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Adopter recruitment

Purpose of report

To provide background information for the discussion on adopter recruitment.

Summary

Jan Fishwick, Chair, and Mark Owers, Director, of the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) will attend the meeting to discuss the challenges of adopter recruitment and how councils and voluntary agencies can work together to overcome them.

Recommendation

This report is for information.

Action

Officers to take action arising out any discussion, as directed by members.

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Adopter recruitment

Background

1. Reforming the adoption system to increase the number of adoptions and reduce delay remains a priority for the Government. The LGA has welcomed some changes implemented to date, such as the reduction of bureaucracy in the assessment process and reforms to the family justice system, but contested others, for example local authority adoption scorecards, which do not provide a fair picture of performance. Other changes include the creation of a National Gateway to provide information to prospective adopters and supporting an increase in 'fostering for adoption'. The Department for Education (DfE) is also developing proposals on post-adoption support.
2. Local government has long maintained that the shortage of adopters is one of the major challenges in securing children adoptive homes. The numbers of children being approved by the courts for adoption each year has risen from just over 3,000 in 2009/10 to over 4,200 in 2011/12. The most recent official data analysed shows that over 4,600 children with a placement order were waiting to be able 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. A survey carried out by the Association of Directors of Children's Services in April 2013 suggests that there has been significant activity in local authorities to increase the number of successful matches of children and adopters since the official data was published. It also points to intentions to significantly increase recruitment activity over the next year.
3. It is important to note that the numbers do not take account of the complexity of matching adoptive families and children. In particular, finding adoptive homes for sibling groups, older children and children with complex needs is a significant challenge.

The role of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs)

4. There are around 30 VAAs in England, which tend to provide placements for harder to place children. The Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) is their representative body. VAAs recruit approximately 20 per cent of adopters; however achieved a 43 per cent increase in the number of adopters approved in 2012/13. Local authority-led regional and sub-regional adoption consortia often have VAA members and a small number of local authorities have contracted with VAAs to provide adopter recruitment services on their behalf.
5. The Government believes that a strong voluntary sector is crucial to addressing the adopter shortage and has outlined some of the challenges it faces. These include cash flow, as VAAs are only paid once a child is placed with an adopter they have approved and limited confidence in local authority demand for their services, which

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inhibits investment in recruitment. The DfE has provided a £1million grant to the sector via the CVAA over 2012-14 and has recently announced an additional £16million package to support growth over 2013-16, including expansion grants, start-up grants and business development support.

Government analysis and proposals

6. In January 2013 the Government published '*Further Action on Adoption: More Loving Homes*' which set out its analysis of the adopter shortage. It recognised that many adoption services provide an excellent service and are effective at recruiting sufficient adopters to meet local need, in line with their statutory duties. However, the current system places disincentives on councils to recruit more adopters than are needed in their local area and supply is not keeping up with demand at national level. The Government also considers that the small scale at which some local authority adopter recruitment services operate is unsustainable.
7. The Government's proposed solution is to provide the Secretary of State with the power to force councils to outsource their adopter recruitment and assessment functions to other agencies. The Children and Families Bill contains provision for such a power, which could be applied to individual councils, groups of councils, or local government as a whole. The LGA believes this is unnecessary, disproportionate and risky and is arguing strongly against the provision as the Bill progresses through the parliamentary process.

Sector alternative

8. The LGA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) have produced an alternative, sector-led plan. It recognises that there is scope for improvement in the system and outlined our collective ambition to reduce the national adopter shortfall (estimated by DfE at 31 March 2012 to be 2,000 – 3,000) by more than 50% by 31 March 2014.
9. Actions include removing the historic systemic disincentive created by the fee structure, which makes competitors of councils and discourages recruiting more adopters than are needed locally. This is because the fee which a council pays to place children with adopters that another council has recruited does not cover the recruiting council's costs. It is also lower than the fee paid to VAAs, which can lead to sequential decision-making and build in delay. The plan also includes measures to support local political and professional leadership and facilitation of discussions about more formal joint working in the sector.
10. The Children's Minister, Edward Timpson MP, has welcomed the commitments made by local government, but has also voiced concern about how this will be sustained in the longer-term. The Minister has invited representatives of the local government and voluntary sector to a series of meeting in the second half of 2013.
11. In parallel to these meetings, CVAA, LGA, SOLACE and ADCS have been exploring ways in which the statutory and voluntary parts of the adoption sector could work more closely together. This could take the form of a joint Board, focusing on ensuring

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the national system operates at optimum level in order to meet the needs of children for whom adoption is the best way to achieve permanence. Further work needs to be carried out on the detail of such a model, but proactively demonstrating sector leadership and addressing performance challenges could put local government in a stronger position on this agenda.

Conclusion

12. The supply of adopters is insufficient for the number of children awaiting adoption nationally. Better matching the supply of adoptive families with the needs of children at national level would have benefits for looked after children for whom adoption is the best choice. This also has the potential to lead to fewer children in care, which would have financial implications for councils. Achieving this requires local authorities to work more closely both together and with the voluntary sector. Failure to do so could lead to the Government using the power to remove councils from adopter recruitment that it expects to achieve through the Children and Families Bill.

Financial Implications

13. The LGA's work on this issue falls within the budgeted resource for the Finance and Policy Directorate.