

**The provision and experience of  
adoption support services in Wales:**  
Perspectives from adoption agencies and  
adoptive parents.

Dr Heather Ottaway, Professor Sally  
Holland and Dr Nina Maxwell

# **CASCADE**

## **Research Briefing**

**Number 2: November 2014**



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Children's Social Care  
Research and Development Centre  
Canolfan Ymchwil a Datblygu  
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### The provision and experience of adoption support services in Wales:

#### Perspectives from adoption agencies and adoptive parents

**Dr Heather Ottaway, Professor Sally Holland and Dr Nina Maxwell**

#### Key messages for policy and practice

- The level of support for those affected by adoption is inconsistent across Wales.
- Of families who receive support, the majority are satisfied, but access to services is perceived as difficult.
- Greater investment is needed in adoption support services:
  - a) There were no dedicated adoption support teams which solely focus on providing support to **all** parties, including birth families, affected by adoption.
  - b) There were limited financial resources available for adoption support.
  - c) Access to specialist training would increase the skills and confidence of all social workers involved in adoption.
- Adoption support services should be able to respond to need and available in both the short and longer term:
  - a) Most adoptive families requested adoption support services several years after the adoption order was granted.
  - b) Therapeutic services for children with multi-dimensional needs resulting from trauma, abuse/ neglect and attachment difficulties is reported to be particularly needed.
  - c) The role of the voluntary sector in relation to adoption support should continue to be developed.
- The new National Adoption Service provides an opportunity to ensure equity of support provision across Wales, which is responsive to local need.



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## Why is adoption support important?

Most children adopted from the care system in the UK will have experienced abuse and neglect (1). Although adoption can provide a positive environment for children to recover developmentally (2), significant concerns remain regarding the high level of children's needs, and the availability of services to meet these needs. The provision of a range of adoption support services has been linked to greater stability in adoptive placements (3), a greater willingness to adopt children from foster care (4), increased parental satisfaction (5) and improved understanding of adopted children (6).

## The research study

The research mapped current adoption support services in Wales, explored the views of adoption agencies about adoption support services, and asked for adoptive families' experiences of support.

All local authority and voluntary adoption agencies in Wales took part in a survey and follow-up telephone interviews. 91 adoptive parents who had adopted a total of 147 children under the age of 18 completed an on-line survey.

## Structure of adoption support services in Wales

Most local authority adoption staff were responsible for carrying out all aspects of adoption work, including assessment, family finding and support. Time focused on adoption support was limited, with priority being given to recruiting adopters and matching children with adoptive families. Adoption support was therefore seen as the 'poor relation'. However, with the development of the National Adoption Service in Wales, more areas reported that they plan to develop specialist adoption support teams.

Adoption support work was viewed as a highly skilled activity which provoked anxiety amongst the workers as well as passion. The need for specialist training, especially around issues of trauma and attachment was highlighted.

Most adoption agencies reported low demand for Welsh medium services, although this may increase if more services are offered through Welsh. One-third of families in this study had at least one Welsh-speaker.

## Accessing adoption support

Families noted that adoption support often ceased after the adoption order was granted. However, adoption agencies stressed that every adopter would have access to the universal services on offer such as support groups, training and activity days.

Adoptive families were not always sure about who to approach for support in their area. Three-quarters tried to access support some years after the adoption order (2-7 years). Most agencies reported that requests for support had to go via their intake teams. This caused concerns for adoption managers and adopters, not only about the low level of 'adoption awareness' of the social workers, but also about the perceived high thresholds required to access services.

A minority of adopters also felt judged or blamed for their child's difficulties. One adoptive parent said: *'they denied the children's difficulties and blamed us'*. Not all adoptive families waited to request help until they reached crisis point, but several reported reaching crisis point whilst waiting for assessments and services. Adoptive parents emphasised wanting an open-minded and proactive approach from social workers when trying to access support.



## Assessing and reviewing adoption support needs

Consultation with education, health, and particularly mental health practitioners, was highly valued during the assessment process but was inconsistent across Wales. Many adopted children have multi-dimensional needs. One adoption agency manager commented: *'It's having the right people involved.... In essence, you can't identify how best to move forward until you understand what the presenting situation is'*

Adoption managers said that many adoptive parents felt daunted, or that they were 'failing' if they asked for help. One solution here would be to include adoption support from the outset of the recruitment process so that adopters do not feel like they are different or failing as parents if they require support.

## Provision of adoption support services

A range of adoption support services are available in Wales. These include services which are universally available to adoptive families such as support groups and on-going training. All agencies stated that they offer help with letterbox contact with birth parents but active support here was very limited in most of Wales.

Targeted support services such as therapeutic parenting courses, peer support for adopted children and young people, and services to birth families and adopted adults were also available, although the provision was patchy across Wales. Access to specialist support services for children with complex multi-dimensional needs was hard to access in many areas. The development of a multi-disciplinary specialist support service in Wales would be particularly welcomed by adoption agencies and adoptive parents. Furthermore, the adoption support offered was reported as often having to fit into existing provision rather than being responsive to need.

As one regional consortium commented:

*I would say that we don't always come up with the best package. We come up with the best within our resources'.*

Voluntary adoption agencies were reported to have particular expertise in adoption support. These included giving adopters and adopted children access to informal peer support networks, giving birth families access to independent support away from the agency that placed their child for adoption, and providing counselling for adopted adults and services to birth families.

Four of the five regions reported that families experience delays in receiving adoption support either 'often' or 'very often'. Significant under-resourcing was stressed, as was the lack of a multi-agency joined up approach and the challenges of geography in Wales. However, where adoption support services were provided to adoptive families, a majority (58%) found the services to be excellent or good.

## The new National Adoption Service: Challenges and Opportunities

Current service provision has areas of strength, including the commitment and creativity of adoption agencies who are working hard to meet the needs of those affected by adoption within limited financial and service resources. However, high quality service provision is patchy across Wales, particularly in relation to specialist services to meet the complex multi-dimensional needs of adopted children and their families. Adoption agencies also reported struggling to meet the needs of birth families and adopted adults in a consistent and timely manner. The creation of a National Adoption Service for Wales provides an opportunity to ensure equity of access to high quality adoption support services for all those affected by adoption, which are responsive to local and regional needs.

## Further Details

This research project was commissioned and funded by the Welsh Government, and was undertaken from January-May 2014. The full report can be found at: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/publications/socialcare/reports/adoption-support/?lang=en#>

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