

SUBJECT: South East Wales Adoption Service Report 2017/2018

MEETING: Children And Young People's Select Committee

DATE: 3rd January 2019

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To report on the performance of the South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) and the National Adoption Service (NAS) for 2017/18. The report is required in line with the Regulations as set out in The Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2005.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that Members scrutinize the progress of NAS and how SEWAS is performing in comparison to other regions and make any appropriate recommendations to the Executive.

3. KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 The National Adoption Service (NAS) was launched in November 2014 with a remit of expectations to:
- Eradicate drift for children in care
 - Eliminate waiting lists for training and assessment of adopters
 - Improve the matching process for children
 - Allay adoption breakdowns by improving adoption support
 - Streamline the process to ensure better linking for children
 - Provide a wide choice of placements through increased use of Voluntary Adoption Agencies(VAA)
 - Ensuring consistent delivery across Wales

National Adoption Agency

- 3.2 A small central team is headed by the Director of Operations, Suzanne Griffiths. The national team provides national direction, development and coordination to all the regions, as follows:-
- South East Wales Adoption Team (SEWAS) (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Torfaen, Newport, Monmouthshire)
 - Western Bay (WB) (Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot, Swansea).
 - Vale, Valley's Cardiff (VVC) (Cardiff, Vale, Merthyr Tydfil, RCT, Vale of Glamorgan).
 - North Wales (NW) (Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd)

- Mid and West Wales (MWW) (Carmarthen, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Powys).

3.3 Each region is responsible for:

- Placing children for adoption (Local Authority)
- Recruits and assesses adopters
- Offers counselling to birth parents
- Offers advice to adopted adults
- Provides post adoption support
- Matches children with adopters
- Has links with voluntary adoption agencies, health and education

3.4 Each Local Authority (LA) identifies children for whom adoption is considered the best plan. Child Care Social Workers in all LA's manage the court proceedings and work with SEWAS colleagues to match children to adopters who can meet their needs.

National Progress

3.5 The key aims of the National Adoption Service are essentially that children are found adoptive homes that meet their needs and the adoption process is completed in a timely manner to avoid drift for children. The emphasis on collaboration is working well and the five regions in Wales are becoming a constructive network to improve performance and promote best practice. Arguably, performance has improved across all the regions and although not always consistent due to extenuating circumstances, there is no doubt that regionalisation is improving outcomes for children.

3.6 Adoption services in Wales have continued to see an increase in demand for adoption placements with Placement Orders and 'Should be placed' decisions continuing at the higher level that began to emerge in mid-2016. There is a growing gap between the level of adopters being recruited and the number of children becoming available for adoption. To effectively place more children and impact on the level of children who wait, including those that wait the longest, adopter recruitment needs to increase.

3.7 Within this context, however, there have been in-year improvements in the average timeframes for children placed and in the approval of adopters. There is also improvement in the availability of life journey materials for children; this has met the current benchmark for the first time. There is also an increase in new demand for post adoption support in some regions. There are regional variations in all aspects of performance.

SEWAS Progress

3.8 SEWAS is one of the larger regions and has a high level of demand for services. Overall the 'Looked after Children' population for the region rose by 19% in recent years, with significant increases in Monmouthshire and Blaenau Gwent a contributory factor. The ethos of SEWAS reflects that of the National Service, in that the overarching goal is to improve outcomes for children. There have been improvements in some of the performance measures, but clearly more work to do.

3.9 Life Journey Work continues to be a fluctuating area of performance. For this reporting period, there was an improvement; however, Quarter 1 and 2 this year is showing a dip

in performance. SEWAS has used the National Adoption Team funding to recruit a Life Journey Work Co-ordinator, who will liaise with Local Authority social workers to implement the best practice guide.

3.10 The pressure area for 2017/18 was a shortage of adopters per ratio of children referred to the service. There has been investment in recruitment and assessment and staffing resources in an attempt to bridge the gap. The national shortage of adopters is impacting on all the regions, this coupled with the increased complexities of children being referred is contributing to the pressure of placing children in a timely manner with the right adopters. SEWAS have the added benefit of psychology input 31 hours per week and is building on improving the experience for adopters by investing in additional training, pre and post approval adoption support and work with panel. Getting the experience right is essential in the competitive area of adoption recruitment and the challenge going forward is how we can maintain those service in the current financial climate.

National Performance Framework - Performance Evidence

3.11 There is a national performance framework set by the Welsh Government. For the purpose of this report I have highlighted the salient measures that relate to improving outcomes for adopted children, as follows:

Figure 1

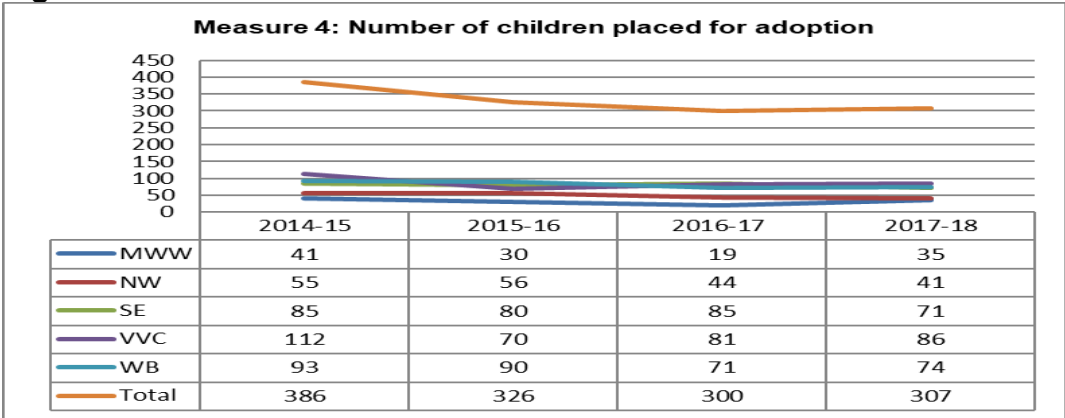


Figure 1 shows the number of children in Wales who were placed for adoption for this reporting period of 17/18. SEWAS shows a decline which is likely to be linked to a shortage of adopters available to meet the needs of our harder to place children.

Figure 2

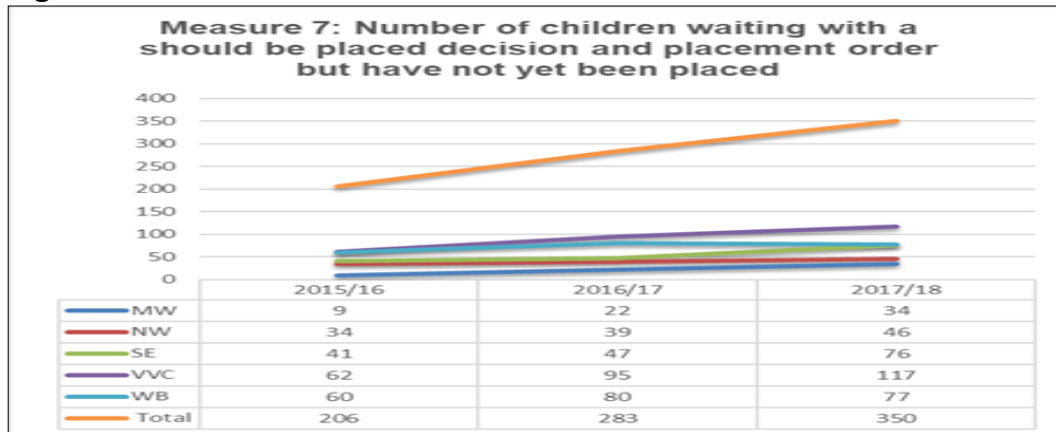


Figure 2 shows an increase in children waiting for adoption placements during this reporting period, which again is likely to be linked to a national shortage of adopters.

Figure 3

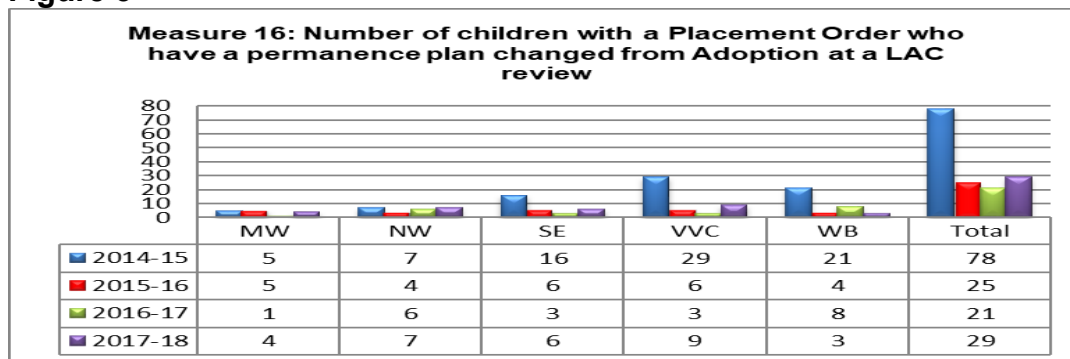


Figure 3 shows the number of children who had their plan for adoption changed.

There was a small increase in the number of SEWAS children that had their adoption plan changed at their care and support plan review but there is an overall downward trend in this. This can be because an adoption placement cannot be found but can be for other reasons too. For example there has been occasion when children have formed good attachments to their foster carers and the foster carer has made an application for a Special Guardianship Order.

Figure 4

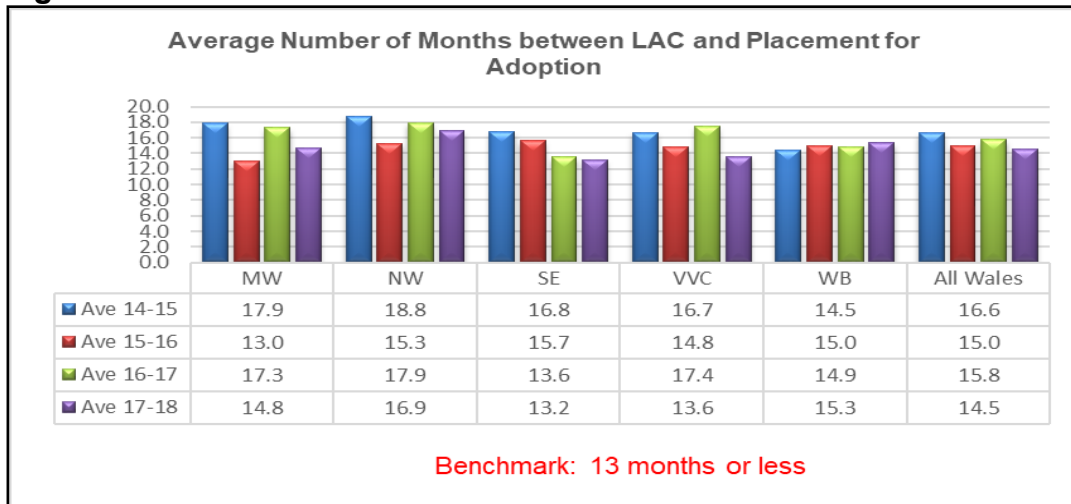


Figure 4 shows the average numbers of months between children becoming looked after to being placed for adoption. SEWAS is showing a consistent improvement. The Benchmark is 13 Months and although slightly above the benchmark we are higher than the national average of 14.5 Months.

Figure 5

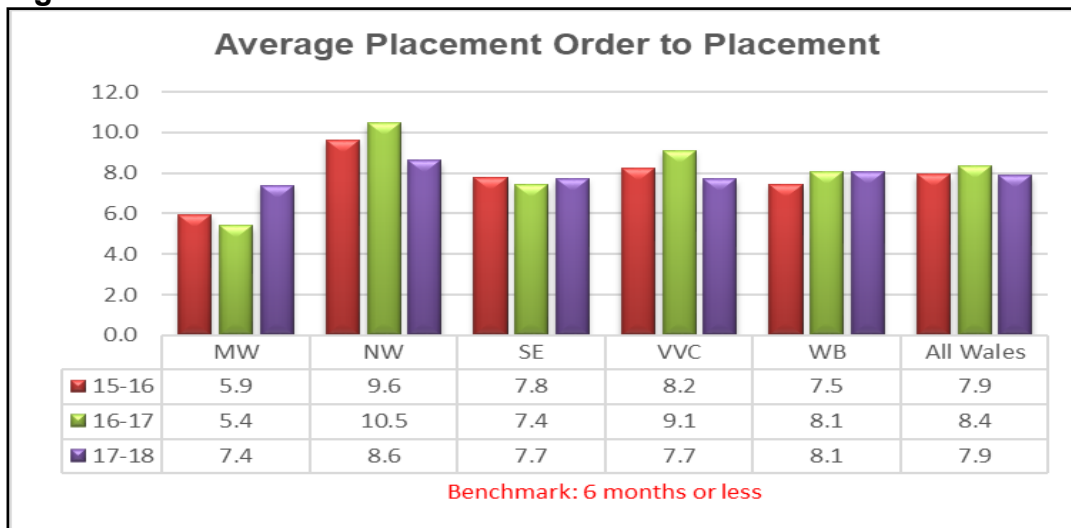


Figure 5 shows the average time from Placement Order to Adoption Placement (Placement Order is a legal order granted by the court at the end of Court Proceedings for Children to allow a child to be placed for adoption) The Benchmark is 6 months. This has been achieved for 35% of children in the SEWAS region for this reporting period. The following characterise those situations where placements took longer in SEWAS this year:

- Complex children, particularly complex health needs, older children and sibling groups;
- A small number of adoption breakdowns where the child was subsequently been placed again with another adopter.

Figure 6

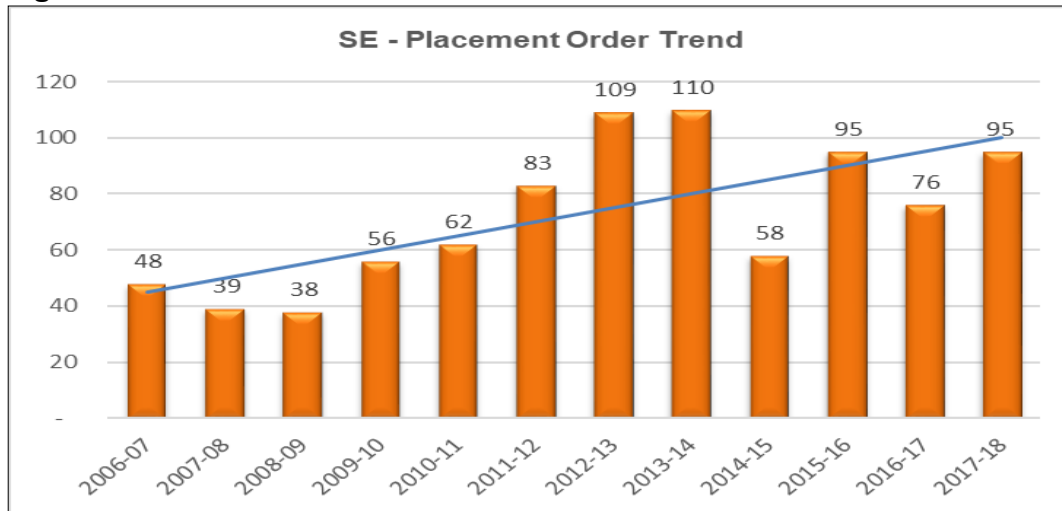


Figure 6 shows the number of placement orders granted in the SEWAS region for this reporting period. The number of placement orders granted in the SEWAS local authorities increased last year to 95. The figure for 2014/15 was comparatively low compared to previous year peaks due to case law interpretation. The last 3 years highlight a more consistent pattern of placement orders being granted.

Figure 7

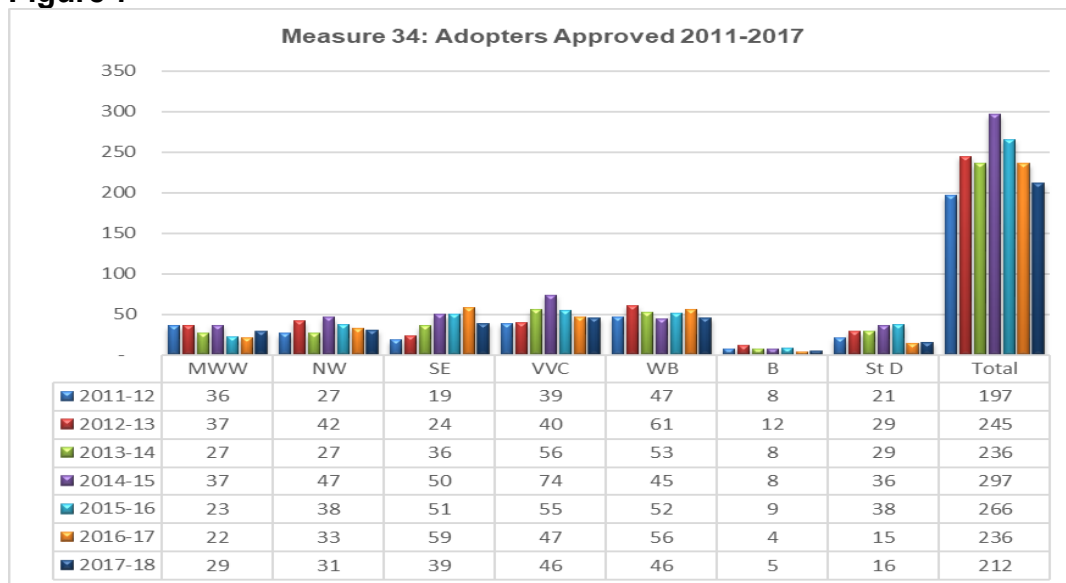


Figure 7 shows the number of adopters approved. For this reporting year the number of adoption approvals was very disappointing. Recruitment dipped as a result of a recruitment pause the previous year when there were more adopters available to meet the needs of children referred to the service.

Figure 8

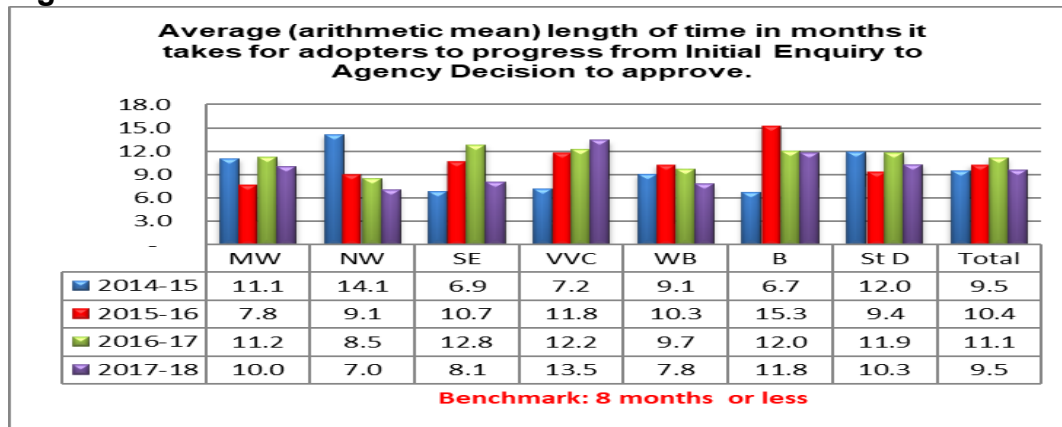


Figure 8 shows the length of time in months it takes for adopters to progress from initial inquiry to approval. SEWAS' performance on this measure is in line with the national trend and is close to benchmark.

Figure 9

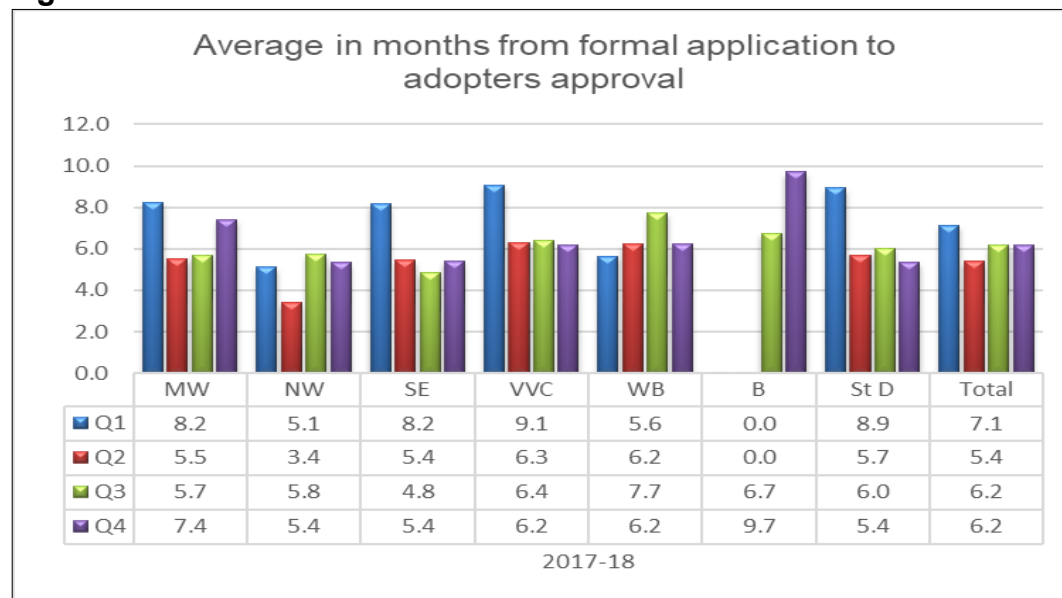


Figure 9 shows the average time in months from formal application to approval. SEWAS' performance in respect of formal application to adopt to being approved is good. An overall average of 5.4 months over the year, lower than the Welsh Government guidance that says this stage should take 6 months on which the NAS benchmark is based. For the last 3 quarters, SEWAS was within benchmark for this measure which is very positive.

Figure 10

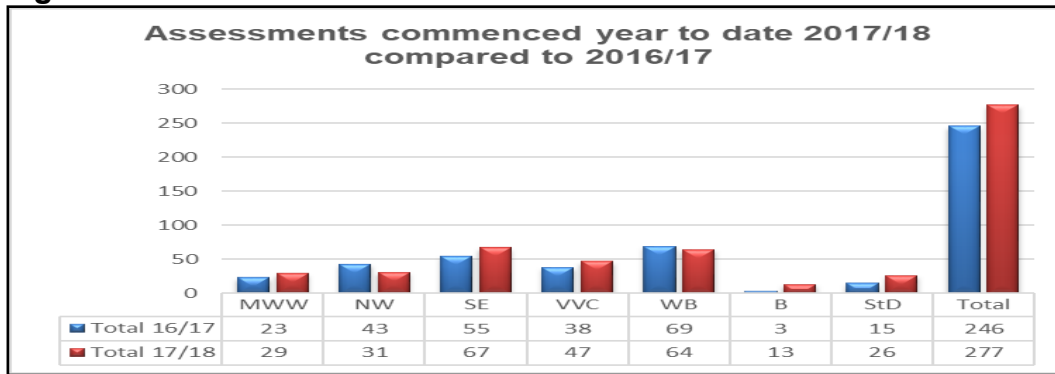


Figure 10 shows the number of adoption assessments started for this reporting period. SEWAS commenced 67, more assessments than last year. This increase will make a contribution to closing the gap for the number of children waiting to be adopted but bigger increases are needed.

Figure 11

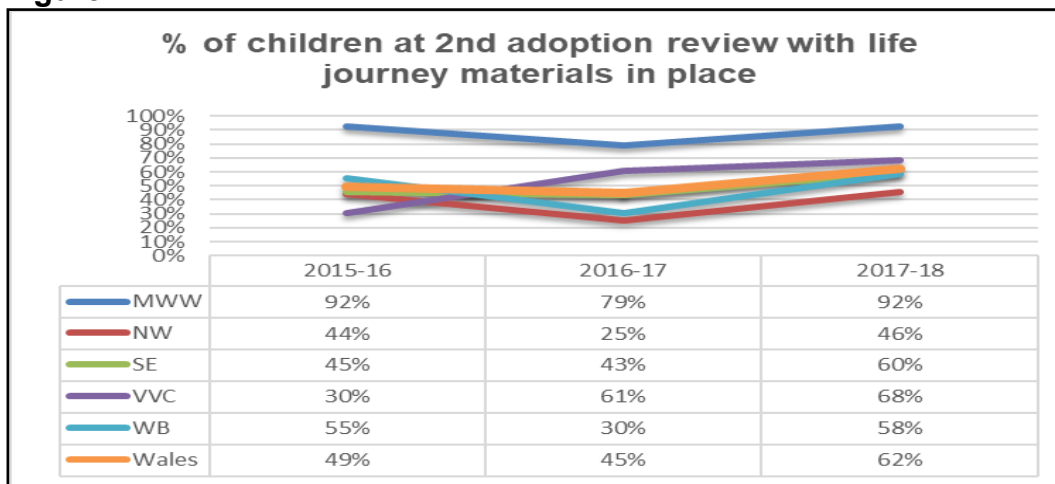
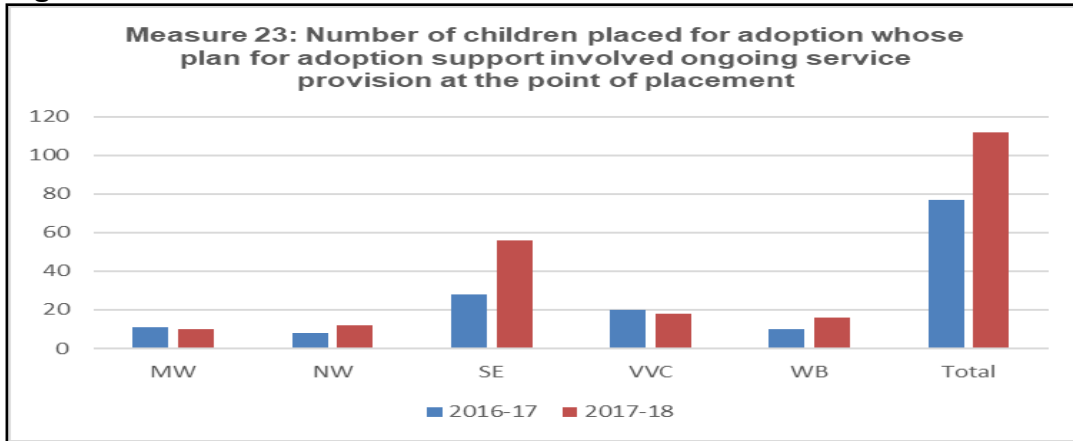


Figure 11 shows the % of children who have had their life journey materials by their 2nd Adoption review. Nationally, the whole year averages shows that 62% of children placed this year had their life journey materials by the 2nd review; in the year of 2014/15 this was 24% so there has been considerable improvement.

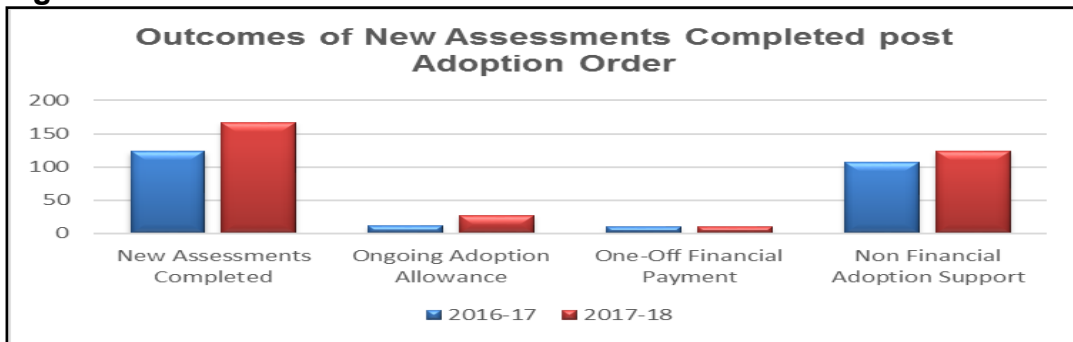
There is ongoing quarterly and regional variation in the performance measure of life journey materials being presented by the second adoption review but SEWAS has improved further with a whole year average of 60%. There were, however, 17 SEWAS children placed with adopters where these materials were not available by the second adoption review. The National Adoption Service has secured financial resource from Welsh Government to support the regions to improve performance in this area of work.

Figure 12



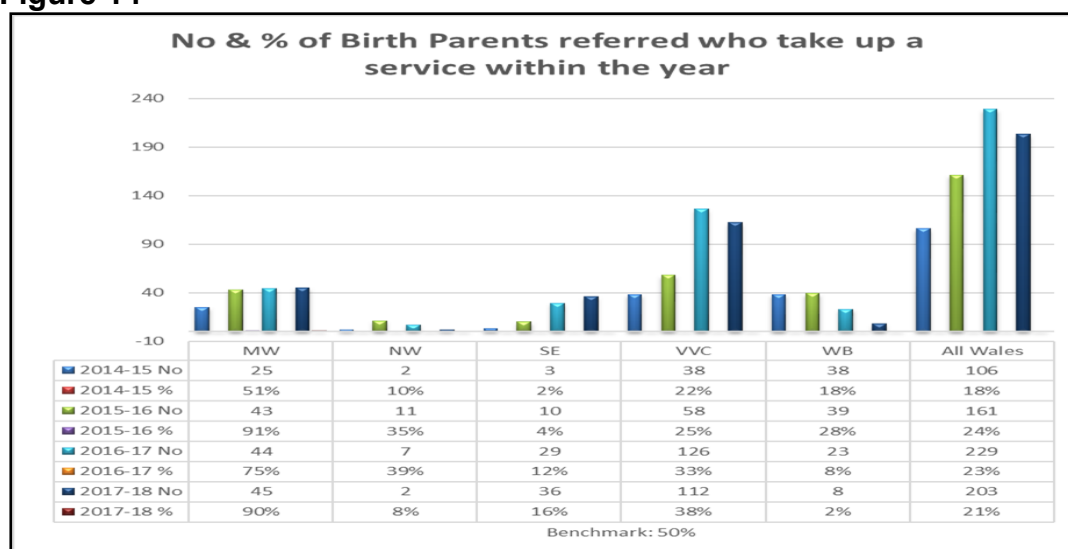
Again this year all the children placed by SEWAS, 100%, had had their need for adoption support services met. The increase in ongoing services being provided is likely attributed to the drive to improve adoption support and the sometimes complicated nature of the children’s care history who are referred to the service.

Figure 13



SEWAS saw a similar level of post adoption support being sought and completed marginally more assessments in the year. 64 new requests for post adoption support were received during 2017/18. The majority of these assessments completed resulted in practical or therapeutic support being provided.

Figure 14



Birth parent support is increasing nationally at 21%. SEWAS has increased year on year, but nowhere near the benchmark of 50%. The increase is likely to be linked to birthparents being able to access a direct referral route to SEWAS. However there is still a reluctance to engage with services with some parents.

During 2017/18 SEWAS:

- facilitated more than 820 active letterbox contact with birth parents. Letter box contact is usually agreed in the courts proceeding to enable birth parents to have an update on children who are adopted
- provided a service to 70 birth parents
- received 9 birth sibling requests for support
- received 32 requests for access to birth records compared to 64 last year. There is no particular reason for the reduction, adults will refer when they are ready
- received 9 requests for intermediary / tracing support compared to 20 last year, again there is no particular reason for the reduction. Advice is available when they are ready

Local information in respect number of Placement Orders granted

	2014 – 15	2015 – 16	2016 – 17	2017 - 18
Blaenau Gwent	8	19	15	10
Caerphilly	7	13	15	25
Monmouthshire	5	7	7	5
Newport	14	31	23	32
Torfaen	23	17	16	26
Total	57	87	76	95

3.12 Key Messages in relation to children

- 71 children were placed in their new adoptive home, a reduction on the number placed in 2016/17 and the previous years when it was 81, 70 and 112.
- 73 children had their adoption orders granted.

- a further 76 children, with the legal authority to be placed for adoption, were waiting to be matched or placed with their new family at the end of the year reporting year
- The children placed for adoption in SEWAS were on average placed within 13.2 months from becoming looked after. This is on the benchmark of 13 months and one of the better averages amongst the National Adoption Service regions.
- At an average of 7.9 months, the time from placement order to placement is improving although the benchmark is 6 months or less.

3.13 Key messages in relation to Adopters

- The number of adopters being approved in SEWAS has fallen, 39 in 2017/18 compared to 59 the year before. This is not sufficient to meet the need for placements.
- The Service invested in recruitment during this reporting period (17/18), therefore, more assessments of adopters were commenced by SEWAS, an increase of 12 to 67. The investment is starting to 'bear fruit' in quarter 1 2018/19 with 18 approvals.
- The average time from enquiry to approval for a SEWAS adopter reduced by 4 months to 8.1 months with the time frame from formal application to approval is 5.4 months. Both are below the national averages and in line with the Welsh Government guidelines which is very positive

3.14 Key messages in relation to Adoption Support

More SEWAS children had an ongoing adoption support service in place at the point of placement, 79% compared to 33% last year. SEWAS saw a similar level of post adoption support being sought. 64 new requests for post adoption support were received during 2017/18, 18 of which were still in progress at the end of the year. The majority of these assessments completed resulted in practical or therapeutic support being provided. SEWAS had the second highest level of post adoption requests of all the NAS regions which is positive in respect of children and adopters getting the support they need.

- 3.15 In SEWAS, 60% of children placed this year had their life journey materials by the 2nd review, an improvement from 43% last year. This figure tends to fluctuate and is difficult to maintain due to it being a local authority social worker role and the competing demands they face. SEWAS will recruit a Life Journey Work Coordinator to support local authority social workers in the completion of this work. This will include implementing a timescale flow chart, quality assurance and reaching out to foster carer groups and adopters to ensure that they all play a part in raising standards.

4.0 EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING)

- 4.1 As this is a performance report and not a decision, an evaluation has not been completed. Safeguarding responsibilities are fulfilled by robust assessment processes and checks. All SEWAS Social Workers have completed updated safeguarding training and comply with looked after children procedures until the final adoption order is made. Post order SEWAS offer a range of life long support and training if required. Each Local Authority complies with their corporate parenting responsibility by investing in the regional service. This is monitored routinely by Heads of Service and the National Adoption Service Central team to ensure that the service is delivering on the key themes of the Social Care and Well Being Act.

5.0 OPTIONS APPRAISAL

5.1 This report is a detailed performance report and not a decision, therefore an options appraisal is not applicable.

6.0 EVALUATION CRITERIA

6.1 Please see the key issues section of this report which outlines the national performance framework set by the Welsh Government.

7.0 REASONS

7.1 To provide a clear summary of the performance of SEWAS in relation to the National Performance Framework in line with duties and responsibilities.

8.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There is a partnership agreement in place for the provision of the South East Wales Adoption Service. Each Local Authority contributes proportionally to their Looked After Children population. Financial risks are managed by the management committee represented by the Heads of Service from each Local Authority. Additional resources for the improvement of services are considered on merit and financial affordability.

9.0 CONSULTEES

National Adoption Service Central Team.

10.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None identified.

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