

Institution: Cardiff University		
Unit of Assessment: Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience (4)		
Title of case study: A new national service in Wales to support the adoption of siblings and hard to place children in care		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Katherine Shelton Amy Paine	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 01/11/2003 – present 04/02/2019 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>It is challenging to find permanent homes for children in care who are aged 4 years and over, especially when in sibling groups. Most of these children revert to long-term fostering, are often separated from siblings, and suffer psychologically from a lack of emotional security. Cardiff University research identified the factors that influence the success of early adoption placements leading to the first national adoption service, called 'Adopting Together', for hard to place children in Wales. Within two years, this service successfully placed 18 children (with 35 more currently being supported to find adoptive families), secured a financial return of £14.4M, and is now referenced as part of the standard protocols for all social work professionals in Wales.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>In 2019, the National Adoption Service in Wales evidenced a shortfall in adopter numbers by almost a third since 2014/15, with a consequent 64% increase in the number of children waiting for a family. There has also been an increase in the number of 'priority' children waiting over 12 months to find a family. 'Priority' children include those who are aged 4 years and over, those in sibling groups and children with medical or additional needs, all of whom adoptive parents are less willing to adopt. Further, a 2014 Department for Education report, entitled <i>Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and adoption disruption</i> highlighted the grave consequences for both children and parents when adoption placements break down which often occurs when children display extraordinarily high levels of challenging behaviour (e.g. aggression; violence; self-harm) and parents receive inadequate professional support. Adoptive placements that take place after the age of 4 are a risk factor for disruption.</p> <p>Research at Cardiff, led by Shelton from the School of Psychology, investigated the factors that led to either successful or failed adoption placements. As well as the role of professional practice, Cardiff researchers broke new ground by also exploring the psychological profile of children who needed to be placed, as well as the families looking to adopt. They did this by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pioneering the Wales Adoption Cohort Study which followed a representative sample of families across the first four years of adopting a child or sibling group. This study used a multi-wave [3.1], mixed-methods approach (questionnaire and interview data; data linkage to several hundred social work records) to identify the support needs of families and the gaps in the amount and quality of professional support received [3.2]; • revealing that adoptees' behaviour and mental health problems remained consistently high over a 4-year period and that early adversity (e.g. neglect and/or maltreatment) was associated with increases in problems. The findings highlighted the value of biographical information about the child's life before and during care to support foster carer and professionals to manage a child's transition to an adoptive family, including post adoption support [3.3]; 		

- identifying that warm adoptive parenting was associated with a marked reduction in children's behaviour and mental health problems in the first three years after placement. Exceptionally warm adoptive parenting continually enhances outcomes for adopted children, which has implications for the design and refinement of therapeutic interventions designed to maximise positive outcomes for adoptive families including placement stability throughout childhood [3.3, 3.4];
- profiling problems with current provision, such as access to therapeutic services (including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) and the almost complete absence of professional support to facilitate relationships between siblings living together and apart. While parents were committed to maintaining and strengthening sibling relationships, many had not been aware of, or prepared for, the challenges that would accompany a sibling placement [3.5].

By following families over time and linking their experiences to social work records of early adversity, moves between foster carers, and age at removal from birth parents, Cardiff research identified the individual, family-based and structural factors associated with early placement success. These findings informed the establishment of a new national adoption placement service, called 'Adopting Together', as detailed in section 4 [3.6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[3.1] Anthony, R., Meakings, Doughty, J., Ottaway, O., Holland, S., & **Shelton, K.H.** (2016). Factors affecting adoption in Wales: Predictors of variation in time between entry to care and adoptive placement. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 60, pp. 184-190. DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.06.010.

[3.2] Meakings, S., Ottaway, H., Coffey, A., Doughty, J. & **Shelton, K.H.** (2018). The post-adoption support needs of children and their families. *Adoption and Fostering*, 42 (1), pp. 58-75. DOI: 10.1177/0308575917750824.

[3.3] **Paine, A. L.**, Fahey, K., Anthony, R.E., & **Shelton, K.H.** (2020). Early adversity predicts adoptees' enduring emotional and behavioral problems in childhood. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. DOI: 10.1007/s00787-020-01553-0.

[3.4] **Paine, A.L.**, Perra, O., Anthony, R., & **Shelton, K.H.** (2020). Charting the trajectories of adopted children's emotional and behavioural problems: The impact of early adversity and post-adoptive parental warmth. *Development and Psychopathology*. DOI:10.1017/S0954579420000231

[3.5] Meakings, S., Coffey, A. & **Shelton, K.H.** (2017). The influence of adoption on sibling relationships: Experiences and support needs of newly formed adoptive families. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47, pp. 1781-1799. DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcx097

[3.6] **Shelton, K.H.**, Merchant, C. & Lynch, J. 2020. The Adopting Together Service: How innovative collaboration is meeting the needs of children in Wales waiting the longest to find a family. *Adoption and Fostering*, 44 (2), pp. 128-141. DOI:10.1177/0308575920920390

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research outlined in section 2 formed the basis of the first national adoption placement service, called **Adopting Together**, for hard to place children in Wales, including older children, those in sibling groups and those with complex psychological and physical support needs [5.1]. To support the establishment of the Adopting Together Service, the Cardiff team used their Wales Adoption Study as the empirical platform for a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) with Dr Jane Lynch (Cardiff Business School) and St. David's Children Society, a charity approved by the Care Inspectorate Wales to work as an adoption agency. St David's Children's Society is the longest serving adoption agency in Wales; it provides locally based adoption services across all of Wales [5.2].

As noted on the Welsh National Adoption Service website, the Adopting Together project uses expertise from Cardiff University (notably through the Cardiff team's research [3.1 - 3.6]). Based on Cardiff's findings [3.1 – 3.5], this innovative service involves clinically-led planning,

preparation and support for both the children and adoptive parents. It is the first time that these three elements (planning, preparation and support) have been integrated and introduced at a planning stage for families, before a child is even placed with an adoptive family as well as throughout the placement process rather than waiting to provide therapeutic support once major problems arise. These attachment-based interventions strengthen the relationship between the child and parents from the very beginning of the placement process. In doing so, parents can be enabled to fully empathise with the child, understand their complex needs, demonstrate high levels of warmth, and ultimately improve the chance of a successful adoption, in line with the original Cardiff research findings [3.1 – 3.5].

“The ethos and philosophy underpinning the early intervention and relationship-based model of the Adopting Together Service has its foundations firmly embedded in the [Cardiff University] Wales Adoption Cohort Study. Offering intensive support to prospective adoptive parents from the outset has enabled them to safely hold the children they will parent from the very embryonic beginnings of that relationship through to becoming a family for life. The Wales Adoption Cohort Study gave us the professional confidence to enable this life affirming practice” – Wendy Keiden, CEO, St. David’s Children Society [5.3].

The Adopting Together service has been widely recognised as a model of best practice and effective collaboration between academia, the third sector and statutory services [5.4, 5.5, 5.6]. It is the first UK adoption programme to bring sustainable social procurement to meet the needs of Looked After Children, making it an exemplar model in relation to the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 [5.6] which requires 44 public bodies in Wales to comply with five essential ways of working (collaboration, long-term thinking, involvement, integration and prevention) to improve population health and wellbeing. Crucially, the approach is based on Cardiff’s evidence of the need for early intervention and therapeutic support for children and adoptive families to secure permanent placements for siblings and hard-to-place children.

The Adopting Together Service led to the following benefits:

4.1 Successful adoption of hard to place children and sibling groups

When the Adopting Together Service was established, there were 94 children on the Wales Adoption Register with no links to possible families. 59 of these children (55%) were in sibling groups, and 46 children had been waiting for over 12 months to be placed with an adoptive family [5.7]. Since it began fully operating in June 2018, 18 children have been placed through the Adopting Together Service. This includes 6 sibling groups and 5 individual children. Singeta Kalhan-Gregory, the Adopting Together Service Manager, notes *“All these children had been waiting over a year for a permanent family and many were on the cusp of their plan changing to long-term fostering”* [5.7].

For context, by July 2020, the Adoption Register was showing a significant increase in the number of children in sibling groups in Wales waiting to be adopted (104 children in sibling groups: 49 sibling groups of 2, and 2 sibling groups of 3). Based on this data, the Adopting Together Service has already placed the equivalent of 12.5% of children in sibling groups on the Wales Adoption Register. As of October 2020, an additional 35 children have been referred to the Adopting Together Service which is now actively working to find families for these children after a 3-month halt due to COVID-19 (when no children could be moved during the national lock-down) [5.7].

Children who grow up in care not only cost the state in terms of foster care provision, they are more likely to be out of education, employment or training as adults so present a probable future cost to the state in terms of claiming benefits, making use of health services and a burden on the criminal justice system. Non-Cardiff University research, by Clifford, J. (Clifford, J. (2011) PACT Domestic Adoption and Fostering: SROI Evaluation. Reading. PACT and London. Baker Tilly) evaluated the overall socio-economic gain secured by permanence in adoption at £800,000 per child adopted (this research is cited by the UK Government’s Select Committee on Adoption). Given that 18 children have so far been successfully placed through this new Cardiff-driven service, and based on Clifford’s figure, the Adopting Together Services has already offered a return on investment of £14.4M. In terms of the social return, adopted children are more likely to achieve their academic potential, secure employment, and to forge

long-lasting, meaningful relationships with their adoptive family if their placements are successful (as noted in Clifford's research highlighted above).

4.2 Transformation in policy and practice

The Adopting Together Service additionally led to transformations in government policy and social work practices in the following ways:

a. Directing Welsh Government's national strategy for how permanence is secured

The Welsh Government recognised the success of the Adopting Together Service and it is now referenced within the *National Adoption Service Good Practice Guide to Family Finding* which is the national strategy for how permanence is secured. This guide sets out standard protocols for all social work professionals in Wales [5.8]. In this guidance, it states: "Family Finding for more complex children including children age 4 and over, children in sibling groups, children with complex health or developmental [needs] will require greater effort and this should be reflected in the individualised plans and timetable for review. Referral to the Adopting Together Service must be considered for these children when it is apparent that they have, or are likely, to wait longer for a placement" - National Adoption Service Good Practice Guide to Family Finding [5.8, p. 4-5].

An outline of the Adopting Together Service, how it operates and how social workers can access it is detailed in this National Adoption Service Good Practice Guide to Family Finding. It states that "The Service offers tailored support to adopters through assessment, enhanced training and therapeutic interventions, pre- and post-placement with a new family. It is a psychology-led service with direct consultations and support from the same psychologist throughout the adopter's journey. In addition to therapeutic transitions and enhanced adoption support, the Service can offer a family finding placement strategy through child-specific campaigns, and targeted recruitment" [5.8, p.6]. This new approach means that Adopting Together is now embedded into service delivery at a national level so when a social worker is looking to find a permanent home for a sibling group or an older child, they can make full use of the Adopting Together Service [5.9].

At the official launch of Adopting Together, Welsh Government's Enabling People Director (Social Services and Integration Directorate) Alistair Davey stated "*We know there are increasing challenges around [...] larger numbers of sibling groups coming into care. We know they are harder to place so we've got something here which is a collaborative and different way of doing that which actually delivers*" [5.10].

b. Transforming social work practice

Traditionally, social workers have scarce information relating to the needs of the children they are trying to place. Using Cardiff's research as evidence for its approach, Adopting Together carefully matches hard-to-place children to parents who are most likely to be a good fit, based on psychological profiles. Adopting Together also facilitates 'Team for the Child' meetings whereby all the key professionals involved in that child's life are brought together, led by a clinical psychologist, to meet with the potential adoptive parents – this includes foster carers, social workers, teachers, and clinical psychologists – making this an extremely child-centred approach [5.11]. The meeting and approach gives social workers a much better understanding of both the children they are trying to place and the prospective adoptive families which enables them to do their job of matching families and placing children much more effectively. The 'Team for the Child' meeting also gives potential parents understanding of the child's background and range of social, emotional, medical, and psychological needs before a placement occurs.

"Working collaboratively in this way (with a Team for the Child meeting) allows professionals enrolled with the children concerned to ensure we are all working collaboratively, and in line with the best interests of the child – a phrase easy to throw away but important to ensure those children are at the forefront of your work" – Anonymous feedback from a Social Worker participating in the 'Team for the Child' meeting.

In summary, founded on Cardiff research, Adopting Together created an empirically grounded novel approach which aims to deliver transformational change in the procurement of social care. It resulted in numerous benefits for hard to place children, including sibling groups who might have been separated or remained in long-term care. Many children have been permanently homed, with 35 other long-term challenging cases now referred to the service to maximise their chance of successful home placement.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] National Adoption Service web page and annual reports

[5.2a] Institute for Public Care at Oxford Brookes University: Business case for investment (2017). **[5.2b]** Screen shot from St David's Children Society

[5.3] Testimonial: Wendy Keiden, St David's Children's Society

[5.4a] Testimonial: Julie Morgan AC/AM, Deputy Minister from Health and Social Services

[5.4b] Press Release outlining Welsh Govt support for Adopting Together

[5.5] 2018 Collaboration Award in the category of Innovation from the Institute for Collaborative Working (ICW). Page 6 - The team received the award at a ceremony at the House of Lords (13/12/18)

[5.6] Testimonial: Huw Irranca-Davies Minister for Children, Older People and Social Care to the Adopting Together team in recognition of the importance of the Service in supporting some of society's most vulnerable children

[5.7] Testimonial: Singeta Kalhan-Gregory, Adopting Together Service Manager, confirming placement data and the halt to the service due to COVID-19

[5.8] National Adoption Service: Family Finding Good Practice Guide (updated 2020)

[5.9] Welsh Government, Ministerial Advisory Group 'Improving Outcomes for Children Programme', Annual Report 2019, p.19

[5.10] Transcript from Welsh Government's Enabling People Director Alistair Davey's speech at the official launch of Adopting Together

[5.11] St David's Children's Society web page – What is a Team for the Child meeting?