

Adoption scorecards

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

Local authority adoption scorecards were published on 11 May, following the commitment made as part of the Government's Adoption Action Plan. The LGA has consistently argued strongly against the introduction of scorecards and has continued to make this case to the Department for Education (DfE).

DfE has identified a number of councils whose performance it considers is causing significant concern. There will now be a process of initial discussions with those areas and for some a further "diagnostic" process. It is anticipated that some areas will receive Improvement Notices. The Children's Improvement Board will have a role in supporting improvement and the diagnostic, but will not be involved in any decisions about intervention which will be taken by DfE alone.

The Children and Families Bill announced in the Queen's Speech will contain proposals related to adoption and care proceedings. This is the subject of **Item 4** on the agenda.

Recommendation

That members discuss the issues outlined in the paper and provide direction to officers.

Action

LGA officers to action as directed.

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Adoption scorecards

Background

1. A commitment to publish local authority adoption scorecards was announced as part of the Government's Adoption Action Plan in March. Their publication was due in April during the local government purdah period, but in line with members' discussion at the previous Board meeting, Ministers agreed to postpone publication until after the local elections. On 11 May scorecards were published for each local authority, along with a spreadsheet of the underlying data.
2. The LGA has consistently argued strongly against the introduction of scorecards and has continued to make this case to the Department for Education. The scorecards do not provide a fair picture of council performance or a sound basis for comparison. This is supported by a recent report by Ofsted which found that court proceedings were the main reason for delay. The approach is also contrary to the Government's wider position on local performance and improvement.
3. The LGA, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Association of Directors of Children's Services released a joint statement condemning the scorecards. Cllr Simmonds was interviewed on radio and television and the sector's position was widely reported across the media.

Performance thresholds

4. Two interim 'performance thresholds' have been set:
 - 4.1. the average time it takes for a child who goes on to be adopted from entering care to moving in with his or her adoptive family – 21 months.
 - 4.2. the average time it takes for a local authority to match a child to an adoptive family once the court has formally decided that adoption is the best option - 7 months.
5. 80 councils meet both thresholds, 72 do not meet one or both. The first indicator does not take into account the length of court proceedings, which are largely outside of councils' control. Nor do the thresholds reflect the challenges facing councils in finding adoptive homes for children that are harder to place, such as sibling groups. Other forms of permanent care for children, such as special guardianships are also not captured.

Further discussion and 'diagnostic'

6. The DfE has identified a number of councils whose performance it considers is causing significant concern. They are not necessarily the councils which rate

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lowest according to the performance threshold indicators. The DfE's intended process is to hold initial discussions with the lead member and Director of Children's Services in those councils to better understand the council's analysis and any improvement plans. The Children's Improvement Board (CIB) will offer support and attendance at the meeting to those councils.

7. In councils where further understanding is required beyond the initial discussion, a "diagnostic" process will be initiated. CIB and DfE have jointly commissioned Outcomes UK in partnership with BAAF to carry out the diagnostic. This will provide an opportunity for a council to tell its own story behind the data and to look at a wider picture of the effectiveness of support for children in care. Where this diagnostic shows genuine concerns about performance, and that the council would benefit from additional support, CIB will be able to discuss priorities for improvement support with the council and broker links to support available from peers in other councils.
8. It is anticipated that a number of councils will receive Improvement Notices. DfE will make recommendations to Ministers about intervention; CIB will not be involved in these decisions. A briefing note on the CIB role circulated to councils on 4 May can be found at **Appendix A**.

Next steps

9. It is anticipated that scorecards will be updated with more recent data in the autumn. It is recommended that the LGA continue to make the case against the flawed approach of scorecards. A potential alternative that could be presented to DfE is council self-reporting via LG Inform. However, it is important that any metrics would be useful to the sector in supporting improvement. This could include, for example, the wider picture of permanence options including special guardianship. Work is underway to explore this, including with the Children's Improvement Board in relation to work already undertaken on local data.
10. A Children and Families Bill was announced in the Queen's Speech on 9 May and is expected to be introduced in Parliament in early 2013. It will include proposal that seek to reduce the numbers of adoptions delayed in order to achieve a perfect or near ethnic match between adoptive parents and the adoptive child. However, a recent report by Ofsted found little evidence of delay caused by an unrealistic search for a 'perfect' ethnic match. The Bill will also implement some of the reforms to the court system from the Family Justice Review. More detail can be found at **Item 4** and a further paper will be brought to the Board once more detail on the proposals is available.

Financial Implications

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