

Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Regional Adoption Collaborative

Progress Report September 2015

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the progress of the establishment of the Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Regional Adoption Collaborative for the Management Board, Joint Committee and relevant Scrutiny Committee.

Background

Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Collaborative (VVC) which is comprised of the adoption services of the Vale of Glamorgan Council, Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC, Merthyr Tydfil CBC and Cardiff Council is one of five regional Collaboratives which form part of the National Adoption Service in Wales (NAS). The background and rationale for the development of the Collaborative can be found in reports to Cabinet in each of the partner local authorities during November and December 2014.

In March 2015. Welsh Government published the (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015, known as “ The Directions Powers “, which prescribe the regional areas and the governance structure for the service at a national and regional level.

The first report of the National Adoption Service for 2014-15 was published in July 2015 which contains a summary of the overall performance of the service and targets for improvement.

VVC became operational on the 1 June 2015 when adoption staff transferred to the employment of the Vale of Glamorgan Council under TUPE transfer arrangements and to their central operational base at Ty Pennant in Pontypridd. The accommodation is leased from RCT on a licence basis. A formal Licence Agreement has been drawn up and duly signed.

The merger of the adoption services within the region on this date was the culmination of much co-ordinated effort and joint working on the part of all partners in progressing the plan to implement the service.

The Regional Adoption Manager, Business Support Manager and other newly created managerial positions within the structure took up post on this date.

The Legal Agreement underpinning the operation of the Collaborative was signed and took effect from 1 June 2015.

Progress Update

Governance structure

In line with the requirements outlined in the Directions Powers, the Steering Group formed to oversee the implementation of the Collaborative was established as the Management Board in July 2015.

The Board meets bi-monthly and is attended by the Heads of Children's Services for the four authorities and the Regional Adoption Manager. It is chaired by the Director of Social Services for the Vale of Glamorgan. The Director of St David's Voluntary Adoption Agency sits as a member of the Board representing the Voluntary Adoption Agencies. The Medical Adviser from Cardiff and the Vale University Health Board and the LAC Education Co-ordinator for the Vale of Glamorgan joined the Board in September providing representation from the health and education sector.

The first meeting of the Joint Committee, comprised of a lead Member from each of the partner authorities and attended by the four Heads of Service and the Regional Adoption Manager took place on 16 September 2015. The Collaborative is unique in having a Joint Committee structure to provide overall governance. The role and function of the Joint Committee is specified in the Legal Agreement along with the reporting mechanisms.

The Joint Committee will agree the draft budget and the Annual Collaborative Plan by 31 December each year. There is also a requirement under the Agreement for an Annual Review of the Collaborative to be undertaken within 3 months of the end of the financial year and for this Review and an Annual Report prepared by the Regional Adoption Manager to be submitted to the Joint Committee.

The next meeting is scheduled for December 2015 and thereafter meetings will be held twice a year.

The Progress Report was approved by the Management Board and Joint Committee.

Staffing resources

Staff recruitment has been an immediate priority and challenge for the Collaborative. Prior to and since implementation, significant effort and time has been devoted to recruiting to the vacant posts created by the merger, both in terms of Social Worker posts and Business Support positions with the aim of filling the gaps as soon as possible .

Gradually posts have been filled so that the Business Support Team is now fully staffed and Social Worker appointments have been made. Six permanent Social Work posts have been filled since June plus one temporary maternity cover position. An offer has been made in respect of another permanent post .Currently two

maternity cover vacancies remain unfilled and a further temporary vacancy is pending to cover another maternity absence. Discussion is now taking place as to the most appropriate means of covering the shortfall, but it is unlikely that a full staff complement of permanent staff will be in place for some time.

However, the keen and consistent interest shown in the posts advertised, both from within the partner authorities and externally has resulted in VVC being successful in drawing upon a range of experience in respect of the appointments made. Some of the staff require to be developed in adoption work but bring vital skills and experience in other areas of practice. It is therefore hoped that by balancing skills, knowledge and experience and developing the enterprising attitude demonstrated by the staff to date, a solid workforce will be established to deliver the work of the region.

Service delivery

The staffing position has meant that the full implementation of the agreed Service Delivery Model according to specialist functional teams has been delayed until the service is fully staffed. The Managers appointed to lead these teams are working to the specialist areas but they also share a range of tasks, such as providing agency advice to the local authority Agency Decision Maker and Adoption Panels.

The level of demand for the service remains high with a consistent stream of enquiries from prospective adopters and a number of children being referred for adoption, although there has been some reduction in numbers reflecting the national trend. The service received some backlog of work from the partner authorities, particularly in the area of Adoption Support with the result that referrals for the Collaborative were received on the first day of operation.

Despite the shortfall in staffing, service delivery has been maintained with emphasis being placed upon reducing disruption for service users wherever possible and trying to provide continuity of service. Social Workers have retained their existing caseloads but new work has had to be allocated across the whole staff team regardless of their particular specialist preference. Recruitment of prospective adopters and family finding for children requiring adoptive placements has been prioritised according to need but there remains a waiting list for Access to Birth Records referrals and requests for Intermediary Services. Business Support roles have been re-aligned to specialist areas to provide consistency and economies of scale.

The management team within VVC has focused attention upon developing support structures for staff and operational processes and procedures in order to provide a more streamlined co-ordinated approach. This work is not yet complete but a plan is in place to progress this. A clear process for co-ordinating the adoption referral and decision making process for children across the region has been agreed and relayed

to all Heads of Service and local Childcare Teams. Further work is underway to establish the regional Adoption Panel with the aim that it will become fully operational from October 2015.

In order to maintain and develop strong working links with local authority teams the Regional Adoption Manager and other Managers within VVC have met with relevant teams to explain the background to the National Service and remit of the Collaborative. These meetings have provided a further opportunity to cascade the procedural changes which have been agreed since implementation.

Priorities

The National Adoption Service has set a number a number of priorities which include recruiting more adopters for siblings and older children, placing children for adoption more quickly, providing better adoption support and engaging more effectively with adults and children who use adoption services. VVC has developed a detailed workplan which reflects national and regional priorities and the actions proposed within the Collaborative to meet these priorities. A copy of the workplan has been submitted to the Director of Operations for the National Service as per requirements.

Performance management

Since April 2014, performance within the Collaborative has been reported on a quarterly basis against the Performance Management Framework developed by Welsh Government. The Director of Operations' report highlights consistent performance for VVC in certain key areas, in particular the recruitment of prospective adopters and the placement of children for adoption, recruiting and placing the highest number in Wales in 2014-15. 74 adopters were approved in this period and 112 children placed for adoption.

Data from Quarter 1 2015-16 (1 April 2015 – 30 June 2015) has been produced and analysed. The data set is split in relation to three main areas: children, adopters and birth parents.

The significant data in relation to children indicates that 20 were matched with adoptive parents during this period and 21 were placed for adoption. The indicators in relation to the timeliness of the process for children from decision making to placement demonstrate that the region has performed well. Of concern however, are the number of children (13) who have waited over six months for a placement and although this number has reduced, the need to place children more quickly is a key action point for the Collaborative.

In respect of prospective adopters, 26 initial enquiries were received in this period and 12 adopters were approved. A high conversion rate from enquiry to approval was recorded. Again regional performance in terms of the timeliness of the process was positive with overall performance being reported just below the national target. One area of improvement noted, is in relation to the response to enquiries within 5 days where the region reported a 96% return. It is hoped, however, that now regional systems are in place to co-ordinate a timely response that this figure will increase by the next reporting period.

Performance in relation to the delivery and take up of birth parent counselling remains low and is a clear priority for the region. It is hoped that the change in practice across the service whereby birth parent counselling is offered as a matter of course will significantly improve performance. Another area which requires improvement relates to the provision of Later Life material for children at their second adoption review. This area, however, relates directly to local authority practice and requires the Collaborative to develop close working links with local authority teams to ensure that this objective is met.

The Quarter 1 data set has been considered against data from the same period last year and although this represents a downturn in certain key areas, such as adopter recruitment and the placement of children, this must be seen in the wider context of the impact of regional re-organisation, staffing shortfall and national trends. Other Regional Collaboratives have reported a dip in their performance during their first year of operation whilst services were being established and resources put in place. Additionally, there has been a reduction in the number of children being referred for adoption and in the number of adopter enquiries on a national level which has impacted upon regional performance. A comparison between the data returns for VVC against other similar regions supports this view. The performance of VVC during Quarter 1 compares favourably with other regions and exceeds some which are more established.

As VVC was not fully operational during the first quarter, individual reports from the four local authorities were compiled. VVC will now take over the administration and co-ordination of future reporting, although initially may have to continue to source some of the data relating to children specifically from the responsible local authority.

Performance against the performance indicators set for adoption is currently being monitored via managerial reporting mechanisms, staff supervision and analysing the factors contributing to performance within the region on a regular basis.

Budget and financial considerations

A first year indicative budget was agreed for the Collaborative. A breakdown of expenditure to date was presented to the Management Board and Joint Committee in September 2015. Close monitoring arrangements are in place to monitor expenditure via monthly budget reports and meetings between the Regional Adoption Manager and Accountant.

The pooled budget does not provide for Adoption Allowances, external agency placement fees and Adoption Support packages. Decisions in relation to funding these matters are referred back to the designated officer in each of the local authorities for agreement following assessment by the Collaborative. The administration of these payments will be undertaken by VVC from January 2016 once all the practical arrangements are in place to undertake these payments on behalf of partners.

Adopter expenses incurred during introductions to children being placed are currently being met from the VVC budget. In the longer term it is envisaged that this expenditure alongside the areas not currently contained within the regional budget will be managed through an equitable formula agreed by all partners.

The regional technical group comprised of finance officers from the four authorities is scheduled to meet in October 2015 to review the budget and plan for the second year.

An internal audit review of the Collaborative was undertaken by Bridgend and Vale Partnership. A report in respect of Part One of the audit process was produced in September 2015. The report concluded “that *the effectiveness of the internal control environment is considered to be sound and therefore **substantial assurance** can be placed upon the management of risks*”. A copy of the report has been circulated to regional partners.

Summary

The establishment of the Collaborative represents significant organisational change both for staff and for the way adoption services were formerly delivered. This has posed challenges but considerable commitment has been demonstrated by all staff to maintain business continuity throughout this period of change and in order to minimise the disruption for service users. There is evidence that the service is now beginning to go through a period of consolidation and that it is stabilising. The introduction of new staff to the region and the commitment shown to meet the staffing shortfall has had a positive effect in developing ownership of the Collaborative amongst staff and in promoting regional working.

The immediate priorities for VVC are to continue to embed and maintain the service and to maintain current performance levels. In the longer term once staff are in

place and staff new to adoption practice are fully equipped to undertake the role, it is anticipated the benefits of collaborative working will be further evidenced and performance levels enhanced.

Angela Harris
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