

7 April 2016

Adoption: A Vision for Change

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

The Department for Education has launched a four year strategy for adoption, outlining a number of legislative and practice changes aimed at increasing the rate of adoption in England. This paper summarises the key points of the government's strategy, and seeks members' views on the LGA's response.

Recommendation

Members are asked to consider the government's approach to adoption, and to advise on the LGA's response.

Action

Officers to take action as directed by members.

Contact officer:

Ian Dean

Position:

Senior Adviser, Children's Social Care

Phone no:

020 7665 3878

Email:

ian.dean@local.gov.uk

Adoption: A Vision for Change

Background

1. Adoption has become an increasingly high profile issue in recent years, with a number of initiatives underway aimed at improving the adoption system and making it easier to find permanent, loving homes for children who need them.
2. This work is driven by the government-led Adoption Leadership Board (ALB), which brings together central government, local authorities (including the LGA) and voluntary adoption agencies in an attempt to drive improvements across the system.
3. The LGA is broadly supportive of this work, and local government has been central to recent improvements in timeliness, post-adoption support and the overall number of children adopted. However, recent statistics from the Adoption Leadership Board highlight considerable challenges ahead, with the number of children placed for adoption continuing to fall and the use of alternative permanence options, particularly Special Guardianship Orders, steadily increasing.
4. In response to these challenges, the Department for Education launched a four year strategy for adoption on 27 March 2016. This strategy outlines a number of legislative and systemic changes aimed at addressing the fall in adoption placement orders and ensuring that adoption remains a priority for social workers and the courts.

Government commitments

5. The primary changes planned by the Government include:
 - 5.1 Amending the Children Act 1989 to ensure that local authorities and the courts consider the likelihood of different placement options providing sufficient care to meet the child's needs *up until the age 18*, rather than right now or in the immediate future.
 - 5.2 Using powers in the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to ensure that all local authorities become part of a regional adoption agency by 2020, with funding of up to £14m available across 2016-18 to support the development and implementation of local plans.
 - 5.3 Introducing a £16m fund for practice development and innovation within regional adoption agencies, and to support capacity building for voluntary adoption agencies.
 - 5.4 Introducing scorecards for regional adoption agencies, which will focus on timeliness and performance for harder to place children as key indicators.
 - 5.5 Working with the sector and Ofsted to produce a revised inspection framework which supports strong innovation and evidenced based practice, and works in a world where adoption services are regionalised.
 - 5.6 Commissioning an independent summary of relevant research evidence, for use by local authority managers, social workers and judges, which focuses on comparative outcomes of different placement options.
 - 5.7 Increasing the central Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to £21 million in 2016-17 and to £28 million in 2017-18, and extending applicability to include adopted young people up to age 21; to children adopted from care in other countries via

7 April 2016

- intercountry adoptions; and to special guardians who care for children who were previously looked after.
- 5.8 Further workforce development, including a robust continuous professional development programme to support social workers making permanence decisions and consultation on a proposed knowledge and skills statement for social workers whose job is achieving permanence.
 - 5.9 Setting up an expert group to advise Department for Education and Department of Health ministers on new care pathways for adopted and looked after children, and developing models of care to meet the mental health needs of adopted children and other vulnerable groups.
 - 5.10 Considering the use of legislation to expand the role of virtual school heads and designated teachers to include the continued support of children who have left care under an adoption order.

LGA view

6. The LGA has been supportive of the government's ambition to secure lasting improvements to the adoption system, and the strong focus on the health, education and support needs of adopted children in these latest proposals is very welcome. We are encouraged by the government's stated commitment to support sector-led solutions, with further funding announced for the development and implementation of innovative local practice and flexibility in the design of regional adoption arrangements.
7. Local authorities are working hard to rise to this challenge, and over 90% of councils have already taken advantage of government support to merge and further streamline their services in regional or sub-regional arrangements. We know that collaboration works best when it is driven by the sector itself, and it is encouraging to see this support for locally-designed solutions rather than centrally-imposed structures and processes.
8. We are concerned that some regional arrangements appear to have been pursued and agreed without sufficient engagement with elected members, and would welcome members' views on the extent to which they have been involved in these developments locally.
9. We have agreed that regional adoption agencies should be held to account for their performance, but are concerned that previous adoption scorecards have failed to provide an accurate basis for comparison across local authority areas. Achieving the best outcomes for children will always be the most important consideration for councils, and we believe it is vital that any attempt to measure performance does not take a narrow view on the speed of placement to the detriment of the quality and stability of care.
10. We have also been clear that any inspection of regional adoption agencies must be fully integrated into existing inspection frameworks. It must not introduce an additional bureaucratic burden for already hard-pressed services, or indeed for Ofsted, which is already struggling to complete other inspection programmes on time
11. Although much of the government's strategy focusses on social work practice, we have been clear that the recent fall in placement orders will not be addressed without an equally strong focus on the work of the courts. Taking a child from their parents is a decision that can never be taken lightly, and social workers and the court must both be convinced that adoption is the best option for the child before an order is granted. But neither party should shy away from adoption where it is in the child's best interests, and

7 April 2016

we believe that work to reduce court delays and speed up legal proceedings must continue if we are to provide much-needed homes for children.

12. We have also emphasised that the ongoing focus on adoption must not distract from the importance of other types of long and short-term care for vulnerable children. Adoption is not right for every child, and local and national government must continue to strive to improve the experience of all children in care – whether they are being looked after by friends or family, in foster care or a special guardianship arrangement, or in residential care. The announcement that money for post-adoption support will also be available to special guardians is a positive step in this regard, though we will be seeking clarity on plans for the long-term sustainability of this national support fund.

Recommendation

13. The national Adoption Leadership Board, of which the LGA is a member, is due to meet and discuss the government's strategy on 14 April 2016. CYP Board members are therefore asked to consider the government's approach to adoption, outlined above, and to advise on the LGA's response.