

National Adoption Service for Wales

Reason for this Briefing

1. To update the Children and Young Person's Scrutiny Committee for the City of Cardiff Council about the National Adoption Service for Wales (NAS) and the role Cardiff plays in hosting the central elements of the service.
2. A linked briefing focussing on progress in the local element of the NAS, the Regional Adoption Collaboration of which Cardiff is a member (Vale, Valleys and Cardiff), is being separately prepared.

Background

3. The cabinet of the City of Cardiff Council were advised in a report on July 14th 2014 that following a competitive process Cardiff had been awarded the prestigious role as the 'Host' local authority for the central elements of the new National Adoption Service for Wales.
4. As a key part of the implementation of the Social Services and Well Being Act (Wales) 2014 the National Adoption Service for Wales has been created bringing together existing local government services into a three tier system, with partnership arrangements for services provided in other sectors, to co-ordinate and deliver adoption services in a different way. As previously advised these tiers are:
 - local authority level where all local authorities will continue to identify and meet needs of children for whom adoption is the most appropriate plan;
 - regional level where five local authority collaboratives have been created to deliver agreed adoption functions and develop operational links, as appropriate, with voluntary sector and other services to develop and improve service delivery; and at
 - national level a small team to co-ordinate and drive improvement and consistency alongside maintaining strategic and planning links with VAA's and the delivery of certain national functions.

The National Adoption Service is probably most accurately described as a network of interdependent services operating at local, regional and national levels through local government and the voluntary sector.

5. Significant work on the national service as a whole was undertaken by a multi-agency Task and Finish group led by the Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru (ADSSC) and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) with a project manager who was employed by ADSSC. Officers from the City of

Cardiff Council worked very closely with these groups to make the necessary arrangements to 'host' the service.

6. Very shortly after the City of Cardiff Council was awarded host status, arrangements were put in place to make the necessary appointments for the Director of Operations, staff and the Independent Chair of the National Adoption Service Advisory Group as well as the practical arrangements for office space and services etc. During December and January all four members of the central team took up post with the team becoming operational from January 5th 2015 working to the transition plan that had been agreed.
7. The National Adoption Service itself was formally launched at the Senedd, on November 5th 2014 during National Adoption Week. At the end of November the first formal meeting of the National Adoption Service Advisory Group took place and it has met bi-monthly since then. Similarly the National Adoption Service Governance Board met for the first time in February 2015 and will meet 5 times during 2015.
8. The Welsh Government funded the central elements of the service for the inaugural year (2014/15) while arrangements were put in place for it to be fully funded by local government in Wales going forward. From April 2015 funding for the central elements of the service, a top slice of the Revenue Support Grant, will be passported from the WLGA to the host local authority for the costs associated with establishing and operating the management and oversight functions of the National Adoption Service on behalf of local government.
9. Subsequently new regulations have been issued to underpin the arrangements. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015, known as 'The Directions Powers', were issued on March 13th 2015 for immediate implementation. These regulations set out in detail the aims for the National Adoption Service and the arrangements, including for governance, that need to be in place at both regional and national levels.
10. Within these regulations, regulation 6 sets out the requirements for all local authorities in Wales to collaborate with each other to carry out their adoption functions. Collaboration is specified at two levels together with the necessary governance arrangements:
 - nationally – all local authorities together to provide management and oversight of certain specified functions via a host local authority;
 - regionally – the 'footprint' for the regional adoption collaboratives is set out together with a detailed outline of what should be included in the partnership agreement for each collaborative.

The structure & role of the central team,

11. The team is based in County Hall of the host authority, the City of Cardiff Council and consists of:

- Suzanne Griffiths – Director of Operations
- Martina McCrossan – Policy and Practice Officer
- Wendy Carroll – Business and Performance Manager
- Tom Wood – [part-time] Administrative Assistant

Website: www.adoptcymru.com

12. The Director of Operations and the small team is appointed by the host authority to fulfil a range of functions related to the management and oversight of the National Adoption Service in line with the aims of the Service. The regulations, The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015 specifies that these functions must include the following:

- Production of an annual work programme for the National Adoption Service and the Advisory Group which must include priorities, targets, financial plans and a budget;
- Monitoring and analysis of performance data from the regional collaboratives;
- Setting out the actions to take to address any issues which require improvement;
- Submission to the Governance Board of a six monthly interim progress report on 31 December and an annual progress report on 30 June each year to include
 - an analysis of the work programme previously approved by the Governance Board,
 - a financial report and analysis of the expenditure in relation to the central elements of the service,
 - an analysis of the reports received from the regional collaboratives and their performance,
 - what needs to be improved with proposals and
 - plans for how this is to be achieved that link back to the board aims of the service.
- Promotion of best practice and a culture of continuous improvement throughout the National Adoption Service;
- Establishing and maintaining a website for the National Adoption Service;
- The co-ordination of preapproval training courses for prospective adopters;
- The co-ordination of adoption support services;
- Managing the staff required to assist in carrying out the functions of the Director of Operations.

Governance arrangements - nationally

13. At national level local government must establish a Governance Board and an Advisory Group with terms of reference that are in line with the regulations and reviewed annually. There is also an expectation that local government ensures that the Governance Board, the Advisory Group and the Director of Operations are resourced sufficiently to perform their functions and achieve the aims of the National Adoption Service as well as having adequate financial and accounting procedures.
14. The membership of the Governance Board is set out, consisting mainly of elected representatives; it must include a representative of each of the regional collaboratives and a chairperson. In addition 'best endeavours' must be used to ensure that the following become members of the Governance Board:
- (a) the WLGA spokesperson for Health and Social Services;
 - (b) the WLGA deputy spokesperson for Health and Social Services;
 - (c) the mayor or the executive leader (or a deputy for these roles) of the Host Authority;
 - (d) the independent chairperson of the Advisory Group; and
 - (e) a representative of the registered adoption societies.

All these representatives are in place, with the Board being chaired by Cllr Nott OBE the WLGA Presiding Officer.

15. The role of the Governance Board is to provide strategic direction in the development and delivery of the National Adoption Service, having regard to any advice from the Advisory Group and the Director of Operations. This includes approving the annual work programme, ensuring that the views of all stakeholders are represented effectively, monitoring and overseeing performance, the quality of engagement with registered adoption societies and service users at both central and regional levels, the budget and financial management, compliance with the Directions Powers and ensuring that due consideration is given to the need for Welsh language in planning and delivery of adoption services throughout Wales. It is also the responsibility of the Governance Board to make copies of reports available to Welsh Ministers and notify Welsh Ministers of any issues regarding the National Adoption Service which, in its view, need to be drawn to their attention.
16. The Advisory Group is comprised of professionals and experts in the field of adoption and other linked disciplines and has an Independent Chair who is appointed by local authorities via the WLGA. The individuals and the organisations that they represent have a lead role or interest in providing, supporting or developing adoption services in Wales.

17. The role of the Advisory Group which is to provide professional advice and support to the Governance Board to inform the overall strategic direction of the service as well as supporting the operation of the service, ensuring it promotes best practice and notifying Welsh Ministers of any issues it considers should be drawn to their attention.
18. The membership of the Advisory Group is also specified and must include a representative of each of the regional collaboratives and an independent chairperson. In a similar way to the Governance Board it is expected that 'best endeavours' are deployed to ensure that the following become members of the Advisory Group:
- (a) a representative of the Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru (ADDSC);
 - (b) a representative of the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW);
 - (c) a representative of the WLGA;
 - (d) three representatives from registered adoption societies;
 - (e) a legal adviser from the Host Authority;
 - (f) a Designated Doctor (appointed by the Public Health Wales National Health Service Trust with specific responsibilities in relation to safeguarding the welfare of children and in relation to children looked after by a local authority);
 - (g) a medical adviser appointed by an adoption agency;
 - (h) a representative of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS);
 - (i) a service user representative;
 - (j) a legal advisor from the host authority; and
 - (k) a representative from a Social Research Centre (CASCADE).

The entire above are in place, with Mr Phil Hodgson MBE appointed as the Independent Chair. Since becoming established the Advisory Group has agreed that a representative of the Children's Commissioner should become a member with observer status and that links be created with CAFCASS Cymru.

19. The current arrangement is that the Director of Operations, the Chair of the Governance Board and the Independent Chair of the Advisory Group meet with the Minister for Health and Social Services twice a year. To date two meetings have taken place.

Governance arrangements regionally

20. This will have been considered in previous reports to the City of Cardiff Council where the arrangements for the regional collaborative were agreed.

21. Governance at the regional level stems from the written partnership agreement that must be in place between the local authorities in the collaborative. A wide range of matters are prescribed for inclusion in the partnership agreement as well as there being provision for additional matters, relevant to local circumstances, to be included. The regulations cover in some detail a range of matters relating to the governance and service delivery of the collaborative as well the relationship between the regional collaboratives and the central / national elements of the service and in particular reporting and provision of information to the Director of Operations, the Advisory Group and to the Governance Board.

Update on performance of the National Adoption Service

22. April 2014 to March 2015 is seen as the inaugural year of the National Adoption Service straddling as it does much of the set up phase and the first few months of the National Adoption Service being operational. A decision was taken that an annual report would be produced for 2014/15; this was published on July 16th 2015 receiving a good response and positive media coverage. The full report, and a short / young people's version, is available on the website

<http://www.adoptcymru.com/en/news-and-events/annualreport>

23. The report notes that a great deal had already been achieved in terms of:
- a. All the regional collaborations were providing services jointly; four fully functioning with the fifth due to be very early in 2015/16;
 - b. The central elements of the service established and effectively operating;
 - c. The very important relationship with the voluntary sector adoption services that operate in Wales being maintained and maturing;
 - d. A strong partnership with Health, via the Designated Doctor service, forged leading to the development of standards and quality assurance mechanisms;
 - e. Arrangements for learning from best practice and research in place due to the establishment of a strong relationship with Cardiff University through both CASCADE (Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre, School of Social Sciences) and the Wales Adoption Study (School of Psychology);
 - f. Engagement with adopters and adopted young people finding out what the current issues were for them and how they wished to engage with the service going forward;
 - g. Being able, through the new Performance Measurement Framework, to identify where improvement is needed but also demonstrate the improvements that had already been made

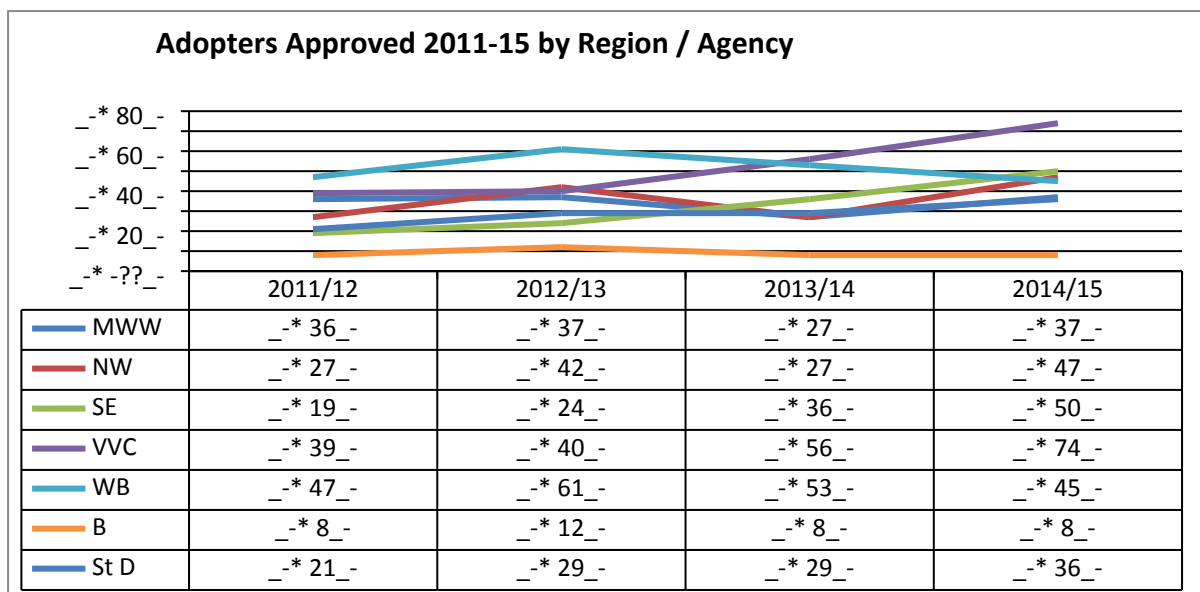
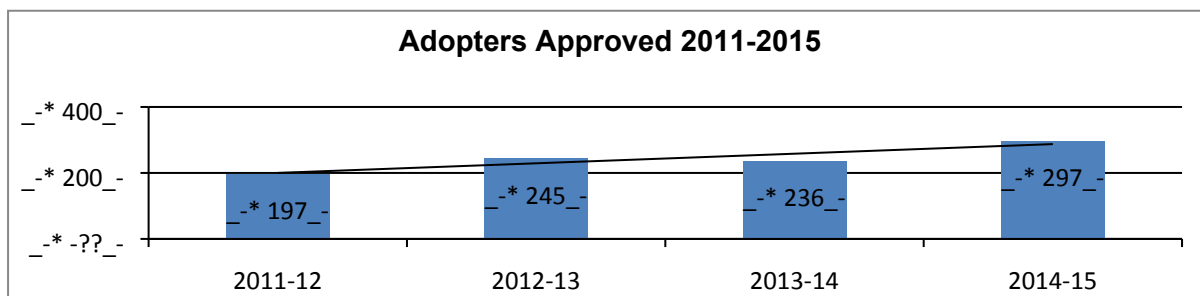
Performance

24. It was possible to provide a comprehensive overview of the performance of adoption services for the first time. This was based primarily on data collected for the new Adoption Performance Management Framework which was procured by Welsh Government and commenced data collection in April 2014. Regions and Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Wales also provided some historical data to inform the identification of trends over time.

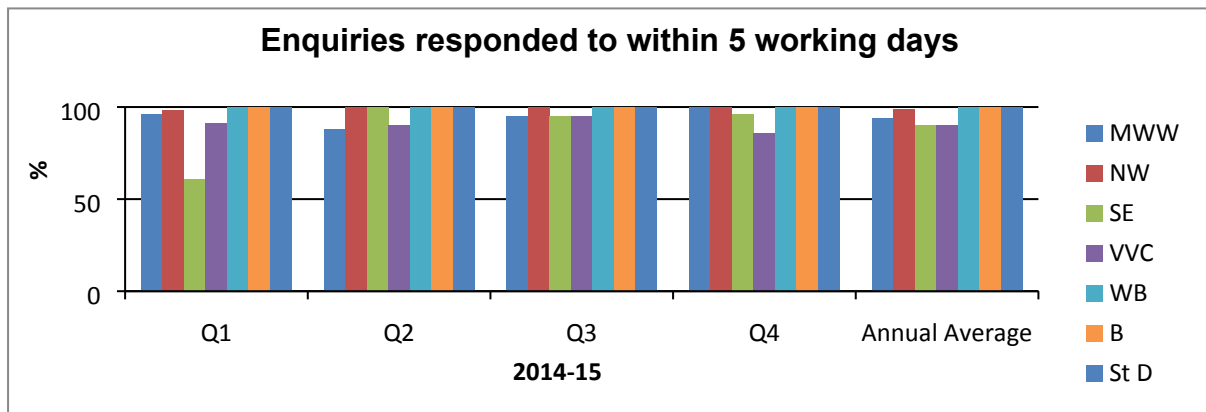
25. This was positive in enabling us to see and understand performance with more confidence than had been possible before. By understanding what the data tells us, the stories behind that data and also the comparative information we will be greatly assisted as we work to improve adoption services in Wales. It was also a time for a cautionary note in that this is the first time that this data has been available to agencies, their first opportunity to interrogate it and consider fully what is telling us particularly in relation to the comparisons between agencies.

26. The highlights from the performance reports were as follows;

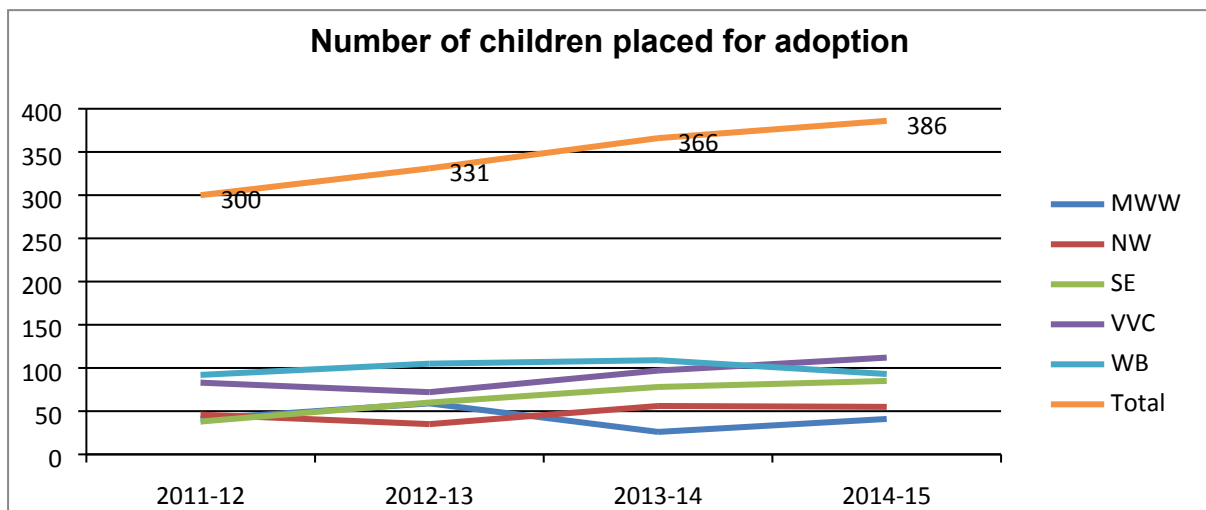
- 26% more adopters were approved in 2014/15 than in the previous year maintaining an overall upward trend in approvals with some regional variations.



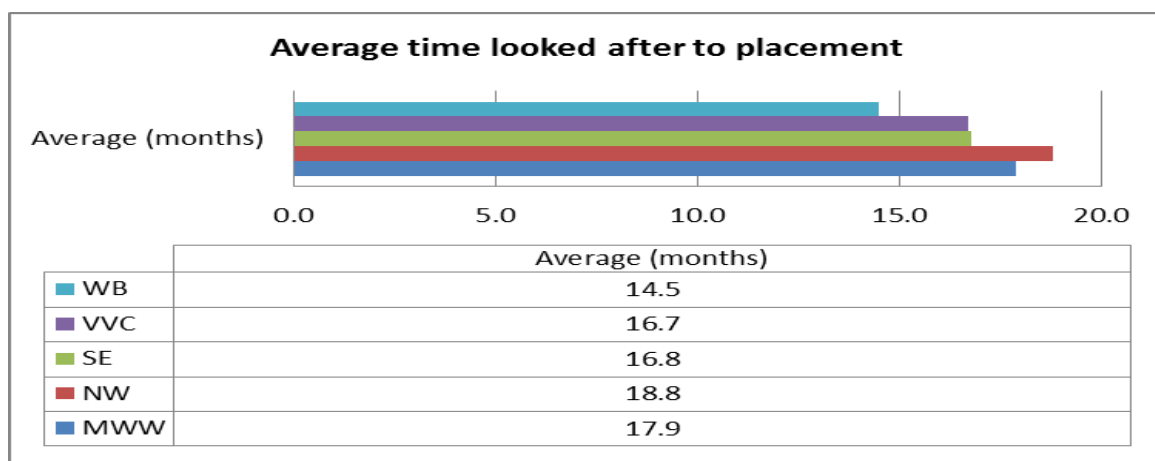
- Some agencies achieve 100% in responding to enquiries in 5 working days and the remaining performance is at 95%



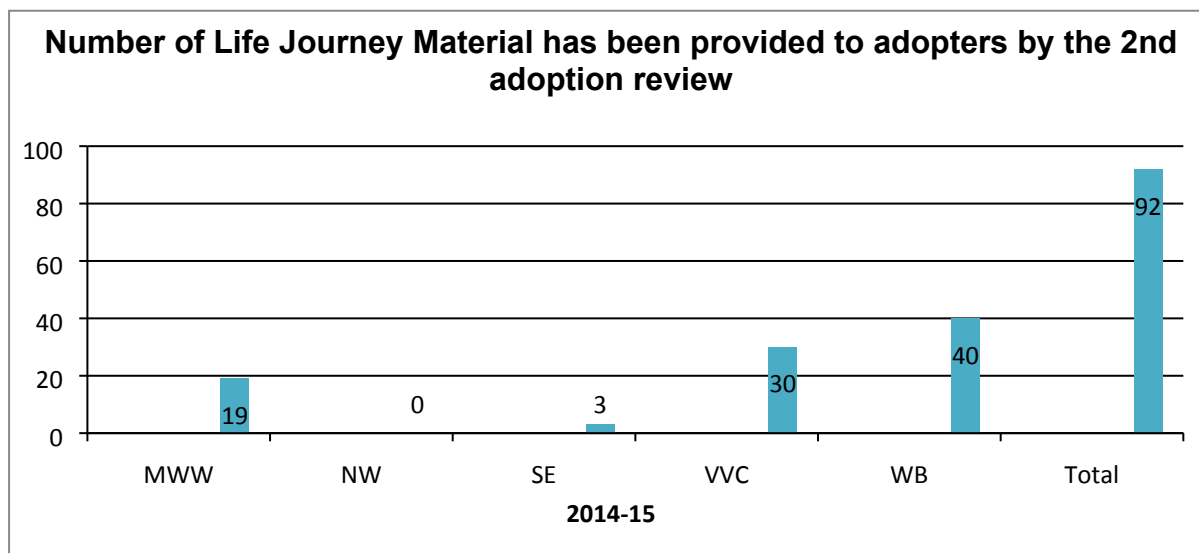
- The number of children placed for adoption has increased for the third year. In 2014/15 386 children were placed for adoption in Wales.



- The average time it takes for a child in Wales to be placed for adoption (from the point of most recent looked after episode) has shortened by 10 months to 16.5 months or 1 year 4.5 months from 2 years and 3 months.



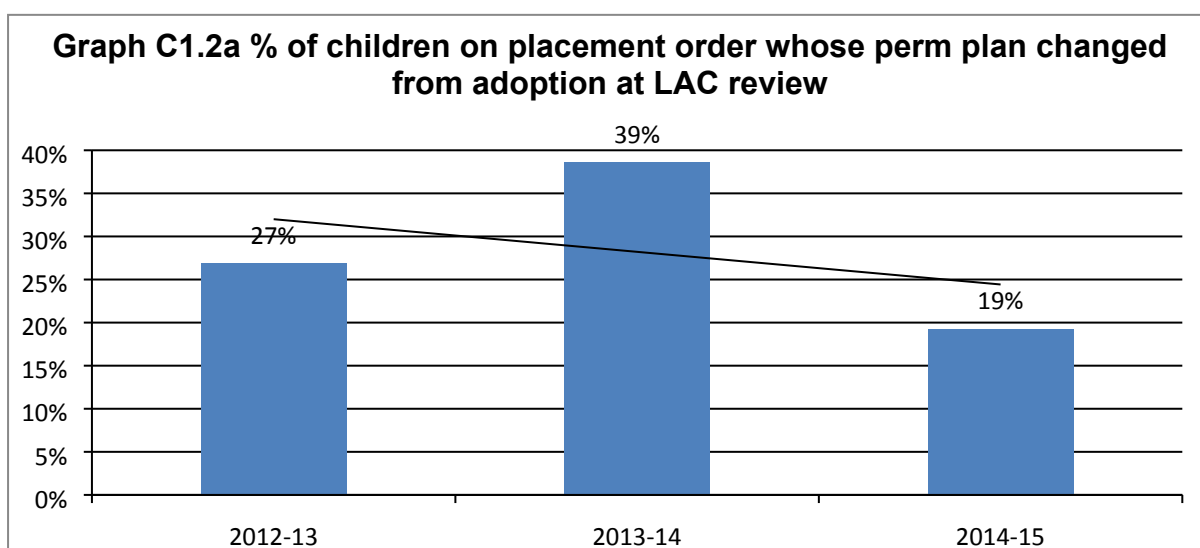
- The level of birth parents who take up the offer of a service is very low, 18% overall across Wales.
- Too few Welsh children and their adoptive parents are receiving life journey material in a timely way (23.8%).



% of Life Journey Material has been provided to adopters by the 2nd adoption review

	MWW	NW	SE	VVC	WB	Total
Total	46.34%	0.00%	3.53%	26.79%	43.01%	23.83%

- Fewer children had their plan for adoption changed this year (78 compared to 180 in the previous year) but we would still wish to see a further reduction in this.



2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
---------	---------	---------

95	180	78
----	-----	----

27. We have used the data to inform service targets for 15/16 which link to the priorities which are outlined below.

- We need more adopters who can meet the needs of children waiting for adoption, particularly for children over the age of 4 and sibling groups.
- There is more work to do to improve how children and families are matched. We have speeded this up, but too many children still wait more than 6 months for a match. Too many children have their care plan changed from adoption because we cannot find an adoptive family for them. We do not have an agreed system that works well for matching children with a family. We aim to develop a system, and also address some practical matters such as getting life story work done.
- A lot of work needs to be done to improve adoption support services. This is going to be challenging because of the cuts to public services. At the very least, we need a way for adopters to keep in touch with the adoption services if they want to. It would be a step in the right direction if adopters had an annual contact or information bulletin from the adoption service, were told what support is currently on offer and the process for accessing support was easier.
- Everyone needs a way to get involved and have a say about adoption services. This applies to work with individuals, how we check the quality of services and how we run services. Both children and adults need a way to get involved. We will need to do some further development work on this, alongside doing what adults and young people have already told us. We need to find out why we are not doing well at involving birth parents, and think of how to do this better in the future.
- Research has been published about the quality of services, from the perspective of adopted children, young people and their parents. The research has some important and difficult messages for us. Everyone involved in adoption services needs to hear these messages. We all need to take the messages into account as we make changes.
- The Welsh Government is developing work around looked after children. We are watching this work. We recognise that we have a role to play in this. In particular we have a role in promoting good practice about attachment and resilience in children, and in planning for permanent futures.

28. There is a detailed plan which is being worked on to meet the priorities and targets

Suzanne Griffiths
 Director of Operations
 National Adoption Service for Wales
 August 2015

