

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Partnerships

Date: 24 April 2024

Time: 5.00 pm

Present: Councillors E Stowell-Corten (Chair), B Davies, P Drewett, A Morris, M Pimm and A Screen

In Attendance: Natalie Poyner (Head of Children Services), Becky Jones (Service Manager – South East Wales Adoption Services), Louise Quatermass (Residential and Resources Service Manager), Katharine Majer (Deputy Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser), Emily Mayger (Governance Officer) and Taylor Strange (Governance Officer)

Apologies: Councillors C Baker-Westhead, F Hussain, J Jones and K Whitehead, Sally Jenkins (Strategic Director – Social Services)

1 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Davies declared an interest as her daughter is a social worker and kinship carer. Councillor Drewett declared an interest as a family member is a fosterer and an adopter.

2 South East Wales Adoption Service Update

Invitees:

- Natalie Poyner – Head of Children Services
- Becky Jones – Service Manager – South East Wales Adoption Services

The Service Manager – South East Wales Adoption Services (SEWAS) gave an overview of the report.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee thanked the officers for the report and its layout. The Committee asked how many foster carers moved on to adopt. The Service Manager – SEWAS advised that, while the exact percentage was unknown, foster carers are allowed to apply for adoption after one year of fostering.
- The Committee queried why the number of assessments was lower than the number of initial enquiries. The Service Manager – SEWAS explained there might be reasons on both the staff and the adopter side for why the process doesn't move forward following the initial enquiry stage.
- The Committee asked what the objectives of the service were. The Service Manager – SEWAS advised that the objectives included providing a service for those within the adoptive services, and for children. The aim was identifying the best matches and achieving permanence at the earliest stage possible when adoption is part of a child's care plan.

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- The Committee asked what the obstacles faced by the service were, as well as the progress made. The Service Manager – SEWAS explained they always seek to provide placements either within SEWAS or from an outside agency. Concerns were raised by the Service Manager about maintaining a pool of approved adopters. The Head of Children Services noted another challenge was finding a range of adopters willing to adopt sibling groups or children with specific needs.
- The Committee queried how difficult it was to get adopters or whether there was a reason impacting the shortage. The Service Manager - SEWAS highlighted there was a shortage, which was not the case pre-covid. The national service was looking into the shortage and highlighted the cost-of-living crisis as a contributing factor, as well as reaffirming that there were adopter shortages for sibling groups and children with additional needs.
- The Committee asked if adopters are given a monetary allowance. The Committee were advised by the Service Manager - SEWAS that a needs assessment is conducted to see if help is required, however, adopters are not given a standard allowance.
- The Committee asked how long an adopter is responsible for an adopted child. The Service Manager – SEWAS noted at 18 they are considered an adult legally, however, early adult support may be provided. The Adoption UK service has a service for adopted persons aged 18-25. They emphasised that an adopter would have responsibility for their child in the same way as a non-adoptive parent.
- The Committee asked how long adoption support was available for, as well as whether counselling was provided to the adoptee and family. The Service Manager - SEWAS informed the Committee that support is provided following the end of the adoption based on a needs assessment. SEWAS has access to a psychological service that could provide help, and the adoption service provided a service in relation to counselling. The Head of Children Services noted adoptees are provided help from Children Services teams if required.
- The Committee asked if any training was provided for the adoptive family as the child grows. The Service Manager – SEWAS explained that training workshops are provided through various sources such as the National Adoption Service and psychological support provided via the SEWAS team. The Service Manager highlighted that an adoption passport is provided to the adopters which gives them greater access to support such as those provided by Adoption Service UK.
- The Committee queried whether many foster parents went on to adopt and did this impact the number of potential foster parents available to the service. The Service Manager – SEWAS noted that adopters typically would not be on the fostering list. The Residential and Resources Services Manager noted they do have foster carers that foster as well as adopt.
- The Committee requested more information on the impact on the service following legislation changes around adopted children having the right to know their birth parents' identities.
- The Committee noted that care experienced is now recognised as a protected characteristic by Newport City Council and wondered whether this applied to those who were adopted. The Head of Children Services explained that as they are no longer in care, adopted individuals wouldn't be considered as care leavers.

Conclusions

- The Committee praised the good progress made in reducing the wait time for children and providing adoption support services, the commendable work on the Welsh Early Permanence scheme and the life journey work for children. The challenges faced in recruiting adopters, especially for children with complex needs or large sibling groups were also acknowledged. The Committee found the graphs in the report helpful to see how Newport compares to other local authorities.
- The Committee request detailed updates in the next report regarding the progress on post-commencement regulations, outcomes of national and regional recruitment marketing campaigns, and the impact assessment of the Welsh Early Permanence scheme to ensure transparency and accountability in service delivery. The Committee also recommended ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of new initiatives to be included in next year's report to ensure positive outcomes for service users.

3 Fostering Service Update

Invitees:

- Natalie Poyner – Head of Children Services
- Louise Quatermass – Residential and Resources Service Manager

The Residential and Resources Service Manager gave an overview of the report.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee queried why the harmonisation of fees report was delayed. The Residential and Resource Services Manager advised that the work was delayed due to the significant uplift in funding required, which had been escalated to Welsh Government.
- The Committee commended the service for the mother and baby joint foster work, as well as commending the officers on the report and work provided. The Committee requested further information on this aspect of the service in next year's report.
- The Committee queried the difference in recruitment of adopters and foster carers, and the barriers faced. The Residential and Resources Services Manager noted there are a variety of foster carers such as those that foster on a short-term or long-term basis and highlighted that the legal status as well as the role of a foster carer is different from those that adopt.
- The Committee asked how feedback is provided on the service. The Residential and Resources Services Manager noted that the Childcare Social Worker as well as a Fostering Social Worker were able to provide feedback, as well as other professionals within the foster carer and foster cared child's life. The Head of Children Services noted the feedback is relayed back on all levels of the service provided.
- The Committee questioned whether there was data on this feedback. The Residential and Resources Services Manager noted 6-monthly quality of care reports were conducted as well as 3-monthly data driven reports created. The Committee asked if this data could be provided at a following committee. The Head of Children Services informed the Committee that there was a Gwent Advocacy Service that fostered

children could provide feedback to, as well as an independent reviewing officer. The Head of Children Services noted the child's voice is at the centre of all work.

- The Committee asked if kinship carers were provided with the same financial support as foster carers. The Residential and Resources Services Manager noted this did not sit with this team however the information could be passed on. The Head of Children Services highlighted they have a team that works on this, and noted kinship caring is always the desire.
- The Committee asked if there was partnership work that allowed fostering households to gain discounts or rewards. The Residential and Resources Services Manager detailed to the Committee that foster carers have access to Blue Light cards as well as noting free gym memberships were available from Newport Live. The Residential and Resources Services Manager further explained that the Recruitment Officer was looking into any other help that could be provided and emphasised this was always a priority especially on a local level. The Head of Children Services highlighted a Christmas event celebrating foster carers.
- The Committee queried whether there were any legislative changes that would make it easier to provide foster care. The Head of Children Services noted that barriers to education and health provisions make it harder for foster carers in dealing with children with additional needs.
- The Committee asked how the service dealt with unsuitable foster carers . The Residential and Resources Services Manager noted the assessment process would find out any issues in suitability with the information then put forward to an independent panel. The Head of Children Services noted annual reviews of foster carers are conducted as well as foster carers being subjected to similar procedures that staff would face and highlighted foster carers can be deregistered.

Conclusions

- The Committee praised the work undertaken and encouraged the continuation of the proactive approach in enhancing support services for carers. The Committee also commended the efforts made in improving support services and recommend further collaboration with partners to strengthen the support network for carers and service users.
- The Committee were pleased to hear about the parent and child fostering scheme, highlighting its importance in keeping them together to prevent future problems. The Committee requested for more information and details about the parent and child fostering scheme for inclusion in the next report for better understanding and evaluation of its impact and effectiveness. The Committee also recommended that the Fostering Service enhances monitoring of children's fostering experiences, including quality of care and data-driven reports, to be included in next year's report.
- The Committee requested information regarding the kinship carers allowance, including clarification on the differences in payment levels compared to foster care allowances and how kinship carers and special guardianship carers receive support from the Social Work Team.

4 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Invitee:

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

a) Actions Sheet

The Committee were advised that all actions were up to date.

5 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 20th March 2024

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 20th March 2024 were accepted as a true and accurate record.

The meeting terminated at 5.57 pm