopters should be immediately placed on a national register to be available for linking.

133. Within the context of a potential disconnect between the preferred matching criteria of the prospective parents and the existing need of the adoption agency to which they have applied, we received evidence in support of closer working between consortia in respect of matching and also evidence in support of establishing a national register for Wales from Barnardo's, BAAF Cymru and Rhondda Cynon Taf. St David's Children Society recommended that a national register for Wales should be established, to include all children with a placement order whose assessed need is adoption and all prospective adopters waiting for a placement. Evidence suggested that a Wales specific register would widen the pool of prospective adopters available to be matched with children waiting to be adopted:

“An early flagging system would help direct the adoptive parent recruitment strategy of the ‘national adoption body.’”⁷⁷

134. In her oral evidence, the Deputy Minister responded to a question about whether all local authorities would be directed to pool their prospective adopters by stating: ‘yes, that would be the aim.’⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK Cymru

⁷⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from St David's Children Society, 23 May 2012

⁷⁸ RoP [para 61], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

Matching difficult to place children

135. Several adoption agencies highlighted the additional challenges they face in finding prospective adopters for specific groups of children such as sibling groups; children with complex needs; older children; and black and minority ethnic children. Both Barnardo's Cymru and St David's Children Society specialise in placing some of the hard to place groups.

136. BASW Cymru referred to the need for 'designated recruitment of adopters to take on the older child, sibling groups and children with issues and disabilities.'⁷⁹ Whilst BAAF Cymru stated:

"In addressing the current shortage of adopters, the challenge is to recruit a greater number of adopters generally and more adopters specifically skilled, able and interested in caring for children who wait the longest. For example large sibling groups, disabled children or those with medical uncertainty, older children and children from black and ethnic minority groups."⁸⁰

137. As stated earlier in this report, the Committee is keen to see further development of specialist recruitment strategies targeted at adopters willing to adopt more 'difficult to place groups' in order to reduce delay in matching these children.

Sibling groups

138. Dr Heather Ottaway, a lecturer in social work at Cardiff University, told us that:

"Most children requiring adoptive placements today will have siblings [approximately 80%]. However, many children grow up in their adoptive placements separated from some or all of their brothers and sisters [research studies indicate a figure between 50-75%]."⁸¹

⁷⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BASW Cymru, 21 June 2012

⁸⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁸¹ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Heather Ottaway, Consultation Response AD14

139. In respect of the challenges of finding adopters willing to consider adopting a sibling group of three or more, she suggested that raising the profile of sibling relationships could lead to attracting more prospective adopters to adopt sibling groups, and ‘also develop professionals’ views on sibling relationships and their potential significance.’⁸² Whilst NWAS told us that ‘separate funding should be made available to support adopters who will adopt any sibling group.’⁸³ Dr Julie Selwyn told us that there was a need to reach out to non-traditional prospective adopters. She also told us about the importance of financial and practical help to support adopters willing to consider adopting a sibling group, stating:

“Taking a large sibling group needs a very detailed and careful support plan, and should not underestimate the amount of practical support that people may need. We found that there was some reluctance, for example, to put in home helps or offer that kind of practical support right at the beginning of the placement, when adopters needed to focus on relationship building rather than washing and ironing [...].”⁸⁴

140. Voices From Care told us:

“Voices From Care would like to see every effort being made to place siblings together in adoptive families, although we recognise that this may mean searching for particular families and involve a significant amount of support going into those families. We would like to see all children being given equal value. Whilst we recognise that planning for siblings groups can be very complex, we feel that situations which value the future prospects for younger children over those of older siblings is not respectful of all children’s rights or consistent with the principle of non discrimination under Article 2 and of maximum survival and development under Article 6 of the UNCRC.”⁸⁵

141. The Committee is aware that the Department of Education in England has called for evidence on placing children in sibling groups

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from North Wales Adoption Service, 21 June 2012

⁸⁴ RoP [para 305], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁸⁵ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Voices From Care, Consultation Response AD20

for adoption, which includes consulting on whether ‘the law should be more explicit that the case for placing siblings together should be considered on the merits of the case for each individual child’.

142. As stated earlier in this report, the Committee believes that the proposed National Adoption Service should develop a national advertising campaign which includes distinct strategies to target adopters for difficult to place children, including sibling groups.

143. The Committee also believes that further review is needed of the specific issues relating to increasing the adopter pool for ‘difficult to place children’, for example in respect of practical support. The proposed National Adoption Service should work with key stakeholders to lead this review.

Recommendation 6: Matching

The Welsh Government should establish a National Adoption Register for Wales and all prospective adopters and children with an adoption plan should be immediately placed on the register to be available for matching.

Detailed Action:

- **the National Adoption Service should work with key stakeholders with a view to increasing the adopter pool for ‘difficult to place children’ taking into consideration both ways in which recruitment could be improved and also examining issues relating to increased practical support which could be provided.**

Pre-adoption assessment and screening

144. The Committee has received evidence about the crucial role of pre-adoption assessment and screening of children as tools to inform decisions on matching and to inform adoption support plans. The evidence we have heard on the relevance of pre-adoption assessments to post-adoption support and CAMHS is set out later in this report.

145. Within the context of matching, a small number of families, including those who have experienced serious difficulties, told us they felt that they had not received sufficient information about their children’s early experiences and potential health, learning or

behavioural difficulties at the matching stage. Some reports were out of date and children's needs had changed prior to matching. Three families felt that siblings had been inappropriately placed together.

146. Some evidence told us how outcomes for adoption are improved by an accurate assessment of a child's abilities and developmental needs⁸⁶ at the outset. Dr Julie Selwyn told us that many assessments contained pages of description 'with little analysis of what this means for the child'⁸⁷. Dr Alan Rushton told us of the importance of better devised screening tools to undertake more comprehensive and more reliable pre-adoption assessments on a routine basis.

"In adoption work, comprehensive and reliable assessments of children's current functioning are needed. [...] Standardised measures, observations, file searches and interviews should be used to create the most reliable history of the children's key pre-adoption experiences and their strengths and vulnerabilities."⁸⁸

147. Dr Mike Davies, independent consultant psychotherapist, told us that, given most adopters have limited experience of caring for children, especially those with severe attachment problems, he was 'very concerned' about the lack of adequate screening of the child's potential for significant attachment issues prior to deciding on their future placement. Dr Davies also told us that better pre-adoption assessments may identify a very small number of children with significant difficulties, where adoption may not be a suitable placement, at least in the first instance. St David's Children Society did not share this view.⁸⁹

148. SEWAS suggested that social workers do not find the Child's Assessment Reports for Adoption (CARA) to be a helpful document in terms of profiling the child's needs. They state:

⁸⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1d), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

⁸⁷ RoP [para 291], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁸⁸ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-17-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Alan Rushton, 13 June 2012

⁸⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from St David's Children Society, 23 May 2012

“[...] there is a risk they focus on the legal matters at the expense of those things that would be important to the child in the future.”⁹⁰

149. The Committee is clear that undertaking pre-adoption assessments by appropriately skilled and experienced staff is crucial. The investment of staff time in constructing the most accurate assessment of the child’s abilities and developmental needs has the potential to provide a platform for a more stable placement. It should result in better informed adopter parents, better targeted and planned post-adoption support, a reduced risk of future adoption disruption and, crucially, result in a better experience for children.

Provision of information to adopter parents

150. The evidence we heard both from adopter parents and others highlighted the importance of supporting parents to give meaning to and to have a clear understanding of the long term implications of the information available about a child. For example, they should be provided with information in pre-adoption assessments, expert reports and child permanence reports. Dr Alan Rushton told us that much more needs to be done to convey information about the likely effects of serious maltreatment, and to explain what challenges this may present.⁹¹

151. BAAF Cymru told us:

“Being provided at the outset with full information about the child and his/her background – Disruption meetings have highlighted concerns about insufficient information being made available at time of placement. Such information could have assisted with understanding how to manage behaviour and proactively seek help before situations escalate to a crisis point.”⁹²

152. We also heard of a small number of cases where adopter parents had felt they had information ‘withheld’ from them about a child. In some cases, this was felt to be deliberate, where in others it was felt to

⁹⁰ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from South East Wales Adoption Service, Consultation Response AD19

⁹¹ RoP [para 28], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

⁹² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

be as a result of a lack of organisation on behalf of the placing authority. BAAF Cymru told us they did not feel that the deliberate withholding of information from parents was widespread.⁹³

153. The Committee accepts the evidence we have heard that pre-adoption assessments undertaken by a skilled and experienced workforce are crucial, both in terms of better informing the matching process and in terms of setting the foundations for constructing a meaningful adoption support plan. We also agree that the investment of time in explaining the potential consequences of a child's assessment in terms of their future support needs can reduce the risk of adopter parents facing future unexpected challenges.

154. The Committee feels that this is a key issue which needs to be addressed and one which does not fall within the remit of the current proposals for a National Adoption Service. Our specific recommendations on workforce development, which include issues relating to pre-adoption assessment, are set out later in this report.

Preparation support for children

155. We have received evidence of the key role of preparation support in ensuring smooth and successful transitions for children. Enabling factors that have been identified include flexibility and adaptability during the transition period; children who have had meaningful life-story work undertaken with them; and foster carers who have the skills to support the transition. Our views on the importance of life-story work are set out in paragraph 167 of this report.

Role of foster carers

156. Of the adopter parents who have provided evidence, some mentioned that their children had not received enough support and preparation in leaving foster carers and being moved to a new family.

“He certainly grieved for his foster carers over a long period.”

157. A few noted that experienced foster carers had provided invaluable support to both the child and adopters. This was often on-going.

⁹³ RoP [para 220], 9 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

“Our children’s foster parent really helped us to become competent parents. We were very nervous.”

158. On the other hand, there were a few accounts of foster carers making the move difficult.

159. Parents told us that foster carers play a vital role in helping children move successfully to adoptive families, but may find this process very difficult and require support in doing so. These views were reiterated by many agencies. For example, NWS told us that foster carers should receive mandatory training on ‘how to move children on for adoption’.⁹⁴

160. SEWAS told us that it is helpful to have link workers to help foster families support the child’s transition and, where appropriate, to support the adopters at the beginning of the new placement:

“Foster carers are key people in this process and need support and training to undertake the complex role of supporting a child to make an attachment then supporting them to transfer that to adopters, and continuing that link where appropriate.”⁹⁵

161. SEWAS also told us of the importance of training for foster carers:

“[...] to enable them to recognise and deal with the feelings they will experience in letting go of a child in their care as well as the need to ensure positive endings.”⁹⁶

162. These views were echoed by BAAF Cymru:

“This is critical that foster carers understand their roles and responsibilities in this process and are able to give permission to the child to move on to their new adoptive family.”⁹⁷

Detailed Action: Preparation support for children

- **foster carers should receive mandatory training on ‘supporting children to move on for adoption’. Any specific foster carer support needs should be identified at the time a**

⁹⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from North Wales Adoption Service, 21 June 2012

⁹⁵ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from South East Wales Adoption Service, Consultation Response AD19

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

decision is made on moving a child placed with them on to an adoptive placement. The Welsh Government should work with the WLGA to ensure this happens.

8. Children's rights within the adoption process

163. All the issues highlighted within this report are underpinned by the Committee's view that children's rights should be central to the provision of adoption services. However, there are some aspects of the evidence which the Committee has heard on adoption services which merit specific reference within the context of the rights of children.

164. Adoption is a service for children. Whilst the Committee is clear that adoption services need to work towards building sustainable families, we are also clear that with all aspects of the adoption process, primary consideration should be given to the best interest of the child rather than those of birth families or prospective adopters.

165. Some of the duties arising from the *Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure*⁹⁸ came into effect in May 2012. This will place a duty on Welsh Ministers to have due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We anticipate that the development of the proposed National Adoption Service will be very much informed by the Convention.

166. There are several articles within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which are of relevance to adoption, including article 21 which, in summary, states that when children are adopted, the first concern should be what is best for them.

167. The Children's Commissioner for Wales told us:

"We need to look at the adoption system through a children's rights lens and use the UNCRC as a framework to underpin all decision-making processes in all areas where children and young people's best interests should be placed as the paramount consideration."⁹⁹

168. These views were echoed by BASW Cymru, Barnardo's Cymru, Voices From Care and the NSPCC Cymru. BAAF Cymru told us:

"It is also important to stress that adoption is a service for children. Whilst this may sound obvious, it can be tempting to regard the 'customer' in the adoption process as the

⁹⁸ Given royal approval in May 2011

⁹⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Children's Commissioner for Wales, 21 June 2012

prospective adopter. That is to misunderstand adoption in the most fundamental way. The placement of a child in a loving family is what drives the adoption system. It is our responsibility to ensure that the system that delivers this is effective and efficient with the resources it needs to secure that objective. Prospective adopters deserve nothing less than a first class service that is efficient, welcoming, fair and responsive but we must never lose our focus on the child.”¹⁰⁰

169. The adopted young people we met placed an emphasis on their personal identities, including the wish to know siblings, to have a more positive portrayal of birth families, for schools and peers to be more sensitive, and the important role of adoption support groups. The Committee valued the time given by the young people’s group and noted that, as would be expected, young people placed some very different emphasis on the issues that were important to them. A mechanism must be in place to ensure that the development of the National Adoption Service is informed by the experiences and views of young people. The specific issues raised by young people are referred to throughout this report.

Recommendation 7: Children and young people’s participation
The Welsh Government should establish a mechanism for adopted young people to participate in the on-going development and delivery of the National Adoption Service.

Listening to children and young people during the adoption process

170. The Committee has received evidence from a range of agencies expressing concerns about children and young people’s lack of meaningful engagement in the aspects of the adoption process which fall within the responsibility of local authorities.¹⁰¹ Aligned to this, we have been told that there is a lack of age appropriate information for children involved in the adoption process.

¹⁰⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁰¹ Issues relating to children’s participation in the family justice system are outside the remit of this inquiry and were within the remit of the Family Justice Review.

171. BAAF Cymru told us that improvements were needed to ensure that the workforce is trained to listen to children's wishes and feelings. They told us:

"At times it is a difficult equation for practitioners to balance the 'wishes and feelings' of the child and the paramountcy of the child's welfare. This often involves a judgement of the 'situation of least detriment' rather than a clearly defined decision. It is also of concern to practitioners, panels and others that at times there is an apparent lack of direct work with the child in order to inform and elicit those wishes and feelings."¹⁰²

172. The Children's Commissioner for Wales referred to inspections of adoption services carried out by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales (CSSIW).¹⁰³ He told us that whilst the reports identify some areas of good practice in relation to the inclusion of children and young people's voices and engagement throughout the adoption process, in the Children's Commissioner's view the reports suggest that 'there remain significant shortcomings amongst many local authorities in Wales'.¹⁰⁴ He goes on to say that the CSSIW also 'consistently highlight the lack of engagement of children and young people in permanency planning meetings',¹⁰⁵ and:

"I urge the Committee to seek assurances that improvements are made locally to ensure that the rights of children and young people to having their voice heard and engagement in decision-making processes are in place. Part of this learning process could include developing and promoting feedback from children and young people about their experiences of going through the adoption process."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁰³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Children's Commissioner for Wales, 21 June 2012

¹⁰⁴ In response to a query from a Member, the office of the CCFW has clarified that they sought permission from the Chief Inspector of the CSSIW to reference their adoption inspections as cited in his written evidence given that CSSIW reports state that 'you may not reproduce it in part or in any abridged form and may only quote from it with the consent in writing of Welsh Ministers.'

¹⁰⁵ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Children's Commissioner for Wales, 21 June 2012

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

173. He also told us that children and young people must gain access to age-appropriate information to help them understand the process of adoption and what they can expect and states:

“This is a matter of particular concern and I would encourage the Committee to seek assurances that the recommendations I note above are taken forward and that where good practice exists locally, that this is shared and built upon.”¹⁰⁷

Detailed Action: listening to children and young people’s ‘wishes and feelings’

- **the remit of the National Adoption Service should include the promotion of existing information for children and young people and developing accessible materials to meet any gaps in the current available resources. The Service should also have a broader role in promoting training and good practice in respect of listening to children’s wishes and feelings during the adoption process.**

Children’s rights to information: the quality and provision of life-story information.

174. We heard evidence both from parents and organisations that life-story work is being undertaken very inconsistently across Wales. The Committee is extremely concerned to hear such evidence, given the value of this work to children and young people’s well-being in the longer term.

175. One adoptive family told us they had experienced many difficulties in finding information about their child’s life history (an older adopted child). Several families mentioned that they had received no life-story books or that life-story books were inappropriate (for example, containing birth family address). One family described life-story work as the ‘lowest priority’ for local authorities.

176. The evidence from agencies suggested that life-story work was not given the priority it needs, primarily because of the lack of capacity within social work teams. Several local authorities told us that specialist life-story workers should be employed to undertake this area of work.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

177. BAAF Cymru told us that:

“Life journey work can sometimes be viewed as an additional service instead of an integral part of the work with a child which needs to be undertaken by workers experienced and trained specifically for this work.”¹⁰⁸

178. Newport City Council told us of the need for:

“Greater clarity in terms of the legislation, regulation and guidance is needed around the issue of a) direct work with the child and b) life story/journey work [information to the child about adoption]. This would also need to underpin the validity of this work within childcare teams so that it carries ‘weight’ and its value is seen in terms of not the immediacy [i.e. a life story book availability] but in terms of the important messages given to the child that creates self worth and value, hears their voice [...]”¹⁰⁹

179. Adoption UK Cymru highlighted a specific danger which can arise in respect of this issue:

“Adopted children are increasingly making contact with their birth families through social networking and so it is increasingly important that they have access to high quality and sensitively delivered life story work.”¹¹⁰

180. We were told that the lack of quality life-story work can cause difficulties for children within the class-room setting. This is referred to in more detail later in this report.

181. St David’s Children Society told us that the proposed National Adoption Service should have the responsibility for ensuring that children are prepared for adoption and that life-story books are in place. Depending on the extent of the future remit of the proposed National Adoption Service, the Committee believes the feasibility of this option should be explored.

¹⁰⁸ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁰⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services, 21 June 2012

¹¹⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

Recommendation 8: Life-story work

Every adopted child should be offered quality life-story work. The Welsh Government and local authorities must, as a matter of urgency, review the extent of gaps in the provision and put a strategy in place to ensure that all children have access to quality information.

Rights to contact with birth families including birth parents and siblings

182. Responsibility for making recommendations on contact falls within the remit of both social services and the Children and Families Courts Advisory Service (CAFCASS). Final decisions will be made by the court. Whilst the Committee has not sought to scrutinise the detailed and complex issues relating to contact, we wish to briefly summarise the evidence we have received.

183. The issue of contact with birth parents came up surprisingly infrequently from families, although contact with siblings has arisen from some evidence. There were a few examples of families who were maintaining post-adoption contact with birth families. Several adopters commented that they would like to promote more contact with siblings in other adoptive families. Birth family was a stronger issue for the young people who gave evidence to the Committee than for adoptive parents. Several thought that there should be more emphasis on siblings being kept together or kept in touch and that there was too much negative portrayal of birth parents. One young person expressed the view that they should have access to adoption records at 16 rather than 18. One adoptive parent told us that contact visits by the birth family stopped due to the birth family's difficulty in travelling the distance to the adoptive home from South to North Wales.

184. The parents consulted as part of the evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf told us that:

“[...] contact arrangements post adoption do not always support children's rights, particularly if arrangements for contact breakdown.”¹¹¹

185. NWAS told us that:

¹¹¹ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Consultation Response AD10

“It is our experience that delay in placing some children is not caused by the shortage of adopters but rather their unwillingness to facilitate and manage direct contact with birth parents.”¹¹²

186. This latter view did not appear to be borne out by those adopter parents who provided evidence to the Committee, several of whom told us of the importance of maintaining contact with birth families.

187. Dr Heather Ottaway told us:

“The adopted child’s identity encompasses a dual connection – with their adoptive family and their birth family. Prospective adopters and existing adoptive parents need to be supported and encouraged to understand this.”¹¹³

188. Evidence from SEWAS, Voices From Care and Dr Heather Ottaway specifically highlighted the importance of contact with siblings. We were told that direct contact with birth siblings post-adoption is rare and that contact with brothers and sisters is more likely to be in the form of letter box¹¹⁴ contact. We were also told that adopted children struggle to find accurate information about other siblings because of the way information is (or is not) recorded on their adoption files. Voices From Care would like to see a presumption that contact is maintained between siblings where adoption is being considered for one or all of the siblings. They told us that they frequently hear from older siblings of the trauma of having contact with younger adopted siblings being terminated.¹¹⁵

189. In England, the Department for Education have called for evidence in respect of changing regulation and guidance for contact arrangements for adopted children.

190. Whilst the Committee has not received sufficient evidence to make specific recommendations relating to the role of social workers

¹¹² Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from North Wales Adoption Service

¹¹³ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Heather Ottaway, Consultation Response AD14

¹¹⁴ Letter box contact is a common form of indirect contact where cards and letters are exchanged between the child and birth relatives at agreed intervals during the year.

¹¹⁵ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Voices From Care, Consultation Response AD20

and CAFCASS in respect of recommendations on contact, we are clear that staff should receive quality training to support them in the task of ascertaining the wishes and feelings of children in respect of this complex issue.

191. In respect of the evidence we have received on the importance of contact with birth families and siblings, where this has been decided to be in the child's best interest, the Committee agrees that in some cases more robust practical support may be needed. We also conclude that there is a case for more robust monitoring of contact arrangements to ensure that the appropriate efforts are made to support with practical difficulties which may arise. We accept the evidence we have heard that adopter parents may need support in respect of issues relating to contact.

Detailed Action: Contact

- **where it has been decided that contact with their birth family is in the child's best interest, the Welsh Government should require local authorities to identify ways of improving practical support to sustain and better monitor such arrangements.**

9. Supporting children, young people and families: post-adoption support

192. Many adoptive families will need long term support requiring a coherent multi agency response. The Committee has heard extensive evidence, both from adopter parents and from organisations, which highlights specific gaps and problems in the provision of post-adoption support. Whilst the Committee accepts that not all families need or want support and that the privacy of families must be respected, overwhelmingly the evidence we have heard is of many families who have struggled to get the help they need.

193. Adoption support was a very strong theme throughout the evidence from adopters. From their evidence, post-adoption support services appear to be difficult to obtain and inconsistently applied, with thresholds for entitlement unclear. A small number had received good support and provision post-adoption including, in a very few cases, extensive packages of support. A more common story was the need to battle for post-adoption services, particularly expensive therapeutic services. One family told us they are ‘exhausted and burnt out’ and had still been unable to access the support they wanted.

194. The lack of post-adoption support is of ‘particular concern’ to the Children’s Commissioner for Wales. Barnardo’s Cymru told us that post-adoption support was determined by a ‘postcode lottery’. We were also told that some staff within a range of organisations are not sufficiently ‘adoption aware’ and that they lack an understanding of associated issues, such as attachment disorders.

195. Adoption UK Cymru told us that that the biggest impact on outcomes for adopted children can be achieved by focusing on support offered to adoptive families. They stated that a clear understanding of the likely challenges and support needs should be set out in the child’s initial adoption support plan. The evidence referred to earlier in this report on the need for skilled staff to undertake pre-adoption assessments is pivotal to the identification of potential support needs. We also note the evidence that support needs change over time. Evidence from a range of witnesses told us that many difficulties relating to attachment or disability may not emerge for several years after adoption and that it is difficult to access support at a later stage.

196. Local authorities have a legal duty to assess the support needs of adoptive families at any time after placement until the child's 18th birthday. A placing local authority is responsible for funding adoption support services (other than financial support) for three years following the date of the adoption order. A placing authority also has responsibility for on- going financial support that it decided to provide before the making of the adoption order.

197. Several parents highlighted the specific problem of access to post-adoption support when children are adopted into another local authority. Responsibility for post-adoption support moves from the child's originating authority to their current local authority after three years. Several families had difficulties in engaging support in this period.

198. The *Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (Wales) Regulations 2005* make provision for local authorities to provide adoption services and refers to the provision of education and health services. In practice, the evidence we have heard from both parents and agencies including WLGA, Wrexham County Council, BASW Cymru, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, SEWAS, and BAAF Cymru suggests that post-adoption support is assumed to be the sole responsibility of social services departments rather than being a shared responsibility with other agencies, specifically health and education services. Adoption UK Cymru told us that statutory duties or directions need to be placed on education and health services in relation to the provision of adoption support. Cwm Taf Health Board told us there 'should be a targeted service for children considered for and subsequently placed for adoption in terms of health'. They also told us that a specialist nurse/health visitor would be ideally placed to undertake this role, being involved in the matching process, developing the adoption plan and liaising closely with adoption services.

Funding for adoption support

199. A survey by Adoption UK Cymru also found that nearly half the adoption agencies in Wales did not have a dedicated budget for adoption support. The West Wales Adoption Service and Ceredigion

County Council joint response¹¹⁶ also highlighted funding problems and NWAS told us that the lack of funding for post-adoption support was resulting in local authorities ‘struggling to attract the right adoptive parents to match the children with the most complex needs and provide an appropriate level of financial support’. One family told us that they had good on-going links with social workers but that there was little funding for support:

“there is an open door to the local authority [but] there is no money behind it”.

200. Dr Alan Rushton referred to the concept of an Adoption Passport suggested by the English Expert Working Group on Adoption:

“The Adoption Passport idea, as discussed in An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling delay (DfE) is worth pursuing as a way of guaranteeing a measure of post adoption support – but depends on the provision of services of sufficient capacity, expertise and availability to meet any entitlement. Resources should be allocated on the basis of need not as a fixed amount.”¹¹⁷

201. The Committee were keen to explore what the possibilities and limitations are of the proposed National Adoption Service making the step change that is needed in respect of post-adoption support. Dr Alan Rushton suggested a centralised professional advisory group with expertise in recent practice development and research evidence being useful, upon which local practitioners could call. He suggested such a group could potentially offer consultation and supervision for difficult cases.

202. NWAS suggested that one potential option was:

“[...] for central government to provide financial support to adoptive families on placement to enable them to purchase the support they need and ensure stability of the placement.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services, 21 June 2012

¹¹⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-17-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Alan Rushton, 13 June 2012

¹¹⁸ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from North Wales Adoption Service

203. The Committee is of the view that many families are accessing post-adoptive support at crisis point rather than accessing quality on-going support. Support should be on-going as a presumption because of the realities of adoption, not as a sign of the failure of adoptive families. Work on the development of the idea of an Adoption Passport in England could be of relevance in Wales. The Committee is of the view that the proposed National Adoption Service offers the possibilities of the co-location of multi-agency post-adoption support teams on a regional basis and that this should be explored.

204. The Committee believes there is a case for the provision of post-adoption support to remain the responsibility of the placing local authority until the child's 18th birthday. In order for this to be operational, the legislation would need to change in England as well as in Wales, in order to create feasible cross-border arrangements. The Committee intends to draw this to the attention of the current House of Lords Select Committee Inquiry on Adoption Legislation.

Recommendation 9: Post-adoption support

The Welsh Government, in conjunction with the UK Government, should explore the feasibility of the responsibility for the provision of post-adoption support remaining with the placing authority until the child's 18th birthday.

Extending duties to adopted children

Rights to needs met as well as rights to have an assessment

205. One specific issue raised in the evidence is that the *Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (Wales) Regulations 2005* place a duty on local authorities to assess the support needs of adoptive families but that there is no corresponding duty to provide the services. Adoption UK Cymru called for a statutory entitlement to adoption support services, not just an assessment. The Deputy Minister told us:

“[...]this type of support is a targeted duty; dependant on an ‘assessment of need’ as is the case in the provision of all services provided by local authorities, as opposed to an adoptive family having an ‘entitlement’ to a particular service

or level of service which could be enforced in the courts by way of judicial review.”¹¹⁹

206. We note the evidence from the Deputy Minister; however this does not prevent the Committee recommending that the Welsh Government extend the current entitlement of assessing the need for adoption support services to an entitlement which includes the provision of those support services.

Similar entitlements to looked after children

207. We have heard a range of evidence in support of creating a legal duty to post-adoption support similar to duties towards looked after children. Many parents noted that adopted children have similar needs to looked after children and should have the same access to services throughout their childhood. Most adoptive parents who gave evidence supported the view that adopted children should have similar entitlements to looked after children. Aligned to this was support to adopter parents, for example, some adopters referred to the lack of access to respite care and other support services offered routinely to foster carers.

208. The Children’s Commissioner for Wales told us:

“Adopted children often face the same challenges as looked after children but we know that those children who can benefit from a successful adoption have much better outcomes than their peers who remain in the care system.¹²⁰ There is a case for the specific duties applied towards looked after children in relation to wellbeing, mental health and additional educational needs through Guidance and Regulations issued in 2007¹²¹ to be extended to adopted children.”

¹¹⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 26 September 2012

¹²⁰ Biehal, N et al (2011) *Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption*, Adoption Research Initiative, Summary 1, www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk

¹²¹ *Towards a Stable Life and a Brighter Future: Guidance and Regulations on measures to strengthen arrangements for the placement, health, education and well-being of looked after children and young people.*

209. This view was supported by Barnardo's Cymru and by the parents who gave evidence to inform the response from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council.

210. The Deputy Minister told us:

“We would need to be clear regarding appropriate support an adopted child may require, compared to the needs of a looked after child who does not have the same parental support as other children. [...] Adopted children have the stability of their adoptive parents and may not want to continue to be considered as looked after children. What we need to understand is the level and types of support and services need, and that access to these services is as good as it can be.”¹²²

211. Based on the extensive evidence from parents and also the support from key organisations, the Committee believes there is clear evidence for adopted children to have improved access to CAMHS and increased entitlements to support within the education system. The evidence for adopted children having similar entitlements to looked after children has informed recommendations 11, 12 and 13 set out later in this report.

Recommendation 10: Entitlement to adoption support services
The Welsh Government should amend current regulations to create a statutory entitlement to adoption support services, not limited to the entitlement of an assessment of need.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and therapeutic services

212. One of the clearest messages arising from the evidence was of a significant problem in accessing CAMHS and therapeutic services for adopted children, including problems arising from attachment disorders. Many parents told us they had to battle for services, especially expensive therapeutic services.

“We have continued requesting therapy for (daughter), but are now giving up as we are fighting an uphill battle we won't win.”

¹²² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 26 September 2012

213. Several parents felt that attachment disorders/difficulties are under-recognised and not provided for. Therapy provided by independent and third sector providers was identified as invaluable but often expensive and difficult to access. One family told us:

“We feel passionately that this model of intensive input from a team of professionals supporting the adopters and adoptee in the run-up to and early months following placement could be of much wider value...and that all those involved in the adoption journey deserve the amount of care, skilled support and attention which we have been lucky enough to receive.”

214. Several adopters noted that the costs of post-adoption therapy are much lower than long-term foster or residential care, suggesting that the provision of therapy could save resources as well as improve the outcomes for children. A very small number of families had engaged in protracted battles with local authorities to secure therapeutic support or care packages for severely disabled children. Sadly, these had sometimes involved legal proceedings. Evidence from parents and agencies alike told us that, due to the failure to provide timely and relevant CAMHS and therapeutic services, children and their families were being placed under significant stress with the risk of the adoption breaking down.

Attachment issues

215. During the course of the adoption inquiry we have heard much about the significance of attachment issues and the neurobiological development of infants in the early years. We were told that early negative experiences and trauma experienced by some adopted children can lead to significant emotional, behavioural, educational or developmental difficulties. In turn, these difficulties affect the child's abilities to form secure attachments with their new parents.

216. Dr Mike Davies told us he had previously worked for CAMHS for more than twenty five years as a clinician and operational manager and that he now works with adoption agencies and directly with families post-adoption. He told us that ‘attachment problems range from mild anxiety and separation problems to severe challenging behaviours, as well as an absence of empathy and severe temper outbursts’. He told us:

“The more severely affected child has significant innate developmental damage (disorganised attachment) as a result of severe early life adversity. Arguably some of these children, as a result of neuro-developmental problems - originating in the first 2 years of life, will have additional significant difficulties with their psychological functioning in the long term. Of concern here is the child’s potential to develop empathy and be relational in the usual way. Some of these children can appear superficially to be fine but in the context of their day to day care the experience for their families is very different; the worst of attachment behaviour is manifested in their routine care and with whom the child is closest.”¹²³

217. Dr Alan Rushton told us that ‘attachment is crucially important’, however he also highlighted other developmental issues which may be relevant to adopted children and cautioned against attributing ‘everything to attachment issues’.

Problems accessing CAMHS

218. In addition to the evidence from parents, NWAS, Barnardo’s Cymru, the West Wales Adoption Service and Ceredigion County Council (joint response), amongst others, highlighted the challenges faced by adopted children and their families in accessing support from specialist CAMHS.

219. Dr Alan Rushton told us:

“[...] adoptive families whose children have multiple problems often fail to receive prompt, relevant, effective services. Struggling adopters can have a sense of failure when approaching services and often report feeling blamed for the child’s problems or treated like a dysfunctional family.”¹²⁴

220. Dr Mike Davies told us that where referrals were made to CAMHS ‘they have very little priority and spend long periods on waiting lists’. He went on to tell us:

¹²³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Mike Davies, 23 May 2012

¹²⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-17-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Alan Rushton, 13 June 2012

“Increasingly, from my experience, because CAMHS is occupied with other client groups, it does not necessarily have the expertise (let alone the inclination or resources) to provide the quality of assessment and intervention required especially in the more complex cases.”¹²⁵

221. The Welsh NHS Confederation acknowledged that specialist CAMH services ‘are not uniform across Wales’. They identified a number of reasons why CAMHS may be perceived as not meeting the needs of adopted children including: inappropriate referrals from staff in other agencies; lack of funding compared to England; CAMHS being perceived as the service which is required ‘when other parts of the system are not working particularly well’; and the ‘huge problem’ of the withdrawal of support from social services in some parts of Wales:

“In particular, the input into the CAMHS teams provided by social services has gradually been withdrawn over the past 5 years. This has left a gap for the NHS that has affected the dedicated provision to adopted and looked after children.”¹²⁶

222. They told us that a more co-ordinated multi-agency approach was needed and that an internal report had recently recommended the establishment of a national planning forum for CAMHS in Wales with links to other structures within Welsh Government.

223. The Welsh NHS Confederation also told us that a ‘significant amount of work’ is being done on children with attachment disorder, including adopted children but that ‘these cases require long-term intensive treatment, and (CAMHS) might be involved with them for several years, so turnover is very slow.’ An additional paper was provided by them outlining how adopted children are provided services through the different tiers of CAMHS.¹²⁷

224. In respect of staffing, they refuted the evidence presented to the inquiry that CAMHS staff lacked the necessary expertise and awareness of issues relevant to adoption, stating that:

¹²⁵ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Mike Davies, 23 May 2012

¹²⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p4), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from NHS Confederation, 23 May 2012

¹²⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p4a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from NHS Confederation, 23 May 2012

“All senior staff in a specialist CAMH service are highly trained professionals who are experienced in dealing with children and young people who are both adopted or looked after.”¹²⁸

225. On the basis of evidence heard from parents, Jocelyn Davies AM challenged some of the written evidence provided by the Welsh NHS Confederation in their written evidence and stated:

“It describes a situation that people are not experiencing in reality.”¹²⁹

226. Dr Mike Davies told us that the medical model within CAMHS ‘has become stronger and that has, effectively, been a gate-keeping tool for it as well. In respect of the medical model, Adoption UK Cymru told us:

“Whilst some CAMHS teams are able to offer some limited family therapy to adoptive families, many regularly tell us that they are very limited to a ‘medical model’ of mental health which relies on a medical diagnosis followed by treatment based largely on prescription drugs.”¹³⁰

227. The Welsh NHS Confederation told us of work they were undertaking to develop ‘a national and more holistic model’ and also stated:

“We should not knock the medical model, because that is the right service to meet the needs of some children. However, for a lot of children, it is not, and in the absence of anything else, that is often where children and their families end up. That is not right and we all recognise that.”¹³¹

Specialist services

228. Some evidence strongly advocated for the creation of a specialist therapeutic service for adopted children. Newport City Council told us that:

¹²⁸ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p4), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from NHS Confederation, 23 May 2012

¹²⁹ RoP [para 327], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹³⁰ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK

¹³¹ RoP [para 336], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

“The families who come back to us post adoption who seem to be having significant difficulties would say that therapeutic support to children is what they need and find difficult to access.”¹³²

229. Cardiff Council outlined the difficulties social services departments face stating:

“We have purchased services that are technically therapeutic services, so there is a debate about whether we should use our funding for those services when they are health services.”¹³³

230. A representative of Wrexham CBC told us:

“I cannot see why social services are responsible for purchasing that therapeutic input all the time, when it should be provided through the health service.”¹³⁴

231. Adoption UK Cymru suggested accessing therapeutic services for adopted children was a ‘postcode lottery’ in Wales and recommended that:

“[...]a specialist project should be developed in Wales, along the lines of Family Futures in England, which would bring together the expertise of CAMHS, independent therapists, social workers and educationalists to provide a specialist service for children with severe problems derived from poor attachment and early trauma and neglect.”¹³⁵

232. Dr Mike Davies advocated for specialist services to be developed and told us:

“I would be very concerned at this stage about locating these services in CAMHS unless there was some autonomy for the new service and ring-fencing of resources. The prevailing medical model and lack of current expertise in this area in CAMHS will prevent the families getting the best out of any

¹³² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services, 21 June 2012

¹³³ RoP [para 146], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹³⁴ RoP [para 143], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹³⁵ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK Report 2010 (Annex B)

resources that may be allocated. [...] If new resources are allocated I strongly recommend that attention is paid to the development of expertise on attachment issues amongst the professional community as well as therapeutic practice in this highly neglected area of work.”¹³⁶

233. Dr Julie Selwyn suggested that it may be ‘better to skill up CAMHS for all vulnerable children and not to put adopted children outside that system’.¹³⁷

234. In response to whether specialist services should be developed outside CAMHS, the Welsh NHS Confederation told us:

“There needs to be collaborative work. I would welcome a service that is not developed on the medical model. That can be developed within or outside of CAMHS, depending on the style of leadership within CAMHS that you are building with. Part of the task for the national group is to get an established model, which I argue should not solely be a medical model.”¹³⁸

Same priority as looked after children

235. Adopted children, in common with looked after children (LAC), are likely to have a higher than average incidence of mental health needs.¹³⁹ Newport City Council, Adoption UK Cymru and several parents advocated for adopted children to have the same priority access to CAMHS as looked after children. The evidence we heard suggests that LAC children may have better access because of their integration into the social care system – rather than because of any specific priority that LAC children are afforded within the tiers of CAMHS provision. Nevertheless, the Committee fully accepts that adopted children who need CAMHS services should be able to access the appropriate provision as timely as LAC children.

236. The Welsh NHS Confederation told us they prioritise the mental health needs of all children on the basis of ‘clinical priority like any other NHS service’ and that looked after and adopted children have the same access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)

¹³⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Mike Davies, 23 May 2012

¹³⁷ RoP [para 345], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹³⁸ RoP [para 331], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹³⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1c), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

as any other child who presents with a disorder that falls under the remit of a CAMH service'. They also told us it was possible that looked after children are seen by mental health professionals sooner because several local authorities have placed psychologists, psychotherapists or nurses to work in the looked-after care system. They told us:

“What you described in terms of looked-after children is a much greater provision at the lower end of the spectrum, which helps with early assessment and support, which is very much linked in with the integrated social services model of family support. That enables some of what you were describing to happen, around that early assessment of need, so that making the way through the gateway into specialist service is more rapid and often more appropriate as well, because that early assessment in intervention is able to be done appropriately with the family in a non-medical model.”¹⁴⁰

237. Whilst the Committee accepts evidence from the Welsh NHS Confederation that the implementation of the *Mental Health (Wales) Measure 2010* should result in some beneficial changes for all children in accessing CAMHS, we are not convinced that, in isolation, the Measure will address the full range of difficulties experienced by adoptive families in accessing the support they need.

238. In additional written evidence provided to the Committee in respect of CAMHS, the Deputy Minister writing on behalf of the Minister for Health told us:

“I intend to look at strengthening support to meet the needs of children with ongoing health and education issues.”¹⁴¹

Recommendation 11: CAMHS and therapeutic service

The Welsh Government should, as a matter of urgency, work with the Welsh NHS Confederation in respect of provision to adopted children to audit current provision and identify gaps, considering the issues highlighted in our evidence with specific attention to access to specialist therapeutic services. They should subsequently set out a plan which outlines the specific actions which will be taken to address the current shortcomings in

¹⁴⁰ RoP [para 276], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁴¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from the Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 26 September 2012

provision for adopted children. As part of this approach, the Welsh Government should also compel local authorities and local health boards to work jointly. Further evidence should be sought from all interested parties including adoptive families. The plan should outline whether therapeutic services will be delivered via the development of a new specialist service or make it clear how they can be delivered in a timely way within CAMHS.

The Children and Young People Committee will specifically revisit the progress which has been made in delivering this recommendation in 12 months' time. We commit to undertake any further scrutiny we regard as necessary to review progress and secure the changes needed in delivering these important services.

Education

239. Education and the provision of related services was highlighted as another key issue which presented difficulties for adopted children. Issues included concerns that some schools and teachers are providing inadequate support to adopted children; issues arising from teaching about families; other classroom activities; the schools admissions code; and a recommendation for the duties of looked after children education co-ordinators to include adopted children.

240. Schooling was the strongest theme in the evidence from the young people we heard from. For these young people, school environments, including peers, had provided both support and difficulties. Several felt that all students should be educated about adoption and that all should be aware that adopted children can be subject to bullying. They told us that teachers should be aware that some topics could be upsetting, such as studying the play 'Blood Brothers' in drama. There was agreement in the group that schools could do more to acknowledge and teach about diverse family forms of all types. All of the young people attending this support group emphasised how important it was to them to be able to be among other adopted peers to socialise and discuss shared experiences. In an exercise where young people expressed their views along a continuum, the need for more sensitivity in schools was a clear preference.

241. In the evidence from parents, positive and negative experiences had come from state, private, special, primary and secondary, large

and small schools. There was no particular pattern to the school experiences of families.

242. Erica Beddoe, senior educational psychologist for looked after children at Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, told us that some adopted children ‘are facing different challenges to any other child going into school’

“Adopted children will be going in with a lot of difficulties and a lack of the skills that other children will go to school with, which makes it quite difficult for them to manage in the classroom setting.”¹⁴²

243. She highlighted a range of issues that some adopted children may face, including difficulties with concentration, attention and listening well; difficulties with ‘executive functioning’ (planning and organisation) which is an essential skill in the school setting; struggling to accept failure and disappointments; and difficulties with play skills. She also told us that some adopted children may have difficulties with managing the many transitions within the school day, for example transitions into the classroom, from there to play, from play times back to class and from lunch times to play.

“When you struggle with managing those changes, throughout the school day you have a lot of anxiety over transitions.”¹⁴³

244. These views were echoed by Adoption UK Cymru, who told us that the mainstream school environment ‘will often be doing its best to move children towards an independence that most adopted/fostered children may not be ready for or even be able to cope with’.¹⁴⁴

245. In written evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, they told us that ‘those working in the field (feel) that there is a need to raise awareness in Education Departments and school settings of the needs of adopted children’¹⁴⁵ and that a gradual transition into the full school can be perceived to affect the school’s performance on attendance.

¹⁴² RoP [para 74], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁴³ Ibid

¹⁴⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1d), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁴⁵ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Consultation Response AD10

246. In response to the evidence which has suggested inadequate support provided to some adopted children from teachers, schools and wider education services, Leighton Andrews AM, the Minister for Education and Skills told us:

“I would hope that this is rare as I clearly recognise that some adopted children may have additional needs requiring ongoing support.”¹⁴⁶

Support and being adoption aware

247. In the evidence from parents, a small number of families noted how sensitive and responsive their children’s schools had been to their children’s needs. Examples included a teacher letting parents know that the class will be discussing ‘who’s who’ in their families the following week and suggesting that they prepare their child for this. Many families reported insensitive attitudes from individual head or class teachers about adoption. This included no warning when children may be asked to provide baby pictures (which they may not possess). Several parents reported under-recognition of the long-term impact of early loss, abuse or poor parenting.

248. We were told that many teachers may not be aware that a child is adopted and the possibility that some adopters may prefer not to share that information with the school. We were also told that for some adopted children, there is insufficient information provided by the placing authority to the adopter parents (including life-story work) to enable them to give teachers a full picture of their likely support needs.¹⁴⁷

249. Evidence also highlighted the lack of training for teachers and school staff on attachment issues and how to support children with those difficulties. Adoption UK Cymru told us that educational professionals should be trained in issues of trauma and attachment. Barnardo’s Cymru echoed these views. Erica Beddoe told us that training was important to highlight the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties that some adopted children often face:

“There is an attitude that is probably generally held that if a child is adopted, they are extremely fortunate—that they have a

¹⁴⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Minister for Learning and Skills, 26 September 2012

¹⁴⁷ RoP [para 126], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

new family and their life is going to be lovely. They are forgetting that those children have been looked after, and if they are looked after, in the world in which we live, they will have experienced a lot of trauma, neglect and other major issues. The teachers' attitudes will probably be that they are lucky children, as they have been adopted."¹⁴⁸

250. She also gave us examples of some strategies that teachers and school staff can successfully use such as: meeting and greeting the child at the beginning of the day; keeping the child near to the teacher to enable frequent positive attention to be paid to them; addressing the child individually after group instructions; having a set routine and providing visual timetables or plans for the day.¹⁴⁹

251. Conversely one or two parents mentioned cases of over-attribution of adoption and associated problems such as attachment disorders to behaviours within the normal and expected range. Some felt that their children had been labelled as difficult:

"I asked if all girls who deliberately forget their PE kits are labelled as having attachment disorders."

252. Many families called for more training for teachers and other school staff. ADEW told us they are 'happy to work with Welsh Government to ensure that teachers and schools have a greater level of awareness regarding the needs of children and young people who are adopted'. They also told us they are happy to work with the Welsh Government and other partners to ensure that schools have a greater awareness of the curriculum needs of adopted children and that:

"Information about attachment disorders could be a valuable part of the initial training of teachers and on-going CPD of teachers."¹⁵⁰

253. The Minister for Education and Skills told us:

"I would expect all teachers to demonstrate that they understand the diverse learning needs of learners and

¹⁴⁸ RoP [para 95], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁴⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Erica Beddoe, 26 September 2012

¹⁵⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p4), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Minister from Association of Directors of Education Wales, 26 September 2012

endeavour to provide the best possible education for them to maximise their potential [...]"¹⁵¹

School subjects

254. Some adopter parents told us that some subjects studied in schools can be painful for adopted children (including some fiction and classes about genetics and inheritance) and teachers could be more sensitive to this and proactively offer confidential support. This was a very clear message from some of the young people we heard from.

255. Adoption UK Cymru told us that the way some subjects are dealt with 'can result in hurtful experiences for children whose family life or background does not match the idealised version that is presented':¹⁵²

"[...] many subjects within the school curriculum are fraught with difficulty for adopted/fostered children. Classwork on family trees, family timelines or baby pictures for instance, are obvious areas that causes distress and upset for adopted/fostered children."¹⁵³

256. Erica Beddoe told us that she had met some 'extremely sensitive teachers who would be very caring and accommodating' of adoption issues, but that this was not the case with all teachers.

257. The Minister for Education and Skills told us that learning from real-life experiences is central to personal and social education (part of the basic curriculum for 7 to 16 year olds). He told us that through PSE, 'learners can (also) be enabled to explore their feelings, develop self-awareness and self-respect and develop their self-esteem'¹⁵⁴ and that there is Welsh Government guidance to support teachers in dealing with sensitive issues.

¹⁵¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Minister for Learning and Skills, 26 September 2012

¹⁵² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1c), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁵³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁵⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Minister for Learning and Skills, 26 September 2012

Additional Learning Needs

258. A number of families told us they felt that their children were receiving too little or the wrong type of additional help. Children who have experienced early traumas may have needs that do not fit easily with existing categories of provision. Erica Beddoe told us that some adopted children with emotional and behavioural difficulties may 'often be perceived as having challenging or difficult behaviour, without appreciation of where that behaviour emanates from'. She also told us that:

"Making arrangements for special educational needs to be met within that short timescale often does not meet local authority timescales. That is a huge problem for children who have been in specialist settings, particularly if they are in special schools with additional learning needs."¹⁵⁵

259. Adoption UK Cymru called for 'entitlements to additional support under the statementing system'.¹⁵⁶ The Minister for Education and Skills told us that the Welsh Government is proposing to replace the existing statutory framework for the assessment and planning of provision for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) with a simpler, more person centred system for children and young people with additional needs (AN). He also told us that the new system 'is intended to capture adopted children identified as having additional needs'.¹⁵⁷ A pre-legislative consultation document, *Forward in partnership for children and young people with additional needs: Proposals for reform of the legislative framework for special educational needs*, closed for comments in October 2012.

260. The Committee also notes that from September 2012 Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in Wales will have the opportunity to follow a Masters programme which includes a focus on additional learning needs.

¹⁵⁵ RoP [para 164], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁵⁶ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK Report 2010 (Annex B)

¹⁵⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Minister for Learning and Skills, 26 September 2012

School admission

261. Several families would have liked help and support in choosing and applying for schools. Places are often required at short notice if children are already school-aged when they join the family. Many families felt that adopted children should have the same priority for admissions as looked after children have (as they are formerly looked after children and have similar needs). Until the adoption order has been made, at the time of placement, they are looked after children who have priority under the schools admissions code.

“Case example: One rural family wanted their child to attend the same over-subscribed school as his or her older sibling but they live outside the catchment area. The local school is potentially unsuitable due to connections with the birth family. The older sibling was ‘looked after’ on entering school and therefore a priority. The younger sibling is adopted and has no automatic priority for admission.”

262. Adoption UK Cymru recommended that adopted children have the same priority as looked after children in school admissions systems.

263. Erica Beddoe told us there should be flexibility about timings, including choice and timing, of a child attending any type of pre-school/nursery provision and decisions regarding the timing of a start of a new school and whether attendance should be part time/full time/phased introduction. She told us:

“Adopters and social workers for adopters become anxious about that, because legally they should be attending school, but their needs are not always met at that stage in their life by attending school. For me, there is a real conflict in terms of whether they should have more time at home to allow them to become part of their adopted family before they are faced with the additional stress and pressure of moving to a school.”¹⁵⁸

264. The ADEW told us that if a child’s needs were extensive or that the transition into the adoptive placement was complex they would not advocate ‘that the child be rushed straight into a school’. They told us

¹⁵⁸ RoP [para 176], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

they were not aware of any schools ‘forcing’ children to attend in the early days of a placement.¹⁵⁹

265. The Welsh Government School Admissions Code, issued in 2009, includes ‘a requirement that admission authorities’ oversubscription criteria includes ‘looked after children’ as the first criterion in all instances. It does not give this specific priority to adopted children. In England adopted children who were previously looked after are given the same priority for school admissions as for looked after children.

266. The Minister for Education and Skills told us that his department ‘is in the course of identifying any necessary changes to the Code and will, as part of this exercise, consider practice in other areas of the UK, suggestions forthcoming from interested parties and lessons learned from the implementation of the current code’. Subsequently, in September 2012, the Welsh Government issued a consultation on ‘School admissions and school admission appeals’.¹⁶⁰

Looked after children education co-ordinators

267. Welsh Government guidance issued in 2007¹⁶¹ strengthened previous duties on responsible authorities to promote the educational achievement of looked after children and requires local authorities to appoint looked after children education co-ordinators. Existing Welsh Government guidance¹⁶² already required schools to designate a teacher to act as a resource and advocate for looked after children and young people. School governors also have a key role to play in promoting the educational achievement of looked after children.

268. Erica Beddoe told us that adopted children face the same issues in the school setting as children who have been looked after and that ‘looked-after children co-ordinators need to extend their role to be party to that process for post-adoption work’ and that ‘psychologists for looked after children could extend that role into adoption’.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ RoP [para 324], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁶⁰ Welsh Government [Consultation on school admissions and school admissions appeals](#), 28 September 2012

¹⁶¹ Welsh Government [Towards a Stable Life and a Brighter Future: Guidance and Regulations on measures to strengthen arrangements for the placement, health, education and well-being of looked after children and young people](#), 2007

¹⁶² Welsh Government Circular 02/2001 [Education of children looked after by local authorities](#)

¹⁶³ RoP [para 115], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

269. She did, however, highlight the resource implications associated with this, given the rise in the looked after children population. Whilst ADEW also highlighted that existing LAC education co-ordinators will face challenges in having the capacity to extend their role to include adopted children¹⁶⁴ they also told us they would welcome discussions on both the appropriateness of giving adopted children the same priority as looked after children and regarding the extension of the remit of LAC co-ordinators.

Recommendation 12: School Admissions Code

Adopted children should be given the same priority as looked after children within the School Admissions Code.

Recommendation 13: Remit of Looked After Children's Education Co-ordinators

The Welsh Government should extend the remit of Looked After Children's Education Co-ordinators to include adopted children.

Detailed Actions: Education

- the Welsh Government should ensure that forthcoming changes to the framework for the assessment and planning of provision for children and young people with special educational needs include specific reference to the potential needs of adopted children;
- training on attachment disorders and the effects of early trauma on children within the school system should be incorporated within initial teacher training qualifications, as well as being part of the continuing professional development of teachers, school counsellors and other school based staff;
- the Masters in Educational Practice, introduced by the Welsh Government from September 2012, should, in the academic year 2013/14, include a focus on attachment issues as part of its core teaching on additional learning needs.
- The Welsh Government should work jointly with ADEW to develop written materials for adoptive parents to give to school staff in Wales highlighting the particular needs of adopted children.

¹⁶⁴ RoP [para 332], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

Specific post-adoption support to parents

270. Adoption UK Cymru told us that:

“Adoptive parents may have had little previous experience of parenting and will have to jump in at the deep end by becoming the full-time parent of one or more children. Not babies, who are sleeping a lot, but active toddlers or older children who may never have experienced good parenting and who have little trust that family life is a permanent situation.”¹⁶⁵

271. We have received evidence of the importance of parenting support programmes and peer support for parents. We have also heard of the benefits of involving experienced adopters in recruitment, training, mentoring and post-adoption support.

272. Many parents told us they accessed support from voluntary organisations such as Adoption UK and After Adoption, who appeared to provide a vital source of information, training, advocacy and support. Few were able to access regular support groups from local authority adoption agencies post-adoption, with a few notable exceptions.

“Case example: One adoptive parent described the local authority adopters’ group as a ‘life-line’. There is no equivalent group in several neighbouring authorities.”

273. Post-adoption training sessions on issues such as attachment, parenting teenagers and helping children understand their life history were seen as invaluable but not offered frequently enough, or were too expensive. Parents told us that training was sometimes offered too early in the process, before the issues have become pertinent to the adoptive family.

Parenting support programmes

274. Adoption UK Cymru told us that due to adopted children’s early experiences ‘traditional parenting techniques may not work and adoptive parents may need to develop alternative parenting strategies in their role as “therapeutic parents” for traumatised children’.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1c), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁶⁶ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from Adoption UK Recommendations (Annex A)

Barnardo's Cymru and the Children's Commissioner for Wales both highlighted the importance of parenting support programmes. Dr Alan Rushton told us that different parenting programmes emphasise different aspects of adoptive parenting and use different theoretical models and formats (individual versus group sessions). He emphasised the importance of evidence based interventions, stating:

"I should like to see an evidence-based adopter parenting programme offered to all new adopters of challenging children. At the end of the programme, with the aid of 'before and after' measures to assess change, I should like to see a review to identify any persistent problems followed by a focussed therapeutic plan."¹⁶⁷

275. He went on to tell us:

"Parenting programmes specially tailored for adopters are strongly to be recommended. The benefits are that they are easy to commission, not too costly, do not need extensive training for parent advisers, are easily accessible and should provide a practical response to pressing challenges for adopters and lessen the likelihood of disruption or other poor outcome."¹⁶⁸

276. In terms of evidence based approaches, he outlined how, for example, a randomised controlled trial of the 'Enhancing Adoptive Parenting' programme showed that parenting confidence and satisfaction improved significantly more so for those receiving the ten week programme than for the control group when followed up six months beyond the end of the intervention. He told us that the parenting manual developed as a result of the programme both addresses the question of how to understand behaviours and provides practical and daily help on challenging behavioural problems. He also highlighted that such an approach may not be sufficient for some families with more complex needs who may require a more expert intervention.

¹⁶⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-17-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Alan Rushton, 13 June 2012

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

Peer support

277. Peer support was mentioned by nearly all families as a positive that should be encouraged and could be more formally arranged.

“A parent mentor should be available for all families to aid safe exploration of this ‘uncertain transition’ [i.e. not a problem] from a couple into adoptive parenthood and from a child looked after by the local authority to an adopted son or daughter of a new family.”

278. SEWAS told us that ‘adoptive families have been positive about adopter support groups and value the mix of informal support and learning topics discussed in adopter support groups are useful to adopters’,¹⁶⁹ for example issues such as managing facebook contact with birth families can be discussed.

279. All adoptive families should be provided with access to evidence-based parenting programmes with follow up support; access to local peer support groups and access to the types of support, information and training currently provided by voluntary agencies. These resources should accommodate the full spectrum of needs within the wide range of adoptive families.

Recommendation 14: Parenting support

The National Adoption Service, in conjunction with key providers, should be responsible for developing a wide ranging set of parenting support programmes which: meet the varying needs of families across the spectrum; focus on evidence based models; and promote opportunities for adopters be involved in designing and delivering content.

Detailed Action:

- **the National Adoption Service should support adoption agencies and voluntary organisations to develop local peer support groups and develop national groups where there is an identified need, for example for single adopters.**

¹⁶⁹ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from South East Wales Adoption Service, Consultation Response AD19

Adoption disruption and breakdown

280. There is very limited data collation on the rates of adoption breakdown and limited definitive information about the causes. There appear to be no specific systems to monitor and track children post-adoption. We have received evidence that adoption disruption and breakdown can arise as a result of poor post-adoption support. In the main, the evidence we have heard suggests that when major difficulties arise, most families struggle on (despite inadequate support) in a desperate effort to keep the family together. Dr Alan Rushton told us:

“[...] the concept of adoption disruption is problematic. It is not just that some continue and some do not. Some continue but in a very unstable and unsatisfactory way. You would not want to not take those into account. You would have a disrupted group, a continuing but very unhappy group, and also other in-between examples.”¹⁷⁰

281. The data suggests that a small number of adopted children return into the care system and we have also heard of temporary arrangements being put in place for children to live with extended adoptive family members.

282. St David's Children Society referred to several recurring themes in adoption breakdowns including inaccurate information in CARAs; lack of adequate preparation of prospective adopters; insufficient weight being given to the child's views; and poor post-adoption support.¹⁷¹

Limitations of existing data on adoption disruption

283. We received estimates of one in five adoptive placements disrupting before the adoption order being granted and also evidence citing an estimate that one in three adoptions break down when taking all disruptions and family breakdowns together.¹⁷² We were also told by the WLGA / ADSS that there are limitations to applying such estimates directly into the current Welsh context.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ RoP [para 379], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁷¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-20-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from St David's Children Society, 27 June 2012

¹⁷² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁷³ RoP [para 241], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

284. Barnardo's Cymru told us:

"We also believe there should be greater analysis and scrutiny of the number and nature of adoption breakdowns in Wales – why they happen and how they could be prevented. If we do not learn from these, then we run the risk of increased numbers of breakdowns as the numbers of adoptions increase."¹⁷⁴

285. BAAF Cymru told us that 'whilst disruption stats are not collated nationally there are huge variations in how a disruption is interpreted'.¹⁷⁵ SEWAS highlighted the limitations of the existing data.

286. The WLGA / ADSS told us:

"The numbers of placement breakdowns is very small in Wales. Less than 5 children's placements were disrupted prior to the adoption order being made last year and fewer than 5 children had breakdowns after the adoption order, requiring them to be brought back into the LAC system."¹⁷⁶

287. They also told us:

"I guess that you would expect me, from the WLGA, to say that, when you say that it is surprisingly low, it is because authorities are doing a good job, and we should applaud that, rather than question why it is so low."¹⁷⁷

288. However a representative of Adoption UK Cymru told us:

"When I saw the WLGA figure and showed it to others, the response was one of incredulity, because they could instantly count at least five without even thinking about it."¹⁷⁸

289. They recommended that:

¹⁷⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Barnardo's Cymru, 23 May 2012

¹⁷⁵ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁷⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services, 21 June 2012

¹⁷⁷ RoP [para 241], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁷⁸ RoP [para 244], 9 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

“The Welsh Assembly Government should work with Adoption Agencies in Wales to track and record the disruption and family breakdown rates for children placed for adoption from the care system, using this as a key indicator of adoption outcomes.”¹⁷⁹

290. Dr Julie Selwyn is currently undertaking research¹⁸⁰ into adoption breakdown in England, commissioned and funded by the Department of Education. When questioned as to whether this research may be of relevance to Wales, Dr Selwyn told us that

“Somebody who is more aware of the Welsh context would need to look at what we have published and see whether it fits the Welsh experience. Only then could you decide whether you needed to fund further research.”¹⁸¹

291. Collecting the information about individual disruptions or breakdowns in Wales, reviewing the data and learning from it are vital steps in improving the outcomes of adoption. The evidence we received on the limitations of overall adoption data is outlined later in this report.

Detailed Action: Adoption disruption

- the Welsh Government should work with adoption agencies in Wales to review the way data is currently recorded and should establish a new tracking and recording mechanism for the disruption and family breakdown rates for children placed for adoption from the care system.**

Financial Support

292. We have received evidence suggesting there is limited financial support being offered to families, including one-off payments at the beginning of a placement and also on-going financial support when families might need it.

293. We also received evidence on issues which are the responsibility of the UK Government, such as the recently introduced local housing

¹⁷⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1c), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁸⁰ [Beyond the adoption order: a study of the continuity of placements](#)

¹⁸¹ RoP [para 377], 13 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

allowance¹⁸² and adoption leave and pay.¹⁸³ These issues fall outside the remit of our inquiry, however we call on the Welsh Government to correspond with relevant Ministers at a UK level to review the tax and benefits systems to ensure that adopted families are supported and encouraged and that specifically there is parity between maternity and adoption pay.

294. A range of issues were highlighted to us, for example North Wales Adoption Service told us:

“Furthermore, the children who currently wait longest such as older children, children with disabilities and large sibling groups, may become a more viable option for adoptive parents if they were to receive sufficient financial support to allow one parent to stay at home to care for them.”¹⁸⁴

295. Adoption UK Cymru also told us that a national minimum adoption allowance should be introduced for all adoptive families, stating:

“At present there is no consistent national approach to adoption allowances, with local authorities entitled to set their own policies. All adopters should be entitled to an adoption allowance but it is currently down to a postcode lottery as to how much that is.”¹⁸⁵

296. BAAF Cymru told us that:

“For large sibling groups consideration should be given to financial assistance in order for the adoptive parents to stay at home for as it takes the family unit to settle. Additional support in the home early in the morning and after school would also

¹⁸² Local Housing Allowance (LHA) regulations are the responsibility of the Department for Work and Pensions. The LHA is a flat rate allowance for different sizes of properties within a Broad Market Rental Area (BMRA). The Rent Officers Wales (within the Welsh Government) is responsible for determining BMRAs, but they are not responsible for the regulations.

¹⁸³ Adoption leave and pay are non-devolved

¹⁸⁴ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence to the pre-consultation from North Wales Adoption Service

¹⁸⁵ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1d), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

be an excellent short term investment for long term placement stability.”¹⁸⁶

297. We heard two cases of ‘single adopters’ who had experienced financial difficulties due to their status as lone adopters. In one case the parent wanted to take the right amount of time off work to make the adoption succeed, but this left her and her daughter without the income she felt was needed to sustain the family.

298. Adoption UK Cymru told us:

“It is much harder for adopters to forge strong attachments and bond with their newly placed children if they are unable financially to take sufficient time off work and this is detrimental to adopted children and adoptive parents.”¹⁸⁷

299. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council told us that:

“[...] a review of the financial support available to adopters would reduce inequalities between agencies and encourage applicants from a wider range of backgrounds.”¹⁸⁸

300. Barnardo’s Cymru told us:

“It should not be about only the rich being able to adopt, but about making the best placements for children. If people are on a low income, we should look at supporting adoption financially.”¹⁸⁹

Detailed Action: Financial support

- the Welsh Government should make representation to relevant Ministers at a UK level, calling for a review of the tax and benefits systems to ensure that adopted families are supported and encouraged and that specifically there is parity between maternity and adoption pay.**
- the Welsh Government should consult on the standardisation of financial adoption allowances.**

¹⁸⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2ac), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁸⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1d), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

¹⁸⁸ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Consultation Response AD10

¹⁸⁹ RoP [para 127], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

10. Workforce issues

301. A theme which emerged in evidence from families was the importance of ‘key individuals’ in enabling positive experiences for adopter families. This included examples of social workers; therapists; voluntary agency staff; teachers; foster parents; and police officers who had all been perceived to make a big difference. Evidence from the office of the Children’s Commissioner for Wales also highlighted the importance that children and young people place on their ‘relationship with a key professional.’¹⁹⁰

302. Parents also told us that the individual relationships with social workers (the adopters’ and the child’s) are central to the experience, suggesting a need for high quality specialist training and policies to encourage retention of experienced workers in these posts. Parents told us that where adoption agencies employed freelance social workers, who were often retired, and experienced, assessments proceeded quickly and smoothly. One parent told us:

“Our freelance social worker was an angel. She was there for us”.

303. The Committee is clear about the pivotal role played by, and the relevance of, workforce issues to the experiences of adopter families. In particular, we have heard of the problems arising from social work capacity; lack of continuity of social worker; lack of expertise and experience of adoption issues within generic social services teams. Some parents also told us about issues arising from the ‘balance of power’ in their relationship with a social worker.

Social work capacity

304. Much of the evidence we heard suggested that social workers have limited time to undertake direct work with prospective parents during the application process and also limited time to undertake direct work with children. Many adopters we heard from had become aware that staff shortages were delaying the recruitment, assessment and matching process.

305. We were told of the increased volume of work arising from additional child protection referrals, partly arising as a result of the

¹⁹⁰ RoP [para 26], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

tragic case of baby Peter.¹⁹¹ A representative of BASW Cymru said that often childcare social workers do not have the time to attend training because of caseload pressures.

“When I have been running training, and when BASW has put on events, we find that it is the childcare workers who do not get the space to come.”¹⁹²

306. SEWAS told us that ‘caseloads for social workers need to be at a level that allows them to devote sufficient time to permanence planning and to be undertaking the quality of work with the child and family’.

307. Wrexham County Borough Council told us they had to recruit relief sessional workers as in the previous year they had ‘plenty of applications from adopters but not enough social workers to undertake the assessments’.

308. They told us that ‘one of the fundamental challenges is giving social workers the capacity to do a good quality job’ and that ‘the caseloads and the increased referrals have had a significant impact on the quality’.¹⁹³ Cardiff Council echoed this view, telling us:

“We have seen significant numbers of referrals into children’s services in recent years. Our looked-after children population has not increased significantly but, in terms of the make-up of that population, we have seen an increasing number of babies and very young children coming into care. That has increased the adoption workload, both for case management social workers and for our adoption social workers.”¹⁹⁴

309. Cardiff Council also told us that child protection cases will inevitably take priority to moving children on for adoption, stating

“[...]if you have to make a choice about what you are doing with your time and if there is that much pressure on you, you would go for the child who is at risk of significant harm as opposed to the one whom you were assured is safely placed and whose

¹⁹¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from St David’s Children Society, 23 May 2012

¹⁹² RoP [para 240], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁹³ RoP [para 8], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁹⁴ RoP [para 9], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

work you can pick up the next day or the day after. It is one of the realities, unfortunately, of the pressure of the work.”¹⁹⁵

The West Wales Adoption Service and Ceredigion County Council (joint response)¹⁹⁶ told us that a ‘lack of capacity in adoption teams causes delay’ and that they ‘need more staff to speed up’ the process.

Direct work with children and families.

310. BASW Cymru told us of the need for time to undertake direct work during the recruitment process to manage their expectations of the adoption process and to ‘explore their capacity and flexibility for adoption’:

“To overcome (this) and encourage adopters to look beyond the ideal takes careful and skilled social work over a period of time to help people realise what adoption is today and to help them to explore their skills, abilities and emotional flexibility to take on a child that they had not first considered.”¹⁹⁷

311. In respect of work with children, BASW Cymru told us:

“It is difficult to get people to go into childcare, it is difficult to get them to stay there and it is difficult to get them to have a sense that they are really making a difference to a child, because there is a managerial approach to it. The sort of work that I would have done in the past with a child involved direct work with that child, so you got to know them and you could write the form because you knew that child. There is not the space or the time to do that now.”¹⁹⁸

312. SEWAS noted the ‘volume of written work’ and referenced the report of Professor Eileen Munro in England, which found that the demands of bureaucracy has reduced social workers capacity to work directly with children, young people and families.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ RoP [para 15], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁹⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services, 21 June 2012

¹⁹⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BASW Cymru, 21 June 2012

¹⁹⁸ RoP [para 230], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

¹⁹⁹ [The Munro Review of Child Protection: A child-centred system](#), Department of Education, 2011

313. Some evidence highlighted the issue of the balance of power between the social workers undertaking assessments and adopter parents. As stated previously, several adopters mentioned the feeling of powerlessness in the process. They felt the need to be very passive and extremely compliant in order to be recommended for adoption and to be matched with children. Barnardo's Cymru told us:

“[...] it is an intrusive process and it can be perceived as a power imbalance, but that is where the skills of workers come in, in empathising with the people who want to come forward to adopt, and in knowing their situations and their motivation. It is a skill and a very specialist area of work, and so skilled workers can reduce that imbalance.”²⁰⁰

314. In our report, the Committee accepted that pre-adoption assessments undertaken by a skilled and experienced workforce were crucial. We also concluded that the investment of time in explaining the potential consequences of a child's assessment in terms of their future support needs can reduce the risk of adopter parents facing future unexpected challenges. The Committee feels that this is a key issue which needs to be addressed and one which will not be addressed by the proposed National Adoption Service, as confirmed by the oral evidence from the Deputy Minister, that assessments of children will remain the responsibility of local authorities.

Continuity of social workers within adoption process

315. We have been told of the importance of continuity of workers within the adoption process and the potential negative impact of staff turnover. We have also heard that some change is inevitable, due to the differing responsibilities of workers to the child and adopter parents at different stages of the process.

316. BAAF Cymru told us of the importance of ensuring the continuity of practitioners, stating:

“From the point at which a child becomes looked after, there are different team arrangements. There could be an intake team, an assessment team, and a long-term or permanence team, so the case responsibility moves from one team to another and from one worker to another. Within that, there has

²⁰⁰ RoP [para 25], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

been for a number of years a frequent turnover of childcare staff.”²⁰¹

317. They also told us ‘within any proposed structural changes on how adoption services can be delivered in the future, expertise and knowledge of the case worker needs to be considered’²⁰²

318. Barnardo’s Cymru shared these views:

“It is very difficult in local authority services where there is a constant stream of new staff. We have had examples of children who have been adopted, and by the time they are placed, they have had lots of social workers—quite a high number, sometimes. Sometimes our workers know the child as well as the local authority does. That is not to disrespect social workers within local authorities because they are under a lot of pressure.”²⁰³

319. Adoption UK Cymru told us:

“There is a lot of movement even now between one adoption team and another. We try to keep records of who is working in what team, and we cannot keep up because they move around like chess pieces.”²⁰⁴

320. Wrexham County Borough Council told us that in circumstances where there are changes of worker ‘it must be extremely upsetting for families to have a constant stream of strangers coming in with their family information’.²⁰⁵ Cardiff Council told us they did ‘experience difficulties with changes of social workers’ and that they hoped that their efforts to explore the creation of more senior roles to support and advise social workers would increase staff retention.

Adoption expertise and experience within generic social services

321. Much of the evidence heard relates to a lack of adoption expertise and experience within generic social worker teams. Many of the issues faced by the adoptive families we have heard from have arisen because

²⁰¹ RoP [para 224], 9 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²⁰² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

²⁰³ RoP [para 102], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²⁰⁴ RoP [para 225], 9 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²⁰⁵ RoP [para 113], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

of a lack of ‘adoption awareness’ amongst frontline staff such as teachers and mental health workers. These issues are dealt with elsewhere in this report. Adoption UK Cymru told us that:

“It is agreed that centralising the provision of adoption services should allow social workers to develop greater expertise in assessing, training, matching and supporting adopters.”²⁰⁶

322. The Children’s Commissioner for Wales told us:

“One common theme running through many of the CSSIW inspection reports is the need for training on adoption and permanency for child care social workers and adoption/permanency panel members. I would suggest that meeting an identified need for training for these professionals is an essential component of improving assessment and approval processes.”²⁰⁷

323. Evidence from social workers submitted as part of evidence from NWAS makes several references to staffing issues, including the benefits of an ‘identified key adoption consultant worker in childcare teams to provide support and guidance to staff undertaking cases leading to adoption and liaise with the adoption family finding service. They said:

“As many social workers only come across adoption cases on occasions it is often unlikely that they are able to build up a vast amount of experience and expertise in the child care teams”.

324. Cardiff Council told us that the challenge was to ‘recruit and retain social workers who have that specialist knowledge [...] in a climate where we do not have enough social workers and when there is so much movement and pressure on them. They told us how they had reduced the vacancy rate in social work teams but that ‘the reality is that we have a workforce that is weighted heavily with high numbers of inexperienced staff’.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

²⁰⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 21 June 2012

²⁰⁸ RoP [para 24], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

325. Barnardo's Cymru told us that it was important for social workers to develop a specialism and that 'if you have a generic caseload, it is probably quite difficult to balance'²⁰⁹. These views were echoed by Dr Mike Davies, who told us that a specific level of expertise was needed in adoption.²¹⁰

326. St David's Children Society told us:

"One of the things of concern to me is the greater use by local authorities of self-employed social workers, or social workers from disciplines outside fostering and adoption, to undertake adoption assessments. The research points to clear evidence that if adoption social workers do not know the work, it will likely lead to inadequate assessments and a higher breakdown rate."²¹¹

327. BAAF Cymru also highlighted the important role played by Independent Reviewing Officers, saying that:

"Specific experience in adoption work is variable amongst IRO's and they need to be able to pick up on the signs of a placement experiencing difficulties at an earlier stage. Their role is critical and pivotal as they have an overview of the agency's overall functioning as well as the individual child's circumstances."²¹²

328. Adoption UK Cymru highlighted the problems faced by adopted families seeking help when there is a potential adoption breakdown:

"Families who are at risk of breaking down will usually be assessed by the local authority intake team in the same way as any other family where there is a 'children in need' or 'child protection' referral. However, these teams may have little or no knowledge about adoption."²¹³

329. The Deputy Minister referenced the findings of the Family Justice Review and told us:

²⁰⁹ RoP [para 104], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²¹⁰ RoP [para 178], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²¹¹ RoP [para 112], 23 May 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²¹² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

²¹³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

“The Review (also) makes recommendations for the professional development of social workers, placing more emphasis on child development and training to improve the content of assessments that meet the requirements of the courts when making decisions about children.”²¹⁴

Specialist workers

330. Several local authorities told us of the potential benefits of specialist staff. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council told us it would be helpful to have:

“Development of specialist Assessment & Care Management Workers to focus on completion of the adoption work for the child including life story work and Child Assessment Reports for Adoption.”²¹⁵

331. Wrexham County Borough Council were exploring ways of maximising staff capacity in respect of adoption including the creation of a ‘consultant social worker’ with specialist knowledge to advise on adoption within the generic childcare team. Cardiff Council were also exploring options such as combining their fostering and adoption services to ‘promote permanency for children’ and where duties were specifically divided between qualified and unqualified staff in order to maximise capacity. SEWAS told us that it would be helpful to have one person with specific adoption knowledge in each social work team.

332. The Committee applauds the efforts being made by some local authorities to maximise and disseminate specialist knowledge in respect of adoption issues.

Links between adoption teams and childcare teams

333. Some evidence highlighted the importance of relationships between different social work teams. Bridgend County Borough Council told us ‘a stronger interface between the adoption team of the

²¹⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-24-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Minister for Children and Social Services, 19 July 2012

²¹⁵ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Consultation Response AD10

local authority and the childcare teams is important'.²¹⁶ This was echoed by BAAF Cymru who told us:

"The relationship and joint working arrangements between adoption and child care social workers within the local authority is critical as are the dovetailing arrangements between the adoption service [particularly if sited within a shared Service] and the permanence functions and specific duty towards the individual child retained by the local authority."²¹⁷

Implications for the proposed National Adoption Service

334. BASW Cymru told us that there was potential for the proposed new Service being seen as 'an elite place to work'; that 'highly skilled people from the local authority will want to go there'; and that it 'could leave the local authority without as many staff as it should have'. They said:

"When establishing this service, consideration should be given to everyone working in adoption being provided with the same training and skill opportunities, thus providing an equitable work force. The role of the social worker in the local authority adoption agency will be just as challenging and in need of a strong professional base of adoption knowledge and best practice as the National Adoption Service role will be."²¹⁸

335. The Deputy Minister told us that:

"We are open, as regards the previous question, about staff remaining in local authorities. I see the need for staff to work locally, to prepare this work and to be there for the adoption plan, the court reports and so on, but there is no necessity for them to remain employed by that local authority as an individual local authority."²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services, 21 June 2012

²¹⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BAAF Cymru, 9 May 2012

²¹⁸ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BASW Cymru, 21 June 2012

²¹⁹ RoP [para 85], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

Initial training and continuous professional development (CPD)

336. Dr Alan Rushton advocated that:

“Specialist professional university based adoption work courses are needed with academic accreditation to improve skills and gain up-to-date knowledge, giving practitioners greater opportunity to read and critique relevant research. These would be of benefit to teachers and other school staff, to psychologists, medical professionals and social workers.”²²⁰

337. A parent who provided evidence as part of the submission from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council told us that involving adopters in the training and CPD would ‘increase understanding and knowledge of adoption’.²²¹

Recommendation 15: Workforce issues

The Welsh Government should work with the Care Council for Wales and the WLGA to review the social work ‘workforce strategy’ as relevant to adoption, specifically identifying and addressing gaps in respect of knowledge of child development and attachment theory. The review should look at the needs of staff within a National Adoption Service and, of equal importance, the needs of social workers within local authorities undertaking permanency assessment and planning work with children. The proposed National Adoption Service should have a lead role in the training and continuous professional workforce development in respect of adoption issues.

Detailed Action:

- **the Welsh Government and the Care Council for Wales should work with universities providing qualifying and post-qualifying social work programmes to identify, and if necessary, address gaps in the field of adoption including child development and attachment theory, law, policy and evidence based practice.**

²²⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-17-12(p3), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Dr Alan Rushton, 13 June 2012

²²¹ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Consultation Response AD10

11. Proposals for a National Adoption Service

338. The Welsh Government published its consultation document on the *Social Services (Wales) Bill* on 12 March 2012. The consultation document proposes that Welsh Ministers be given powers to require all local authorities (adoption agencies) to come together to form a single National Adoption Service.²²² The new Service would not function as an adoption agency: agencies would remain in each local authority and continue to manage individual cases.

339. The Welsh Government has established an Expert Working Group on Adoption which it is anticipated will consider the remit and functions of the National Service.

Overall support for the concept of a National Adoption Service

340. The evidence we have received suggests overall support for the concept of a National Adoption Service, from agencies and parents alike. The Committee is keen to highlight however, that our findings suggest that the mandate for Welsh Government to take forward proposals for such a service in their current form should be treated with caution. The evidence we have heard suggests a significant disparity between what those providing us with evidence anticipate might be delivered by a National Adoption Service, and the proposals as currently set out by the Deputy Minister.

341. Jocelyn Davies AM outlined to the Deputy Minister:

“You mentioned the overwhelming support for the national adoption service, and we certainly found that, but I would put it to you that it depended what they thought it was going to be. They were generally very supportive of what they would like it to be, but I do not think that any of them have described what you have laid out for us today.”²²³

342. Within the context of general support for the concept of National Adoption Service, the WLGA told us that there are ‘clear and defined

²²² There are currently 15 separate adoption agencies in Wales. Twelve local authorities have formed three regional local authority adoption services consortia: North Wales; West Wales; and South East Wales. In addition, the remaining ten local authorities in South Wales work collaboratively in respect of placements. There are also two voluntary adoption agencies based in Wales: St David’s Children Society and Barnardo’s Cymru Adoption and Fostering Service.

²²³ RoP [para 66], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

areas where reform would be beneficial'. St David's Children Society 'fully supports' the proposals and states a National Service should reduce delays and achieve better outcomes for adopted children; provide greater choice of prospective adopters for children; and establish clear targets for completed assessments, placements and reduce delay. Barnardo's Cymru 'cautiously welcomes' the proposals as an opportunity to standardise, improve and better co-ordinate provision. Adoption UK Cymru see the proposals as addressing the variation in the provision of adoption services referred to earlier in this report.

343. From the evidence given by parents, a number of families had clear opinions about the creation of a single adoption service, and some of the other evidence in this report is also informative about this issue. Most families who had an opinion on the issue thought that a single adoption service would be a positive step forward. This was for the following reasons: a more consistent and clear response to prospective adopters; speedier and more successful matching with a larger initial pool of adopters and children; more consistent and better quality training and post-adoption support services; and nationally applied thresholds and standards for provision of post-adoption support. A very small number of families opposed the concept of a national service because they feared that the excellent local service they and their children had received would be diluted in a larger service, with less local knowledge and relationships with local staff.

344. The Committee fully supports and applauds the concept behind the Welsh Government's proposals for a National Service but the service **needs to have a significantly more substantive delivery role than the model currently put forward**. A step change is needed to address the range of shortcomings within current adoption services. A National Adoption Service must have the remit to deliver the majority share of those changes.

Remit and functions of a National Adoption Service

345. In written evidence the Deputy Minister provided the following detail on the creation of a National Adoption Service based on proposals in the consultation document:

"We want to identify aspects of the adoption process that are best performed at a national level, whilst recognising that there

are functions that should remain the responsibility of individual local authorities – achieving change without detriment.(...)”

346. Our current thinking is that the National Adoption Service would be responsible for:

- providing National leadership and overview of adoption services (linking to Standards, performance and improvement);
- a framework for adoption approvals (including panels);
- establishing a resource hub, to provide a gateway for potential adopters, providing - information on training programs, information on assessment process and advice line; and
- promoting adoption, if in best interest of the child, recruiting prospective adopters and the development of a specialist and highly skilled workforce.”²²⁴

347. Evidence from parents suggested that the functions of a national adoption support service should include, as a minimum: providing a one-stop initial response to adoption enquiries, ensuring a consistent response and timeframe for the start of adopter assessments across Wales, ensuring quality and consistency of assessments and initial training, produce clear guides (‘road-maps’) to the adoption process, providing a national matching service, ensuring that thresholds for entitlement to post-adoption support are consistent across Wales, mapping and commissioning specialist adoption support services, leading public awareness campaigns and providing advice and training to mainstream services such as health and education providers. A service that provided (rather than co-ordinated) all of the assessment, training, matching and post-adoption support was also supported by some families.

348. One parent who contributed to the evidence by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council strongly argued that involvement of adopters in service design, planning, delivery and review would improve the service and ensure that it was more in line with the needs of adoptive families and that the body of knowledge and experience

²²⁴ Welsh Government consultation document on the *Social Services (Wales) Bill* on 12 March 2012.

held by adopters is under-used. Some parents who provided evidence direct to the Committee also expressed this view.

Division of responsibilities at a national, regional and local level

349. Many organisations told us they agreed with the functions of the proposed National Adoption Service as set out in the consultation document.²²⁵ However as stated in paragraph 336 of this report, the Committee is not convinced that there is a shared understanding of how the potential service will operate and the implications of how adoption services will be delivered.

350. BASW Cymru²²⁶ told us that, whilst they agreed with some of the proposed responsibilities, it would be important to consider these again when they have become more task specific.

351. The WLGA / ADSS propose a three tiered model, adding a regional tier to the model proposed by the Welsh Government. A brief summary of their proposals are:

- the national functions, including: being the first point of contact with prospective adopters; a national recruitment strategy, a national adoption register, a data collection and research function; an independent review mechanism; and workforce development.
- a regional function (which would require legislative and regulatory change) to 'enable regional agencies to be established, as this function is currently the preserve of an individual local authority' including: first stage counselling for prospective adopters; the targeted recruitment/assessment for all prospective adopters; workforce development; training of prospective and post-approved adopters; management of adoption panel to recommend approval; linking individual children with potential prospective adoptive families; assessment of post adoption service support; management of post adoption contact arrangements; collaboration with multi-disciplinary colleagues - health, education; facilitate support

²²⁵ Welsh Government consultation document on the *Social Services (Wales) Bill* on 12 March 2012.

²²⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from BASW Cymru, 21 June 2012

groups for adoptive families, birth families and children who have been adopted.

- local functions, including care planning decision making, matching individual children to named prospective adopter; direct work; delivery of assessed post-adoption support services; work with birth parents and siblings.

352. The Deputy Minister told us:

“I do recognise, (however), that both the Welsh Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Social Services have proposed alternative means of delivering greater efficiency for example through use of regional collaborations underpinning the national arrangement and we shall consider carefully the merits of their proposal.”²²⁷

353. St David’s Children Society also provided the Committee with a detailed proposed model and staffing structure, which recommended a wider range of functions being undertaken by the proposed National Adoption Service, including:

- being a single reference point for all children with an adoption plan;
- establishing and maintaining a register for all children with an adoption plan and a similar register of approved available adopters;
- responsibility for recruiting, training and approving new prospective adopters;
- initial responsibility for identifying and recommending proposed links of children with prospective adopters;
- responsibility for ensuring that children are prepared for adoption and that life-story books are in place;
- being the placement support agency until the adoption order is granted.

354. They also provided a detailed potential staffing structure.

²²⁷ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-24-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 19 July 2012

355. BASW Cymru outlined that the new service should develop strong recruitment policies; and develop services for those harder to place children. They also highlighted a range of other potential roles including: commissioning of an Adoption Support Service; establishing a Welsh Adoption Register; setting up of a National Adoption Helpline for children and adopters; the standardisation of policies and procedures, IT systems and a standardisation of financial adoption allowances; collection of data; and offering a service to birth parents.

356. In her oral evidence, the Deputy Minister told us the proposed National Service ‘would be accountable to local authorities.’²²⁸ She also told us that the Welsh Government were ‘open to discussion about the best staffing structure’ and as yet, there were no firm proposals on the staffing arrangements for the proposed Service. In response to a request from the Committee for further detail on the split of specific responsibilities between adoption agencies and the National Service, the Deputy Minister provided a diagram and clarified that the proposed changes would create a ‘local authority owned’ service.²²⁹

357. In written evidence, the Deputy Minister told us that ‘the Welsh Government’s aim is to transform adoption services’.²³⁰ **The Committee is unanimous in the view that this aim will not be realised, unless there is more substantive centralisation of functions at a national level.**

358. Our understanding of current proposals for change is that they range on a continuum. On the one side is the Welsh Government’s proposal for a service with more limited national functions; in the middle is the WLGA’s more regional model; to the other end of the spectrum are proposals which make a case for much wider functions to be delivered centrally.

359. At the conclusion of our inquiry, we need to be assured that the changes proposed by the Welsh Government will deliver the necessary outcomes for adopted children and their families.

²²⁸ RoP [para 19], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²²⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-25-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 26 September 2012

²³⁰ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-24-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, 19 July 2012

360. The Committee re-iterates the first recommendation within this report, that **the direct service delivery role of the National Adoption Service should be significantly strengthened from that currently set out in the *Social Services (Wales) Bill* consultation document. It should have a central delivery role and staffing for a range of adoption services. It should not be ‘owned by local authorities’ as set out in current proposals.**

361. **Unless substantial changes are made to current Welsh Government proposals for a National Adoption Services, a significant opportunity will be missed to make greatly needed improvements in the lives of adopter families and some of the most vulnerable children in Wales.**

Accountability within and operational delivery of the National Adoption Service

362. Whilst it is for the Welsh Government to consider how the final agreed model for a National Adoption Service will operate in practice, the Committee wishes to highlight what it believes should be integral to a new Service, as follows: the National Adoption Service should employ staff at a national and regional level. The lead role within the National Adoption Service should be a senior independent role, reporting to a multi-agency board, and ultimately accountable to the relevant Welsh Government Minister. This multi-agency board should oversee the strategic direction and operational functions of the National Adoption Service and should be chaired by someone who sits outside the statutory sector. The National Adoption Service should be accountable to a Welsh Minister rather than to local authorities.

Recommendation 16: National Adoption Service

The Welsh Government Expert Working Group should explore the model for a National Adoption Service based on the Committee’s recommendations. The Deputy Minister should return and brief the Committee regarding the detail of the model, once changes to her proposals are more developed.

Detailed Action:

- the Welsh Government should explore and take forward a management and accountability model for a National Adoption Service based on the framework recommended by**

the Children and Young People Committee (as outlined in paragraph 357 of this report).

- the development of the National Adoption Service should be informed by the views of adopter parents. The Welsh Government should ensure that there are meaningful systems in place for adopters to participate in the on-going development and delivery of the National Adoption Service.**
- the Welsh Government should consider how work in respect of step-parent adoptions can best be taken forward within the context of the creation of a National Adoption Service.**

Role of the voluntary sector

363. Evidence highlights the important role of played by Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) and the wider voluntary sector in the provision of adoption services and support. Adoption UK Cymru told us it was important that the ‘considerable expertise’ of the voluntary sector was not lost within the new proposals:

“Currently some of the best practice resides within the voluntary sector and it is important that this isn’t lost in any move to a National Service. Rather the voluntary sector should be engaged as a full partner in any new system and good practice build on where ever it exists.”²³¹

364. The WLGA / ADSS / BAAF Cymru²³² told us:

“We also recognise the unique expertise the voluntary sector brings to adoption and adoption support in Wales and will work collaboratively with them to scope out the detail of any proposed implementation of adoption reform.”

365. Barnardo’s Cymru called for ‘greater acknowledgement of the role of VAAs’ within the proposed National Adoption Service. They told us:

“We have expertise which brings clear added value to such areas as adoption placements for children with complex needs,

²³¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p1b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Adoption UK Cymru, 9 May 2012

²³² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association, Association of Directors of Social Services and BAAF Cymru, 21 June 2012

for children from specific religious and ethnic backgrounds and post adoption support.”²³³

366. Some evidence pointed to the additional responsibilities borne by local authorities compared to VAAs and of the perceived additional costs of VAA placements.^{234 235}

367. Both Barnardo’s Cymru and St David’s Children Society suggested that there were opportunities to explore improved collaboration and partnership arrangements between VAAs and local authorities. As stated in respect of permanency planning, St. David’s Children Society cited as an example the ‘highly successful’²³⁶ partnership between Coram and the London Borough of Harrow.

368. In response to questioning by Rebecca Evans AM, the Deputy Minister told us that ‘there are supportive services that will best be provided by the voluntary sector, and that the proposed National Adoption Service would be owned by local authorities and that this ruled out ‘outsourcing it to the voluntary sector’.²³⁷

369. The Committee is convinced of the benefits brought by VAAs and the wide range of other voluntary organisations in delivering adoption services. It is pivotal to the development of the proposed National Adoption Service that these organisations play a key role in its development and delivery.

Geographical implications

370. Some evidence highlighted the practical issues and implications of an adoption service operating over a wider geographical area. We were told both of the advantages of local knowledge and networks but also how disadvantages of lack of concentration of specialist knowledge and limited matching opportunities in the localities.

371. SEWAS told us:

²³³ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2b), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Barnado’s Cymru, 23 May 2012

²³⁴ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from North Wales Adoption Service, 21 June 2012

²³⁵ RoP [para 264], 21 June 2012, Children and Young People Committee

²³⁶ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-15-12(p1), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from St David’s Children Society, 23 May 2012

²³⁷ RoP [para 90], 19 July 2012, Children and Young People Committee

“Local recruitment is also important in terms of an awareness of the local situation, where advertising is effective and knowledge of the community and how it responds to such campaigns. It is important that any national, regional and local recruitment is co-ordinated and giving the same messages.”²³⁸

372. The evidence sessions with parents in Wrexham and Narberth in particular, but also some written submissions from families, highlighted positive and negative geographical aspects of adoption. Some small, rural adoption teams are reported to know their communities, children and adoptive families well, leading to a supportive environment and good matching (this comment was also made about at least one larger, valleys authority). Some had concerns about maintaining their children’s confidentiality in small communities, particularly where birth families were from the same region. Several families had difficulties in getting a response from their child’s originating local authority when this was some distance away and they wished to access support services. High turnover of staff compounds this difficulty.

“Case study: A family in South Wales adopted a child from North Wales. During the introductory period the adoptive family had to stay in a hotel, which was made more difficult by the foster family’s resistance to the plan. Contact visits by the birth family stopped due to the birth family’s difficulty in travelling the distance to the adoptive home.”

373. These issues will be important considerations in shaping the specific detail of how more regional and national working can be developed.

²³⁸ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from South East Wales Adoption Service, Consultation Response AD19

12. Limited adoption data

374. We received evidence from a range of organisations suggesting there are difficulties arising from the limited collection and publishing of adoption data and that, in turn, limits transparent monitoring and service improvements. BASW Cymru told us:

“One of the issues for the 22 local authorities, the 4 consortia and the Welsh Government has been the collation of vital information and statistics on Adoption. Without accurate information, it is difficult to address need [...]. The National Adoption Service could be in a prime position to address this shortfall, and become a repository for information and data collection.”²³⁹

375. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council told us of a lack of clarity, stating:

“Professionals working in the field were not clear as to the measures which had been put in place to monitor adoptions and track progress except via the triennial inspection regime. The end of year statistical return figures capture some data but they do not give a clear profile of need or the reasons for delay in children being adopted.”²⁴⁰

376. The West Wales Adoption Service and Ceredigion County Council (joint response) also told us of shortcomings in monitoring specific aspects of the adoption process:

“There is little or no tracking of review decisions, timescale through to Panel & court decision, then stages including those introductions which break down & child needs to come back to selection process. More robust information on these timescales and reasons for delays would be helpful to ensure improvement in the system.”²⁴¹

²³⁹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-18-12(p2a), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from BASW Cymru, 21 June 2012

²⁴⁰ Children and Young People Committee, *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Consultation Response AD10

²⁴¹ Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-19-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Written Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Social Services, 21 June 2012

377. Barnardo's Cymru told us of the importance of focusing on outcomes for children and hoped this might be achieved as a result of proposals for a 'national outcomes framework' within the Welsh Government Sustainable Social Services proposals. They said:

"In our view, there is a danger that monitoring is based around numbers and statistics and that these do not take into account the 'real life' outcomes for adoption. Adoption is a lifelong process and does not end once a child is adopted. More qualitative measures should therefore be developed to accurately reflect the adoptive experience for both adoptive parents and adopted children."²⁴²

378. Bridgend County Borough Council made the case for regional consortia to have a strengthened role in respect of data and in identifying trends. They told us that 'prompt accurate information on trends enables agencies to adjust and make strategic adaptations to changing service needs'.

379. Several witnesses suggested that the proposed National Adoption Service could have a role in data collection and monitoring. The WLGA / ADSS suggested that the proposed National Service could track outcomes for individual children; track outcomes of prospective adopters from inquiry to placement; and develop data to inform service delivery. BAAF Cymru told us that a National Service could 'collate data, analyse trends and plot variations in interest from different regions' BASW Cymru told us that a National Service 'could be in a prime position' to address the limitations in current data and 'become a repository for information and data collection'.

Detailed Action: Data collection and monitoring

- **the proposed National Adoption Service should have a specific role in collecting, monitoring and publishing a full range of adoption data (including qualitative data where relevant) in order to inform service delivery and identify trends with a focus on delivering improved outcomes for children.**

²⁴² Children and Young People Committee Paper CYP(4)-13-12(p2), *Inquiry into Adoption*, Additional Written Evidence from Barnardo's Cymru, 23 May 2012

Annex A: Summary and analysis of written and verbal evidence from adoptive families prepared by Dr Sally Holland

1) Profile of adopters providing evidence to the Committee

The inquiry has received 23 written submissions from adoptive families. Three of these are anonymous, forwarded by adoption agencies. There are also sets of collated responses (but containing lengthy direct quotations) from adoption agencies: RCT, Blaenau Gwent, North Wales Consortium. The WLGA collated responses from a number of adoption agencies, and some of that evidence included direct quotations from adopters sought specifically for the inquiry. One adoption support group held a special meeting to discuss the inquiry and submitted written comments from the group.

Members of 37 adoptive families (including seven young people in a group session) gave verbal evidence in informal, private meetings with sub-groups of the Committee. Some, but not all, of these have also submitted written evidence. An estimate is that we have direct or pre-collated evidence from at least 60 individual adoptive families.

Six private evidence sessions took place with families between March and July in Cardiff, Narberth and Wrexham. On these occasions sub-groups of the Committee have met adoptive parents, sometimes accompanied by their children. One session in Cardiff was with a group of seven adopted young people. Committee members have noted that these evidence sessions have been informative and very helpful.

The families who have taken part live in a wide range of family circumstances. The inquiry has heard from single adopters, adopters of older children, trans-racial adopters, Welsh-speaking adopters and same-sex couples. These diverse experiences add to the evidence provided by those families who represent the majority of adopters in Wales and the majority of our participants: heterosexual, white Welsh or British couples who adopt pre-school children from white ethnic backgrounds.

The adopters have had a wide range of experiences and have adopted through local authority adoption agencies in Wales and the St David's

and Barnardo's adoption agencies. Most of the local authorities in Wales have been mentioned in the evidence from families, with several families having had experiences with more than one local authority. All of the children have been adopted from local authorities in Wales and England. A number of children were adopted with identified disabilities. Several others have experienced difficulties related to attachment disorders and behavioural difficulties. These difficulties have often become apparent several years after adoption.

The inquiry has heard evidence from two families whose teenage children have had to be accommodated by the local authority due to behavioural problems, many years after adoption. Another family have adopted a child who had previously experienced an adoption disruption and the child and parents received excellent therapeutic support and training from an independent agency.

Children were aged from 3 months to 9 years at the time of placement. Families have adopted between one and three children. Most children experienced abuse or neglect if they were not removed at birth due to concerns with older siblings. Several of the children were born drug dependent. Most adoptions appear to have been contested by birth parents.

Adopters have been at different stages of the adoption process when they have provided evidence. A small number of families had completed assessments and were waiting to be matched with a child. Some had adopted several years earlier.

It should be noted that the inquiry was approached by a small number of birth families or their relatives whose children had been adopted. Their experiences are an important part of adoption. The Committee decided that to include evidence from birth families would go beyond the time and remit of the inquiry but the issue of the experiences of birth parents and siblings played a part in some of the evidence from families, especially young people, and some of the evidence from agencies.

In summary, it can be concluded that the adoptive families who have taken part in the inquiry represent most of the demographic features of adopters in Wales. The only group that the inquiry has not heard

from has been those who began the adoption process but decided not to proceed, or those who were rejected as adopters.

2) Themes emerging from written and verbal evidence from individuals affected by adoption.

The written and verbal data have been analysed thematically and the most common themes are represented below. Attention has been paid to the range of experiences of families and care has been taken to note where experiences are exceptional or appear to be commonplace. Selected quotations are included to illustrate key points and to give a flavour of the rich and detailed nature of the evidence provided by families. Some details in the brief case studies have been changed to ensure anonymity.

A) Young people's views

A sub-group of Members met a group of seven young people aged 14-17 who attend an adoption group facilitated by After Adoption, spending an hour and a half in discussion with the young people. The young people were enabled to express their views through group discussion, a written exercise and activities. Two further young people submitted some written views.

The two most predominant themes from young people were schools and birth families.

For these young people, school environments, including peers, had provided both support and difficulties. Several felt that all students should be educated about adoption and that all should be aware that adopted children can be subject to bullying. Teachers should be aware that some topics could be upsetting, such as studying the play 'Blood Brothers' in drama. There was agreement in the group that schools could do more to acknowledge and teach about diverse family forms of all types. All of the young people attending this support group emphasised how important it was to them to be able to be among other adopted peers to socialise and discuss shared experiences.

Birth family was a stronger issue for these young people than for adoptive parents in the inquiry. Several thought that there should be more emphasis on siblings being kept together or kept in touch and that there was too much negative portrayal of birth parents. One

young person expressed the view that they should have access to records at 16 rather than 18.

In an exercise where young people expressed their views along a continuum, the need for more sensitivity in schools was again a clear preference. Media representations of adoption were also thought to be poor. Most young people thought that the Welsh Government should encourage more adoption from care. In a brief written exercise (also completed by two young people not present on the day) the following views were expressed:

If I was in charge of adoption in Wales:

Keep this the same: After Adoption Group (x7); keep brothers and sisters together (x2);

Change this: more openness and education around why children are placed. Not always neglect etc i.e. mental health etc; every adopted child to have contact with birth parents.

Have more: Meetings (with doughnuts and fruit) (x2); teaching about adoption in schools (x4) adopted children to have contact with birth parents (x2) opportunity for adopted people to meet more often.

Have less: nothing (x3), less negative attitude towards birth relatives.

B) Issues relating to timescales

There were strong views from some families that the process moved at about the right pace, whilst many others found it frustratingly slow. A strong theme was the length of time it took to place children with adopters, particularly when adoption had been a likely option prior to the child's birth due to the family history.

- several adopters noted that timescales felt about right for them, and that if the assessment or matching had been carried out any more quickly they would not have been thorough enough. Many felt that reducing the assessment process would be detrimental for children.

"I personally felt some alarm at hearing that the adoption process should be speeded up."

"you can't rush the process."

- many adopters felt discouraged by their local authority response to their initial query. Several were told that they would need to wait many months before an initial appointment or that they were not the type of adopters currently being considered (due to age or previous adoptions precluding the adoption of sibling groups). Several adopters tried neighbouring or independent adoption agencies and received a much more encouraging welcome and almost immediate initial visits or invitations to information evenings.
- many stated that assessments could be speeded up and that there were delays in starting assessments. Some assessments were carried out very slowly. There were often frustratingly long waits for approval and matching panels. Some had waited years from first enquiries to the time their child came to live with them. For a few families the process had been completed within months.

Case example: A couple applied to adopt in a rural local authority that was part of a regional consortium. Within twelve months of their first enquiry their pre-school children were living with them. They attributed this to the thorough, but speedy, assessment process and the good communication within the adoption agency which meant that the assessing social workers knew the children who were waiting for adoptive placements.

- where adoption agencies employed freelance social workers, who were often retired, and experienced, assessments proceeded quickly and smoothly.

“Our freelance social worker was an angel. She was there for us”.
- many problems relating to attachment or disabilities may not emerge for several years after adoption. It is difficult to access support at that stage.
- responsibility for post-adoption support moves from the child’s originating authority to their current local authority after three years. Several families had difficulties in engaging support in this period.
- several parents felt that decisions about adoption could have been made earlier and that birth parents were given too many

opportunities to the detriment of the child's need for a permanent placement. Several families felt that they should have been given the chance to care for immediately younger siblings who were removed at birth, rather than those children spending several months with foster carers prior to the adoption placement.

"I had six months of knowing that 'my' child, as I felt towards her, knowing that the plan was for her to come to us, was being cared for by someone else."

C) Unevenness of provision

- several adopters have adopted more than once through different agencies and have provided evidence that there is a contrast in terms of levels of support, speed and efficiency of processes and post-adoption support between agencies.
- while both of the voluntary sector agencies were discussed extremely positively in terms of all aspects of their service, it is important to point out that several local authorities were named as providing excellent, responsive, sensitive services on an equal par with the voluntary sector.

"The way our initial enquiry was handled was very impressive and reassuring... we were really impressed by the very clear information pack...(social worker) was very reassuring and positive about adoption, she answered all of our questions and made us feel very welcomed."

At the other end of the scale, adopters talked of services that fell short of expectations, with lengthy delays, particularly in response to initial enquiries.

"Two years after our assessment we received a call to say that it had been found in the bottom of a cupboard".

"Our applications forms got lost".

"We felt that we were being told to join the end of the queue".

"Our referees were contacted before we had met a social worker".

- two families who have adopted through voluntary agencies noted that these agencies can have more difficulty in securing

access to resources for support, despite often placing children with above-average levels of need.

D) Experiences of assessment and preparation for adoption

Experiences of assessment were very mixed. Most comments were about the individual relationship with the social worker, speed of the process and the types of area covered.

- adopters commonly said that the assessment was deeply personal and challenging but that this was necessary due to the needs of children waiting for adoption.

“We did find the assessment process hard and long at the time but now after the fact we understand the need”.

- many testify to the positive experience of group information and training sessions, especially when led by adopters. Indeed training, support and advice from other adopters was one of the strongest themes in the evidence.
- a few instances were reported of very dull, compulsory preparation training sessions, ‘*death by powerpoint*’.
- many individuals had developed good relationships with social workers and found it particularly helpful when they had continuity of staff

“Our social worker has supported us through each step and has explained clearly and honestly what each step will entail and mean to the whole process.”

- a small number found some questions irrelevant or insensitive and far too intrusive. One family felt that they had been ‘grilled’ about their Christian religion, in a manner that might not have been applied to people of other faiths or atheists, despite their willingness to allow any adopted child to pursue their own faith or none. Another family felt that the exercises and essays that they were asked to write made them feel like ‘school-children’.

“The bureaucracy for all of the different forums can lead to social workers’ attention being diverted from the central core of their work which is the child’s best interests”.

- several adopters mentioned the feeling of powerlessness in the process. They feel the need to be very passive and extremely compliant in order to be recommended for adoption and to be

matched with children. It is often difficult to find clear information about how to go about adopting and what the process entails.

- one adopter pointed out the anomaly that childless couples were expected to have direct experience of children. Another family said that spending time at a local nursery with children of a similar age to the child they were being matched with was invaluable.
- a single adopter felt that the system was geared towards couple adopters in assessments, financial supports, training and adoption support groups. Two single adopters mentioned the considerable financial strain they had experienced and feel that there should be better provision for long-term adoption allowances for those who need to reduce their working hours due to the adoption. Another single adopter felt that she had been treated well as a single adopter.
- many adopters had become aware that staff shortages were delaying the process. Weekly assessment visits were seen as desirable in contrast to monthly visits.

E) Experiences of matching

- experiences of matching were very varied. Most were matched within weeks or months of approval as adopters. A small number felt pressurised into considering children they may not have previously considered, but most found the process acceptable or good. Several commented on the fact that having a social worker with whom they have an excellent and trusting relationship made the experience very positive.
- several thought that matching is done too locally (to keep expensively assessed adopters for local children) and that better matching could be achieved if done on an all-Wales or even all-UK basis. Local matching caused a problem with speed, but also with protecting their children from birth families or places that might evoke bad memories.
- there were mixed experiences of consortium matching days. Most found the experience of queuing up to look at profiles of children and to register an interest rather distasteful, however at least three of the families who gave evidence had achieved successful matches with children through this process.

“Sometimes finding a match feels like a series of lucky coincidences or the result of good personal relationships between social workers.”

- second or third time adopters sometimes had to repeat lengthy assessments, where briefer, more focused reviews might have sufficed and led to children being placed more quickly. This was particularly frustrating when adopting siblings of their existing children and the plan had been adoption from pre-birth. Several adopters would have considered concurrent planning arrangements for new-born younger siblings.

“Eighteen months is a long time in foster care.”

- a small number of families, including those who have experienced serious difficulties, felt that they had not received sufficient information about their children’s early experiences and potential health, learning or behavioural difficulties at the matching stage. Some reports were out of date and children’s needs had changed prior to matching. Three families felt that siblings had been inappropriately placed together.

“From our experience it seemed that the children and parents were **far from** being at the centre of the process. There was too much emphasis on the system, paperwork, box-ticking and little emphasis on the true needs of the child and parents”.

F) Post-matching and post-adoption support and therapy

Post-adoption support was a very strong theme throughout the evidence from adopters.

- a small number have received good support and provision post-adoption including, in a very few cases, extensive packages of support.
- a more common story is the need to battle for post-adoption services, particularly expensive therapeutic services. Several adopters noted that the costs of post-adoption therapy are much lower than long-term foster or residential care. A very small number of families had engaged in protracted battles with local authorities to secure therapeutic support or care packages for severely disabled children. Sadly, these had sometimes involved legal proceedings. One family suggested that they should have

access to independent advocacy services when in dispute with the local authority.

“there is an open door to the local authority (but) there is no money behind it.”

“We have continued requesting therapy for (daughter), but are now giving up as we are fighting an uphill battle we won’t win.”

“We are exhausted and burnt out and have been denied any respite.”

- several feel that attachment disorders/difficulties are under-recognised and not provided for.
- many children require health, social care and educational support. Assessments and services could be more integrated and social workers should have better access to dedicated post-adoption support budgets.

“It would be a lot less stressful and prevent the ever ending cycle of assessments if one social care assessment was possible which was also able to incorporate health and education.”

- very many parents noted that adopted children have similar needs to looked after children and should have the same access to services throughout their childhood.
- therapy provided by independent and third sector providers was identified as invaluable but often expensive and difficult to access.

“We feel passionately that this model of intensive input from a team of professionals supporting the adopters and adoptee in the run-up to and early months following placement could be of much wider value...and that all those involved in the adoption journey deserve the amount of care, skilled support and attention which we have been lucky enough to receive.”

- many access support from organisations such as Adoption UK and After Adoption. Few are able to access regular support groups from local authority adoption agencies post-adoption, with a few notable exceptions.

Case example: One adoptive parent described the local authority adopters' group as a 'life-line'. There is no equivalent group in several neighbouring authorities.

- post-adoption training sessions on issues such as attachment, parenting teenagers and helping children understand their life history are seen as invaluable but not offered frequently enough, or too expensive. Training is sometimes offered too early in the process, before the issues have become pertinent to the adoptive family.
- some mentioned that their children had not received enough support and preparation in leaving foster carers and being moved to a new family. A few noted that experienced foster carers had provided invaluable support to child and adopters. This was often ongoing. On the other hand, there were a few accounts of foster carers making the move difficult. Some felt that their children had received poor care in over-crowded or inexperienced foster homes. One baby was reportedly neglected in a foster home.

"He certainly grieved for his foster carers over a long period."

"Our children's foster parent really helped us to become competent parents. We were very nervous."

- one adoptive family had experienced many difficulties in finding information about their child's life history (an older adopted child). Several mentioned that they had received no life-story books or that life-story books were inappropriate (e.g. containing birth family address). One family described life-story work as the 'lowest priority' for local authorities.
- the timescale and procedure for meeting children and getting to know them before moving into the new family was experienced by some adopters as a very positive time but for others the timing and style was too inflexible. Experienced practitioners and foster carers are invaluable in this period.
- two families have experienced child protection investigations due to their children's challenging behaviour, including false allegations. Both families felt unsupported and traumatised by this experience despite being exonerated.

- peer support is mentioned by nearly all families as a positive that should be encouraged and could be more formally arranged.

“A parent mentor should be available for all families to aid safe exploration of this ‘uncertain transition’ (i.e. not a problem) from a couple into adoptive parenthood and from a child looked after by the local authority to an adopted son or daughter of a new family.”

G) Education

- schooling was the strongest theme in the evidence from young people as is reported above.
- small number of families noted how sensitive and responsive their children’s schools had been to their children’s needs. Examples included a teacher letting parents know that the class will be discussing ‘who’s who’ in their families the following week and suggesting that they prepare their child for this.
- several families would have liked help and support in choosing and applying for schools. Places are often required at short notice if children are already school-aged when they join the family.
- many families felt that adopted children should have the same priority for admissions as looked after children have (as they are formerly looked after children and have similar needs).

Case example: One rural family wish their child to attend the same over-subscribed school as his or her older sibling but they live outside the catchment area. The local school is potentially unsuitable due to connections with the birth family. The older sibling was ‘looked after’ on entering school and therefore a priority. The younger sibling is adopted and has no automatic priority for admission.

- many families reported insensitive attitudes from individual head or class teachers about adoption. This included no warning when children may be asked to provide baby pictures (which they may not possess). Several reported under-recognition of the long-term impact of early loss, abuse or poor parenting. One or two mentioned *over-* attribution of adoption and associated

problems such as attachment disorders to behaviours within the normal and expected range. Some felt that their children had been labelled as difficult.

“I asked if all girls who deliberately forget their PE kits are labelled as having attachment disorders.”

- some subjects studied in schools can be painful for adopted children (including some fiction and classes about genetics and inheritance) and teachers could be more sensitive to this and proactively offer confidential support.
- many families called for more training for teachers and other school staff. Some reported that schools were deterred by the costs of such training.
- a number of families felt that their children were receiving too little or the wrong type of additional help. Children who have experienced early traumas may have needs that do not fit easily with existing categories of provision.
- positive and negative experiences had come from state, private, special, primary and secondary, large and small schools. In other words, there was no particular pattern to the school experiences of families.

H) Regional and rural issues

- the sessions in Wrexham and Narberth in particular, but also some written submissions, highlighted positive and negative geographical aspects of adoption.
- some small, rural adoption teams are reported to know their communities, children and adoptive families well, leading to a supportive environment and good matching (this comment was also made about at least one larger, valleys authority).
- some had concerns about maintain their children's confidentiality in small communities, particularly where birth families were from the same region.
- several families had difficulties in getting a response from their child's originating local authority when this was some distance away and they wished to access support services. High turnover of staff compounds this difficulty.

Case study: Geographical issues. A family in South Wales adopted a child from North Wales. During the introductory period the adoptive family had to stay in a hotel, which was made more difficult by the foster family's resistance to the plan. Contact visits by the birth family stopped due to the birth family's difficulty in travelling the distance to the adoptive home.

I) Further issues

- many adopters noted how they felt their lives had been enhanced by their children and some stated that they would like more positive stories to be portrayed in the media to encourage more adopters to come forward.
- one family noted that they had needed support with the legal process of adopting their children but they had been left to 'get on with it'. Other non-devolved issues included the low level of adoption pay compared to maternity pay, despite the fact that some families may begin looking after several children with additional needs at once, requiring lengthy periods off work and the need to reduce to part-time working. Some employers were said to be unsympathetic, whilst others had been very flexible.
- there are few examples of post-adoption contact with birth families. Some come from challenging family structures with the children in one adoptive family having 26 known half-siblings. Several adopters commented that they would like to promote more contact with siblings in other adoptive families.

3) Summary of barriers identified by individuals

- delays in responses from local authorities to prospective adopters
- inconsistent services experienced by adopters who adopted from more than one agency
- Poor and inconsistent access to post-adoption therapeutic and specialist services
- CAMHS services are inaccessible to those who do not meet certain thresholds. State-provided family advice, training and

therapy before problems become too severe would be welcomed.

- staff lacking knowledge about entitlements and adopted children's needs (social services, education and court staff)
- the need to battle for support and recognition of difficulties faced by children and/or parents. Adopted children should have the same entitlements as looked after children (if needed).
- lack of respite care and other support services offered routinely to foster carers.
- some adopters feel self-imposed pressure to put on a brave face and show that they are coping, particularly in the early stages, because they still feel that they need to prove that they are able to be parents and because everyone involved is so keen to hear that things are going well. Peer support and ongoing low-level support from adoption social workers can both be effective in these situations.

4) Summary of enablers identified by individuals.

- speedy and enthusiastic response from adoption agencies
- continuity of adoption staff
- involvement of experienced adopters in training and mentoring
- peer support in groups and one-to-one
- support from agencies such as Adoption UK and After Adoption.
- supportive and knowledgeable foster carers who help children move successfully and teach adopters how to care for this particular child.
- specialist therapeutic services. Specialist services for children who have previously experienced disruption.
- good quality training after adoption.
- many adopters mentioned the joy they had experienced as adopters. They hoped that positive stories could encourage more adopters to come forward.

"Of course he is the best little boy in the world!"

"It has been fantastic!"

“My husband and I have a wonderful little boy who does have some challenging behaviour but we have come through it and we love him very much and feel truly blessed.”

5) The proposed single adoption service

A number of families had clear opinions about the creation of a single adoption service, and some of the other evidence in this report is also informative about this issue.

- most families who had an opinion on the issue thought that a single adoptive service would be a positive step forward. This was for the following reasons: a) a more consistent and clear response to prospective adopters, b) speedier and more successful matching with a larger initial pool of adopters and children, c) more consistent and better quality training and post-adoption support services, d) nationally applied thresholds and standards for provision of post-adoption support.
- a very small number of families opposed the concept of a national service because they feared that the excellent local service they and their children had received would be diluted in a larger service, with less local knowledge and relationships with local staff.

Summary

Almost all families wished to emphasise that the joy of parenting their children outweighed any difficulties they had experienced and they wished more positive stories to be used by the Welsh Government to promote adoption in Wales.

One of the strongest themes was the inconsistency of responses between local authorities, with initial responses, assessment, training, matching and post-adoption support varying from excellent to very poor.

The individual relationships with social workers (the adopters' and the child's) are central to the experience, suggesting a need for high quality specialist training and policies to encourage retention of experienced workers in these posts.

Schools' responses to adopted children vary from excellent to insensitive, suggesting a need for national training and advice for schools.

Post-adoption support services appear to be difficult to obtain and inconsistently applied, with thresholds for entitlement unclear. There appears to be gaps in provision of specialist adoption support in Wales, from relatively low-cost provision such as support groups (for adopters and for young people) and parent training more costly individual and family therapeutic interventions. Most adoptive parents in this inquiry support the view that adopted children should have similar entitlements to looked after children.

Many adoptive families are distressed by how long their children spent in foster care before coming to live with them. This appears to be a particular issue when the likely outcome prior to the birth of the child was adoption and the adopters of an older sibling were willing to be considered as potential adopters for a new-born baby.

Foster carers play a vital role in helping children move successfully to adoptive families, but may find this process very difficult and require support in doing so.

Adopted young people placed an emphasis on their personal identities, including the wish to know siblings, to have a more positive portrayal of birth families, for schools and peers to be more sensitive, and the important role of adoption support groups.

Voluntary support agencies such as Adoption UK and After Adoption appear to provide a vital source of information, training, advocacy and support.

Acknowledgements

I wish to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped facilitate the evidence from adoptive families: the families who have taken part, some of whom have travelled long distances and taken time off from work, After Adoption's young people's group and

workers, Adoption UK, St David's Society, Barnardo's, several local authority adoption consortium and team managers and the committee clerks and researcher.

Dr Sally Holland, Reader in Social Work, Cardiff University School of Social Sciences.

Independent advisor to the inquiry.

Annex B: Terms of Reference

For this Inquiry, the Children and Young People Committee identified a need to:

- review the delivery of adoption services in Wales, and consider how effectively they reflect the rights of the child; and
- examine the experiences and voice of those directly affected by the adoption process, including prospective parents, adoptive parents and adopted children, and how they are supported throughout the process.

The Committee's aims were to:

- identify where action is needed to remove barriers to adoption, including how best to ensure that delays in the adoption process can be kept to a minimum;
- identify good practice and make recommendations that could be taken to improve the support given to adoptive families and children post adoption;
- identify how the Welsh Government monitors adoptions and tracks progress for the child and parents, specifically the permanence of placements;
- consider how the creation of a National Adoption Service, as proposed by the Welsh Government, could improve the effectiveness of adoption services.

Annex C: List of witnesses who gave oral evidence

9 May 2012

BAAF Cymru and Adoption UK

23 May 2012:

St David's and Barnardo's Cymru

Dr Mike Davies, Independent Consultant Psychotherapist

NHS Confederation (CAMHS provision)

13 June 2012

Dr Julie Selwyn

Professor Alan Rushton

21 June 2012

Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales

Erica Beddoe, Senior Educational Psychologist

British Association of Social Workers Cymru

Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

Wrexham County Borough Council

Cardiff Council

Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of
Directors of Social Services (ADSS)

19th July 2012

Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services

The Committee is also exceptionally indebted to the adopter parents and the young people, who have not been named in this report, but who have given their time to help us with this important inquiry. Their willingness to openly share their experiences gave the Committee a unique insight into adoption in Wales.