Adoption and permanence:
learning from consortia and joint service provision

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Background

This report looks at the action being taken by local authority children's services to address performance issues on adoption and permanence, including increasing the number of prospective adopters, the number of children being adopted and reducing delays in the adoption process. It outlines the current context and describes a joint LGA, ADCS, SOLACE and VSC seminar on 26th March 2013 attended by DCSs and senior managers from a wide range of authorities.

It summarises the varied presentations made at the seminar, and the main discussion points arising from them. The discussions prompted by the various presentations were held under Chatham House rules, so contributions from the floor are not attributed. The report concludes with an outline of the joint position paper on adopter recruitment, assessment and approval sent to Children and Families Minister Edward Timpson by the LGA, SOLACE and ADCS – which includes commitments to a sector-defined approach to increasing the number of approved adopters which it is estimated could reduce the current national shortfall by up to 50 per cent by March 2014 (Annex A).

Finally, in Annex B, the report summarises the key findings of a recent data exercise conducted by ADCS to provide an analysis of adoption activity undertaken by local authorities acting as adoption agencies, including collaborative activity in which they are involved.

Context: The adoption challenge

The Coalition Government's focus on adoption goes back to the year of its election. Concerns expressed by MP's about delays and variability in performance from their constituency casework were highlighted and found a receptive audience in both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State Michael Gove, who was himself adopted. Back in November 2010, the then Children's Minister Tim Loughton, wrote to DCSs and Lead Members about the latest adoption statistics, urging them to do everything possible to increase the number of appropriate adoption placements and improve the speed with which decisions are made; he also made a speech marking National Adoption Week in which he said:

"A drop of 15 per cent in the number of children being placed for adoption this year is unacceptable. I hear about too many cases where prospective adopters are turned away because they don't meet the local profile, yet other local authorities have a shortage of suitable adopters. It can't be right that around 200 families, already approved by voluntary adoption agencies, are still waiting to adopt some of the most difficult-to-place children. Local authorities should be making more, and better, use of voluntary adoption agencies and the families waiting to adopt children. I want local authorities to focus on what is in the best interests of the child and look beyond what services they alone can offer."

At the time and, subsequently, there were concerns raised across the sector that a focus on adoption, however valid in tackling variability, might distort policy and consequently practice from the significantly wider issues of permanence and care. This debate has continued and is reflected in the recent discussions with OFSTED over limiting judgements on adoption in the newly proposed inspection arrangements for Autumn 2013.

A range of initiatives followed through 2011, including, in February, new guidance for local authorities and the establishment of an expert Ministerial Advisory Group. In April, The Times newspaper launched a campaign aimed at doubling the then annual total of 3,200 adoptions and speeding up the time taken over the adoption process. The Times commissioned Martin Narey, former Chief Executive of Barnardo's, to write a report on adoption and, whilst writing it, Mr Narey was made Ministerial Adviser on Adoption (in July 2011). In October, the DfE published new Children in Care and Adoption Performance Tables.

In March 2012, the Prime Minister himself launched An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay, which was accompanied by a report from the expert working group, Re-designing adoption. The latter helpfully analysed the well-publicised criticisms of the system and the counter-views, but recognised that the criticisms must be tackled. The group's focus was on addressing the concerns without losing the strengths of the existing system; 'achieving change without detriment'.

The concerns highlighted were that:

- It was questionable whether all children who needed the permanence of an adoptive family are being identified, pro-active plans made for them and progressed in a timely way

- it takes too long to secure an adoptive placement

- the application and assessment processes for prospective adopters had become a disincentive to adopt

- for some prospective applicants, the system was experienced as unfair because of inconsistencies between adoption agencies in their application of policies

- despite good intentions and recent changes in post-adoptive support, adoptive parents sometimes felt abandoned as they care for increasingly needy children

but the counter views included:

- the true measure of success in adoption is the very low rate of failure or disruption – which must always be the key test

- the numbers of adoptions need to be seen in the context of the growth in alternative forms of permanence, including Special Guardianship Orders

- the criticisms of the adoption service often tend to be on behalf of the adults as prospective adopters rather than the children – whilst the service must prioritise the needs of children

- there is a fundamental difficulty in the mismatch between the increasingly complex and challenging needs of children (including sibling groups) and the capacity and expectations of many prospective adopters

- if the problem is one of consistency, then system reform is not required as much as a more consistent approach in the existing system.

These initiatives – of which more followed in a steady flow (see below) – ran alongside an independent Family Justice Review, which was set up in 2010 and reported in November 2011, leading to significant reforms in the family courts and how they work, including measures to reduce delay. Whilst there were tensions between central and local government, there was also a lot of constructive work being done, especially through the expert group (with representatives of local government children's services, the voluntary sector and academia).

In a major speech on adoption in February 2012, anticipating publication of the Action Plan, Michael Gove highlighted what he saw as the central issues, including:

- children and young people do not encounter disadvantage because they have been in care; they are in care because they have had to be rescued from disadvantage

- there is strong evidence that there has been too much reluctance to remove a child from circumstances of consistent and outright abuse and neglect

- children whose entry to care is delayed by indecision or drift risk longer exposure to damage and neglect, increased emotional and behavioural problems and more placement disruption and instability

- of all the possible permanent solutions, adoptions are the most likely to last, and when a child is adopted quickly, before their first birthday, the breakdown figure is very low

- there has been a fall in the adoption rate over the previous decade, though the number of children finding permanent routes out of care has increased;

"we need to be careful that alternative solutions like special guardianship or residence orders are not used as a substitute for adoption when it would be the best option for a particular child."

- the average time between a child entering the care system and being adopted has been over two-and-a-half years, but this average hides huge variations across different regions

- we need a system that works for all children, regardless of where they live, which is quick, effective and robust – and we need radically to increase the supply of adoptive parents; hence the Action Plan on Adoption.

In May 2012, the DfE introduced 'Adoption scorecards', highlighting three indicators of how quickly each local authority places children in need of adoption; this brought to a head the differences between Ministers and leaders of children's services and local government. A joint statement by ADCS, LGA and SOLACE said:

"The data fails to provide a sound basis for comparison across local authority areas. For example, one council's Ofsted-rated outstanding adoption service looks like a poor performer in the score card – this is simply not credible. We have engaged constructively with DfE and are therefore even more disappointed that our shared improvement agenda is undermined by a misleading use of data. Councils acknowledge that there is variation in performance across the country and want to work with the Government to help support improvement... Councils simply cannot risk shifting their focus from the quality of placements to the speed of placements."

Nevertheless, the sector response through the Children's Improvement Board was to commission support for local authorities engaged by DFE in any initial dialogue over scorecard performance. This was followed up with a more formative diagnostic assessment where appropriate. The learning from this exercise has proved valuable and is captured in the CIB published Director's Briefing; indeed, the diagnostic has now become part of a more universally available toolkit for children's services operating on a commercial basis.

In September 2012, the DfE launched a consultation document Adoption and Fostering: Tackling Delay, which included proposals for a shorter, two-stage training and assessment process for prospective adopters (developed by the expert group); a fast-track process for previous adopters and foster carers; increasing the use of the Adoption Register; 'Fostering for Adoption'; and other measures aimed at streamlining the system. Statistics released a week after the consultation was launched showed an increase in the number of children coming into care (up 3% from the previous year, and 21% up from 2008), but also a 12 per cent increase from the 2011 figure in the number of children adopted.

In January 2013, the DfE published Further Action on Adoption: Finding more Loving Homes. This included a 'last chance for local authorities to demonstrate that they can take convincing action to put a plan in place for the long term and recruit the adopters children need now nationally' – with failure to do so leading to Ministers using a new power (included in the Children and Families Bill) to require LAs to outsource their adoption recruitment and approval services.

This drew a blunt response from the sector observing that local authorities had worked with the Department for Education on a wide range of reforms including the Adoption Gateway, a streamlined adopter assessment process, speeding up the adoption process and encouraging fostering for adoption as well as to address the unacceptable variation in quality and performance of adoption agency practice. LGA SOLACE and ADCS strongly opposed the new power, describing it as 'heavy handed and unnecessary'. Nevertheless they acknowledged that having 150 LAs all doing their own adopter recruitment may not be sustainable, and that 'some of them may be too small to operate effectively on their own', and undertook to work together to explore the possibility of consortia and partnerships to scale up provision where that is the case.

The joint LGA, ADCS, SOLACE and VSC seminar on 26th March 2013

The seminar was well attended with DCSs and senior staff with responsibility for adoption, permanence and care drawn from across the country and including representation from the majority of consortia arrangements.

Anton Florek, Chief Executive of the VSC, introduced the event and pointed out that local authority (LA) performance on adoption, in terms of the data gathered varies greatly, but the real reasons behind this variation are not yet fully understood. Amongst factors affecting timing, there are tensions between the parallel reform programmes affecting LAs and family courts, but a range of work is going on with the aim of improving knowledge and understanding, reducing delays and increasing the rate of adoption.

Colin Hilton, Director of the Children's Improvement Board (CIB), emphasised the centrality of adoption to the Government as a policy issue, with No. 10 taking a very active role in addition to that played by the DfE. He reminded delegates of a number of government actions, including the publication of LA performance tables and the 'threat', in the Children and Families Bill currently before Parliament, to require LAs to outsource adoption functions (see above). He stressed the importance of the sector being in the strongest possible position to respond to this government agenda, pointing out that the DfE publication Further Action on Adoption identified an annual shortfall of some 600 adopters. He announced that a forthcoming joint LGA/SOLACE/ADCS paper (now published, and outlined below) describes a range of possible actions with the potential to halve the national adopter shortfall by April 2014. Whilst reiterating local government's commitment to increasing the number of adopters, Colin issued a 'health warning' that the current focus on adoption could be at the expense of other related issues – in particular, overshadowing other forms of permanence for children in care and funding to support adoption activity.

The remainder of the event comprised a series of presentations and discussion, summarised below, starting with brief consideration of the parameters of good practice, visioning the shape and size of the future ideal system, and the creation of a public value proposition (by reference to Prof. Mark Moore's 'strategic triangle[1]').

Key points from initial discussion:

- the primary aim of adoption is to find permanent solutions for children in the care service, not to provide children for couples; the focus on adoption is much stronger in the UK than in many other countries

- practice should be child-centred, and informed by evidence on the success of outcomes, with a willingness to challenge existing thinking

- it requires a special sort of parent to look after somebody else's child – it is not the same as raising a child of your own; this is particularly true for the increasing number of children entering the system with more serious difficulties at an early age

- the aim should be to get children placed at the earliest time there is the authority to do so, with matching taking place during proceedings and an adopter ready by the time of their completion (ie. no avoidable delay)

- the key issue for carers is the quality of their treatment, including being kept informed and being treated as flexibly as possible

- 180+ adoption agencies is too many, leading to some with inadequate scale and capacity, given the range of needs to be met – particularly post-adoption support (the availability of which is an essential factor in successful recruitment of adopters, particularly for children with greater needs); scale needs to relate to the shape of populations and how to meet their needs, rather than existing models

- there is a danger of creating an unhealthy 'hierarchy' of permanence, with poor public knowledge and understanding of alternative solutions, which must be kept in sight

- support for adoptive parents must be long term, including the involvement of health and education services; this requires stability of funding (which cannot be based on a one-year grant).

A powerful contribution suggested:

- there is a moral imperative to focus on getting things right for children long term, and there are improvements which can be made to the present system

- there is sometimes an 'arrogance' about the sector, with a tendency to think it knows best: it was acknowledged that, despite major reservations about the adoption score-card diagnostic, it had been helpful in highlighting that too many children and young people were being let down – *"we need to acknowledge there is more we could do, and then do it"* - participant.

Adoption 22: the NW Adoption Consortium

Jane Holden, Operations Manager of Adoption 22, outlined its origins and operation. Emerging in 2005 from existing regional consortia, Adoption 22 now comprises 23 LAs (since reorganisation in Cheshire) and four VAAs. Within the region, there are four separate groupings (clusters) of LAs with levels of joint service provision and integration ranging from whole service integration to informal joint working. Originally conceived as a brokerage agency, Adoption 22 has three part-time staff and is underpinned by a service level agreement and a governance steering group, and is now evolving to undertake a much broader range of activities:

- set an annual interagency fee

- support and manage a regional adoption database

- support a regional adoption managers group and working groups

- develop regional protocol, guidance, policies and procedures

- regional training and conferences

- identification and support of regional commissioning.

Adoption 22 produces a quarterly adoption data report for its LA and VAA members, containing regional performance data and benchmarking information using Ad22 data and other sources, including the DfE Scorecard. Some of the statistics are quite challenging, and have led to some soul searching, and an honest approach to the way forward. The trend has been a steadily increasing shortfall in adopters between September 2008 and September 2012, but the number doubling over the past three quarters to a regional total topping 400 – implying that the national shortfall may be higher than current estimated. All but one LA have more children seeking placements than approved adopters (several by a considerable margin), but the evidence nevertheless shows that local support for adoption is more effective than national initiatives.

Norfolk/Suffolk intensive fostering partnership

Sue Lowndes, Suffolk County Council's Head of Fostering, described the development of a shared, intensive evidence-based intervention programme (IEBI) across the two counties, focused on the Great Yarmouth/Lowestoft area straddling the border and sharing common issues – and with a good local CAMHS service upon which to build as an active partner. The background was a rising number of looked after children and young people with increasingly complex needs (including issues with drugs, mental health, offending behaviour, learning and emotional difficulties), making foster placement very difficult and resulting in a disproportionate level of expenditure on a small number of individuals. The strategy was to develop the DfE grant-funded programme with the aim of increasing placements within the counties (in line with young people's wishes), achieving consistently high standards and choice in local placements, improving outcomes and reducing costs. The two strands of the 12-month programme are designed to promote the young people's stability and ability to live in a family (Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care, MTFC) and to develop the parenting skills of their foster carers (KEEP).

The opportunities presented included:

- redesigning the services

- achieving local sufficiency through managing the market

- developing a collaborative advantage, both through the two councils joint work, and that with the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust.

The key learning outcomes were the importance of:

- establishing the 'Public Value Proposition' (which required engagement and support at DCS/Lead Member level)

- building in sustainability

- understanding the 'Authorising Environment' and securing the engagement of stakeholders (with the confidence to adapt the programme to meet local needs)

- establishing clear governance to support the partnership

- establishing the programme within the overall children's strategy

- recognising and working with differences between partners (the two councils have very different approaches to commissioning of services; Suffolk CC

has taken the lead, with Norfolk CC largely purchasing places – but providing support and a pooled budget)

- working with the complexities of staff and carer recruitment (which proved quite challenging across three public bodies with varying terms and conditions)

- challenging existing processes where necessary to secure success.

The outcome is that the new service ('Zipwire') has been established, with all staff in post by November 2012, the first MTFC placement in January 2013, recruitment of foster carers on target, and the KEEP programme starting in March 2013. The key objective has been to develop a programme which is supported because it works, and will therefore be sustainable when the grant is no longer available.

Adoption in Bedfordshire - learning from Central Bedfordshire/Bedford Borough shared service partnership

Fiona Mackirdy, Central Bedfordshire's Head of Adoption and Fostering, described the shared adoption service, which was a legacy of local government reorganisation (LGR) in 2009 – in effect, the continuation of the existing fostering and adoption service previously run by the old County Council (and rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2008). Following LGR, and establishment of two new unitary LAs (which share a similar demography) in place of the County Council, it was agreed to maintain the existing service through a service level agreement (SLA) for at least one year – with a commitment from both councils to make the arrangement work. The service is hosted by Central Bedfordshire Council, with the budgets based on a crude percentage split between the councils based on 14 measures of activity. The SLA was found to require the addition of more detail when reviewed at the end of the first year. Learning from the shared service partnership included:

- potential for some economies of scale, particularly in 'standalone' posts (eg. team manager, panel adviser, life-story worker and recruitment/training activities)

- ability to establish a good 'brand'/marketing presence for recruitment

- collaboration rather than competition for adopters and staff

- size and expertise affords opportunities to share good practice and to innovate

- need to establish unit costs and usage of the service (under pressure from members to ensure that both councils get equal value – not an easy task)

- need to agree mechanisms for responding to changes in usage levels, ensure agreed governance and planning mechanism for change

- need to manage the 'in-pipes' which affect outcomes (eg. quality of reports, resource issues, ICT access, virtual school support for looked after children, and areas where the two councils have different services)

- importance of Ofsted engagement and understanding of the issues of shared provision, together with a shared level of aspiration on what is acceptable as an Ofsted judgement and on the adoption scorecard (which has resource implications)

- need to pay attention to practical arrangements (eg. case recording, ICT and locations), accountability mechanisms and employer liabilities

- importance of allowing enough time to manage the SLA and communicate positively and early about potential issues (so that issues don't blow up unexpectedly).

The tri-borough fostering and adoption service (Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster)

Steve Miley, Hammersmith and Fulham's Director of Family Services, described the development over the past year of the tri borough service, which was created from the three individual services – each of which was previously small scale in terms of LAC and staff numbers, and adoption and special guardianship orders. The three councils retain their individual LAC services, served by one fostering and adoption service in a single location, with pooled staff in four teams: recruitment (divided into fostering and adoption), fostering, a connected team, and adoption (family finding and post-order work). Key features of the arrangement include:

- the aim was to achieve productivity savings, not one-off structural savings

- there are other tri, and bi-borough arrangements between the three LAs, and more are being looked at; the process allows a deep 'compare and contrast' exercise to match performance against management issues

- employment: K&C hosts the service; most staff retain their original employer, competitive interviews were needed only for team managers; and Section 113 (of the 1972 Local Government Act) enables the service to be put at the disposal of other LAs

- finance: decisions and payment for placements are made by each LA; funding for staff is by % LAC size

- governance: line management by one Director of Family Services, reporting to 3 x Lead Member, 3 x scrutiny, 3 x Cabinet (ie. each LA individually)

- IT: a single carer database, but three ICS systems (until summer 2014); payments via three LA systems

- Ofsted: a single inspection, with separate reports for each LA.

The arrangement is not yet a year old, so it is early days to judge its impact. An initial report indicates the following:

- improved adopter recruitment (a bigger improvement than foster recruitment)

- more choice from a larger pool of adopters, and more children placed in-house; staff, including long-term managers, believe the new system is better

- Lead Member confidence has been enhanced, and fostering inspection was positive

- no negative impact from loss of individual LA brand; adopters see more opportunity for better matching.

Overall, the experience has certainly not been straightforward, with many issues arising from multiple IT systems, HR inconsistencies (it may have been easier to have a single employer) and practice differences (which should have been aligned from the outset); more lead in time and a period of co-location prior to the launch would also have helped. But it is felt to have been the right decision.

Key points from the concluding round-table and plenary discussion:

- Is it the right cohort of children on the 'waiting list' for adoption, or are hopes being falsely raised? Children over the age of three become increasingly hard to place as they get older, and sibling groups of three or more are almost impossible to place. (Some agencies appear to 'succeed' by concentrating on easier, younger, cases – whilst others focus on hard to place groups.)

- Is there an optimum size for a collaborative arrangement, or is the issue more about function than size? Most LAs are good at some things and less good at others, and there may be scope for purchasing the functions they're not good at. But a major issue is the contrast between the low cost/high volume placements and the high cost/low volume placements – with a need for sub-regional, regional or even national specialist solutions for the latter.

- Foster carers are perceived to receive better support (and payment) from independent fostering agencies (IFAs) than from LAs; LAs need to manage this perception, and to 'sell' their offer more effectively. They could also apply learning from the fostering experience to the recruitment and support of adopters.

- There is a need to balance management of the 'here and now' (children currently awaiting adoption) with the challenge of how to use recent research and new practice to manage the future differently (for example, most of the children coming into care by age 5 have been known from much earlier).

- There is a need to improve public information and perception about the system as a whole. In particular, special guardianship should be better known and understood (adoption has remained relatively steady whilst there has been a major increase in SG Orders, which provide a more appropriate permanence solution for many young people). The current focus on adoption creates a danger of overshadowing alternatives.

- There are different ways of doing things well, and quality needs encouraging.

- There is space for a broader (regional?) view of some issues, and LAs should seek support with issues on which they need it – seeking the best spatial area for a solution (including possibly from outside their region).

- The Adoption Reform Grant offers LAs an opportunity (though also presents a risk and challenge, as it is funded by top-slicing the Early Intervention Grant); it must be used to best effect (eg. funding new permanent settings as early as possible, focusing expenditure on children already awaiting placements).

- Government (of all political persuasions) has a major intolerance of long-term commitments – so a series of short-term initiatives is far more likely, and LAs will need to make the most of them.

Conclusion

Experience, reflection and analysis suggest that, in order to meet the challenges and expectations of children and adopters, as well as the government and the regulator, LAs increasingly will need to know themselves well, work together across boundaries, engage with a range of voluntary sector and independent partners, share and learn from their own and others' experience, and keep a clear focus on the quality and outcomes of their permanency arrangements.

Annex A

Adopter recruitment, assessment and approval: LGA, SOLACE and ADCS commitments to a sector-defined approach to increasing the number of approved adopters

This paper has been sent to Children and Families Minister Edward Timpson. The accompanying letter states that 'opinions differ about the solution to the problem of the adopter shortage', but councils agree that there is an urgent need to increase the number of adopters to match the number of children awaiting adoption and the complexities of their specific needs. 'Local government is rising to the challenge by doing things differently and changing current practice.' It says there is also a high degree of consensus between councils and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) about the way forward: VAAs recruit only one in five adopters, and are clear that they would not be able to scale up to meet demand; councils already contract with VAAs for elements of their adoption service in many areas, but this does not offer a solution to the recruitment problem nationally. (The LGA press notice accompanying release of the document provides data showing that twice the proportion of initial enquiries to LAs result in applications for adoption compared with those to VAAs.)

Introductory points in the paper are:

- The number of children approved by courts for adoption has increased significantly in each of the last two years. It is estimated that some 4,200 children were waiting to move in with a family at 31 March 2012. The DfE estimates an additional 500-600 adopters need to be recruited and approved per annum, in order to address the estimated national shortfall of 2,000 - 3,000 adopters (as at 31 March 2012).

- LGA, SOLACE and ADCS have made a set of commitments to address the shortfall of adopters and the small scale at which some local authority adoption agencies operate in the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, with the collective ambition that by 31 March 2014 the national adopter shortfall estimated by DfE (at 31 March 2012) to be between 2,000 – 3,000 will be reduced by more than 50%. The associations are also working through the CIB to support the sector to increase the number of prospective adopters (eg. through events such as that on 26 March).

LGA and SOLACE commitments:

- Consolidating leadership – a communication plan is being implemented which includes:

  - discussion in relevant bodies to ensure elected member representatives are fully informed of plans, and there is continuing scrutiny of progress

  - establishing a group of member champions for adopter recruitment

  - production of a fact sheet of data on adopter shortage, and information on the challenge and support on offer

- Addressing performance challenges – working together, through CIB, to analyse data and identify councils who require support to improve, including:

  - provision of briefings and information as necessary

  - matching up with the member champion group

  - engaging the Chair and Lead members of the LGA Improvement and Innovation Board to address any persistent poor performance or unwillingness to engage in improvement

- Addressing systemic disincentives – measures to tackle systemic issues include:

  - further promotion of alignment of the inter-authority fee paid to other councils for adopters with that paid for adopters from VAAs

  - work on development (and testing) of a cost recovery methodology for setting fees, which would remove the current disincentive to recruiting adopters for other areas and would introduce an element of competition

  - explore with DfE and other stakeholders the potential for incentive payments/payment by results for adopter recruitment

- Working with the VAAs to improve a cooperative approach to tackling the shortage of adopters.

ADCS commitments:

- the benefits of Payment by Results (PbR) and Social Investment Bonds (SIBs) should be explored to provide potential stimulation and incentives into the market specifically for those children who wait the longest to be placed with adoptive families (often older children, sibling groups and children with disabilities or other particular needs)

- ADCS supports market diversification for the recruitment, assessment and approval of prospective adopters, but de-stabilising existing arrangements by removing or threatening to remove the role of the largest supplier [LAs] must be avoided. Where areas wish to consider floating off services to social enterprises or staff mutuals, it is vital that the right entrepreneurial leadership exists to drive progress whilst ensuring appropriate safeguards remain in place. Whilst the entry of social enterprises and staff mutuals into a diversified market would be welcome, it will not address the shortage of adopters quickly

- ADCS will support the active development of formal merged services or hard federations between LAs, and with VAAs and with any new entries to the market which may emerge

- ADCS is undertaking a data exercise to better understand and triangulate DfE estimates of the approved adopter shortfall, the analysis and accompanying narrative of which (identifying implications and recommendations) will be shared with Ministers (this is now complete; see Annex)

- ADCS is also committed to:

    - addressing the issue of too many small LA agencies, and the structural issues of cooperation between LAs and VAAs

    - more targeted work on those children who have been waiting longest

    - taking a whole system view

    - promoting the existing suite of reforms to adoption to reduce the time the process takes and address the shortage of adopters.

Annex B

ADCS Adoption Data Analysis

The ADCS has published a detailed and informative report, with accompanying narrative, on its recent data exercise aimed at providing an up-to-date analysis of adoption activity undertaken by local authorities. It considers data on both children and adopters in the system and information about collaborative activity in which local authorities are involved. The analysis is based on data received by ADCS covering 139 local authorities, a 91% response rate.

The data returns included information about adoption activity currently, at 31 March 2013, and that predicted by 31 March 2014 covering:

- current and predicted numbers of children placed for adoption (but without a final adoption order)

- current and predicted numbers of children waiting for adoption

- current and predicted numbers of adopters waiting, and the number being assessed

- sources of approved adopters that LAs plan to use over the next 12 months.

The data provide no information about the needs of children waiting, or the suitability of adopters to meet those needs, nor about how long children or adopters wait.

The main findings from the analysis include the following:

- there was a 45 per cent increase in the number of children placed but without a final adoption order between 31 March 2012 and 2013 compared with the previous year (this trend was reflected in all regions, though unevenly)

- the number of children with a placement order but not matched or placed for adoption is likely to be an over-estimate of the number who are waiting for adoption because suitable adopters have not been found (because some will be in the process of being matched, or waiting for specific adopters to have their approval finalised, or waiting for the panel to meet to finalise the match with an identified adopter, or the child's parents are contesting the adoption)

- similarly, the number of adopters approved but not matched is an over-estimate of those adopters who are available for future matching (because some are involved in concurrent planning, and are waiting for a specific child; some have put their application on hold for personal reasons; a few are having their suitability reassessed; and, again, the timing of adoption panels)

- on a national basis, if every adopter waiting was matched to a child who is waiting, there would be a 33 per cent reduction in the number of children waiting (1,400 fewer)

- there are significant differences between individual LAs and regions in the numbers of adopters and children waiting; whilst some LAs have more adopters than children waiting, no regional grouping has such a surplus

- if the number of adopters currently being assessed is taken into account (on the basis that this provides an indication of the short-term supply of adopters) then, nationally, the total of adopters waiting and in assessment almost balances the number of children waiting; significant differences between LAs and regions remain, but four regions show a surplus of adopters waiting and in assessment over children waiting

- the number of adopters that LAs plan to have in assessment by 31 March 2014 is 60 per cent greater than the number in assessment at 31 March 2013 (based on 116 LA responses to questions about both)

- the number of adopters that LAs plan to recruit in 2013-14 (based on figures from 121 LAs) is 50 per cent greater than the 3,000 recruited nationally in 2011-12; this would be sufficient in 2014 to meet the DfE's predicted requirements of 3,600 adopters each year, plus up to 1,000 to clear the backlog of children waiting

- LAs reported a wide range of formal and less formal arrangements with other adoption agencies (LAs and voluntary), with the majority expressing the intention to source adopters from any agency that could provide an adopter to meet the needs of the specific children waiting in the authority, and only slightly fewer saying they intended to supply some adopters to other LAs.

The narrative accompanying the report provides further interpretation of the findings, and some commentary on proposed changes to adoption provision. In it, ADCS acknowledges that, in the past, adoption services may not have received the attention or resources that they needed to be most effective, and that recent national attention has played a valuable role in focusing minds in the issue – though it points out that the data gathered shows that during 2012-13 LAs made significant progress, and intend to further improve the supply of adopters in 2013-14.

The important point is made that the issue is not just a question of an absolute shortage of adopters, but requires an emphasis on (i) recruitment according to an assessment of need and (ii) distributing approved adopters among

LAs more effectively. Successful adoptions are based on appropriate matching of adopters' skills and capabilities with children's needs; if there are children and adopters waiting in the same LA, the adopters are presumably not considered suitable for the children waiting.

Key points made in the narrative include the following (some of which appear as recommendations, *shown in italics*):

- reasons given for why children may be waiting underline the weakness in taking a wholly data-driven approach to analysing adoption

- there is a delicate balance to be struck between the scale of an agency's adoption activity and the opportunities for personal interaction between professionals, children and families

- it is necessary to combine a personal approach with a more strategic analysis of both current and future needs

- the variation in the rate of improvement in the number of children placed for adoption in different LAs suggests that, as well as a shortage of adopters to meet particular needs, there may also be a problem of distribution – aspects of which are considered in the paper

- the combination of economic and demographic changes and pressures will be felt in the adoption system as they influence the numbers and needs of children in the care system and the availability and willingness of adults to become adopters; changes to the way that ethnicity is considered in matching children to adopters may help some areas to reduce the number of children waiting; some LAs may also find that broadening their collaborative arrangements could open up new sources of adopters from a broader range of ethnic backgrounds

- groups of LAs where there are already a large number of children waiting, where the group as a whole is a net importer of adopters, and where there are similar demographic profiles may struggle to form a sustainable adopter pool; geographically-oriented consortia may not always be the best solution – collaborating with LAs further away may lead to a more diverse pool of adopters for all LAs involved

- *ADCS calls on LAs to:*

  - examine existing collaborative arrangements for sharing adopters

  - work with partners to understand and alleviate any shortage of suitable adopters, including through voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs)

  - where they are not in collaborations, seek to form a sustainable arrangement with other agencies; explore closer collaboration with a smaller number of LAs and VAAs to support early matching and concurrent planning; and consider how regional or sub-regional contracts with other agencies could offer efficiencies and alignment of fostering and adoption processes

- there are issues which require consideration (outlined in the paper) around recruitment of adopters by VAAs, sometimes through formal contracts, including for the support of concurrent planning; some of these may have implications for the use of the National Register

- *ADCS calls on LAs entering contractual arrangements with other agencies to consider carefully:*

  - arrangements for sharing information about trends in the needs and numbers of children expected to be placed for adoption

  - accountability arrangements that reflect adoption's place in the wider children's services system

  - arrangements that allow social workers to form and sustain supportive relationships with children and prospective adopters

- the National Gateway for adoption has been established to increase the rate of conversion from an initial enquiry to assessment and approval by an adoption agency; Ofsted estimated that in 2011-12 there were 25,000 enquiries but only 3,000 subsequent approvals, so a small improvement in the conversion rate would greatly increase the number of adopters available nationally – though this would not necessarily result in an increase in the number that are suitable for the children waiting (the National Gateway will need to work closely with agencies and partnerships to understand the nature of demand in their areas)

- *the revised two-stage adopter assessment process should be implemented without delay*

- there are important issues (including costs and collaborative arrangements) around concurrent approval of individuals as foster carers and adopters, especially where fostering and adoption services are provided by agencies outside the LA; *ADCS calls on LAs entering into contractual arrangements with an independent fostering agency or VAA to ensure that arrangements for concurrent approval are not compromised*

- post adoption support is critically important both for adopter recruitment and for supporting stable adoptions in the longer term, and the effect of increased inter-adoption agency working is likely to result in increased out-of-authority placements; the role of other local partners (particularly health providers) is critical in the provision of post-adoption support, and *ADCS calls on the Government to clarify as soon as possible proposals for funding and delivery of post-adoption support.*

The narrative concludes by highlighting that LAs, as corporate parents, retain the ultimate responsibility for ensuring a sufficient supply of adopters for children with a placement order – including strategic planning to ensure that matches are timely and children do not wait for adoption longer than necessary. It suggests that other payment models may need to be explored to secure a sustainable supply of adopters for those children hardest to place, and says there is a strong argument for retaining local delivery of adopter recruitment, approval and matching services as part of the wider corporate parenting responsibilities of LAs, albeit in a mixed market of adoption agencies.

The size of some individual adoption services does not appear to allow recruitment of sufficient suitable adopters from within their boundaries, and collaborative arrangements create larger pools of adopters which increase the likelihood of meeting the needs of a particular child, provided that the diversity of adopters is increased and mirrors that of the needs of children requiring adopters. But the narrative suggests that the collaboration to support concurrent planning and early matching requires closer working, and may operate more effectively on a scale smaller than a regional footprint (but bigger than a single LA adoption agency's footprint).

Overall, it concludes that LAs will, together, face up to the challenge of recruiting 50 per cent more adopters for each of the next three years by forming strategic collaborations at a number of levels – which must be underpinned nationally by a free exchange of data and intelligence; a system of incentives that recognises the full cost of recruitment and approval of adopters; an efficient, effective and rigorous process for approving adopters, including dual approval as foster carers and adopters; and a clear offer of post-adoption support for adopters and the children they adopt, with certainty for LAs about the resources they must find to provide such support.

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email: dcsleadership@virtualstaffcollege.co.uk

Sir Colin Campbell Building
Triumph Road
Nottingham
NG7 2TU

T: 0115 7484126

E: dcsleadership@virtualstaffcollege.co.uk

www.virtualstaffcollege.co.uk

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