

28 March 2012

Item 2

Reform of adoption and care systems

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

The Government published its Adoption Action Plan on 14 March, with proposals aimed at improving and speeding up the system. Legislative elements will be included in a Bill in the next Parliamentary session and a publication on the wider care system for children is expected in the summer.

This paper provides an overview of the Action Plan and an update on LGA activity.

Recommendation

That Members discuss the issues outlined in the paper.

Action

LGA officers to action as directed.

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Reform of adoption and care systems

Background

1. The Secretary of State made a speech on 23 February, reiterating the Government's commitment to improving and speeding up the adoption process and setting out the case for the forthcoming Action Plan. The Prime Minister made a subsequent announcement on 9 March on a number of proposals relating to ethnicity and matching; increasing the practice of concurrent planning; and better use of the National Adoption Register. The Adoption Action Plan was then published in full on 14 March, including the introduction local authority scorecards.
2. The LGA has been in discussions with the Department for Education (DfE) on the development of the proposals over previous months, in particular in relation to local authority performance and accountability.
3. The LGA programme, media and public affairs teams worked together closely in the weeks leading up to the publication of the Action Plan. This led to widespread coverage of the LGA's position on the day of publication, including in print and online media. Cllr Simmonds appeared on the Today Programme alongside the Minister and gave interviews on BBC News 24 and Sky News. On the Day Briefings were disseminated to members and Parliamentarians on the day of the Prime Minister's announcement and on publication of the Action Plan.

The Adoption Action Plan

4. The Action Plan is primarily aimed at reducing delay and speeding up the process. It contains three distinct but related sections:
 - 4.1. finding children loving homes without delay;
 - 4.2. valuing prospective adopters; and
 - 4.3. system Improvement.
5. 'Finding children loving homes without delay' includes proposed changes to legislation to make clearer that avoiding delay, not ethnicity, should be the key consideration when matching children and families; plans to make concurrent planning easier and encouraging its wider use; and legislation to require councils to place children on the National Adoption Register if they have not been found a family locally within 3 months in order that they can be matched with families in other authorities. Social worker training and assessment will also be updated.

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6. 'Valuing prospective adopters' is a series of proposals made by an Expert Working Group established by the Government. They are designed to speed up assessment, including a fast track process for foster carers and people that have previously adopted, and to improve the levels of information and support so that prospective adopters are encouraged, not deterred.
7. 'System Improvement' seeks to address delay and the variation in local authority performance. The action plan introduces local authority scorecards and sets out the intention for a tougher intervention policy.
8. The LGA argued strongly against the introduction of the scorecards, as they provide a very limited picture of performance and are not consistent with the wider Government approach to local performance and improvement. However, although the Government does not believe in strong central management of local government with targets, it considers action necessary in this case.
9. In response to feedback from the sector, DfE has made some amendments to the original scorecard format, such as including the average length of court proceedings locally and some contextual data.
10. The performance threshold for the child's overall journey from entering care to being placed with a family will be set at 21 months, rising to 14 months over the next 4 years. The scorecards will be published in the next couple of weeks and a significant number of councils are expected to be below the performance threshold. Importantly, however, the Government has stated that "the indicators alone do not give a full and authoritative picture of local authority performance so there will be no automatic link between the performance thresholds and intervention".
11. 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 Children's Improvement Board will work with councils to ensure that improvement support on adoption is available to those areas that need it.
12. Further information on the content of the Action Plan is provided in the two On the Day briefings, which are **appended** to this paper.

Wider reform: A summer publication

13. Some of the changes in the action plan require legislative change and an Adoption Bill is expected to be included in the Queen's Speech in May. However, some proposals, including the role of the new Gateway for prospective adopters and extension of adoption will require further development. These will be included in the Government's summer publication

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on the wider care system for children. It remains unclear what form this publication will take.

14. Proposals for the wider reform of the care system for children remain less detailed than those for adoption and are currently being developed by the DfE. We understand that issues being considered include foster carer training, delegated responsibility, commissioning and improving outcomes for looked after children including in relation to offending.

Conclusion and next steps

15. The initial next step will be for the LGA to offer support to local authorities to help them prepare for the publication of the scorecards in the next couple of weeks.
16. Continuing this work in the longer term, influencing the reform of the care system is included in the 2012/13 business plan and Tim Loughton has publicly committed to the Government working with the LGA and the Children's Improvement Board.
17. In line with the discussion at the Board's January meeting, the process has started for commissioning several pieces of research from NFER in this area, with Cllr Liz Green as the member champion. This includes research on children's views of the care system and on different service delivery models for adoption and fostering.
18. We are currently planning a stakeholder roundtable meeting, in order to better understand some of the challenges in the care system for the wider sector and to develop ideas and proposals for improvements.
19. We are also planning a week of activity around the theme of corporate parenting to coincide with the LGA's Annual Conference at the end of June.
20. Members of the Board will be updated with further details on these pieces of work as they develop and their involvement and views sought.

Financial Implications

21. The LGA's work on this issue falls within the budgeted resource for the Children and Young People programme.