

Adoption Action Plan

14 March 2012

Further to the Prime Minister's announcement on the 9 March, the Secretary of State has today published full detail of the Government's Adoption Action Plan, which contains proposals aimed at improving and speeding up the adoption system. Legislative elements will be included in a Bill in the next Parliamentary session. A publication on the wider care system for children is also expected in the summer. The Children's Minister, Tim Loughton, has committed to working with the LGA on adoption and care reform.

LGA Key Messages

- Achieving the best outcomes for children is the most important thing for councils. Adoption is right for some children, but for others long term stability might best be found with friends and family through special guardianship.
- Councils and social work professionals will continue to work on finding children secure, stable and loving homes. We agree that delays should be minimised and while councils are rightly keen to reduce delays in matching children in their care to loving families, the Government's score card system risks shifting focus from the quality of placements onto just the speed of placements. Children in care and adopters should not be a commodity to be processed as fast as possible. Adoption's success as the best form of long-term care should not be put at risk by focusing on speed over quality.
- Scorecards do not provide a fair picture of performance and could deter prospective adopters if councils are wrongly deemed to be underperforming. They do not take into account the quality of placements; the excellent work some councils do in finding homes for children that are harder to place; or any improvements over the 3 years.
- Five times as many children are approved for adoption as there are prospective adoptive homes and this fundamental shortage needs to be addressed. We also need willing people to come forward to help councils find stable homes for siblings, older children and those with health issues or disabilities. It is widely recognised that finding adoptive parents for a newborn baby is much easier.
- The Government has rightly recognised that bureaucratic target settings and top-down micro-management of councils do not deliver better services. Local councils know that the best way to improve what they do is to understand their own strengths and weaknesses and to tackle problems directly. The Government has endorsed this approach through funding a major programme of sector self improvement for council children's services. The scorecard system is completely at odds with this new approach.

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SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

Adoption Scorecard

The Government is introducing a 'scorecard' for each local authority, with a range of indicators, heavily focused on the length of time the adoption process takes. There will be a number of contextual indicators, including in relation to adoption rates. The figures will be a three year average, updated annually.

LGA View:

- Whilst councils are rightly keen to reduce delays in matching children in their care to loving families, the Government's scorecard system is not the answer. It will provide a very limited picture of performance and could cause unnecessary and unwarranted reputational damage for some children's services departments.
- Councils are already faced with a system that has five times more children waiting for adoption, than we have adopters. Pitching councils against each other through targets and scorecards is a gamble that could actually prove detrimental to the adoption process. We cannot afford to put prospective parents off if their council is wrongly deemed to be underperforming
- Placements driven by government targets rather than the needs of a child could also be at greater risk of breaking down. The scorecards will not take into account the quality of the placement, nor will they acknowledge the problems that councils face when trying to find homes for siblings, older children or those with health issues or disabilities.
- The focus on only adoption also fails to take into account other options for permanence more appropriate for some children, such as Special Guardianship which may be awarded to family members or long-term foster parents. Although adoption rates have decreased, over the last 5 years there has been a 27 per cent increase in overall permanence orders.

Intervention

The Government will set performance thresholds for timeliness, which will be progressively tightened over the next four years. The Action Plan is clear that being below the threshold does not necessarily mean the council is performing badly. Delays could be due, for example, to the courts or as a result of children having particular needs which make them harder to find families for.

LGA View:

- Given that the scorecard data does not provide a fair picture of performance, it is absolutely right that there is no automatic link between the threshold and intervention. Further diagnostic work would be needed to fully understand the situation, including direct contact with councils.
- In line with the Government's wider policy on local government performance, we expect the sector to have the opportunity to improve itself and that Ministerial intervention is to be used only as a last resort.
- The LGA is a partner in a major programme of improvement for children's services. Through the Children's Improvement Board, it will work with local councils to ensure that improvement support on adoption is available to those areas that need it.

VALUING PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

A Working Group established by the Government has made a series of proposals designed to improve the system for prospective adopters.

A new training and assessment process

A radical re-design leading to a two stage process: initial training and preparation clearly separated from a streamlined assessment. It is anticipated that in the majority of cases the first stage should be complete within two months and the second within four. There will be a fast-track process for approved foster carers and people who have previously adopted. The Government accepts these proposals and will consult on regulatory change later in the year.

LGA View:

- The LGA has already called for unnecessary reams of paperwork to be scrapped to help speed up the system. These proposals, including making it easier for foster carers to adopt, are therefore very positive. The proposed pilots on a draft new assessment form should be carefully evaluated to ensure they are fit for purpose.

National Gateway

The Government accepts the principle of a new national gateway, which would provide a first point of contact for independent advice for prospective adopters. It would collect management information on how prospective adopters are handled. The Working Group has been asked to consider whether the gateway should have a wider role, including linking to the National Register.

LGA View:

- Five times as many children are approved for adoption as there are prospective adoptive homes. Proposals such as the Gateway aimed at increasing the numbers of adoptive families are helpful.
- Any management information collected by the Gateway would need to add value to the elements included in the scorecard. It would also be important for any information to be objective and not solely based on the views of adopters, representing only one side of the story.

Adoption Support and recruitment

An 'adoption passport' would be a guarantee of the support that adoptive families will receive, providing greater clarity and consistency. Proposals also include an extension to existing adoption support. Further detail is to be set out in advance of the summer publication.

LGA View:

- We advocate effective support for adoptive families, in particular to reduce breakdowns and help increase the amount of people willing to adopt children with particular needs. We will work with Government to develop these proposals. Such a passport should be at local level to enable flexibility to reflect the different challenges and services locally.
- Councils are managing cuts of 28 per cent; any requirement to extend adoption support must be fully funded.

FINDING CHILDREN LOVING HOMES WITHOUT DELAY

The proposals announced today follow the Prime Minister's announcement on the 9 March, where he outlined proposals to speed up the adoption system with regard to:

- legislative changes to ethnicity and matching;
- concurrent planning for adoption and fostering; and
- use of the National Adoption Register.

The LGA produced an On the Day Briefing in response to these measures, which can be accessed [here](#).

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