

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Partnerships

Date: 4 December 2019

Time: 5.00 pm

Present: Councillors J Hughes, S Marshall, R Mogford and T Suller

In Attendance: Meryl Lawrence (Scrutiny Adviser) and Sally Ann Jenkins (Head of Children & Young Peoples Services)

Apologies: Councillors C Jenkins, M Spencer and K Whitehead

1 Nomination of a Chairperson for the Meeting

Members voted for Cllr Stephen Marshall to be the Chairperson for the meeting.

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 National and Regional Adoption Services

Attendee:

- Sally-Ann Jenkins (Head of Children and Young People Services)

The Head of Service presented a brief overview to the Committee and highlighted the key areas for consideration. It was explained that the reason for this report and the Fostering report has come to the Partnerships committee is that it partly reflects the regional work. In relation to Adoption, it is an arrangement in statute, we can't run our own adoption service, the terms are set out in legislation. South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) neatly maps the same footprint as Health and Police colleagues in Blaenau Gwent, Monmouthshire, Caerphilly and Torfaen. Members were then advised that all three Heads of Services are still in post within SEWAS, which shows consistency.

It was agreed to have a single employer - Blaenau Gwent, working from Mamhilad. We all contribute. Adoption affects a small amount of children but adoption is the most draconian and life change decision for a child's life. Whilst there is a small group of children, there is a weight of decision making for children. It was advised that there are still things to iron out regarding government. There are no powers to enforce anything. She can guide and direct, can't enforce, which can create tension.

SEWAS was set up as a partnership across Wales to improve services. We know England and Wales have a number of people wanting to adopt. The creation of service and collaboration to build healthier and greater adopters.

Within the report, officers have laid out background and laid out National Adoption Service report. Key data for Newport is included. Challenges are that there is a still struggle to recruit adopters for Newport, and sibling groups for older children. It is easier to adopt babies, 2 - 3 year olds is a challenge. Finding adopters for children who have disabilities is also a struggle.

too, as well as children who can be challenging to care for. Whilst children post adoption can settle well, when they hit High School etc, they can raise questions about their identity, which can be flare points.

Members asked the following:

- Members commented that although it is a regional report, they were hoping to see a bit more in depth how it impacts Newport and is it value for money. The issues raised in the report are generically about regions, are we doing well in areas and how many people in Newport are adopting? Members were advised that it would be difficult to give an answer for how many people in Newport are adopting, as they could adopt in other places such as Cardiff and Bristol as well.
- With Newport using the pool as much as everyone else, do you feel that allocation is fair? Members were advised that it is fair, as it is about matching carers to children. There is no incentive for them to place more children in one authority, there is nothing to gain. If the match is wrong and the adoption cracks, then it raises questions about the quality of work.
- Is an Out of County placement considered to be outside of Gwent or Newport? Members were advised that it is considered to be outside of Gwent. Sometimes, the preference is to place a child a distance away. Examples were give where a number of minority families have been signed and we try to find relevant matches for those children with a ethnicity background. There aren't many of these families in Monmouth of Blaenau Gwent, so we would need to look in Cardiff or Bristol.
- Do we track young people once they have been adopted? Members were advised that they aren't tracked once adopted, we might not hear ever again what happens to the child, unless the adoption breaks down. When the adoption order is made, the child becomes the child of that family. We do however hear anecdotally how some children are doing. Members then asked how performance is managed and how are breakdowns signalled? Members were advised that if an adoption breaks down, the children come back into care. Children phone to advise of any issues, and the local authority will also contact to get the history of the child. In regards to performance, Adoption have the lowest number of breakdown rates, which is roughly 4% nationally. The Head of Service didn't have figures for Newport but can give the committee the figures from SEWRAS.
- Are adopters given training for special needs? Members were advised that adopters have full information about the children. They also have assessments that aren't for the faint hearted, it is very complex and demanding. It looks at the potential adopter's lifestyle and relationships. There are various training available, such as Adoption UK offer peer to peer support and groups. SEWAS offer a psychology service. All children over 2 years old are offered a day when there is a potential match, the adopter will have a day with professionals working with the children and go through what the child's life has been like, and their likes and dislikes. Getting to know a child is emotional for one day. Furthermore, if a child has medical needs etc, adopters would be given training.
- Can you describe what is meant by "embedding a performance culture"? The Head of Service explained that before adoption service become regional before 2014, there had been no performance information. Now, we have much better

performance information that has now been collected and understood. When Members asked there is a pressure to meet timescales, it was explained that there are no penalties, it is understanding our own performance. Information was given about life story process for children, in which there is a clear sense that we should have the life story work completed by the second review. Newport is great at doing this, we can compare this to other regional collaborations and be proud of this area. If we do miss the second review it isn't a big deal but it could be off key and might need to be looked at.

- Comment was made that some figures can be concerning if you don't understand them. Query was then made about how many younger children were in waiting? Members were firstly advised that it is concerning that the number of people wanting to adopt are smaller number than the children waiting to be adopted so there are children that are not able to be placed anywhere. It was then advised that there aren't any issues with under 2 year olds being placed. The difficulty is for those over two years old, especially siblings. Members then asked if there are targets set for these, which was advised there are. It starts with SEWRAS for 6 months, then they get signed onto the National Adoption Registrars. There are a couple of schemes in Wales and additional support that we are on the cusp of using. It was also advised that there are plans being looked at to recruit adopters for older children. There are also "Link Maker" days and adoption parties, which have also helped to get children to be adopted.
- Does Newport still have the ability to be creative? Members were advised that there are five Heads of Children Services offered a day of in house psychology which is a consultation service attached to SEWRAS, which is being used as an example of best practice across Wales. The five Heads of Service's Local authorities work well together and meeting up regularly, normally monthly and adoption is always on the agenda.
- Is there a reason why adopters aren't coming forward? Members were advised that society has changed, and suspects that significant improvements in IVF does impact. Years ago childless couples normally adopted however there had been horror stories about older children and those with challenges.
- Members queried are BAME children matched up to BAME families? The officer advised that they try to match families with a happy child and an identity to grow with. Comment was made that it was hoped that in this day and age racism had reduced. The officer advised it has diminished but they want a child to have a family they can identify with.
- Can you give an example of where you have listened to adopters and children and the changes that resulted from it? The officer advised adopted children come back to talk to SEWRAS, however there is a
- How many children in Newport need to be adopted, and is the number going up? It was advised that it varies year by year, however it isn't going up, in the last six months numbers had dropped off. There are around 50 children on placement orders but some will have already been matched. There are always some children waiting. When asked if the children can go back to their natural parents, it was advised that assessments with their families are taken beforehand. Adoption is a last resort.
- Members commended the mention of the budget being handled effectively. Could services be better in relation to finance pressures? It was advised no, adoption is hard work. It was advised that the Service Manager in SEWRAS is excellent and

there is no sacrifice in service. Grants have been given by SEWRAS for adoptions service in order to help support the services. There is also a good push from Welsh Government for adoption support.

- Members commented that earlier in the presentation it was noted that the National service look down but have no ability to make changes to enforce. Does the officer see that changing in future? Members were advised that there was a large report last about changes which included views from Welsh Government, Councils and families. It doesn't look like it'll change in future, however people involved in Adoption work together regionally and are committed to work in the same way. There is no real tension and everyone knows each other.
- Within the regional side, is the relationship mature and are there any challenges? It was explained that the relationship is five years old, there has been some fraught meetings and difficult discussions about information received. Overall it is a mature relationship. There was a risk of it previously set up with no signed partnership agreements, but there was a level of trust involved that allowed that to happen.
- Are staff experienced, and is there is any way of mitigation of future planning. The officer advised that Adoption and Fostering do tend to hold onto experienced staff as they are desirable social worker jobs. Staff have built up a wealth of knowledge.
- Are resources being maximised, and it is cost effective? Members were given example of the psychology service which was pooled for the regional service. Partners were very quick to agree that should be a single service with staff being on single service. There is no friction and all prepared to work with each and end with an agreement. In regards to being cost effective, Members were advised that the scope of where we can place children has increased as there is a pool of 5 Local Authority adopters instead of 1. We'd be paying per placement if not for the regional service.
- Has anything been done about promoting Adoption within the Public Services Board? It was explained that Adoption is a statutory right, we do not do anything extra. Sally Ann Jenkins is going to the Public Service Board to discuss Looked after Children so adoption may be discussed. There has been work done regionally.
- If there are any big argument, who comes out on top? Members were advised that there is too much common ground, the objective is the same for all of us and share the same values. The buy in is too much.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending.

4 Fostering Services

Attendee:

- Sally-Ann Jenkins (Head of Children and Young People Services)
- Joanne Llewellyn (Service Manager Resources, Children and Young People Services)

The Head of Children and Young People Services presented a brief overview to the Committee and highlighted they key areas for consideration. Fostering, although not regional service it is important to bring to the committee as it talks about a regional service linked into regional partnerships.

The report outlines work the completed, recruitment strategy and communication panel. Fostering, like Adoption, has an aging population, fewer people wish to be foster carers. The Council has a comp need in children in foster that place a challenge in how we care for those children. 22 local authority recruitment and large number of agencies. In fostering, diff position where 22 LA, far too children involved, but also have large number of national and international agencies who recruit. More challenging area. Need more, more children to place and more competition.

The five local authorities pay different amounts and are all fishing for foster carers. Newport foster carers can foster for any other agency or authority for example a foster carer living in Rogerstone could foster for Caerphilly and Cardiff. The National Fostering Framework has looked at national issues. Some work has been done around foster agencies. Some weaknesses of the National Fostering Framework is that it isn't strong enough about out work around agencies and is a bit slow. working regionally. There is a funded Regional Officer that is funding out of the framework which is looking at issues, but it is still slow. Newport pay less than a few other authorities and considerably less than Cardiff, and all of agencies.

A challenge for Fostering is branding and how do we better promote fostering. We've done significant amount of work but what else can we offer apart from money. Support and benefits for foster carers are also important. The support given to foster workers are link workers, training, hours of support, peer support is strong. The Foster Care Forum raised issues that when placements end it can be emotionally draining. The Council has been able to offer wider packages, such as access to Newport Live leisure facilities.

To advertise Fostering Services, officers attend Over 50 events, advertise through Twitter and Facebook. If people phone us, they need to speak to someone straight away, so it is important for them to be able to talk to someone who can give information and arrange a visit. 20 Reasons to Fostering is a National campaign that Welsh Government have agreed to fund. Early next year Fostering across Wales is being released. This will be interesting as Foster Wales is a national brand. We would have Foster Newport and would have our own materials for Newport. Themes will be the same, but will be customised for local use.

Members asked the following:

- If people want to become foster carers how do they get in touch? It was advised that information is on the NCC website. You can phone the duty desk number directly and You can email which will go directly through to the Duty desk. There is currently work taking place with the Communications Team to put the link on the front page of the website.
Members were also advised that the Council were involved in a mystery shopper exercise in which we received good feedback for contacting people back
- With private agencies is there a worry that they aren't doing as good a job as the Council? Members were advised that the challenge is that some agencies are excellent but the reality is that agency foster placements will cost twice as much. It isn't supporting a local business as some are part of an international business. Public money should be spent on children.
The officer then advised that there has been a trend of unstable placements, which could be the beginning of a potential problem. We care about the care that the children receive. When asked if Welsh Government are stepping in, it was advised that they have already looked in Scotland, and the Deputy Minister has looked in Glasgow. It is a real challenge as we need foster placements, if there are no places to go then we have to go to an agency for a placement.
- It was advised that the telephone lines are open office hours, however people can email straight away. When Members asked if telephone lines could be open out

of hours, it was advised it could be looked into, however it would be tricky because it would need to be staffed.

- Members voiced their interest in the fostering process and then queried if 100 people rang, how many of those would become foster carers? Members were advised that this information can be sent to the committee. It was advised that there are some people that aren't suitable to be foster carers. They look into people who haven't smoked for 5 years, their criminal record, ensure they are in reasonable health and their family environment. It is important for the child to be cared for in an environment that is appropriate for them.
- Members were advised about the discrepancy on page 67, it should note 12 including kinship.
- Query was made about the relationship with Barnardos and their independent fostering service. It was advised that Charge less than an independent private agency as money ploughed back into children's organisation. The Head of Service argued that a Local Authority is democratically accountable, however they argue that Fostering and adoption service run out a different part of the organisation. If we have a choice we don't use them for placements. The preference is our own foster carers
- Members advised that there had been a similar report from a West Country local authority and there too are struggling to recruit. Concerned was then voiced that there is a lot of time taking place in recruitment but not in protecting our current staff. Members were advised that work is done to retain staff and ready to go depending on the budget such as putting up fees. Comment was then made that after talking to foster carers, it is about money to a point however morale is low. The Head of Service advised that issues have been more rigorous about people leaving i.e respite care. There is a balance needed, wanting to get 60 foster children by independent fostering agency carers reduced. Welsh Government have proposed to reduced looked after children. Poverty is only one aspect of why LAC numbers need to improve.
- How much work is being done in Foster Carer forums to ask what do they want? Members were advised that there are one group of Foster carers sees themselves as professionals and want to be paid accordingly and are more vocal. Group emails regularly. Another group with young foster children, happy to carry on. We are also looking into council tax assistance but there is a cost.
- It was advised that work has been done within hubs regarding advertising Fostering and how to get the message out. Other suggestions included social media and advertising in the South Wales Argus.
- Concern was raised about a child's place in school when they are taken into a family. What are the implications? Members were advised that the majority of children remain in the same school initially and not move them mid-term. It is the local authority's responsibility, not the foster carers. The Council does spend a lot of money in transport, which is another set of challenges.
- Are foster children classed as children who couldn't be adopted? Members were advised that it could be that the child has just come into care, have complex needs. It was then advised that the foster carer would have a range of training to support those children who have special needs.

- How many children did well in foster care? Many examples were given such as children getting good results in school, going on to have good carers and become good parents themselves.
- Members
commented on plans on page 68 and commented that it was hoped to see detail on how we are doing on the ground e.g. over 50s forum day presence, cinema's work. This does help Members to understand what is being done. Members were advised that the previous Strategic Director – People had done a lot of work through Corporate communications and marketing. There isn't a budget for advertising so teams will need to improvise.
- Commen
t was made that there are huge challenges in services, how are we faring in relation to pressures on our staff? It was advised that this week was hard with short term sickness. Inspectors commented on how positive staff were. The recruitment and retention of staff is okay. It is important to ensure that staff are not overwhelmed which isn't easy as the workload is high. It was noted that they have a young workforce, and it is much better that staff are all located in one area in the Civic Centre.
- Members commented that there was nothing in the report regarding residential services. The officer advised that this report was purely about fostering placements, but will take comments on board.
- Collaboration in groups was discussed, and was the asked about best practice and innovative ideas being shared across the country. Members were advised that the Team Leader meets with Gwent Team Managers along with regional managers, who take ideas to national managers. Ideas are also shared along with policies. It was also advised that the Foster Care Association would be useful if it could gain traction, which would be a foster care led organisation that can bring challenges to the Local Authority.
When queried about a regional worker being funded by the Welsh Government, Members were advised that work is looked at what can be done regionally and the overall fostering service. Work on "20 Reasons to Foster" makes sense to do regionally. The partners are trying to look at what things can be done locally, regionally and nationally.
- Is there a future of partnership working moving forward? It was advised that assuming national branding goes ahead, that will see change for us. All partners will have a common branding approach to fostering. Work is being done with an agency and seen a mock up of the work, which is distinctive, fresh and modern. It will be interesting to see what steps Welsh Government take with independent foster agencies.
- Will this be a good way of working in 5 – 10 years? It was advised there is pressure on Welsh Government to harmonise fees. There is also a push forward to decreasing independent fostering agencies and have more regulation.
- Will you see a difference within the county of Gwent with more working together and less fees? Members were advised that we are looking to get to a point where all 5 authorities pay the same, or similar to Caerphilly. was then made that it would be useful to have discussions with Welsh Government regarding fixing fees to be the same.

- Are partners looking at other things, such as what fosterers say? Members were told about Fostering Fortnights. If branding is agreed, then this will also be launched. A Foster Care tea party also took place last year, which was an open invite. All foster carers get a thank you letter from the Chief Executive Officer around April/May.
- Members discussed page 68 – looking at plans of communication. Are we sharing information with the Public Service Board? Are local companies such as Admiral being accredited to advertise? Members were advised that work had been done with Wealthy Women of Newport this year and last year which had been really successful engaging with foster carers. There is also a good buy in from Newport County and the Celtic Manor for children Christmas parties. Admiral last year gave Christmas presents. Work could be stronger though.
- Comment was made about those who are harder to reach, such as shift workers. Is advertising taking place in schools and gyms? It was advised that there are pop up stands in certain areas. Corporate Communications team do this. This is also done in GP surgeries and stands in Tesco. It is also advertised in school newspapers.
- Members commented about Dementia Friendly City program, and noted the potential to get the scheme off the ground. Comment was then made about discounts at the Riverfront for carers and if there was any other discounts elsewhere. Members were advised that Riverfront issue discounts for pantomimes. We are also looking get carers access to the staff Vectis cards which offer discounts in numerous stores.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending.

5 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Attendees:

- Meryl Lawrence (Scrutiny Adviser)

a) Forward Work Programme Update

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the Forward Work Programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next two committee meetings:

Wednesday 5 February 2020 at 5pm, the agenda items;

- Education Achievement Service (EAS) Business Plan
- Well-being Plan Mid-Year Update

Wednesday 18 March 2020 at 5pm, the agenda item;

- Regional Safeguarding

The meeting terminated at 7.40 pm