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**PROPOSALS FOR ACHIEVING
A NATIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE IN WALES
AND
DEVELOPMENT OF THE FUNCTIONAL MODEL**

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Proposals for achieving a National Adoption Service in Wales and Development of the Functional Model

- This paper sets out ADSS Cymru's proposals for achieving, as quickly as possible, radical reforms to Adoption Services in Wales and the creation of a National Adoption Service. It is grounded in a strong and shared commitment to building only on the best of current practice and to ensuring that the changes enable us to keep the child's best interests throughout their life at the core of adoption work.
- Adoption should be seen in the broader context of planning placements and permanence for children and as part of an integrated system of services for meeting their needs and promoting their well-being. There is a clear requirement that children in care must have plans for permanence in place that consider the full range of permanence options and that are put into effect with appropriate urgency. These plans should be agreed as soon as possible after admission and reviewed regularly thereafter.
- As a leadership organisation, ADSS Cymru acknowledges that reform on the scale set out in this document is delivered most effectively if there is a strong consensus across the key stakeholders and a coherent and professional approach to managing change. With others, local government has a key role to play in helping to generate these preconditions and so the plans have been produced in collaboration with the WLGA. A clear political mandate across local government has been achieved in respect of those issues which touch most directly on its role in bringing about change.
- The proposals acknowledge the significant contribution that the Voluntary Sector plays in the delivery of Adoption Services in Wales and its unique expertise. It is only by the statutory and voluntary sectors working together inclusively and collectively, drawing on best practice, that the vision of a National Adoption Service can be realised. Key voluntary adoption organisations have been involved in considering the plan put forward by ADSSC, in part through the national Expert Reference Group which has endorsed the proposals.
- The proposals provide an ambitious but realistic pathway for creating an effective and responsive National Adoption Service, a goal to which local

government is committed. The Local Government Implementation Plan for Sustainable Social Services includes responsibility for developing the operational model. These proposals build on two previous papers submitted to the Expert Reference Group and they are underpinned by the ten principles for adoption services devised by BAAF (December 2011).

- The proposals will help to ensure:
 - A new direction for the delivery of Adoption Services that is particularly suited to the Welsh context.
 - Timely implementation of the improvements required.
 - An increase in the pace of collaboration and the capacity to build sustainable services for the future.
 - A reduction in bureaucracy and a streamlining of service delivery.
 - An improvement in service accessibility for all the key stakeholders in every aspect of Adoption Services.
 - Maintenance of the essential integrity and coherence between all the elements of Adoption Services, to prevent a mismatch between the needs of children requiring adoptive placements and the adopters being recruited.
 - Long-term and lasting improvements to address the weaknesses identified in the some elements of current service provision.
 - A central place for the significant contribution made by the Voluntary Sector as valued co-producers and delivery partners.
 - Collective opportunities for local authorities to respond effectively to rising pressures within the care system.
- Adoption Services are governed by a number of detailed Regulations. These proposals recognise that changes in Regulations may be required in due course but progress in implementing key aspects can be made, pending those changes.

Context

1. In February 2011, *Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action* made clear that some services could be delivered more effectively at a national level. The Deputy Minister was keen to pioneer this approach in exploring, with stakeholders, the remit and functions of a National Adoption Service.
2. The Deputy Minister is clear that the new powers being sought under the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Bill will allow Welsh Ministers to direct local authorities (adoption agencies) to come together to form such a service. The law is to be underpinned by a National Standardised Performance Framework that will allow the National Adoption Service management team to identify, review and highlight key performance measures - such as how swiftly local authorities place children in need of adoption and how swiftly they deal with prospective adopters. The framework will set performance thresholds and make clear the Welsh Government's minimum expectations for timeliness in the adoption system, for both the child and the prospective adopter. It will allow local authority adoption agencies and others to monitor their own performance and compare it with that of others.
3. The case for change is widely accepted: BAAF estimate that 1 in 4 children available for adoption will not be placed primarily because an adoptive parent resource is not available. There are clearly issues about variability, both in performance between different local authorities and in the experience of prospective adopters. Services are insufficiently coordinated and they have not tackled well enough issues about supply and demand, to overcome barriers to recruitment and matching.
4. In November 2012, following an in-depth inquiry into adoption in Wales, the Children and Young People Committee published recommendations calling for radical action. It proposed a major shift in the way adoption services are organised and delivered, re-invigorating the momentum and the aims of the 2002 Adoption Act and strategies for placement choice and stability.

5. The Deputy Minister then repeated her commitment to establishing a National Adoption Service, which will have the power to deliver services across Wales. She has established her expectations about what the new system must offer:
 - eradicating 'drift' for children in care
 - eliminating waiting lists for training and assessment
 - improving the matching process
 - allaying adoption breakdown by providing comprehensive adoption support services
 - streamlining the process and ensuring better linking and understanding between social workers
 - providing the widest choice of placements through the increased use of voluntary adoption agencies; and
 - most importantly, ensuring consistent delivery across Wales.

6. The Children and Young People Committee recognised too that some services are best delivered regionally. The Deputy Minister supports this approach "as the key to change is not the location of the service, but rather the delivery of a national framework for the recruitment, training and approval of prospective adopters. The focus of the National Adoption Service will be on promoting excellence and driving continued improvements, ensuring that opportunities for collaboration are maximised whilst maintaining the necessary local links and knowledge, which are crucial aspects of adoption services."

7. Adoption Services are complex, provided to a wide range of service users from very young children who are being placed for adoption to older adults who are seeking to be re-united with their birth families and governed by a large number of detailed Regulations. These proposals are formulated as an appropriate response to that complexity.

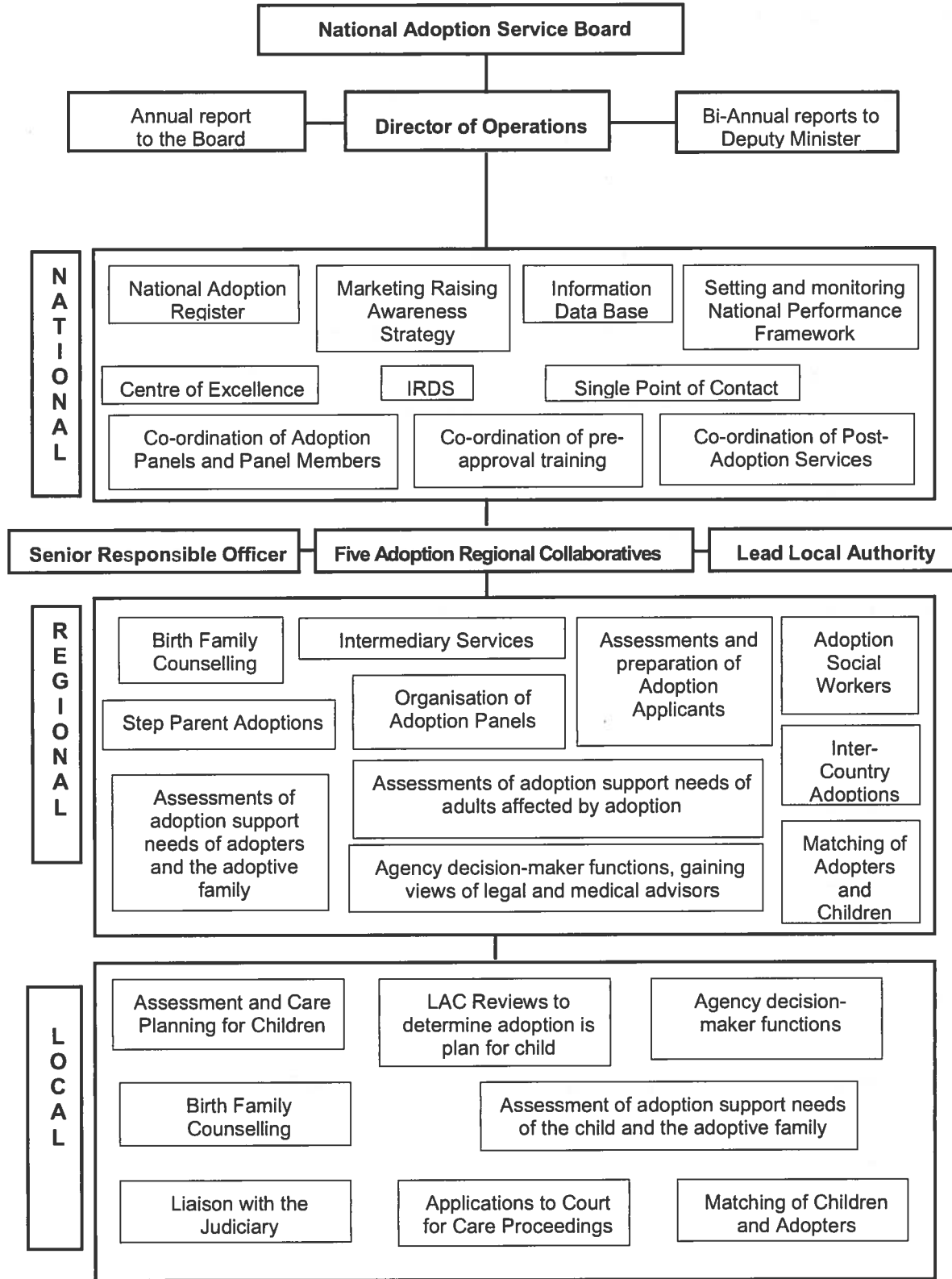
8. One of the crucial tasks has been to ensure that the proposals provide a means of addressing urgently the concerns outlined earlier, without sacrificing the acknowledged strengths within the existing system – what the Deputy Minister describes as "achieving change without detriment." For this reason, ADSS Cymru has worked with the WLGA to ensure that there is support for the proposals from

local authorities across Wales as well as from the professional leadership organisation for social services. We believe the National Adoption Service would reap great benefits from harnessing this support for change.

9. The report of the *National Inspection of Adoption and Permanency Services delivered by Local Authorities*, undertaken by CSSIW in 2009/10 has also been revisited. These proposals incorporate the strengths the Inspectorate identified in the provision of Adoption Services across Wales and address the areas that were identified as requiring attention.

10. A functional model for the National Adoption Service is set out in the chart overleaf. To ensure a seamless service, co-ordinated activity between the national, regional and local elements is critical. It is only in this way that children, adopters and those affected by adoption will receive the best possible service regardless of where they live in Wales.

National Adoption Service – Functional Model



A The National Adoption Service

11. Welsh Government would establish a national performance management framework. All Agencies will be required to operate within the framework set for by the National Service.

12. The National Service would undertake the following roles and functions.
 - i **Monitoring delivery in accordance with the national performance management framework.** The Regional Adoption Collaboratives described later would be accountable to a National Board for their performance and the National Board would have the powers to intervene if they are not delivering the service to the required standards. The Regional Adoption Collaboratives will have day-to-day line-management of the staff delivering the service at a regional level.

 - ii **Establishing a National Board** with the following membership:
 - Representatives from Voluntary Adoption Agencies
 - Adoptive Parents
 - Adopted Adults/Young People
 - The senior responsible officer of the lead Local Authorities for the Regional Adoption Collaboratives
 - NHS representative
 - Education representative
 - Academic representation
 - Director of Operations of the National Adoption Service (in attendance).

 - iii **Producing an Annual Report and action plan on the delivery of Adoption Services in Wales.** The Annual Report should be presented to the Board and to the Deputy Minister. In addition, the Director of Operations will produce bi-annual reports for the Deputy Minister.

- iv **Developing and delivering a national marketing and raising awareness strategy.** This would involve developing a national brand, a set of images to be used uniformly, to ensure brand recognition across Wales. Potential adopters would get a more accessible and consistent message. It will also help dispel some of the commonly held myths about the children who are seeking adoptive parents and which adults who can adopt children. The national marketing strategy will need to pay particular attention to attracting adopters for children whose circumstances make placement more difficult to achieve.

- v **Providing a single point of contact for anyone who is seeking information about adoption.** A National Adoption website and helpline will provide consistent information to children, young people and adults who may be interested in any aspect of adoption. It will also provide information on inter-country adoption. There is an increasing use of the Internet and social media sites by service users to gain information. It is essential that the National Service keeps abreast of these developments and maximises the opportunities they create.

- vi **Providing a database of information** to monitor where the greatest demand for services is being received by the Regional Collaboratives. This will allow resources to be deployed to areas of greatest demand or need.

- vii **Developing and maintaining a National Adoption Register.** This will enable linking and matching of children requiring adoptive placements with adopters across Wales, a service currently delivered by BAAF. It will maximise the opportunities for Welsh children being placed in Wales. A number of existing collaborative arrangements currently operate regional registers and a National Register could build on those experiences. Close links would be needed to the systems operating in the other three Administrations in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

- viii **Providing the Independent Review Determination Service.** This service is currently commissioned by Welsh Government and delivered by BAAF. The

service is being delivered to a high standard and it would be appropriate for this service to continue to be delivered at a national level only.

- ix **Co-ordination of Adoption Panels and Panel Members** to ensure that all the Adoption Panels are performing to the same required standards and Panels in all the Regional Collaboratives are being held frequently enough to avoid any delay for prospective adopters. It would also administer a list of suitably qualified panel members who could be called upon if any of the Regions were experiencing difficulties in ensuring quoracy on their Panels.
- x **Co-ordination of Pre-approval Training Courses** to ensure they are being held at regular intervals across the Regions, to avoid any delay for prospective adopters and to ensure consistency in the course content.
- xi **Co-ordination of Post Adoption Support Services** to ensure there is a robust range of adoption support services in place, particularly to support children with complex needs and their adopters
- xii **Acting as a Centre of Excellence for Adoption in Wales.**
The National Service will ensure that a set of policies and good practice guidelines are developed and maintained which reflect the very best practice in the delivery of all adoption services. It will arrange specialised training for staff in the Regional Collaboratives so that they are properly equipped for their role. There should be links to academic institutions and opportunities for promoting research.

Governance Arrangements at the national level

13. The National Adoption Service will have a Director of Operations who will be accountable professionally to the National Board for Adoption Services. The Director will prepare and present bi-annual information reports to the Deputy Minister and an annual report to the National Board.

B Regional Adoption Collaboratives

14. Five regional adoption collaboratives would be created in Wales, building on existing and emerging networks. This change will:
 - Assist in implementing as soon as possible the National Adoption Service.
 - Cause least disruption for children, approved adopters and adoptive applicants.
 - Ensure the speedy and appropriate matching of children requiring adoptive placements, making best use of knowledge about these children held locally.
 - Concentrate practitioner and managerial expertise, experience and skill into the regional hubs.
 - Achieve far greater consistency in the delivery of services.
 - Embed a culture of statutory and voluntary sectors working in partnership to deliver the objectives of the National Adoption Service.
 - Achieve efficiencies in number of adoption Managers required to deliver the service, staff accommodation required and support services needed.
 - Achieve appropriate economies of scale
 - Ensure sustainable services
 - Ensure regional contribution to marketing strategies, to recruit the numbers and types of adopters required.
 - Reduce the number of Adoption Panels required.
 - Allow the Director of Operations to ensure resources are deployed to areas that have a particular need at any one time.

15. The Regional Collaboratives would deliver the following functions of the National Service.
 - i Ensure compliance with legislation, regulations and the performance management framework set by the National Board.

 - ii Report on a regular basis to the Director of Operations and in turn to the National Board on performance.

- iii Recruit and assess adoptive applicants and provide pre-approval training. This will include the initial counselling service to ensure a speedy, knowledgeable response to possible applicants.
- iv Ensure that the children requiring adoptive placements are appropriately matched with adopters who can meet their needs for their entire childhood.
- v Manage and host Adoption Panels to ensure compliance with Regulations.
- vi Ensure that the statutory and voluntary sectors, working in partnership, provide the range of integrated post adoption support services as prescribed by the current Regulations and subsequently in accordance with the standards set by the National Service. These can include a number of services provided by colleagues in health, education, CAMHS, as well as letter-box contact with birth parents and relatives.
- vii Deliver birth parent counselling for birth parents and relatives who have had their children removed from their care and placed for adoption. Close working relationships with Children's Social Workers and other key stakeholders are essential in the delivery of this service.
- viii Undertake stepparent adoption assessments, as directed by the courts
- ix Provide intermediary services for those adopted adults who are seeking to be reunited with their birth families
- x Provide inter-country adoption services for those adults who are seeking to adopt a child from abroad.
- xi Engage with key stakeholders- the judiciary, statutory and voluntary agencies.
- xii Employ and manage staff delivering functions of the National Service at a regional level.

- xiii Link to each Local Authority Children's Services Department within the region to assist with the training and support of social work staff and to ensure a seamless service for children, adopters and prospective adopters.
16. It is planned that the five Regional collaboratives will be:
- North Wales - Wrexham, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire and Ynys Mon;
 - South East Wales - Blaenau Gwent, Monmouth, Torfaen, Newport and Caerphilly;
 - West & Mid Wales - Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Powys;
 - Western Bay – Neath Port Talbot, Swansea, and Bridgend;
 - Mid & South Wales - Cardiff, the Vale of Glamorgan, Merthyr and Rhondda-Cynon-Taff.
17. These Regional Collaboratives are currently at different stages of development. North Wales led the way with their service becoming operational in April 2010 and the South East Wales Service followed in April 2012. This will facilitate shared learning across Wales, to ensure speedy implementation of these plans. It is planned that all the Collaboratives will be fully operational by April 2014.

Governance arrangements at the regional level

18. Each Regional Adoption Collaborative will have the same set of responsibilities and functions and operate within a performance management framework developed at a national level. Each Collaborative will be accountable to the Director of Operations for its performance and then to the National Board. The Director of Operations, in consultation with the National Board, will have the powers to intervene if the performance of a Regional Collaborative is not meeting required standards.
19. It is likely that one local authority within each Regional Collaborative will agree to act as the lead authority for the delivery of all the regional roles and functions. The Senior Responsible Officer from the lead Authority will be a member of the

National Board. This will ensure accountability of the Regional Collaboratives to the National Board.

20. Directors of Social Services will continue to exercise their statutory accountabilities through a Regional Collaborative Board and maintain the link to the executive and scrutiny functions of their own local authorities.

C The Local Authority Adoption Service

21. Each local authority will retain the following roles and responsibilities.
 - i Assessment and care-planning for children in need and those looked after conducting timely Looked After Children Reviews where the recommendation is for adoption to be the plan for that child.
 - ii Ensuring the Agency Decision Maker functions are fulfilled in compliance with Regulations.
 - iii Undertaking the assessment of adoption support needs of children for whom the plan is adoption.
 - iv Being involved in the matching and linking of children with prospective adopters.
 - v Providing Birth Parent counselling for parents who have had their children removed from their care and placed for adoption.
 - vi Making applications to the Courts for care orders where the plan is for adoption.
 - vii Attending Adoption Panels where a proposed match between a child and prospective adopter is being considered.
 - viii Ensuring that staff maintain their knowledge and understanding of best practice in adoption.

Next Steps:

22. A task and finish group will be established with representatives from Welsh Government, ADSS Cymru, CSSIW, BAAF, VAA and each of the Regional

Collaboratives. The purpose will be to produce a robust change programme for implementing the functional model as set out in this paper.

23. Programme management capacity would need to be available on a temporary basis to drive through these changes in a timely fashion. It might be possible to consider allocating responsibility for any posts to ADSS Cymru and/or one of the social services regional improvement collaboratives. A time-framed project plan would be produced for the task and finish group. The creation of the National Service will require fundamental change at many different levels. Robust financial analysis and planning will be required to cost the delivery of a National Adoption Service. New IT systems will be required and there are significant Human Resource implications.
24. It is anticipated that this initiative will be taken forward using the wider leadership framework established for the ten-year strategy set out in *Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action*. The National Social Services Partnership Forum, Strategic Leadership Group and the Local Government Implementation Board will exercise oversight of the change programme. The Boards of Directors for the Regional Social Services Improvement Collaboratives will have a key role in steering through these changes to the required timescales at the regional and local level.
25. It is recognised that each of the agreed Regional Collaboratives are at different stages. Each Region will be required to develop its own detailed project plan, using a common format and approach. The project plans for each Region will need to reflect the performance management framework agreed by the National Service Board. It is planned that all five Regional Adoption Collaboratives will be established by April 2014.
26. ADSS Cymru awaits Welsh Government direction on the development of the National Service as outlined in these plans. We very much welcome the opportunity to work with the Welsh Government and colleagues in the Voluntary Sector to ensure we deliver a sustainable National Adoption Service of which Wales can be proud.

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