



South East Wales Adoption Service

Achieving More Together

Gwasaneth Mabwysiadu Deddwyrain Cymru

Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd I

For Children - For Families - For Always

Introduction

This report is compiled for Newport city council's performance scrutiny committee. The aim is to give an overview of South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) and report on performance, progress and developments. The report will also outline how SEWAS works in partnership by providing adoption services to all those affected by adoption in the Newport area.

Background

Adoption services in Wales regionalised following the formation of the National Adoption Service (NAS). SEWAS is one of five regional adoption services in Wales.

South East Wales Adoption service was established in April 2014 and as a region it covers Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Monmouthshire, Caerphilly and Newport Local Authority's and the service is hosted by Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. The service is funded by all 5 LA's and the funding contribution per LA is calculated via a formula agreed based upon Children Looked After population.

SEWAS management committee is fully compliant with the Direction of Powers Regulations, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Regulations Wales). There is a partnership agreement in place for the 5 partner local authorities and membership representation from health and education. Monitoring and governance of the service is the responsibility of the management committee, who meet on a quarterly basis.

The service is delivered within a functional model and as such has three distinct teams. Recruitment & Assessment; who recruit and assess prospective adopters and undertake stepparent adoption work. Family Finding who match and place children with adopters and Adoption Support who provide post adoption support to all adoptive families as required, provide independent support to birth families, access to adoption records for adopted adults and facilitate indirect letterbox contact for adopted children and their birth families. All three teams are supported by a Business Support team within the service.

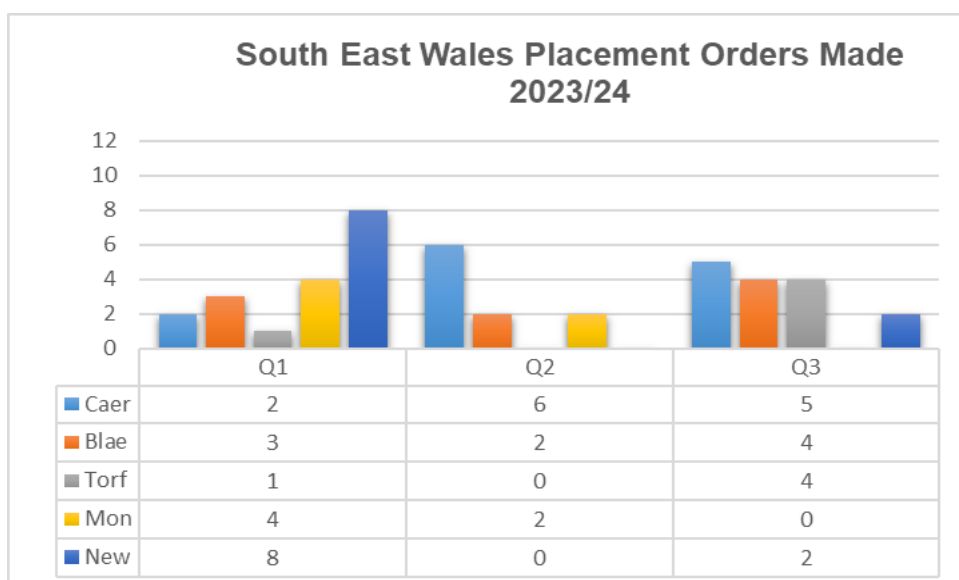
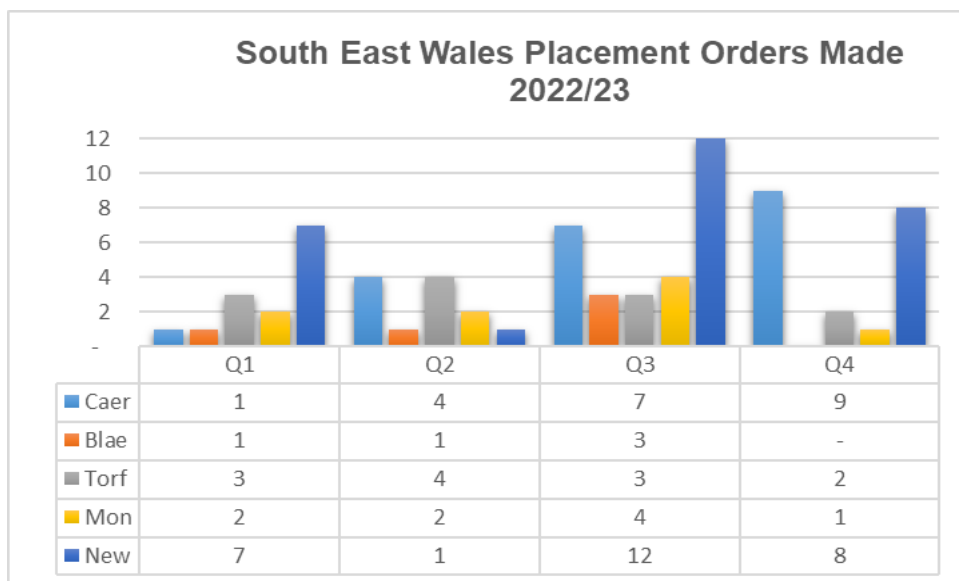
SEWAS also has the added advantage of having direct access to a Psychology Service that provides a range of services to staff, children and adopters in all aspects of adoption support. There are several staff providing adoption support as a result of ongoing Welsh Government investment money, allowing the service to promote initiatives like Pathways (previously known as TESSA) and Connected, as well as specific roles to support the matching and transitions of children to adoption. Adopted children and their families, birth families of adopted children and adopted adults from the Newport area all have access to this provision.

SEWAS holds Adoption panel weekly and has operated a central list for panel members since January 2018. This list works well for the service in terms of availability and a greater diversity of panel members attending each panel. Panel memberships includes professionals from social care, health and education and independent members. Newport has three social workers who are part of panel membership rota.

Performance information

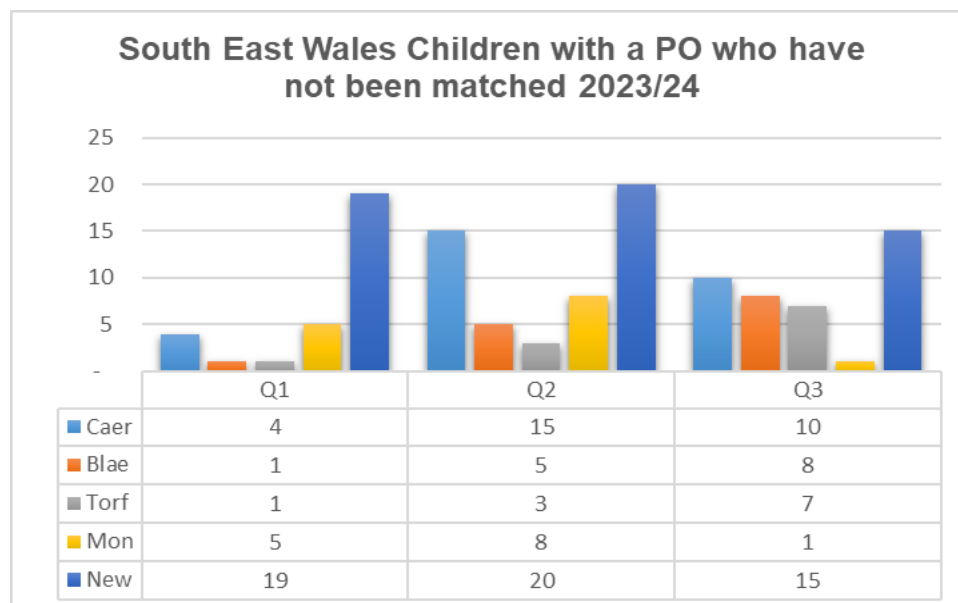
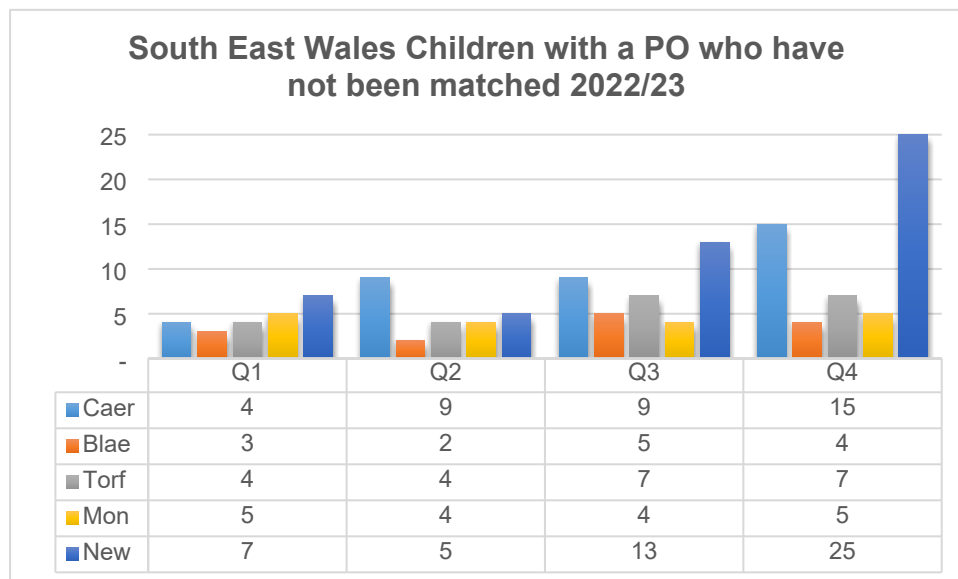
Performance measures are gathered quarterly by each region and submitted to the national adoption service. The following graphs show the areas where performance is measured and include 3 quarters from the current year and the previous year figures. Newport's information appears in the darker blue colour in each graph. It is useful to note that figures vary from each LA primarily linked to size of population in each LA.

Placement Orders Made for children.



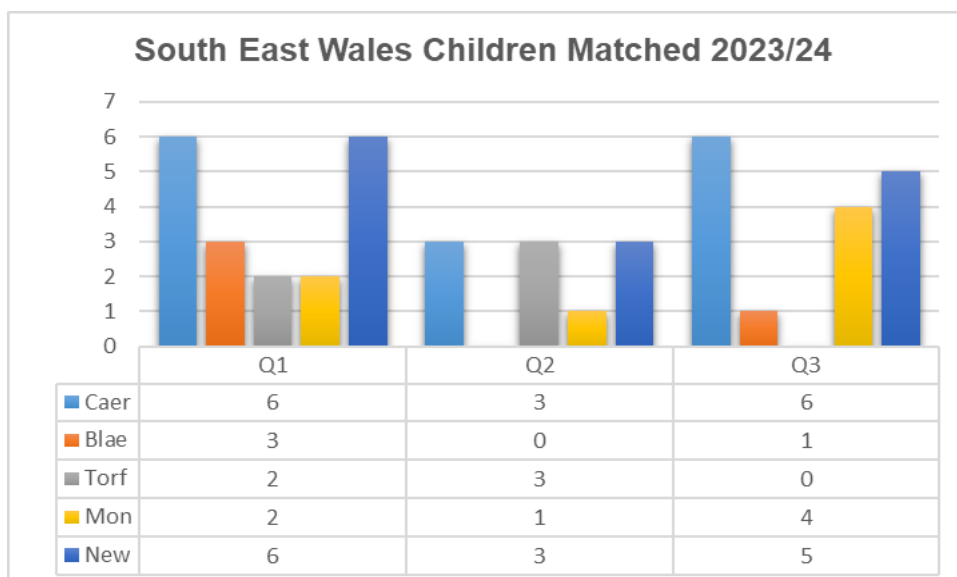
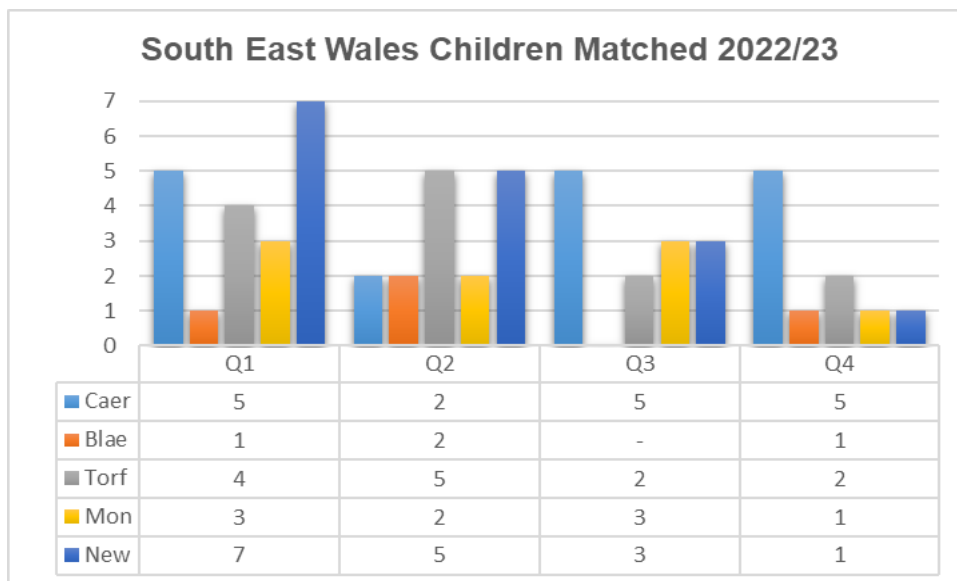
In 2022/23 the number of placement orders made for Newport children was 28. This current year for 3 quarters there are 10 placements orders so there is likely to be a reduction this year.

Children with a placement order waiting to be matched with adopters



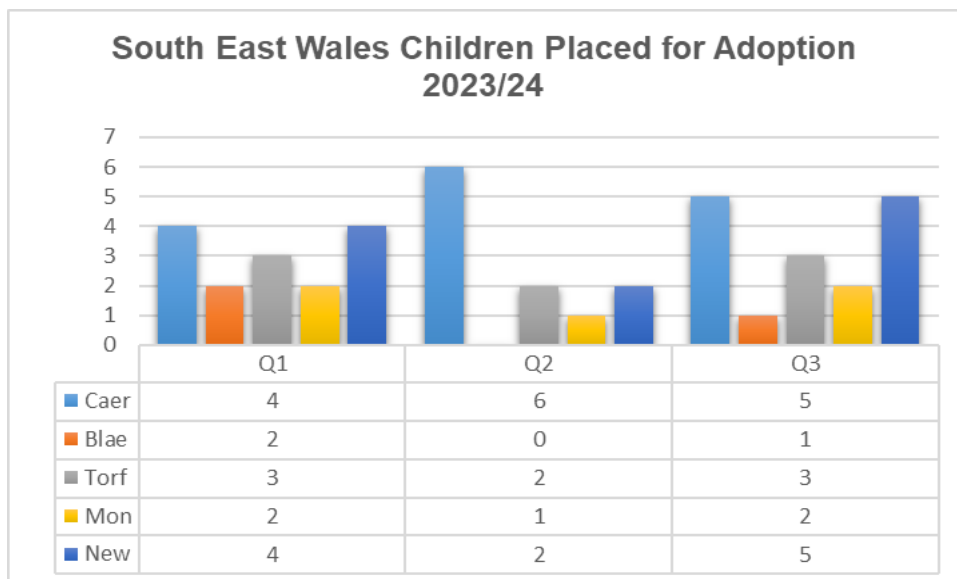
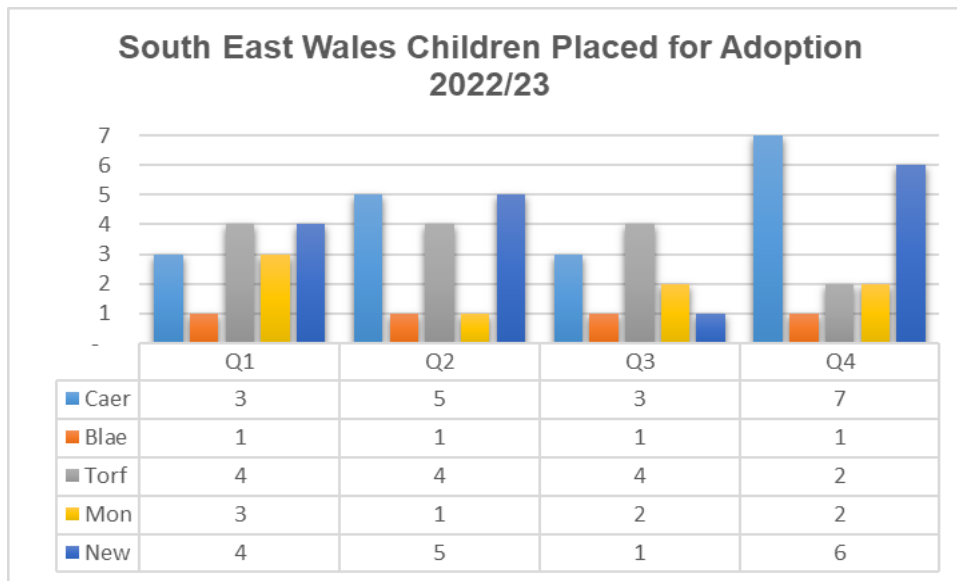
The number of Newport children with a placement order who are not yet matched with adopters is currently 15 and we can see this number was higher at the end of the previous financial year at 25. It was noted that some Newport children were waiting longer for a match than children in some of the other LA's and by looking into the reasons we found this was due to a high number of approved adopters waiting being from the Newport area therefore those adopters could not be considered for Newport children.

Childrens matched with adopters



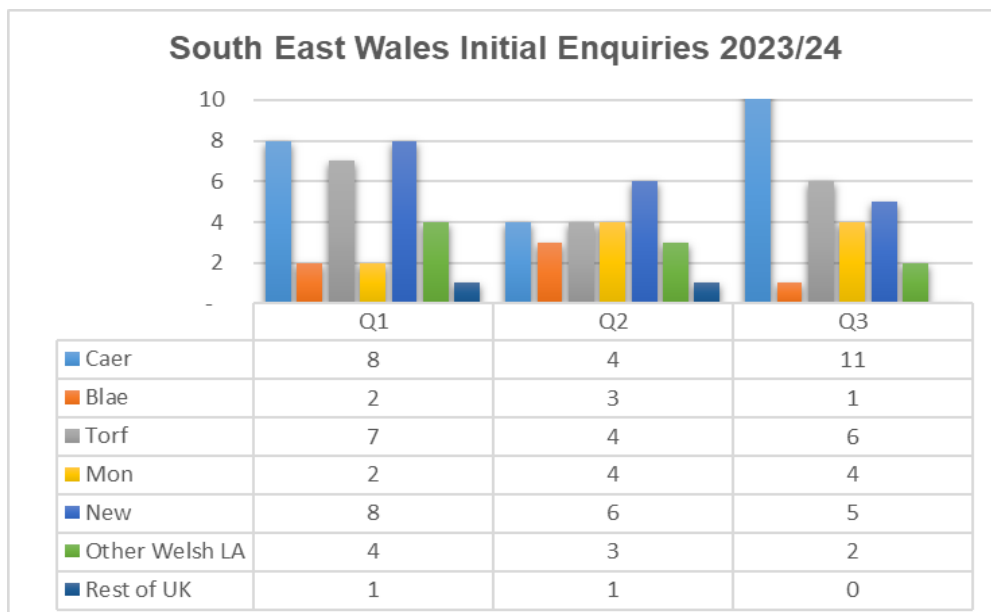
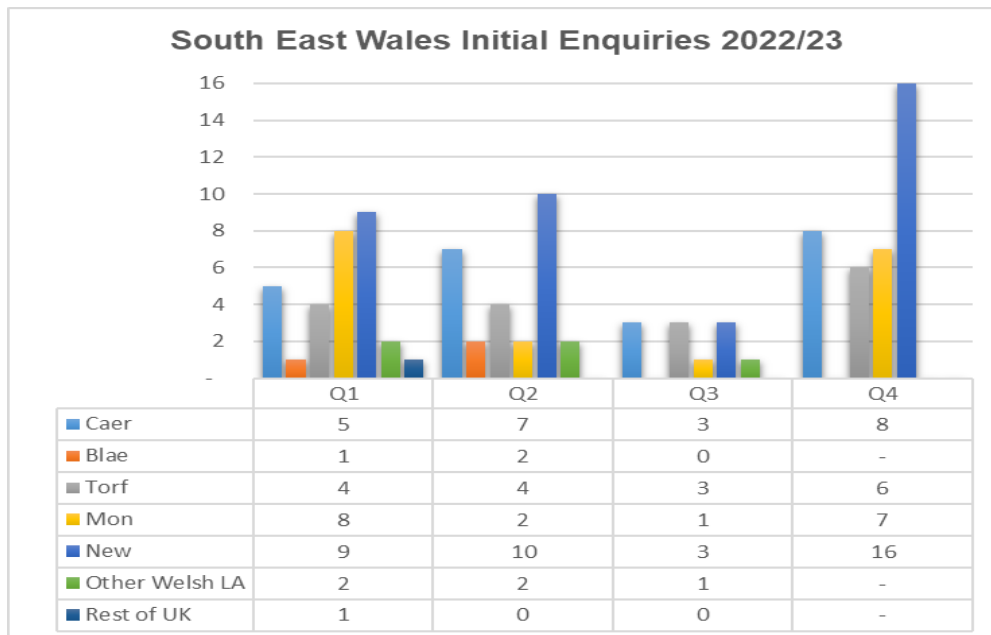
From April 2023 – December 2023 14 Newport children were matched for adoption. 3 of these children are being adopted by their foster carers so SEWAS also undertook child specific adoption assessments for these. 16 Newport children were matched for adoption in the previous financial year.

Children placed with adopters.



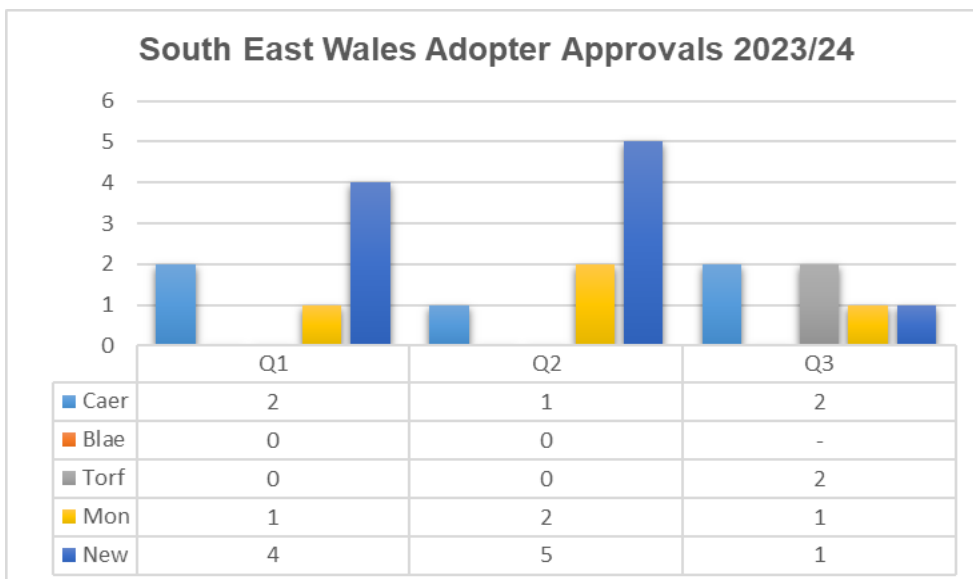
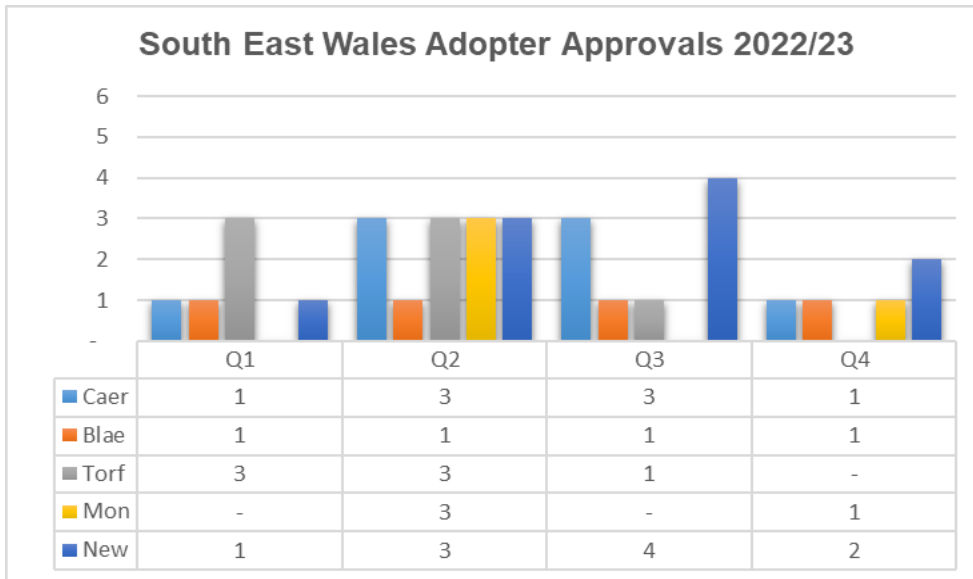
11 Newport Children have been placed with their adopters up to quarter 3 of most recent financial year and 16 children were placed with adopters in the previous financial year.

Enquiries to adopt.



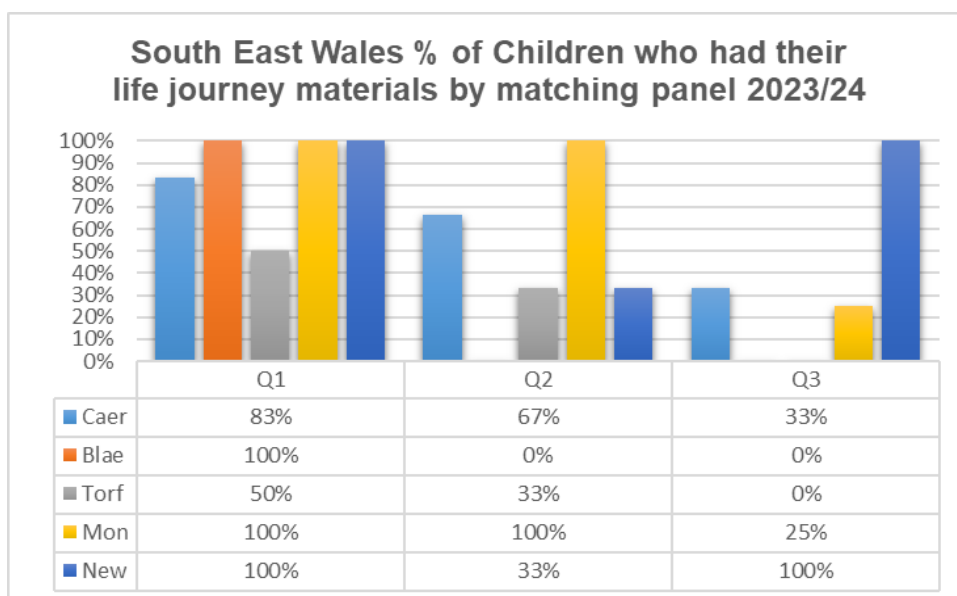
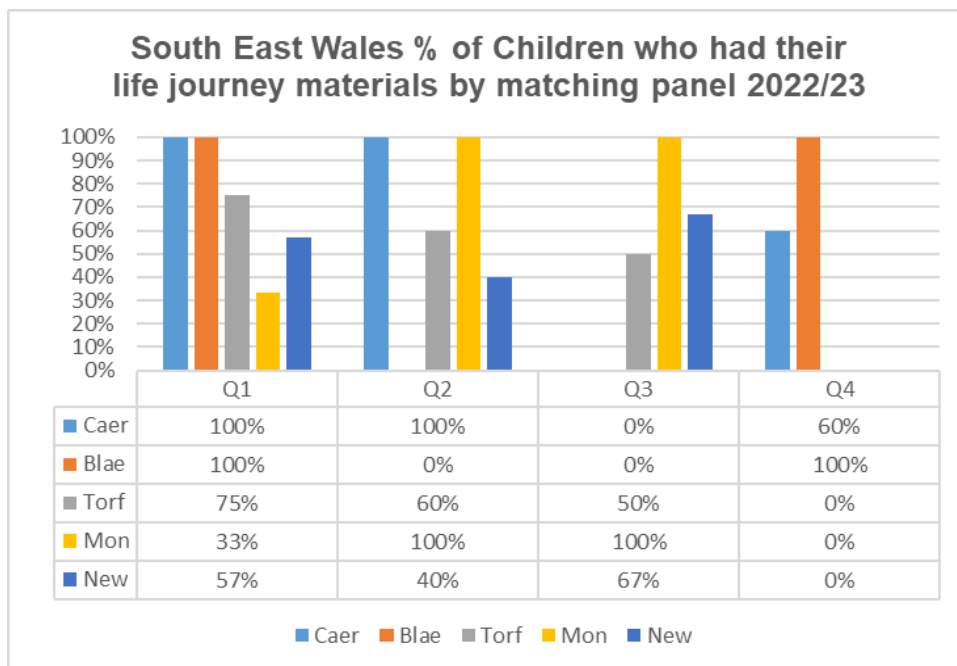
Enquiries to adopt reduced right across Wales post covid pandemic. There were 38 enquiries from people living in Newport in 22/23 and for 23/24 first 3 quarters there were 19 enquiries. SEWAS have been targeting marketing in areas outside of Newport more recently due the need to recruit more adopters from outside Newport area. National adoption week in October 2023 saw an increase in enquiries compared to other times throughout the year. SEWAS service manager and a SEWAS adopter were on a radio Wales show during that week raising awareness of adoption.

Adopters' approvals

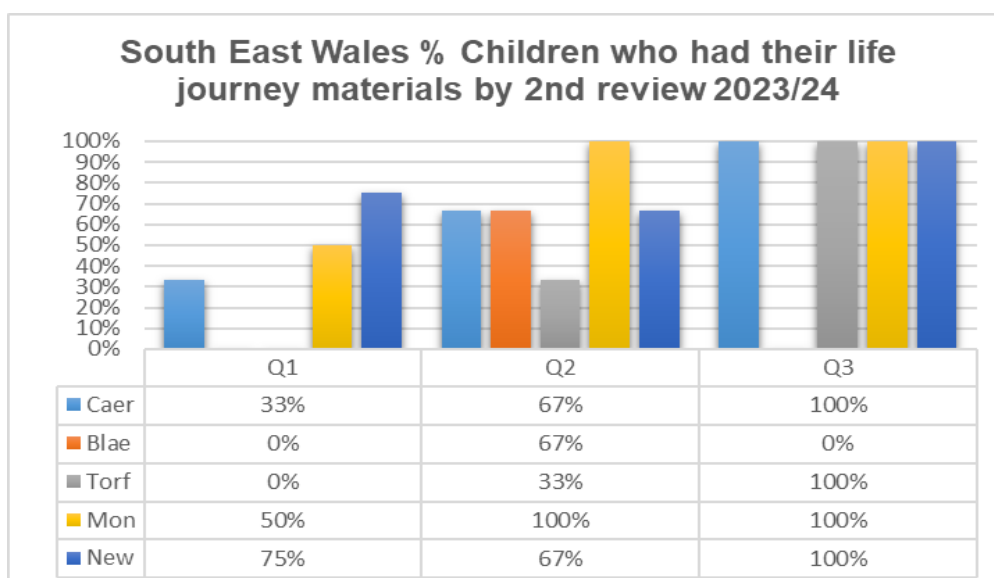
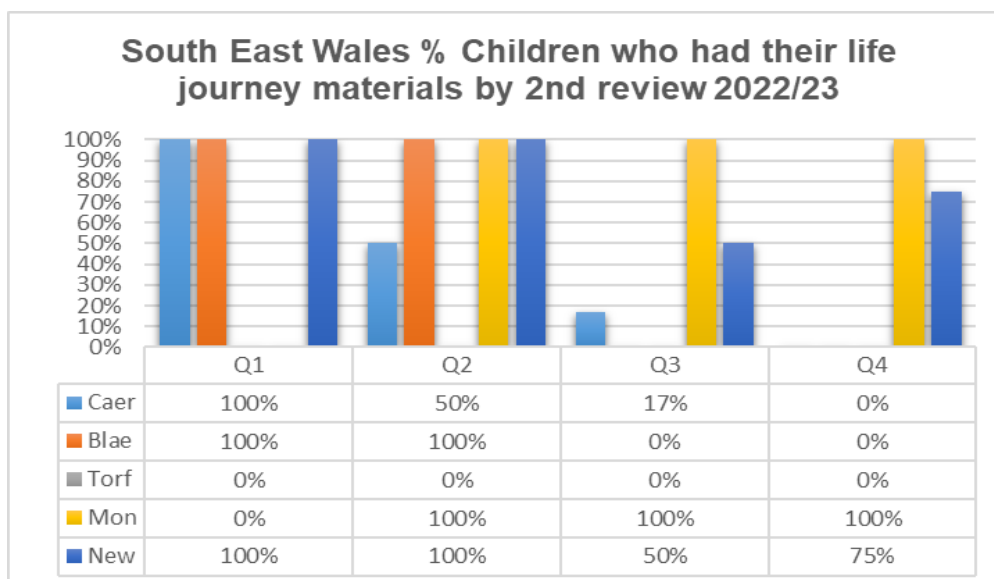


We can see that adopter approvals are higher in Newport area than the other LA's in both financial years, with 10 approvals each year. As identified earlier the higher proportion of adopters living in Newport can mean Newport children may wait longer to be matched with SEWAS adopters. When SEWAS adopters cannot be identified then a search is made outside of SEWAS which will incur a cost for the local authority.

Life journey materials for children.



NAS identified an area of improvement across all of Wales being the production and quality of children’s life journey materials. Most local authorities fluctuate with meeting this target and we can see that most recently in quarter 3 of the last financial year Newport reached 100% which is promising.



By the child's 2nd adoption review; when they are living with their adopters, all should have received their life journey materials. Each child placed for adoption has a Life journey book and this is completed by their social worker or a support worker within the team. Alongside this SEWAS has a life journey work coordinator who provides advice support and training to all staff involved. Over the year 20 staff from Newport children services have accessed training or a drop-in session with the SEWAS worker and this links to the improvements seen in this area.

Children

SEWAS receives referrals from childcare social workers at an early stage for children when twin tracking/parallel planning. A family finding social worker is allocated to link in with the child's social worker throughout the process of matching a child with adopters. In an addition designated social workers within SEWAS undertake Understanding the child days for children over 2 years old. For these days a trauma nurture timeline is completed and shared at the day which is attended by all those involved in the child's life. This good practice is followed in line with NAS Good practice guidance which SEWAS contributed to the making of. These days aim to enhance prospective adopters' knowledge and understanding of a child's needs and assist the matching process. It also assists all professionals involved to consider what the support needs may be for the future. In the past year there have been 10 understanding the child days for Newport children and direct work undertaken with 5 of these children to aid transitions to the adoptive homes.

Adoption Support

As mentioned earlier there are several areas of adoption support work. Over a year SEWAS received 59 requests/enquiries for support for adoptive families, 18 of these were for families living in the Newport area (or for children placed by Newport within the first 3 years of their adoption). These families have an assessment of adoption support needs and a support plan to follow this with a plan of intervention. All adoptive families can access 'Pathways' and 'Connected' both run by Adoption UK. Pathways offers a parent partner; like a buddy for adopters and some additional training/workshops and Connected is a group run monthly for adopted young people facilitated by Adoption UK and a support worker from SEWAS.

There are a number of tiers of support to adoptive families and there are times that the adoption service will need to refer to the relevant LA for additional support or intervention. All safeguarding matters are referred to the LA in line with All Wales safeguarding procedures. Some families where the adoption service and the LA are involved can present dilemmas as to who is best placed to provide the support. This can be due to a child presenting with behaviours that may or may not be linked to fact

they are adopted and some issues that SEWAS workers will not have expertise in. Also, sadly for some families facing crisis and with risks to the stability of the adoptive family then the LA have access to interventions that SEWAS doesn't and there is then a need for the LA to become involved as well as SEWAS. These situations are in the minority however SEWAS is aware of the pressures on childcare social workers and some frustrations they may feel with the process. Another area of challenge is where an adoption support need is identified that is outside of anything SEWAS can provide, and financial support is required to meet that need. SEWAS doesn't have access to a budget for this so would need to refer to the relevant LA for a child. This puts pressure on the LA as except for Caerphilly none of the other 4 LA's have a separated budget for adoption. SEWAS utilises its relationship and strong links with Newport via adoption lead service manager Rhian Brook to manage requests for adoptive families to alert the frontline teams at point of referrals and avoid duplication for families.

Check ins with adoptive families are a new initiative following good practice guidance. 15 Newport families have been offered a check in review one year post adoption order with an aim for signposting to generic support groups/events/activities growing their adoption community and creating earlier links for support if required.

SEWAS held an event for adoptive families at Llandegfedd reservoir last summer, which was also attended by Julie Morgan, Deputy Minister, she spoke with adoptive parents on the day and provided some feedback for our adopters newsletter.

Birth Parent Support

All birth parents whose children are referred for adoption are offered support from SEWAS. In a year 24 birth parents took up individual support and 11 of these were parents from Newport. This support includes supporting them through the adoption process, goodbye contact sessions and with a one-off meeting with prospective adopters where appropriate. There is also a birth parent group that runs 4-6 times per year. In December 2023 13 birth mothers attended this group and received gifts donated by staff from SEWAS. As well as receiving support from SEWAS workers birth parents are also referred on to Reflect service; who work with parents who have has children permanently removed from their care.

Adopted Adults

52 requests for access to adoption records were received over the year, 6 of these were from adopted persons living in Newport area. SEWAS doesn't provide an intermediary service for adopted persons as there isn't a statutory requirement to do this however Disclosure of Adoption Information Post Commencement regulations (2005) legislation means that for anyone adopted after 31st December 2005 SEWAS will need to provide access to records and search and reunion work with adopted adults and birth relatives.

Letterbox (indirect contact)

Indirect letterbox contact for adopted children is managed by SEWAS. From April 2023 to March 2024, 234 letterbox files were managed for children placed by Newport LA. These 234 files generated 820 exchanges between children and their birth families. Overall for all five LA's the service managed 1091 files which facilitated 2946 exchanges.

Budget

In January 2023 a financial review of SEWAS was undertaken instructed by Gwent directors and Heads of Service. There was an exercise to consider what savings of 5% and 10% would mean for the service. The outcome and decision from this review was to end the contract for accommodation in the offices at Mamhilad park Estate and move to share office space with the Emergency Duty Team who are also based at Mamhilad.

Compliments

Following Circle of security groups - An adopter commented:

"I would advise anyone considering attending to do so in a heartbeat. I think it is a key course with valuable information every parent should be aware of. The course coordinators do a brilliant job of bringing the course to life with valuable real life examples."

From adopters:

"You listened and talked me through the process, helping put to bed our worries and concerns. I just wanted to thank you for this as now we have just finished our final court hearing having adopted our 2 amazing boys. I always intended to reach out to thank you and to update. From that initial phone consultation, we had the motivation to adopt thanks to you talking us through the process and our worries at the time. I just wanted to reach out to say a huge thank you again."

From Adopter receiving adoption support:

"You have been the only one that has offered any help, even when it's difficult you listen and try to support us so thank you."

Feedback from a birth parent and adopters meeting:

"I wanted to feedback. It was such a beautiful meeting, moving and emotional but so valuable. X was amazing; she really showed how she wants the boys to be loved and cared for and put them above her. C, you clearly prepared her so well and I can see she really values the relationship with you. Relationships are so important for valuable work. It was truly emotional; something I like they will think about for the foreseeable future."

Feedback from a professional:

Childcare social worker *'the complexity of adoption support cases is something I have never realised in this depth before, it has been eye opening working alongside you.'*

Feedback from a school:

'It has been helpful to have the space to think about how I respond to him, I find it really helpful thinking about why he is doing what he does not getting stuck in the behaviour. Sometimes I wish in the moment I could ring you and say right this did work this didn't, let's have a think. But I'm starting to be able to do it myself now and with colleagues.'

Complaints

An Adopted adult complained about length of time to access her records. The delay was caused by a misspelling of her birth surname on the original archived file at the time she was adopted.

Future developments

The key priorities of the NAS Adopt Cymru 2025 plan are:

- The best families for our adopted children
- Great Adoption Support when and where it is needed
- Healthier contact through better birth family services
- Better adoption records and access to information at any age.

For SEWAS, in respect of adopters, our focus is to recruit and assess enough adopters to meet the National target set for the year for the SEWAS region. The target for 2023/24 was set at 33 adopters. This target took into account 19 adopters who were waiting at the time the figures were calculated, so an expectation of 52 adopters over a year. Taking into account quarter 4 data that is not yet verified SEWAS has met the target of 33 new approvals for the year. SEWAS is aware of the need to recruit adopters from areas outside of Newport area and we are targeting events in other LA's. Our prospective adopters will benefit from transitional support where needed and will have access to the Adoption UK Passport for additional support.

During the last year Welsh Early Permanence (WEP) has been introduced in Wales where prospective adopters can be assessed as foster carers alongside adoption to allow a child to be placed with them in a fostering to adopt situation. SEWAS has one approved WEP carer with a recent placement and we are currently assessing 2 more WEP carers and would anticipate this to be considered in care planning options for Newport children in the next year.

In line with the good practice guide for contact and the NAS 2025 plan, SEWAS will continue to work alongside childcare social workers to consider contact planning for children with a plan for adoption, as we are beginning to consider alternative methods of contact outside of letterbox exchanges. This could also bring about challenges for the service when we consider how contact is monitored in the early stages; for

example, supported by a professional and how resource is managed to meet this need.

A challenge for the service could potentially be the demand in relation to post commencement referrals for adopted adults and birth relatives, the volume of these will be monitored over the next 6 months to ascertain how best to utilise existing resources to meet this need.

SEWAS colleagues will continue to work alongside our local authorities to improve performance in relation to life journey work by continuing to roll out workshops and drop-in sessions.

The service is also updating internal policy and procedures to ensure SEWAS procedures are in line with this All Wales Policy and procedures for Adoption.

Becky Jones

Service Manager

South East Wales Adoption Service

2nd April 2024