

Inspection Report

South East Wales Adoption Service

This document is also available in Welsh.
Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Cymraeg.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) inspected South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) between 30 June and 3 July 2025.
- 1.2 Care Inspectorate Wales reviews local authority social services functions, including functions in relation to adoption, on behalf of Welsh Ministers in accordance with Section 149B of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.
- 1.3 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015 places statutory duties on local authorities to work collaboratively with each other. The primary purpose of these directions is to ensure that effective joint arrangements are in place between local authorities, to ensure consistent and effective adoption services across Wales. Regional Adoption Services across Wales form part of a three-tier structure to provide adoption services across Wales. The three-tier structure forms the National Adoption Services (NAS). Whilst the focus of this inspection is on SEWAS, it is clear they benefit from support provided by other structures in the national service.
- 1.4 The SEWAS Regional Adoption Collaborative comprises of the following local authorities, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Caerphilly, Newport and Monmouthshire. Blaenau Gwent local authority is the host local authority for this region.
- 1.5 The focus of the inspection was on how the service promotes the well-being and safety of children through the provision of permanency with adoptive families, who can safely meet their needs and improve the likelihood of them achieving the best possible outcomes. We evaluated the leadership and governance arrangements that support service delivery, and how effective it is in achieving good quality outcomes for children.
- 1.6 We considered the following key questions under relevant headings.

Well-being

- Are children's well-being needs appropriately safeguarded in achieving permanence?
- Is the service provided accessible, safe and responsive to people's needs?

Care and Support

- Do children, birth and adoptive families achieve good outcomes through the provision of support which promotes their overall well-being?

Leadership and governance

- Do the leadership and governance arrangements ensure the provision of high-quality services for people?

1.7 Glossary of Terminology and Quantity Definitions See Appendix 2 and 3.

2. Summary of inspection findings

- 2.1 SEWAS is supported by a Regional Management Board comprising five local authorities. A signed partnership agreement is in place, promoting consistency in service delivery through shared financial and practitioners' contributions. The Board provides strategic oversight and governance, and enables joint decision-making on service development, policy and resource allocation.
- 2.2 SEWAS utilises guidance, policies, procedures, and templates published by the NAS, supporting consistent practice across the region. Further work is needed on some key documents to ensure all regulatory requirements are met.
- 2.3 Assessments of prospective adopters are robust and comprehensive. Practitioners demonstrate a strong understanding of safeguarding responsibilities, and assessments are aligned with NAS standards.
- 2.4 Matching processes are supported by trauma-informed tools and collaborative working with local authority colleagues. While most cases progress appropriately, a minority highlight delays and variability in documentation quality.
- 2.5 Adoption support services are valued and include psychology led interventions, peer support groups, and therapeutic approaches. However, access can depend on risk level, where the child is placed and available Health support. Waiting lists are in place
- 2.6 Practitioners benefit from peer support and professional development opportunities. Leadership is described as visible, child-focused, and purpose-driven. However, inconsistencies in some internal electronic communication systems and limited quality assurance oversight are noted.
- 2.7 The recruitment of adopters remains a key concern. Despite visible efforts such as targeted campaigns and community engagement, SEWAS has not yet built a sufficient pool of adopters to meet children's needs. Delays in appointing a recruitment officer and the absence of a dynamic marketing strategy are contributing factors.

- 2.8 Recording systems are secure, understood by practitioners and support service delivery.
- 2.9 Business support are skilled and effective. Panel operations are well organised, focused on children and adoptive parents and have a culture of continuous improvement.
- 2.10 A whole service strategic business plan is not yet in place.
- 2.11 The current premises occupied by SEWAS are not fully suitable for service needs.

3. Findings



Well-being

- 3.1 SEWAS operates in line with NAS guidance, policies, procedures and templates. People are well-informed and documentation is accessible.
- 3.2 19% of practitioners disagreed that the Welsh language is actively promoted. SEWAS does not consistently promote the Welsh language 'Active Offer' in line with the *More Than Just Words* framework. While most documentation contains the required information, the Statement of Purpose does not fully meet regulatory requirements. It must be updated to include eligibility criteria and a more detailed complaints section. **SEWAS must ensure all key documents meet regulatory requirements and that the Active Offer is clearly promoted.**
- 3.3 SEWAS provides a good range of documentation to support people's understanding of the adoption process. Information is available in various formats, and 100% of practitioners who completed CIW's practitioner survey, agreed it is timely and accessible. However, access to translated materials often depends on people making specific requests. **SEWAS provides prospective adopters with a timely response. Information should be proactively offered in people's preferred language and format.**
- 3.4 SEWAS practitioners demonstrate a strong commitment to advocating for children and families. Practitioners work in partnership with birth families and are confident in using formal advocacy where appropriate, including for parents with additional learning needs. Practitioners survey responses found 81% either agreed or strongly agreed advocacy support is provided where applicable. This supports inclusive and child centred practice.
- 3.5 SEWAS promotes the voice and rights of birth families. Practitioners are persistent in their efforts to engage birth parents, provide clear information about the legal significance of adoption and facilitate a birth parents support group. Practitioners demonstrate sensitivity and respect in their approach, and advocacy is used appropriately, including for parents with additional needs.
- 3.6 Assessments of prospective adopters are robust and comprehensive. Case file reviews and panel observations confirm that assessments are detailed, analytical, and demonstrate a clear focus on the child's needs. Practitioners value the structured approach to assessment, which is supported by regular

supervision and quality assurance mechanisms. This ensures that adopters are well prepared to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive placements, with strengths and vulnerabilities clearly identified to inform matching decisions.

- 3.7 Practitioners across the service demonstrate a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities. This is evident in interviews and supported by practitioners in CIW's staff survey.
- 3.8 Practitioners are provided with access to a range of training opportunities. 92% of practitioners surveyed agreed they have access to good training and professional development. Practitioners value training delivered by the Psychology team, legal professionals, adoptive parents, and birth parent support workers. Adopters report that training is open, honest, and supports their understanding of modern contact and impact of trauma on children.
- 3.9 SEWAS is embedding the Welsh Early Permanence (WEP) framework, which aims to reduce delay and promote stability by placing children with potential permanent carers at the earliest opportunity. Practitioners demonstrate awareness of the framework and its intended benefits. Evidence shows developing practice, including timely approvals and dual-panel arrangements. Practitioners recognise the need for careful preparation and ongoing support for carers, particularly where uncertainty remains around permanence decisions. As the use of WEP increases, **SEWAS should continue to build carer resilience and ensure appropriate supports are in place.**



Care and Support

- 3.10 Children's profiles are developed in line with national expectations. Family finding activity is supported by monthly tracking meetings with each local authority, and early information is shared to support timely planning. There are examples of well-written Link Maker profiles and proactive engagement with foster carers to inform matching. However, some practitioners report delays in uploading profiles and variability in communication. Additionally, some file reviews showed significant preventable delay. **SEWAS should ensure family finding activity is consistently timely and that children's profiles are shared without delay**
- 3.11 Prospective adopters benefit from a well-structured and reflective training programme, delivered as part of a comprehensive assessment process. Pre-approval training includes contributions from adoptive parents, legal professionals, and birth parent support workers, offering a broad and realistic

perspective on adoption. Adopters report that the training helped them understand the impact of trauma, the importance of identity, and the evolving nature of contact. One adoptive parent described their experience as **“absolutely life changing and really proud to have chosen SEWAS,”** reflecting the depth of support and preparation provided by the service. **This is a strength.**

3.12 SEWAS has systems in place to support matching, including monthly tracking meetings, early profiling, and trauma-informed tools such as nurture timelines and “Understanding the Child” days. These approaches help shape matching decisions and support adopters’ understanding of children’s needs. However, evidence shows variability in the timeliness of some formal matching, including inconsistent use of Link Maker and delays in progressing to panel. The use of trauma-informed tools is not yet consistent across the service, particularly for children under two. **SEWAS must continue to strengthen its approach to ensure matching activity is consistently timely and should use trauma-informed tools effectively for all children.**

3.13 There is evidence of effective collaboration between SEWAS and children’s social workers, with early engagement helping to inform placement planning. However, practitioners report variability in the quality of Child Adoption Reports. While addendums are used to update information, the format can be focused on meeting court requirements rather than promoting the child’s voice and lived experience. **SEWAS should continue to work with local authority colleagues to ensure matching documentation is consistently child-centred and informs placement planning**

3.14 SEWAS supports children’s transitions into adoptive placements through flexible, child-centred planning. Inspectors saw examples where transitions were paced according to children’s needs and adopters were well-informed. Foster carers play a valued role in supporting transitions. One adoptive parent described how their child “continues to feel comfort from both the [photo] book and the teddy, possibly because it’s a connection between where he was and where he is now”. There are examples of well-managed transitions, including strong preparation and support for children and carers. However, evidence from case file reviews and stakeholder feedback indicates the quality and timeliness of transition planning is not consistently applied across all cases. **SEWAS should continue to build on existing good practice by ensuring that transition arrangements are consistently timely, well-coordinated, and inclusive of all relevant parties, with clear communication and planning tailored to each child’s individual needs.**

- 3.15 SEWAS develops adoption support plans collaboratively with adopters and relevant professionals, tailoring them to each child's needs. There are plans informed by psychological input where appropriate, reflecting a trauma-informed approach. **This is good practice.** However, the quality and timeliness of adoption support plans varies, with a few lacking sufficient detail or not being reviewed regularly. **SEWAS should ensure adoption support plans are consistently robust, reviewed in a timely manner, and clearly aligned to the child's evolving needs.**
- 3.16 Life story work is valued and increasingly embedded in practice. There are examples of sensitive and well-structured materials, with meaningful contributions from foster carers and birth parents. Quality and consistency are monitored. However, delays in completion remain. Child's voice is not always fully reflected within the Child Adoption Reports. Later Life letters are of variable quality and occasionally lack a sensitive portrayal of birth families. **SEWAS should continue to support the completion of life story work ensuring it is timely, accessible, and consistently reflective of the child's voice and identity.**
- 3.17 A range of adoption support services is available across the region, including psychology-led interventions, therapeutic approaches such as Theraplay and peer support groups. Stay and Play (an informal adoption support event for adoptive parents and their children) was described by a parent as being an **"invaluable source of support"**. These services are valued by adopters and contribute to placement stability. **This is good practice.** However, whilst initial access to support services are mostly consistent, waiting lists are in place in some areas and access to support can depend on levels of breakdown risk, whether a child is placed within the region and availability of healthcare services. Practitioners described growing demand for post-adoption support and raised concerns about the sustainability of current arrangements. This reflects national trends but highlights the need for local strategic planning to ensure sustainability. **SEWAS must ensure adoption support services are delivered equitably and in a timely manner.**
- 3.18 The importance of contact as part of modern adoption practice is promoted strategically, and the service is beginning to put this into everyday practice. Some practitioners initiate early, child-focused discussions with adopters about a range of contact options, including letterbox, video messages, and face-to-face meetings. While positive examples are evident, the quality and consistency of arrangements varied. It is evident SEWAS has begun improvement work in this area. **SEWAS should therefore continue to strengthen the operational implementation of its strategic vision ensuring practice consistently aligns with NAS'S contact good practice guide.**

- 3.19 Support to birth families is promoted through a worker based in the adoption support team. Support is offered both sensitively and at a pace that is flexible and appropriate to each individual. This includes support with understanding the adoption process and facilitating meetings with prospective adopters. Practitioners recognised the importance of this work in supporting children's identity and long-term well-being. Recent advanced information audit activity highlighted the positive impact of this work, including feedback from birth parents and examples of supported meetings contributing to life journey materials.
- 3.20 SEWAS provides access to adoption records for adopted adults and offers support in line with legislative requirements. Requests to access records are handled sensitively, with practitioners recognising the emotional complexity of this work. For adoptions before 30 December 2005, SEWAS may provide intermediary services where appropriate. For later adoptions, the service supports access to information in line with post-commencement regulations. Practitioners emphasised the importance of ensuring records are accurate, respectful, and accessible, that demand to access records is increasing, and that there is a waiting list. **SEWAS should continue to fully consider future adoption record resourcing needs.**
- 3.21 SEWAS has effective panel arrangements that support decision-making, with access to legal and medical advice. Panels are consistently quorate, well-chaired, and include members with relevant professional and lived experience. Prospective adopters are supported to attend and share their views, with panel chairs offering reassurance ahead of meetings. Panel members described matching processes as thorough, with trauma and nurture timelines aiding understanding of children's lived experiences. Medical advisors provide detailed input, and panel minutes evidence proportionate and child-focused scrutiny. Panel members also contribute to quality assurance processes and receive regular training, including on disruption and safeguarding. **This is good practice.**
- 3.22 Agency Decision Maker (ADM) arrangements are clear and understood across the region. Approvals are managed centrally by the Head of Children's Service for Blaenau Gwent, while matching decisions are made by the relevant local authority ADM. The regional management committee provides oversight and promotes consistency. A national ADM group has been established to support shared learning and alignment with Welsh Government priorities.



Leadership and Management

- 3.23 Leaders and managers demonstrate a clear vision and ambition for the service. Most practitioners across all teams describe SEWAS as a cohesive and child-focused service with a strong sense of purpose. Leaders are visible, approachable, and described as knowledgeable and supportive. Practitioners feel valued and report high levels of morale and commitment. The service's ethos is mostly described as inclusive, reflective, and focused on achieving the best outcomes for children. **This is good practice.**
- 3.24 Governance arrangements support the smooth operation of the service. The regional management committee is well established and includes representation from all five local authorities, as well as health, education, and voluntary sector partners. Meetings are well attended and provide a forum for open discussion, challenge, and shared decision-making. The partnership agreement has recently been reviewed and updated. Strategic oversight is supported by regular performance reporting and a shared commitment to continuous improvement.
- 3.25 Strategic plans are informed by an understanding of current and emerging needs. The SEWAS operational plan aligns with the NAS priorities and includes clear objectives around recruitment, adoption support, contact, and access to records. The plan is well structured and includes accountability for delivery. However, there is no overarching regional strategic plan that brings together priorities across all five local authorities' education departments, health boards, and NHS Trusts. **SEWAS should ensure that a regional strategic plan is developed to complement the operational plan and support alignment of resources and commissioning arrangements across the region.**
- 3.26 Performance and quality assurance systems are in place but not yet fully embedded. Evidence from audit tools and case examples shows that some quality assurance activity is taking place, including closure audits and analysis of birth parent support. These audits demonstrate reflective practice and a learning culture. However, there is no formalised quality assurance framework specific to SEWAS, and the frequency and consistency of audits is unclear. **SEWAS must implement a structured quality assurance framework to ensure consistent oversight and continuous improvement across all service areas.**
- 3.27 The service is delivered by a suitably qualified, experienced, and stable workforce. There are no vacant posts, and the service is structured into three

clear teams with sufficient breadth of roles. Practitioners described strong team cohesion, effective supervision, and access to training and development opportunities. Managers were described as supportive and available, and practitioners feel confident in raising concerns or seeking guidance. Recruitment and retention are not identified as concerns, and recent appointments included former students returning to the service.

- 3.28 The recruitment of adopters remains a significant concern. Despite visible efforts such as targeted campaigns, social media outreach, and community engagement SEWAS does not have a sufficient pool of adopters to meet the diverse and complex needs of children. This shortfall contributes to delays in achieving permanence, which can have a significant impact on children's long-term permanence and emotional well-being. While this is recognised as a national issue, local factors have compounded the challenge. Delays in appointing a recruitment officer and the absence of a dynamic, regularly reviewed marketing strategy have limited the service's ability to respond flexibly to emerging needs. **SEWAS must ensure its marketing strategy is robust and regularly reviewed to support them in their commitment to recruit a sufficient number of adopters.**
- 3.29 Roles and responsibilities across SEWAS are generally well defined and understood. Practitioners consistently described a clear understanding of their role within the regional structure and how their work contributes to the wider service. Pathway documents and flowcharts support expectations at each stage of the adoption process, including timescales and safeguarding responsibilities. Whilst guidance is well developed in some areas such as family finding and transition planning, it is not yet consistently embedded across all service areas. For example, a quality assurance framework, life journey work, and contact arrangements would benefit from being more formalised and applied more consistently. **SEWAS should ensure clear, up-to-date guidance is in place for these areas, that it is routinely reviewed, and that practice is supported by consistent implementation across the service.**
- 3.30 Arrangements for safeguarding are clear and embedded in practice. Practitioners demonstrated a good understanding of safeguarding responsibilities and thresholds. Safeguarding concerns are discussed in supervision and escalated appropriately. Regional managers meet quarterly to review safeguarding issues, and learning from child practice reviews is shared across the service. **This is a strength.**
- 3.31 SEWAS has established clear processes for managing adoption disruptions. Disruption meetings are chaired independently and held promptly, with a focus on learning rather than blame. A recent audit of disruption cases has informed

service development, and findings are being shared across teams and with panel members. Planned training and the routine inclusion of disruption minutes in panel business further support a reflective and quality-assured approach. **This is a strength and should continue.**

- 3.32 Practitioners raised concerns about the impact of the current office environment on well-being and service delivery. The premises lack natural light, are affected by noise from neighbouring facilities, and do not offer access for birth parents or sufficient space for group work. While remote working arrangements help mitigate some of these issues, the premises do not support the full range of service activities. The relocation followed a regional cost-saving exercise. **SEWAS should review the suitability of the current premises and explore options to improve accessibility, wellbeing, and the delivery of direct work for both practitioners as well as people receiving a service**

- 3.33 Systems for the secure storage and management of records are in place. Practitioners demonstrate a clear understanding of data protection requirements, and records are stored securely in line with policy. Business support is described as a strength, and practitioners are confident in the systems used to manage case information and correspondence. Letterbox contact is managed through the duty system, which ensures continuity and accessibility for adopters. However, recent complaints highlighted inconsistencies in how contact preferences are recorded and implemented. **SEWAS should ensure that contact arrangements are consistently recorded, reviewed, and communicated across the team.**

4. Priority Areas for Improvement

- 4.1 SEWAS **must** ensure the Statement of Purpose and children's guide are reviewed annually and include all required information in line with regulatory expectations in line with Regulation 4 and Schedule 1 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019. Also, when the statement of purpose is next reviewed, SEWAS must notify CIW in accordance with Regulation 5(3) and (6) of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019.
- 4.2 SEWAS **must** ensure the Welsh language Active Offer is consistently promoted and that all key documents meet regulatory requirements, including availability in accessible formats in line with Regulation 4, 12 & Schedule 1 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019.
- 4.3 SEWAS **must** ensure its marketing strategy is robust and regularly reviewed to support them in their drive to recruit a sufficient number of adopters in line with

Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015)

- 4.4 SEWAS **must** ensure matching activity is consistently timely in line with Regulation 36 & 17 of the Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005
- 4.5 SEWAS **must** ensure adoption support services are delivered equitably and in a timely manner across all local authority areas in line with Regulations 16 and 17 of the Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (Wales) Regulations 2005 & Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2015)
- 4.6 SEWAS **must** implement a structured quality assurance framework to ensure consistent oversight and continuous improvement across all service areas in line with Regulation 39(1) & regulation 6 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (Wales) Regulations 2019.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 SEWAS **should** ensure that information is proactively offered in people's preferred language and format.
- 5.2 SEWAS **should** continue to strengthen its use of WEP to ensure consistent and timely permanence planning.
- 5.3 SEWAS **should** continue work with local authority colleagues to ensure matching documentation is child-centred, consistently informs placement planning and that trauma-informed tools are used effectively to support decision-making
- 5.4 SEWAS **should** strengthen transition arrangements and ensure they are consistently timely, well-coordinated, and informed by children's individual needs.
- 5.5 SEWAS **should** ensure adoption support plans are consistently robust, reviewed in a timely manner, and clearly aligned to the child's evolving needs.
- 5.6 SEWAS **should** continue to promote modern adoption arrangements that are child-focused, clearly recorded, and appropriately resourced.
- 5.7 SEWAS **should** ensure life story work is timely, accessible, and reflective of the child's voice and identity.

- 5.8 SEWAS **should** ensure that a regional strategic plan is developed to complement the operational plan and support alignment of resources and commissioning arrangements across the region and includes education departments, health boards, and NHS Trusts.
- 5.9 SEWAS **should** ensure clear guidance is developed for all service areas.
- 5.10 SEWAS **should** advocate for more suitable premises to support the delivery of high-quality services.
- 5.11 SEWAS **should** ensure that contact arrangements are consistently recorded, reviewed, and communicated across the team.
- 5.12 SEWAS **should** ensure future planning for adoption record services is informed by current and projected demand, and that resourcing is sufficient to meet statutory responsibilities and support timely access.

6. Next steps

- 6.1 CIW requires that SEWAS compile an improvement plan and share this with CIW by 18/11/2025.
- 6.2 CIW will review the improvement plan and seek further assurance of progress. This will be through a meeting with the Head of Children's Services of the host local authority as well as the Regional Adoption Manager within 18-24 months of publication of the report.
- 6.3 CIW will consider further activity to be assured of continued improvement and will consider bespoke engagement activity to support its ongoing monitoring.

7. Acknowledgements

CIW would like to thank practitioners, partners and people who gave their time and contributed to this inspection.

Yours sincerely,



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Appendix 1

Methodology

Self-Evaluation

- SEWAS was requested to complete a Self-Evaluation to reflect on their own performance in specific areas of service.

Fieldwork

- We reviewed the experiences of 20 people through the review and tracking of their records. We reviewed 16 records and tracked 4.
- Tracking a person's record may include having conversations with the person in receipt of services, their family or carers, adoption social worker, childcare social worker, manager, and where appropriate, other professionals involved.
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups, with 10 people receiving services and/or their carers (to include adoptive parents, foster carers and adopted adults).
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups, with 40 practitioners and managers. This included childcare social workers, adoption social workers, team managers, assistant team managers, voluntary adoption agency representative, regional adoption manager and head of children's services for the RAC's host local authority,
- We spoke with no elected members.
- We engaged, through interviews, with 9 childcare social workers and representatives from partner agencies.
- We spoke with 2 panel chairs and 4 panel members.
- We spoke with 4 children with their adopted parents present.
- We reviewed a sample of practitioners' supervision files.
- We observed a Stay and Play group.
- We reviewed supporting documentation sent to CIW for the purpose of the inspection.
- We administered surveys to SEWAS practitioners and managers, partner organisations and people. We received responses from 26 practitioners / managers from SEWAS, 73 from people and 37 from relevant stakeholders. 7 responses are received from birth families.

Our Privacy Notice can be found at <https://careinspectorate.wales/how-we-use-your-information>.

Welsh Language

CIW is committed to providing an active offer of the Welsh language during its activity with local authorities.

The active offer was not required on this occasion.

Appendix 2

Glossary of Terminology

Term	What we mean in our reports and letters
Must	Improvement is deemed necessary in order for the RAC to meet a duty outlined in legislation, regulation or code of practice. The RAC is not currently meeting its statutory duty/duties and must take action.
Should	Improvement will enhance service provision and/or outcomes for people. It does not constitute a failure to meet a legal duty at this time; but without suitable action, there is a risk the RAC may fail to meet its legal duty/duties in future.
Good practice	Identified areas of strength within the RAC. This relates to practice considered innovative and/or which consistently results in positive outcomes for people receiving statutory services.
Well-being	A principle of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 which aims for people to have well-being in every part of their lives. Well-being is more than being healthy. It is about being safe and happy, having choice and getting the right support, being part of a strong community, having friends and relationships that are good for you, and having hobbies, work or learning. It is about supporting people to achieve their own well-being and measuring the success of care and support.

Appendix 3

Quantity Definitions Table

Terminology	Definition
Nearly all	With very few exceptions
Most	90% or more
Many	70% or more
A majority	Over 60%

Half	50%
Around half	Close to 50%
A minority	Below 40%
Few	Below 20%
Very few	Less than 10%